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Visual propaganda: A symbolic anti-thesis towards Japanese occupation in Malaya (1942-1945)

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss an approach of propaganda used by the military regime of Japan (*Dai Nippon*), during the liberation campaign of Greater East Asia in Malaya in the timespan of 1942 to 1945. The methods used is through the impact and influence of visuals as a platform of effective indoctrination. The strategy is known as *Minshin Ha'aku* (winning the hearts of the people) and *Senbu Kosaku* (indoctrination and subduing of the people), the propaganda that attacked Western exploitation of Asia and the West lack respect of Asian peoples and culture. Hence, portrayed Japan as the liberator and leader of a newly united Asia. Freedom from White Domination, freedom from injustice and oppression. The Japanese regime, through the Department of Propaganda (*Senden-Bu*) is a unit that is responsible to enforce this program, through rigid censorship before it reaches the masses. Hence, this paper systematically analyses the visuals as a propaganda entity that can persuade the people of Malaya to support the New Order and its policies (*Shin Chitsujo*) promoted by the Japanese administration. The manifestation of visual artworks in the form of propagandistic posters, pamphlets, illustration and editorial cartoons filled the spaces of buildings, offices, schools and in prints, such as newspapers and magazines. It is clear historical records tends to describe a negative tendency towards the Japanese occupation, therefore this paper gives a new and an alternative perspective, which shows that there is support towards the occupation and its policies whereby visuals becomes its pictorial narrative.

Keywords; Propaganda, Visual, New Order, Dai Nippon, Minshin Ha'aku, Senbu Kosaku

Abstrak

Makalah ini mencuba untuk membicarakan satu kaedah propaganda, yang telah digunakan oleh rejim militer Jepun (*Dai Nippon*), sewaktu kempen pembebasan Asia Timur Raya di Malaya, yang berlangsung dari tahun 1942 sehingga 1945. Kaedah yang dimaksudkan, adalah melalui kuasa serta pengaruh visual, sebagai salah satu platform indoktrinasi yang berkesan. Ianya dikenal dengan strategi *Minshin Ha'aku* (menarik hati rakyat) dan *Senbu Kosaku* (menindoktrinasi dan menjinakkan rakyat), satu propaganda yang menyerang eksploitasi Barat di Asia, yang tidak menghormati budaya serta masyarakat tempatan. Justeru, Jepun diwajibkan sebagai pembebas dan tuan yang baharu di rantau Asia. Kebebasan daripada dominasi orang putih, bebas daripada ketidakadilan dan penindasan. Pihak Jepun, melalui Jabatan Propaganda yang dikenal dengan nama *Senden-Bu*, merupakan sebuah unit yang bertanggungjawab melaksanakan polisi dan program propaganda, menerusi saringan serta tapisan yang ketat, agar sampai ke khalayak masyarakat. Penulisan ini melihat tatanan visual, sebagai salah satu entiti propaganda, yang berupaya memujuk massa rakyat, agar mendokong polisi-polisi Orde Baru (*Shin Chitsujo*) anjuran pentadbiran Jepun. Citra romantik seni visual, yang dimanifestasikan di dalam bentuk poster, risalah, ilustrasi, mahupun kartun-kartun lerang propagandistik, telah memenuhi ruangan-ruangan bangunan, pejabat, sekolah dan juga di dada-dada akhbar, serta majalah. Nyatalah, disebalik penulisan historiografi yang cenderung menggambarkan dampak dan sisi negatif pihak Jepun, justeru tulisan ini menghidangkan perspektif yang sebaliknya. Ertinya, terdapat juga sokongan daripada penduduk Malaya terhadap polisi-polisi pentadbiran Jepun, bila mana visual menjadi naratif piktorial, yang membuahkan dukungan terhadap kuasa baru dari timur ini.





Kata Kunci : *Propaganda, Visual, Orde Baru, Dai Nippon, Minshin Ha'aku, Senbu Kosaku*

“history is the past incident that needs to be brought forward, to be examined, scrutinized, then judged, and there is no proper judgment but only the truth and justice”

Friedrich Nietzsche

INTRODUCTION

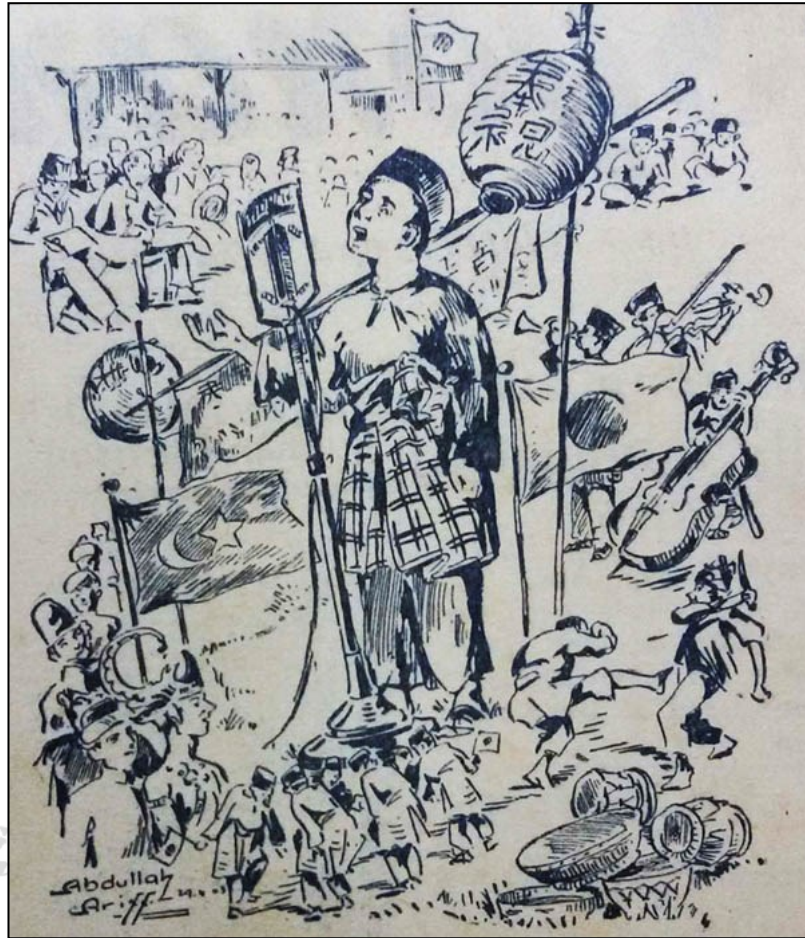
The landing of the Japanese army in Malaya, on December 8, 1941 in Kota Bharu, Kelantan recorded another episode of the colonization of Malaya from another foreign force. The power coming from the east, from Asia itself, which brings the slogan of 'Asia for Asia', '*Hakko Ichiu*' and the romantic doctrine of the 'Co-Sphere Prosperity of the Greater East Asia'. The surrender of the British government to the Japanese, on February 15, 1942 in Singapore, marked a new chapter to Malaya. During the 3 years and 8 months of the occupation, forms the widely notion of a fascist and autocratic rule of the Japanese Military Administration (*Dai Nippon*). However, despite the negative perception among the people of Malaya, there appears to be support and appreciation given, which assumed the Japanese as a 'great liberators' from the British colonial, which has been in power for over 100 years. For example, support is shown by the left political party, Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malays Union), through its progressive organizer, Ibrahima bin Hj. Yaacob, has embraced the presence of the *Dai Nippon* regime, over Malaya.

Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak, explained that The *Dai Nippon* efforts and policies have been widely disseminated, through programs and propaganda activities, among others, involving the use of visuals, in addition to such media as radio broadcasts, literature, news and theater performances. The Japanese, as it is known, also impose tight controls on freedom of speech. The Propaganda Department (*Senden-Bu*) established by the end 1942, is generally responsible for the distribution of information and propaganda to win the support of the people (Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak, 1998). As written by a prominent Japanese historian, Aiko Kurasawa, in her article entitled, Propaganda Media On Java Under the Japanese 1942-1945, stated that visual propaganda that is broadcasted in mass media and public places, requires approval and be regulated by the department, headquartered in *Syonan-To* (Singapore). To achieve this goal, the Japanese have adhered to two main principles: winning the hearts of the people (*Minshin Ha'aku*), and indoctrination and subduing of the people (*Senbu Kosaku*). This principle needs to be implemented and mobilize to the masses, in order to gain support towards the ongoing war campaign (*Dai Toa Senso*). Based on this conviction, Malaya had to be brought to the Japanese perspective, and therefore propaganda was conducted to support the doctrine of the 'Co-Sphere Prosperity of the Greater East Asia', 'Eight Continent under One Roof' (*Hakko Ichiu*) and various 'New Order' campaigns (Kurasawa, 1987).





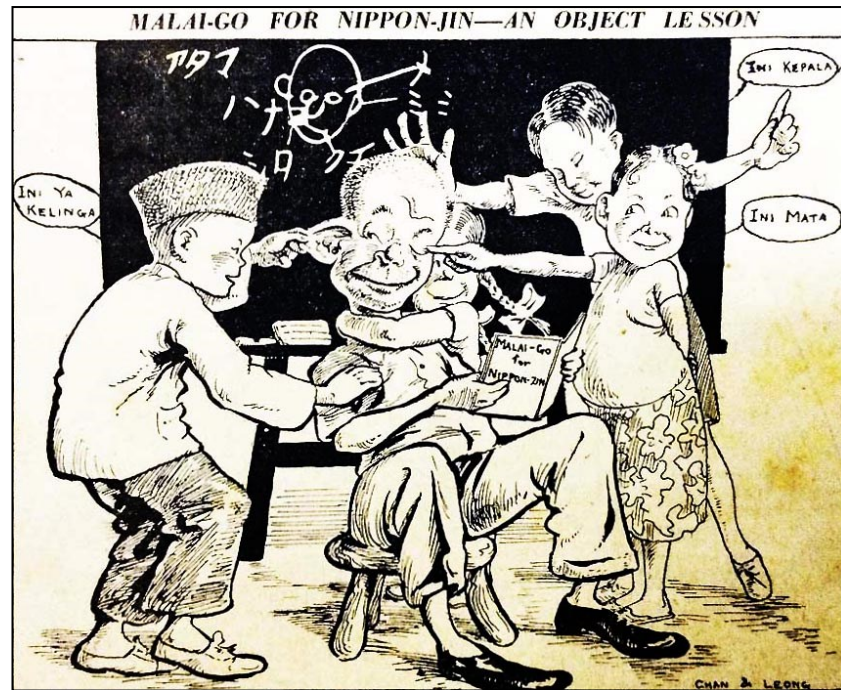
VISUAL PROPAGANDA ON VARIOUS MEDIA DURING THE OCCUPATION



Visual 1: Illustration of *Tentyo Setsu* Celebration in *Syonan*, The *Syonan Sinbun* newspaper, 30th April 1943

Visual 1 captures the birthday celebration of Emperor Tenno-Heika's birth, Hirohito or often called '*Tentyo-Setsu*', was published on April 30, 1943 by Malay propagandist, Abdullah Ariff. This illustrates the symbolization of integration, support, intimacy and co-operation between the Japanese and the people of Malaya, especially among the Muslim society. The visuals are subtle in attracting audience and indoctrination, to support the Japanese occupation. The images also illustrate the attitude of the Japanese administration, that respects local culture and customs, in its propaganda order. The people in Malaya, was portrayed freely practicing their own way of life and culture, without any restrictions from the government. An image featuring art activities performed along the way, highlights the enthusiasm and excitement of the community, celebrating the government's event. There was no representation towards conflict of war, other than images of the people enjoying life in a safe period. Propaganda and its motivation is further reinforced, by the image of the Japanese flag (*Hinomaru*), symbolizing the sovereignty and power of the ruling government which has been legally administered throughout Malaya.

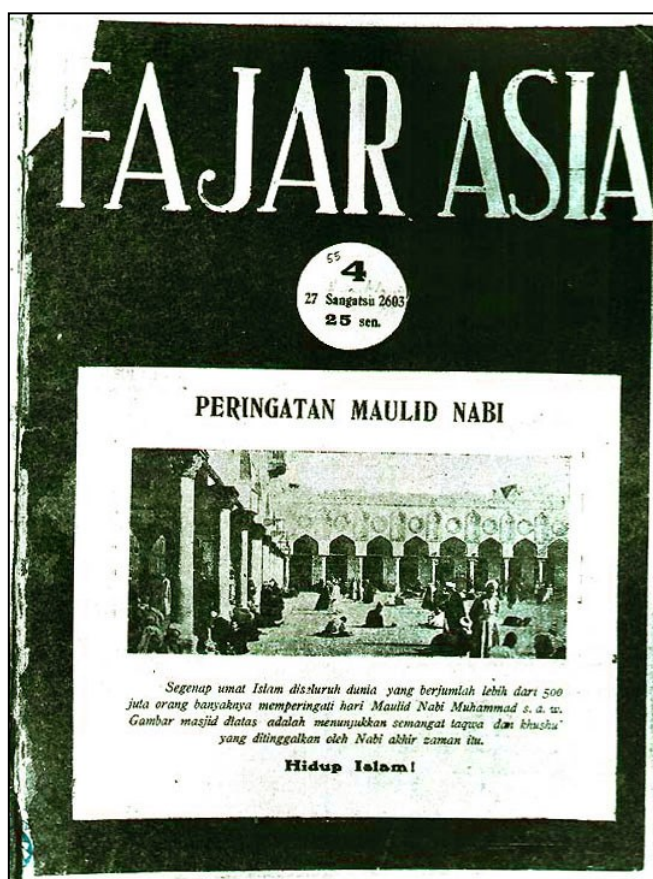




Visual 2: Cartoon *Malai-Go For Nippon-Jin-An Object Lesson*, *Malai Sinpo* newspaper, 24th April 1943

Visual 2 is a cartoon that was aired on Saturday, April 24, 1943, by cartoonist Chan and Leong. A pro-Japanese propaganda with the message of spreading the usage of the Japanese language among the people of Malaya, is clearly presented by the cartoonist, in support of Japan's efforts and endeavors. The Japanese male characters are manifested friendly with the kids, who do not mind being treated by them. The smiling and expression-friendly face, expresses the significance of reinforcing relationship, between the regime and the people. The Japanese man, seem to be willing to be hold and pulled on their limbs by the three children. It carries a very effective propaganda message, that penetrate into the heart of the readers. The military and the Japanese, are often referred to as bad, violent and abusive elements, but the cartoons shows otherwise. The cartoonist tried to soften the character of this Japanese man, depicting a girl hugging him closely, while smiling. In a deeper context, this means that the people of Malaya and the security of the Malays are guaranteed by the Japanese. This image also serves as a precursor, to the Japanese call for liberation of Asia from the British grip, with the slogan; 'East living in East, West living in West, East increasingly prosperous, West increasingly destitute'.





Visual 3: Photography on the front page, Fajar Asia magazine,
27th March 1943



Visual 3 is a photographic image, that reflects the spiritual activities of Muslims in the open space of a mosque, linking it to the commemoration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The Japanese wisely took the opportunity of this event and its significance among the Muslims, to be published on the front page of the 'Fajar Asia' magazine. The visual displays the headline 'Peringatan Maulid Nabi' (commemoration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad) and the phrase 'Hidup Islam' (long live Islam), shows the efforts to illustrate a friendly attitude and not prejudice towards the Muslim community. Religious sentiment has been manipulated by the Japanese, in order to justify their stand, which recognizes religious practices by the people of Malaya, without any restrictions and rules. Indirectly, the Japanese administration is seen, as trying to attract the Malay population, by which the majority of whom are Muslims, to support and co-operate with them. As the Prophet is regarded as a liberator by the Muslims, the Japanese took this symbol, to signify their liberation acts for the people of Malaya. In this context, visuals are used as a weapon in the media to influence the people's minds and support the Japanese Government. This is furthered with the conception and practice of 'Shintoism' that is less dogmatic, allowing the Japanese to participate in this celebration.





Visual 4: Poster '*Belajarlal! Pakailah! Bahasa Nippon!*', circa 1943



Visual 4 is a poster illustration that encourages Malayan people to learn Japanese language (*Nippon-Go*), by the artist Y.Kurakane (Yoshiyuki Kurakane). The 48 cm x 71 cm poster, is released around 1943, that shows a serious effort by the *Dai Nippon*, to introduced the Japanese language to the people of Malaya. The Japanese intend to make *Nippon-Go* as 'lingua franca', capable of being a nation's medium of speech, in a greater commonwealth that includes East Asia. It was issued by *Senden-Bu* (Propaganda Department), based in Singapore. Complementing this pictorial poster, is the text in Malay (*rumi*), English and Japanese (*katakana*), to enable observers to visualize the visual meaning clearly.



Visual 4: Leaflet 'Make Fortune by Co-Operating with Japan', circa 1943

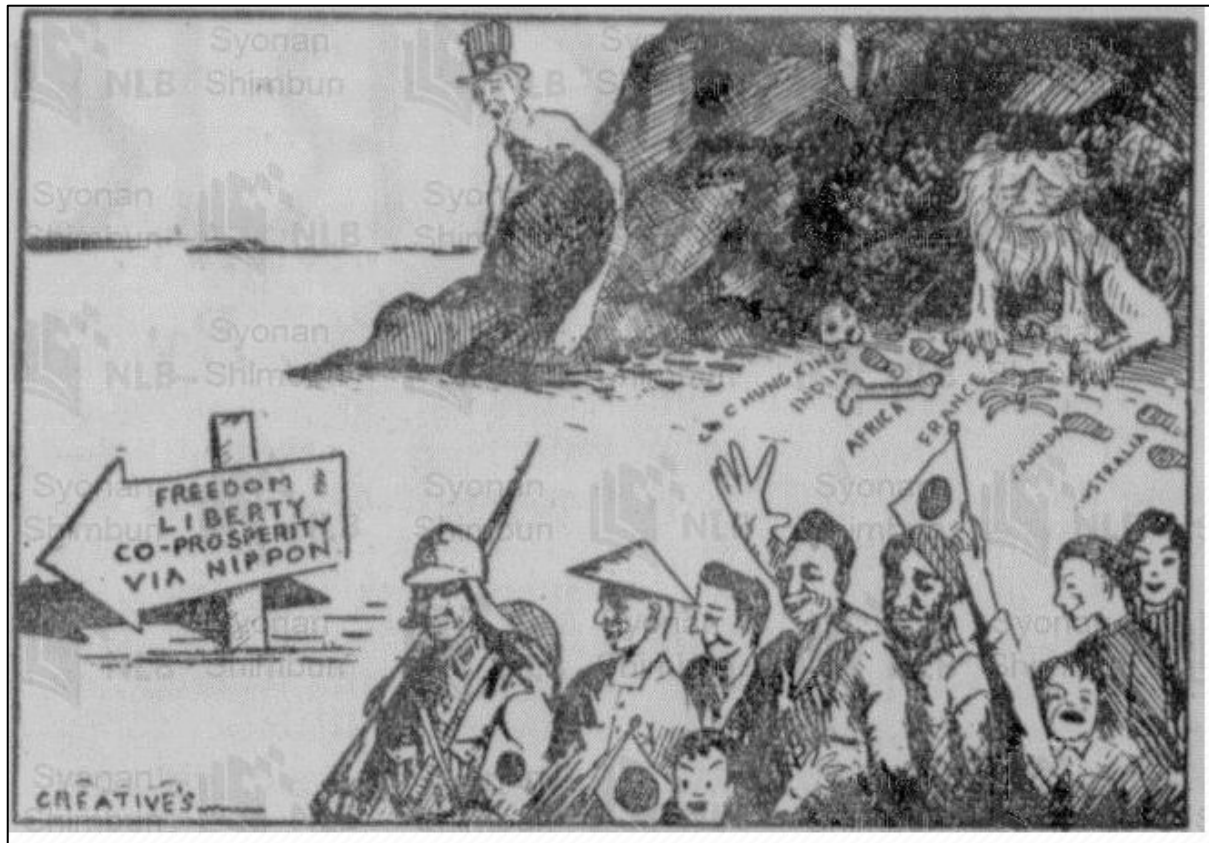
Visual 4 is a leaflet entitled "Make Fortune by Co-Operating with Japan", circulated in 1943, that encourage the people Malaya, to work with Japan through business and trade activities. Images of a group of people, who stormed Japanese-owned business premises, can be identified, through the visual of the *Hinomaru* flag as an entity, or a symbol of the owner of the premises. The *katakana*-written texts, on the signage of the shop reads 'Japanese Store' and 'Japanese Goods'. The activities of buying daily necessities, brings the meaning of purchasing power, among the consumer society to boost economic activity during the occupation period. In the top corner of the leaflet, exposed a figure of an English man, with his depressing face expression, lifting his chin with his hand that aims to describe the British, who is facing bankruptcy. The closure of a British store, is symbolically related to the British embarrassing defeat in the campaign of the Great Eastern Asia Great War (*Dai Toa Senso*).



Visual 5: Poster **Hiduplah Malai Baru**, February 1944

Visual 5 is a poster dated on February 15, 1944, marks the second anniversary of Dai-Nippon's, success in liberating Malaya and Singapore (*Syonan To*) from the British. The image of a man working on paddy fields, brings meaning to the community's support to agrarian campaigns and policies. The strong and stout figure, envisions the indispensable workforce of youth that contribute to the reform and transformation efforts, organized by the Japanese Government. Healthy and energetic youth is an important asset to the government, as a frontline to defend its rule in all aspects. The 'New Malai' (New Malaya) doctrine, sparked by the Japanese, encouraged agricultural activities (cultivation), cultural transformation and a new educational system. The Japan's systematic and state-of-the-art doctrine, were designed to replace the old order and systems adopted from Europe. The Japanese Army administration encouraged Malaya to cultivate, more than what the British had endeavored.





Visual 6: Cartoon Freedom, Liberty & Co-Prosperity Via Nippon, Syonan Shimbun Fortnightly newspaper, 6 Jun 1945



Visual 6 is a visual propaganda cartoons using the title Freedom, Liberty & Co-Prosperity Via Nippon (Freedom, Independence & Commonwealth Together with Japan) that is circulated during the edges of the Second World War. The cartoon is broadcasted two months before the giant explosion in Hiroshima, which serves as a strategy in the last minute, to mobilize the masses, to stay together and support the Japanese side. The notion of the end of the war that is not in favor of Japan, is still manipulated by visual images, reflecting the unwavering support of the Asian people to them. Westerners, such as the United States and the British, are manifested as barbarians, ferocious animals, but frustrated and hungry, resulting in a fatal war. This can be noted in the image of skulls and bones, which bears the effects of greed and humanitarian conflicts with the damaging effects, devastates and injures the western-occupied countries such as Nanking, India, Africa, France, Canada and Australia. A manufacturing consent, which uses visual as a powerful entity, is perceived to be effective to impact the audience.

CONCLUSION

Visual is a 'non-military' weapon of the Japanese Military Administration which has its own appeal in conceptualizing the understanding and acceptance of its observers. The Japanese propaganda attacked Malaya, through the Asian slogans of Asian liberation, the 'Co-Sphere Prosperity of the Greater East Asia', New Order era of '*Dai Toa Senso*', and also the '*Hakkoichiu*' conception (Eight World Angles Under One Roof). This means that the Japanese claim that their actions in Asia are a form of liberation, and not an occupation. The Japanese shouted that the Asian country, has been successfully released from the grips of the Imperialistic powers of the West. Accordingly, departments and units of *Senden-Bu* (Propaganda), are believed to have been the most important indoctrination unit of the Japanese by organizing propaganda programs throughout Malaya, from 1942 to 1945. One of its approaches was to use powerful visuals to attract support, attention and





sympathy among the masses, along with other mediums such as literature, radio and propaganda film. Understandably, visual has become an effective tool for attracting attention, persuasive power and useful sources of indoctrination. This is closely related towards the changing viewpoints and mass reaction from the people of Malaya to the political, social, economic and religious issues. Indirectly, if it is refined from different points of view, the occupation advocates the spirit of independent nationalism for the multiracial people across the region. The appeal of liberation, opposition and echoes of anti-colonial nationalism, invokes a call upon the wind of independence and self-governing system by combating the powers of Western imperialism. As we can see in the historical memoirs, after the defeat of the Dai Nippon, together with the end of the Second World War episode, several countries in the Asian continent, have gained and enjoyed independence. The Republic of Indonesia declared its independence on 17 August 1945, followed by India on August 17, 1947, Burma asserted its independence, on 4 January 1948 and subsequently Malaya, declared 'MERDEKA' (independence), from the British empire, on August 31, 1957.

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