Ethnogenesis in Amdo Qīnhăi: historical questions on the development of Salar identity
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The 18th century Xúnhuà Gazetteer cautioned its readers about the Salars:
“...The Salar Muslims [Sālā Huízĭ] have belonged to the Hézhōu tíng since the Míng [dynasty], they are one of the nineteen Fān [barbarians] who exchanged horses for tea. That tribe is very stubborn and difficult to govern” (Xúnhuà tíng zhì = XTZ juan 4 ‘zuzhai tun’, in Saguchi 1986:86).

1. INTRODUCTION.

One of China’s national minorities, the Salars (pop. ca. 90,000 in 1990) are a Turkic people in origin who likely migrated eastward from the Samarkand area to the northeastern edge of Tibet as a contingent of the invading Chinggisid army in the thirteenth century. Although we lack historical material to prove a direct link between the Salars of China and the modern Salïr-Turkmen, historical, ethnographic, and linguistic evidence suggests that the modern-day Salars of China, like the Salïr-Turkmen, originally stemmed from the Salghur Oğuz clan.

Salar society evolved from a nomadic kinship system to a sedentary sociopolitical one. I examine political divisions and naming practices to demonstrate both the ready incorporation Tibetan and Muslim-Chinese into the premodern Salar social structure, and the surprising resilience of Oğuz-Turkic organizational features. This adaptability proved decisive for the formation of a premodern Salar society.

2. BACKGROUND ON SALAR HISTORIOGRAPHY

The earliest written reference to the Huuchuu Salar (i.e. the Salars of the former Hézhōu district, which included Xúnhuà) is in the early sixteenth-century Ta'rikh-i Rashīdī; the earliest date that can be associated with the Salars is 1370 (XTZ). Although local Chinese and Salar sources describe various Salar migrations through at least Eastern Turkestan and Gānsū, a more westerly provenance of the Salars is

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1 In the following, dynastic years are abbreviated as follows: name, dynastic year, with a Christian-calendar equivalent in parentheses, e.g. Hōngwū 3 (1370). Clues about Salar origins are also to be found in the relevant Chinese dynastic histories (Yuán shĭ, Míng shĭ). Outside of these, the most useful sources are the local primary sources, the Xúnhuà tíng zhì (Xúnhuà Gazetteer, here as XTZ) from the late 18th c., and two collections of Salar documents (Qīnhăi mínzú xuéyuàn mínzú yánjūsuŏ 1981a, b).
The legend of Salar origins begins near Samarkand, where their clan leader, Garaman, together with his brother, Axman, leads the Salars in an eastward migration. They take with them a white camel, a gourd full of water, and a gourd full of earth. They were told that when they stopped in a place where the water tasted the same, and the earth weighed the same as the water and earth in the gourds they had brought, that they would be in their “ancestral homeland”. One evening, after months and months of wandering, they suddenly lost their camel on a mountainside. At dawn the following day, the Salars found their camel in the middle of a bubbling spring in the valley below. It had turned to stone. When they weighed the soil and tasted the water, it was exactly like what they had brought. The Salars settled there, in the place called Xúnhuà (Dwyer 1996, Xúnhuà Sālāzú zìzhìxiàn wénhuáguăn 1988).

The metaphors of water and earth (cf. Ch. shŭitŭ ‘climate’, lit. ‘water-earth’ (Trippner: 246)) and the camel turning to stone represents the transition from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life (Saguchi 1986), and the first major step to establishment of a local Amdo identity.

The Xúnhuà Gazetteer (hereafter XTZ) describes the Sālā’ér people as living in the Xúnhuà area on the western borderlands of Hézhōu, and states that their chief Hán Bāo submitted to the Ming dynasty in third year of the Hōngwŭ emperor (1370). How long the Salars were in Xúnhuà before 1370 is not known; the two most likely possibilities point to either an early-fourteenth-century migration to Xúnhuà during the Mongol campaign, or that the Salars went only as far as Hāmì (Qumul) in the 1320’s, migrating to and settling in Xúnhuà only at the beginning of the Ming.

The XTZ and the Yuán dynastic history (Yuán shĭ) describe the Salars as moving from point to point in what is now southern Gānsū and southeastern Qinghāi before settling in Xúnhuà (Saguchi 1986, Mī 1981, Mī 1990, Kataoka 1991). In all likelihood the Salar migration was part of the Mongolian invasion which began in Central Asia and extended into Chinese borderlands during one or more eastern thrusts. The Mongols assembled various Central Asian peoples (the so-called sēmû rén) to attack the Tanguts, Jurchens, and Han-Chinese Southern Song dynasty. These troops were accompanied by 30,000 craftspeople, women, and children (D’Ohsson Histoire des Mongols). During Chinggis Khan’s 1225-1227 incursion through the Héxī corridor and his further southward thrust towards Sìchuān, troops were sent to Xúnhuà, that lay on the western flank of the route, to conquer the area and protect the right flank. The Salars could well have been part of these troops; they could just as well have come into China after Tamerlane’s sudden rise to power during the fourteenth century.

In any event, the Salars settled in the Amdo region sometime during the early
Yuán period. The XTZ states that in 1370 the first recorded Salar leader, Hán Bāo, was declared darñgači (seal-keeper), a hereditary position during the Yuán dynasty. The Mongolian principle of rule was based on a mistrust of the Chinese and trust of those who came with them to China, including the Protosalsars. While Mongols held the highest positions, the middle administrative positions were held by members of these groups of sèmù rén, including the Salars. In the Yuán hierarchy, the position of darñga (turkicized as darñgaçi, in Chinese as dálùhuāchí) was higher as those held by Hán Chinese, but lower as those held by Mongols (XTZ vol. 5; Yuán shì, bái guān zhì, cited in Mĭ 1990: 64).

2.2 The View from the West

Although there are no existent historical sources for a Salar migration from Transoxiana to China, genealogies and reports of troop movements support the thesis that the modern Salars in China shared a common origin with the modern Salïr-Türkmens.

The Salïrs are the descendents from the oldest son of Oğuz khan’s fifth son Tekke. The name Garaman also appears in the Salïr-Türkmen Oğuz geneologies: Garaman is the son of Akhal. One further source supports the hypothesis that the two Garamans are the same person: two of the rare Salar documents from the 18th century mention Garaman deduni and Omar deduni. Omar was Garaman’s son: deduni was a hereditary title corresponding to Chinese dàyè. The darñgaçi Hán Bāo was Omar’s son.

Akhal’s son Garaman thus likely lead a number of Salar families to Gànsū in the 13th century. Garaman and his descendants then became darñgaçis; in 1370, the Salar Hán Bāo submitted to the Míng. This marked the beginning of the formation of an independent ethnic group.

3. Historical Sociopolitical Divisions Among the Turkmen

The Turkmen made a general distinction between “inner” (ig~ichgi) and “outer” (tashqi) clan members (Bartol’d 1929/1963). This distinction divided the center from the periphery, those with “pure blood” from those with “mixed blood”. The sources do not agree on which clan belonged to which category (what likely reflects different time periods, locales, and clan perspectives); one 16th-century source from Khiva asserts that the “inner” clans were those that lived on the Caspian sea in Mangïshlak, while the “outer” clans were the Tekke, Yomut, and Sarïk in North Khorasan (Sarkisyanz 1961: 219). Other historians assert that the “outer” clans were the Salïr, Tekke, Yomut and Sarïk nomads along the banks of the Caspian, while the

4 The Salar Book of Miscellany (Záxué bĕnbĕn) is the only source to mention deduni and Omar deduni.
5 Cf. for example Shedžere-i Terakime (: 217) from the 17th c.: “Mangkïshlakda Ichki Salurdïn bir kishi bir ölürüp qachïp....” [They killed one of the Inner Salars at Mangkishlak and fled....]
“inner” clans were the Salïr nomads of Khorasan and Ärsari eastwards towards Khorezm (Kononov, Barthold, Bregel, Dzhikiev, in Clark:4). A late-19th-century Russian source even claimed that those that the “inner” Yomut and Göklen Turkmens called “outer clans” (the Tekke Turkmens) stemmed from captive Iranians.

4. Sociopolitical units of the Salar

During the early undocumented period of their ethnogenesis, the Salars moved into the littoral regions on the upper reaches of the Yellow River. There they took on Chinese surnames and organized neighboring villages into so-called gongs, an organizational form unique to the Salars. Each of these Hanafi Muslim communities was composed of group of villages sharing a common main mosque. The formation of these gongs strongly resembled the inner-outer distinction of the Central Asian Oghuz. The Central Asian hereditary system was originally preserved in the leadership of these gong communities, and later with the submission of the Salars to the Ming dynasty consolidated to one or two leaders under the local tūsi system (a kind of local governor) that the Ming favored. The Central Asian system of hereditary titles (e.g. khan) metamorphosed itself first under the Yuán government into a system of administrative titles (e.g. darğa), and thence to another administrative system (tūsi) under the Ming. During the 16th to 18th centuries, with the emergence of charismatic Khafiya and Jahriya Sufi leaders under various associations in the community, the center of political control moved away from the central power of the tūsi system. With the rise to power of Sufi leaders the link of Salar ethnic identity to this Central Asian hereditary system was weakened, and that to Islam strengthened. This development was a source of constant worry for the Ming and Qing governments.

4.1. Salar Gong and Tūsi

Since 1730, then, gongs were formed from a number of Salar villages in an area, and these were divided into inner and outer gongs. The inner gongs were and are still the most central, the oldest, and therefore sociopolitically most important. The outer ones were farther afield (geographically as well as culturally) and “mixed”: they were originally Tibetan areas which had become inhabited by Salars and Muslim Chinese.

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\+ The Salars settled mostly in the area of modern-day Xúnhuà and Huálóng, on the south and north banks of the Yellow River, respectively.

\* Before 1730, the principal Salar organizational unit was the village (Sa. ağïl, Ch. zhuāng). Groups of villages organized themselves into gongs, which became the basic areal divisions. The Salar population increased steadily so that in the 18th c. there were twelve gongs (Lánzhōu jìluè; XTZ; Hézhōu zhì).
living side by side with Tibetans.

The origin of the term *gong* is obscure: it is normally written as *gōng* with the Chinese character for “work” (工), but the XTZ reports that this was a scribal error for the homophone *gōng* (貢) “merit”. The character for “meritorious service for the motherland” was apparently appended to place names, after the Salars took part in the recovery of Zhuozi mountain on the side of the Qing regime in 1730 (XTZ, Huang Qing Shi Xian tu, vol. 5). Other proposed etymologies include Persian känt ‘city, town’ or Arabic qaum ‘clan’; these are phonetically and semantically plausible, especially the former.

The outer *gongs* are composed of five community groupings (tašqi beš gōng, wài wŭ gōng) north of the Yellow River in the former Bayan Rongge, now Huálóng county.9 In the absence of a bridge across the river, the Bayan Salars had little contact with the Xūnhuà Salars. This encouraged the Tibetanization of the Salars north of the river to such an extent that the Qing government and the Xūnhuà Salars to the south saw their northern relatives as a separate unit. For the government, they were classed as ‘Fān-barbarians’, for other Salars, as “outer Salars”. The Hézhōu Gazetteer (Hézhōu zhì) commented:

“Although the Sālā of Bayan rongge worship the same Islam, their language and their dress is completely identical to that of the Fan [Tibetans]. In the old records, there were Tibetan-barbarians who believe in [Islamic] religion. They are known as the outer five gong (wài wŭ gōng).”

The inner *gongs* (nèi gōng) were subdivided into Upper and Lower gongs, reflecting their respective position upstream and downstream on the Yellow River.10 Before 1781 there existed 12 inner gongs (six Upper and six Lower gongs), but so many Salars were killed during the “great Muslim rebellion” of 1781 that the twelve were consolidated into eight.11 In the late 19th c. a report on Xūnhuà tíng shares the following:

„the Salar Muslims [Sā Huí] of the eight gongs are known as the Great Salars. Their customs are despicable and coarse, their weapons effective. The difference between them and the outer five gongs is particularly great.” (Zuo

9 The five outer gong were: Gāndū (Yarluğu), Kălīgāng (Kargang), Shāngshūdì (=modern-day Qúnkè), Hēichéngzī (in the XTZ as Zābā gōng), Shīwūhūī (in the XTZ as Nangmdudú gōng). In 1958 only ca. 4000 Salars lived north of the Yellow River, most in the Gāndū littoral region (Mī 1990: 33, 35). Sixty years later, the Salar population in this region (now Huálóng county) was recorded as 9077 (according to the 1990 census, data furnished by Huálóng county).

10 The upper and lower gongs were also known as the Western Upper Six and Eastern Lower Six gongs. The former group (Xīxiàng shàng liù gōng) included the village-complexes of Gāizĭ (Sa. Altu), Căotănbĕi , Chăjī (Ceg), Sūzĭ, Biĕlĕ , Chăhăndășă (Căyndoi); the Lower or Eastern Lower Six gongs (Dōngxiàng xià liù gōng) included the villages of Qīngshū (Sa. Senger), Dasugu, Mĕngdă (Munda), Zhănghă, Naiman (Kewa), and Xiéchăng (later Xīchăng), with the regional seat Xūnhuà tíng in the middle.

11 Those which were consolidated into other gongs are starred on the map.
The durative power center lay since early Ming times in the hands of the tŭsīs of the upper gongs, beginning with the leader Hán Bāo.

The sons and grandsons of the leader Garaman likely settled in the six lower gongs. These settlement legends that trace the origin of the inner gongs to Garaman’s sons show the pride in venerated ancestry that the Salars of the inner gongs had, in contrast to their fellow clan members “without lineage”. Having the proper lineage was prestigious enough to spawn dozens of local variants of this settlement legend, with each locale claiming to have been founded by (often the same) Garaman descendants.

These gong communities adopted a regional hereditary ruling system common to the Amdo Tibetans, the Monguors, and the Salars, with powerful local clan rulers known as tŭsī. These rulers mediated between their people and the current rulers of China: the Mongols, the Chinese, and finally the Manchus. Though the tŭsī system was in origin a Yuan Mongolian institution (“tŭsī” in Chinese sources is derived from Middle Mongolian tusimel–tušimel ‘minister’), local rulers of all three groups are first mentioned in historical records as submitting to the Ming dynasty. From the perspective of the Ming and Qing governments, these regimes granted the local rulers patents of office with their status as tŭsī and thereby, one can assume, hoped to exert a minimal amount of influence in these borderlands. It served to establish a system of governance, developed agriculture, taxation, commerce, and exert some degree of military control. From a Salar, Amdo Tibetan, or Mongguor perspective, tŭsī status legitimized and strengthened powerful local lineages. Among the Salars, all tŭsī leaders took the surname Hán 韓. Hán, though nominally sinitic, is derived from the homophonous Mongol-Turkic Central Asian title Khan (< *qağan) and shows the lasting prestige of the Mongol past, as well as the position the Salars must have

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12 The overabundance of names for the Salars and for the inner gongs in Ming times provides important clues about the earliest Salar history. After settling in modern-day Gāizĭ (Altiiui), the Salars were known as “the four households and five lineages” (sì fáng wŭ zú). The “four households” were the families of Garaman’s four sons, who were all surnamed Hán; the term “the five lineages” (not “five tribes”, XHZ 5) was actually shorthand for “the five lineages with external surnames” (wài xìng wŭ zú), probably those surnamed Mă (in any case not surnamed Hán, thus “external”) who belonged to the fifth [Salar] clan lineage. (The members of these categories vary somewhat depending on the source; in 1958, for example, E.R. Tenishev was apparently told that the “four households” were not limited to the Upper gongs, but were those settled by Garaman’s four grandsons: “Chihtsu” (Chiizi = Munda, thus part of the lower gongs), Qingshŭi/Senger (also a part of the lower gongs), “Yazi-Yamin” (i.e. Jíshí, the regional seat in the middle, to the upper gongs), Sùzhī (= to the upper gongs) (Tenishev #: 32/59, Kataoka: 32, 49).

The upper-gong villages were known collectively as the “six gates and eight households” (liù mén bā hù). These were the families of Garaman’s six sons plus either two Mă- and Chén-surnamed households or the household of the second wife of Garaman’s second oldest son (Mī 1990: 32). These villages are still found in the Gāizĭ area to this day.

13 Salar tŭsī leaders are recorded between 1370 and 1898 (XTZ juan 5).
enjoyed under the Mongols.

The Salars of the external gongs have in contrast mostly the surname 马 (Mă). This common surname (also the most common among the Muslim Chinese) is known to be an abbreviated form of Muhammed.

As heads of local lineages, the local тус leader of various гон areas were hierarchically classified into houses, i.e. lineages. The oldest and most significant distinction was the division of the inner gongs into main and secondary houses (zhōngfāng, dōngfāng-èrfāng). The main house тус, as propagator of the first (Garaman) Salar lineage, formed the center of power of Salar society in the Ming dynasty; not coincidentally, this center was located in the area of the stone camel, in Gāizī/Altüli гон. Under main house jurisdiction were also the second and third Salar lineages (sān-fāng, sì-fāng). The secondary house тус, established first in 1552 (XTZ juan 5), was responsible for the fifth Salar lineage, that is, responsible for administering the outer five гон. The higher-prestige main house included the upper гонs (except for the hopelessly distant Chāhàndāsī/ Çağendos гон) and the centrally-located lower гон Qingshūi/Senger.

4.2. PERSONAL NAMES

We have just seen that the first documented Salar names originated in Central Asia and make a migration together with the Mongols likely. First, the ethnonym Salar itself, as also with the legendary Garaman and Axman. Axman is most likely an analogy-formation from Garaman – as with the Mongolian surname Хан (Khan).

That the surname 马 appears in historical sources since the Qing indicates that the Salars identified increasingly with Islam, and that numerous Muslim Chinese from Hézhōu came northwest over the mountains to Salaristan and intermarried with local Salars.

There is a certain relationship between surnames and гон-status: in the outer гонs (those also known as wài wǔ xìng “the external five surnames”), the

14 The term Saïr/Salur is derived from Salğur. The low vowel in the second syllable likely reflects the development of -gur > -gur > -gur, cf. the alternation of -ğuz/-ğur in ethnonyms, e.g. O-ğuz, Uy-ğur, ?Ab-khaz, Bul-ğar.

15 The suffix -man, likely derived from Persian manand ‘resembling’ (al-Kashgari’s 11th c. etymology), occurs with only one Turkic group, the Оğuz (SW Turks): the ethnonym Turkmen ‘those looking like the most Turkish of the Turks’, and the personal name Qaraman/Garaman. The latter ‘resembling-black’, < black-surnamed Оğuz) occurs in several Anatolian and Balkan communities and as an Оğuz hero in the Dede Korkut cycle. Its appearance as the name of the Salar progenitor supports an Оğuz origin for the Salars.

Axman, who appears only in some Salar sources (and no Arabic or Chinese sources) as the brother of Garaman, reflects a later parallel form to Gara-man: Ax-man ‘resembling-white’.

16 Although the surname Хан dominates in certain of the inner гонs, within the Upper and Lower inner гонs no correlation can be found between Upper and Хан and Lower and 马; the surname Хан dominates in Gāizī, Sūzhi, and Qingshūi, while the surname Мă predominates in Bielié, Chagendos (=Upper) and *Naiman, Zhanha, and Mengda (=Lower).
surname Mă dominates; it also frequently (51%) appears in Qīng dynasty troop reports. This reflects the Qīng regime’s profound mistrust of the “real” (i.e. Hán-surnamed) Salars. Today – although to the Salars the name Hán still is the most prestigious – the surname Mă dominates. Salar surnames thus had in all likelihood the following evolution: no surname (only a clan name, e.g. garamanlı?) > only Mongolic Hán (< khan) > both Hán + Mă (and others, e.g. Chá) > overwhelmingly Mă. Salar surnames reflect migration patterns due to marriage, commerce, or religion.

The development of Salar given names also reflects the inner/outer distinction. Between the 18th and 20th centuries, males had one given name based either on birth-order (e.g. Hán Èrge ‘Hán the Second’), on the age of a grandfather when the boy was born (Sū Sìshīsān ‘Su 43’), or based on an Islamic name (‘Hán Rahman’).

Sometimes Chinese surnames and given names would be taken on, e.g. Mă Múnnyí (Mă Wényì). These latter names had and still have currency in a public, official context. Today, this custom has become widespread and systematized as an abstracter form of the inner/outer split: most all men have a Quranic name (jìngmíng) used at home, and an official Chinese name (e.g. Mă Déyuán/Junus); women mostly have only an “inner” name, that usually is not Islamic, e.g. Sōjagu, Gahčux nenu, Linto.

4.3. ĀĞINA-KUMSEN

Smaller forms of social organization – in contrast to the inner and outer gongs – in part more closely resemble local Tibetan and Chinese social structures. The smallest and likely earliest (Turkic?) structure is based on patriarchal clan relations and is called āğina (from Old Turkic ağa ‘older brother’ + ini ‘younger brother’); intermarriage between āğina members is forbidden. Later, semi-formalized non-kin bonds developed between neighboring families based on the principle of mutual aid. Members of such groupings of neighbors celebrated and observed rites of passage together, had a common graveyard, and enjoyed trading advantages with each other.

Such neighbor-associations are known as kumsen or ċimsen ‘relative’, from Amdo Tibetan lêmtsang [lêmstʌŋ] ‘family, household’. This reflects the Salar adaptation of a local Tibetan social structure.¹⁷ Kumsen and village names are generally based on topographical features and on clan names of Bodic, Chinese or (less often) Turkic origin.¹⁸

¹⁷ For example, the main village (Dàzhuāng/Ullağel) of Munda – one of the four lower gongs – in 1999 had six kumsen, each including an average of 25 families (Mă Yīnglù (a Munda Salar) 1999, p.c.).
¹⁸ There are relatively few Turkic village names (as in e.g. Munda ‘here’, Agashli ‘wooded place’); instead, Tibetan and Chinese names dominate (Tansegan ‘flat bank’; Gaizi ‘street/market’, Chìizi ‘market’). Rarely, Arabic (Yimamū =Imam) and Mongolic names (Naiman) can be found. In addition to the monolingual place-names there are also those of mixed origin, e.g. Bayan rong (Mong. ‘rich’ + Tib. ‘valley’). Most areal centers (which correspond to some of the former gongs) have both Chinese and another (Turkic or Tibetan) name: Gāizĭ/Altiuli, Qīngshŭi/Senger, Gāndū/Yarlugu.
4.4. **Context-determined language use**

As one would expect from a trilingual group, each language is employed in a different area. Salar is spoken at home; in public, the Salars speak Salar among themselves and Chinese and Tibetan to others. In this way Salar has remained an internal language separating different spheres of life, and has served to preserve a distinctly Salar identity.

Notably, Salar children living on the north bank of the Yellow River speak Tibetan among themselves, even when no Tibetans are present. In this once-Tibetan area, Amdo Tibetan has become the internal language also for Salar children.

5. **Summary**

In the above remarks I have shown – particularly from examples of different language use in specific environments – that the use of Salar as an internal or “inner” jargon in the linguistic realm echoes a larger Salar social structure. The central theme here, then, is the conscious distinction between the internal and the external at many levels of society. If the dichotomy indeed began at the macro-level with Oghuz clan divisions, then an entire social system may have been cast out of the gong system. The “inner” and “outer” of the gong system is the uniquely Salar form of a center-periphery structure.

The modern “doubled” personal naming system of the Salars also reflects this sharp delineation between the internal and external: Turkic or Islamic names for the inner, family realm while Chinese names elsewhere. Salar personal names, titles, and toponyms also nicely reflects important stages of Salar history and the groups they came in contact with: in personal names, Mongolic or Turko-Mongolic titles and names (ağīna, daruğači, khan/Hán, tūsī) represent the oldest layer, while Qīnghăi-Gānsū Islamic and sinitic names are a later but much more dominant layer. Intensive contact with Amdo Tibetans is revealed principally in the crucial Salar adaptation to the supra-kinship organization of kmseñ, and secondarily in the abundance of Bodic toponyms in what is now Salar country.

The Míng-Qīng period was the crucial time period for the coalescence of Salar identity. Central Asian Oghuz structures, particularly the inner/outer dichotomy, were refined to accommodate a local identity in Amdo Tibet. With the integration of the Salars into Sufi saintly lineages (menhuans), this identity had become spiritually Islamic, but organizationally a blend of Turkic, Tibetan and Mongolian social and political structures. Although their central identification with Islam weakened Salar ties to these secular sociopolitical structures, the resultant strain on the Salars’ relationship with the Míng and Qīng governments only served to solidify an independent identity.
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