

**FRANK HERBERT'S INCORPORATION OF ARABIC - DERIVED  
TERMINOLOGY AS A TOOL OF CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL  
WORLDBUILDING IN "DUNE"**

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses the role of language as a structural instrument of authority in Frank Herbert's "Dune". While the novel has been widely studied for its ecological, political and philosophical dimensions, relatively little attention has been paid to the systematic function of its lexicon in forging ideological power. Focusing on four key lexemes, *Mahdi*, *Muad'ib*, *Gob Jabbar*, and *Shai-Hulud*, the study employs a threefold analytical approach combining etymological analysis, semiotic interpretation, and close reading. It demonstrates that Herbert's use of Arabic-derived and pseudo-Semitic terminology operates not solely as an auratic device or marker of exoticism, but as a mechanism that stabilizes authority across religious, juridical, and ecological domains. These lexemes carry a pre-existing semantic, cultural and intertextual weight. The findings suggest that Herbert's lexical choices function as mechanisms of discursive stabilization that neutralize power and render authority linguistically inevitable. By embedding historical semantic resonances into diegesis, "Dune" transforms language into an active agent of worldbuilding, shaping both character perception and reader immersion. The study concludes that Herbert's linguistic architecture exemplifies how discourse functions, moves as a productive force, and naming precedes and legitimizes action, shaping both narrative reality and reader perception.

**Keywords:** Dune; Arabic etymology; semiotics, worldbuilding; Herbert; discourse; ideology.

### **Introduction**

Frank Herbert's *Dune* is a sci-fi classic set in a universe governed by a number of alliances and noble houses. The entire universe in *Dune* is fed on one sole resource: "*Spice Mélange*". It's an essential asset for the entire galaxy, including interstellar travel and life extension. The spice is only found on one planet called Arrakis, which, within the diegesis, is known colloquially as *Dune* due to its vast desert ecology. This world is "both futuristic and feudal, where powerful families compete to control planetary resources and influence precious, interstellar trade through acts of deception, bribery, and occasionally brute force" (Mack, 2011).

The world has always addressed *Dune* as an ecological and geopolitical masterpiece, as well as a tool to reveal underlying patterns of experience. As Janet Kafka noted, "Herbert succeeded in creating a totally believable alien world, complete with culture, philosophy, ecology, [and] language" (1975, p. 47). Little attention has been given to its sophisticated language, its borrowed vocabularies, linguistic

concepts and structures: they build *Dune*'s ideological authority, social hierarchies, beliefs, religious doctrines and abundantly pepper the atmosphere and the overall perception of the galaxy. Frank Herbert uses language to shape the doctrine that lies beneath the *Dune*. The authority that stems from the concepts, the beliefs that arise from word plays, and the control that comes forth into existence to carve out and accentuate the significance of language. In *Dune*, language is the engine and the powerhouse for the exercise of control.

“Language is a guide to social reality” (Sapir, 1929) core principle that Frank Herbert himself acknowledged and incorporated in his works. In *Dune*, the Arabic terminology is functional; it shapes systems of belief, bodily discipline, and ideological authority. The present paper shall focus on four crucial lexical items from *Dune*, namely, *Muad'Dib* (Arabic: مؤدب, mu'addib, “teacher, tutor”), *Mahdi* (Arabic: مهدي, mahdī, “the guided one”), *Gom Jabbar* (Arabic: جبار, “the powerful, the compeller”), and *Shai-Hulud* (Arabic: شيء shay', “thing, being” + خلود khulūd, “eternity, immortality”), selected for their central role and their undeniable roots in classical languages. Through etymological analysis, semiotic interpretation, and close textual reading, this study explores how Herbert's linguistic borrowings construct a cohesive cultural and ideological cosmos. His deliberate use of these terms proves that language functions as both a mechanism of worldbuilding and an instrument of authority. By examining these four lexical items, this paper will demonstrate how Herbert incorporated social and spiritual hierarchies into the narrative, using words not just to describe the universe of *Dune*, but to govern it.

To understand why the author chooses these classical roots, it's important to look at them in the light of his philosophy. He considered language to be a dynamic force that shapes the mind, which he explained during a 1969 interview:

If you want to give the reader the solid impression that he is not here and now, but that something of here and now has been carried to that faraway place and time, what better way to say to our culture that this is so than to give him the language of that place.... That oral tool - it has its own inertial forces; it's mind- shaping as well as used by the mind.

(Herbert, 1969)

With this perspective, Herbert describes language as an “oral tool” with “inertial forces.” he suggests that words carry a weight that can actually dictate the direction of a society. This “mind-shaping” quality serves as the foundation for the world of *Dune*, where the vocabulary used by various factions is not merely a means of communication but a deliberate method of maintaining cultural identity and power.

### Methods

The analytical approach adopted in this paper is threefold, which analyzes and uncovers Herbert's vocabulary choice. First, via etymological analysis, where each term is traced back to its historical origins, primarily in Arabic. This serves to reveal the cultural associations and semantic weight that these lexemes carry into the fictional cosmos of Arrakis. The aforementioned historical layer is complemented by a semiotic analysis, through which we examine how these terms function as signs within the society of *Dune*, how they act as a signifier of power, class, and religious inevitability. And finally, close reading is applied to specific passages in which these lexemes appear, showing how characters react to them, demonstrating the “*mind-shaping*” power of language within the moments of ritual, conflict, or command.

### Results

The following table presents the linguistic characteristics of the four selected lexemes. The findings are organized according to their Arabic etymological roots, their semiotic function within the narrative, and the specific domain of authority they influence within the diegesis.

Table 1:

Lexeme	Origin	Literal Meaning	Functional Domain in <i>Dune</i>
Muad'Dib	Arabic (mu'addib)	Teacher/Disciplinarian/Educator, One Who Disciplines	Pedagogical / Symbolic/Ecological
Mahdi	Arabic (al-Mahdī)	The Guided one	Messianic / Religious

Gom Jabbar	Arabic/Persian-Arabic hybrid (qawm/qom +jabbār) (probable)	Mighty Force/High Enemy (etymologically opaque)	Judicial / Lethal Discipline
Shai - Hulud	Arabic (constructed form)	Thing of Eternity/Immortality	Ecological / Divine

As can be seen from all these six examples, the original phonetic structure of the root language is maintained, thereby creating a direct linguistic link between historical classical languages and the fictional setting. Herbert relied on the “ignorance and ethnocentrism” of his audience to create “exotic effect” (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). By employing neologisms, the author accentuates their “semantic weight” by establishing a sense of “otherness”. For a Western reader in the 1960s, these lexemes functioned as “mind-shaping” tools because they were identified as “religious” or “ancient”, but would be “foreign” enough to remain “mysterious” (Ryan, 2001).

Marie-Laure Ryan provides a framework for this effect through her theory of *narrative immersion*. According to her, these lexemes serve as “anchors” (p. 121), that pull the reader into the fictional reality by making the world of Arrakis feel culturally dense and historically “solid”. This process of “re-centering” (p. 93) allows the reader to accept the fictional authority of the text, to get submerged into the sea of the textual world, even if that solidity is built on the audience’s lack of familiarity with the source languages.

### Discussion

Taken together, the results indicate that Herbert’s incorporation of Arabic-derived terminology in *Dune* serves as a deliberate technique for disseminating authority across religious, political, and ecological domains, rather than as a collection of disparate lexical choices. Previous scholarship has frequently characterized Herbert’s vocabulary as fostering an atmosphere of “exoticism” or cultural “otherness.” Nevertheless, the current findings indicate that these lexemes serve more accurately as tools for ideological stabilization within the narrative. Each term analyzed preserves the phonetic integrity of its source language while being embedded in a specific domain of power, such as judicial (Gom Jabbar), messianic (Mahdi), or ecological (Shai-Hulud); thus, it legitimizes authority through linguistic familiarity disguised as foreignness. This illustrates that Herbert’s worldbuilding depends more on the reader’s implicit acknowledgement of language as a vessel of historical authenticity than on a spectacle. In this sense, the foreign-derived lexicon actively shapes how the world’s power structures are viewed and perceived, and is never challenged. Herbert’s lexicon exemplifies how language functions as an ideological infrastructure, a framework that shapes both readers’ and characters’ perceptions.

Within the linguistic architecture of *Dune*, the term *Mahdi* (Arabic: مهدي, mahdī, “the guided one”) exerts a particular powerful position, functioning as a semiotic conduit that, without the need for a lengthy prelude, conveys an existing messianic teleology into the diegesis. Unlike neologisms that require contextual explanation, *Mahdi* arrives already saturated with the eschatological gravitas of Islamic tradition, where it is manifested as a divinely guided figure whose emergence is both inescapable and cataclysmic. By preserving the term’s original phonetic integrity, Herbert activates these associations while transposing them into a fictional future, thereby allowing Paul Atreides’ authority to appear linguistically inevitable rather than a mere political artifice.

Consequently, this mechanism transforms messianism into a foundational narrative axiom. This is most evident in the response of Fremen, the indigenous population of Arrakis, whose allegiance to Atreides is determined more by the name of his job than by the quality of his actions, which foreshadows his rise as the fulfillment of a long-standing destiny. In this context, *Mahdi* serves as an intellectual tool of stabilization, establishing authority based on religious certainty, rather than as a mere title. While scholars like Durrani (2021) have emphasized the depth and seriousness of Herbert’s engagement with Islamic history and theology, this linguistic determinism also risks reproducing orientalist semiotics by portraying Fremen belief as inherently messianic and linguistically subordinate to prophetic structures. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of *Mahdi* within the narrative illustrates Herbert’s mastery and acute

awareness of language as a force capable of shaping collective belief, revealing how religious terminology can function simultaneously as cultural homage and as a tool of narrative control.

The lexical force of *Mahdi* in *Dune* is reinforced by Herbert's explicit anchoring of the term within the narrative's prophetic discourse. Early in the novel, the Fremen prophecy states that "The Mahdi will be aware of things others cannot see," while the appended definition identifies the *Mahdi* as "The One Who Will Lead Us to Paradise" (Herbert, 2003, p. 503). These formulations reflect the semantic range of the Arabic root *h-d-y* (هـ د ي), denoting guidance or divine direction, from which *mahdī* (مهدي), "the rightly guided one," is derived (Almaany). In Islamic history, the Mahdi signifies a restorer of justice whose authority is legitimized not through political succession but through divine sanction, a meaning codified in classical Islamic scholarship (Hermansen, 2003). By broad incorporation of this term into the Fremen belief system, Herbert establishes a messianic framework that makes Paul Atreides' authority linguistically predetermining rather than narratively contested. Herbert's reversal of historical precedent amplifies this effect even more. The term was famously appropriated by the Sudanese religious leader Muhammad Ahmad, who in 1881 proclaimed himself the awaited *Mahdi* and led a large-scale anti-colonial uprising against Ottoman-Egyptian and British authority during the Mahdist War (Holt, 1961, p. 86). In this historical setting, the Mahdist movement served as an indigenous form of resistance against foreign imperial dominance. *Dune* subverts this dynamic by portraying an outsider himself as the Mahdi, welcomed and elevated by the indigenous population. Paul Atreides is given the title *Mahdi* by the Fremen themselves, who see his deeds through the prism of their ancestral traditions. This narrative inversion intensifies the novel's ideological complexity and demonstrates how linguistic and religious terminology can reshape political authority and turn an outsider into the focal point of a liberation.

However, Paul instrumentalized the Fremen and their prophecy to launch a universe-wide jihad, which eventually destabilizes and undermines the conventional meaning of guidance. Thus, the term *Mahdi* functions as a double-edged signifier: while it confers immediate religious legitimacy, showing how messianic terminology can be used to legitimize domination while also providing instantaneous religious credibility. Herbert's use of *Mahdi* serves as an example of how inherited religious lexemes act as ideological accelerants, influencing belief and obedience while disguising the artificial nature of power under the façade of destiny.

While the appellation *Mahdi* functions as a lexeme of eschatological inevitability, *Muad'Dib* operates as a sophisticated signifier of cultivated authority and symbolic instruction. Unlike the former example, which carries a pre-existing messianic framework from Islamic tradition, *Muad'Dib* appears to derive from the Arabic word مؤدب (*mu'addib*), which denotes a "teacher," "disciplinarian," or "one who educates," and originates from the trilateral root *'-d-b* (أ د ب), associated with discipline, refinement, and education (*adab*), connoting both moral cultivation and cultural instruction (Almaany). In classical Arabic usage, a "mu'addib" is traditionally connected with the instruction and moral cultivation of children, particularly within aristocratic or courtly settings. By appropriating and phonetically transforming this lexical root into *Muad'Dib*, Herbert preserves the semantic core of the original term and adapts its form to fit the linguistic ecology of Arrakis. The trilateral root is Herbert's rendering of *Muad'Dib* as Paul's chosen Fremen name; therefore, it carries pedagogical and ideological implications: Paul is thus rendered not merely as the "rightly guided" but also the active agent of discipline who instructs and recalibrates collective consciousness of the Fremen.

Within the diegesis, the name *Muad'Dib* is further layered by its ecological referent: the desert mouse admired by the Fremen for its ability to survive harsh conditions. As codified in the novel's Appendix, the *Muad'Dib* is: "...the adapted kangaroo mouse of Arrakis, a creature associated in the Fremen earth-spirit mythology [...]. This creature is admired by Fremen for its ability to survive in the open desert" (Herbert, 2003, p. 504). By assuming this mantle, Paul Atreides symbolically establishes an alignment with indigenous resilience, effectively turning foreign authority into local legitimacy. The name becomes a rhetorical bridge through which Paul integrates his persona into Fremen culture while concomitantly preparing to mobilize it for imperial expansion. Thus, *Muad'Dib* exemplifies the mechanism by which Herbert's lexicon constructs authority not only through inherited religious resonance but also through linguistic assimilation and symbolic performance. In the world of *Dune*, leadership is a structure established through the art of naming, and through that naming, it is ontologically stabilized. *Muad'Dib* illustrates how Arabic-derived terminology in *Dune* enhances not

just the exotic ambiance of the fictitious universe but also the articulation of leadership, knowledge, and social discipline within the diegesis.

While the appellations *Mahdi* and *Muad'Dib* build prophetic and pedagogical underpinnings, the lexeme *Gom Jabbar* offers a formidable dimension of juridical and lethal discipline. In the diegesis, the *Gom Jabbar* serves not only as an instrument but also as a semiotic agent utilized by the Bene Gesserit, a powerful sisterhood trained in psychological discipline, political manipulation, and advanced mental conditioning. *Gom Jabbar* determines a subject's "humanity", functioning as a coercive threat and a tangible proof of sovereign judgment. The official lexicon in the *Dune Appendix* provides the fundamental interpretation for this instrument, defining the *Gom Jabbar* as "the high-handed enemy; that specific poison needle tipped with meta-cyanide used by Bene Gesserit Proctors in the death-alternative test of human awareness (Herbert, 2003, p. 500). According to this definition, the needle is defined as a codified part of a "death-alternative test", where the subject's survival is solely dependent on their ability to control themselves.

Further description provided in *The Dune Encyclopedia* reveals that the *Gom Jabbar* functioned as the dismal focal point of Bene Gesserit education (McNelly, 1984). The mechanics were as merciless as the intent. The poisoned needle, tipped with meta-cyanide and lacking any antidote, formed part of a structured awareness test associated with the order's training institution on Wallach IX. This school functions as the principal site of Bene Gesserit formation, where sisterhood members go through rigorous academic, psychological, and physical training. During the trial, the candidate's hand is placed in a box containing nerve inducers designed to simulate escalating agony, while the proctor holds the *Gom Jabbar* at the subject's neck, threatening immediate death upon withdrawal. This trial itself is a masterpiece of psychological and physical torture. It was clearly intended to weed out those who were unable to control their biology.

The test is administered by Gaius Helen Mohiam, who bears the title of Reverend Mother, a rank within the Bene Gesserit reserved for members who have completed the order's highest level of psychological and physiological training. The Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam defines the parameters of the encounter with chilling precision, "I hold at your neck the gom jabbar," she said, "The gom jabbar, the highhanded enemy. It's a needle with a drop of poison on its tip. Ah-ah! Don't pull away or you'll feel that poison." (Herbert, 2003, p. 15)

In this declaration, the language used to introduce the instrument has two functions: it both identifies the item and delineates the limits of the subject's bodily action. In this passage, the linguistic designation comes before material explanation in *Gom Jabbar's* initial introduction, suggesting that authority is discursively constructed before being physically exercised. This sequence is significant; the lexeme is first introduced as a proper noun, and then peppered with a morally charged epithet. In this case, the act of naming the object precedes and legitimizes the threat.

From a philological perspective, the second component of the expression resonates with the Arabic word جَبَّار (jabbār), derived from the root ج ب ر (j-b-r), a semantic field associated with force, compulsion, and overwhelming authority (Almaany). The most striking examples of this semantic field are most vividly reflected in the divine epithet al-Jabbār ("The Compeller") and the divine description of the qawman jabbārīn - a "tyrannical people" of exceeding strength (QAC).

Crucially, the term ritualizes violence through the high art of naming. The scene of the "test" acquires a transcendent symbolic importance because the object is never reduced to a descriptive neutrality. It is contained within a lexeme that evokes the absolute dominion of judgment. In this case, language functions as the necessary precondition for action: the invocation of *Gom Jabbar* creates the "right" to lethal authority before the actual deed is completed. In this respect, Herbert's lexical selection transforms a mere instrument into a totalizing institution. The preceding element *gom*, however, does not correspond to a clearly attested Arabic lexical item. It may therefore represent Herbert's own phonetic adaptation designed to evoke a Semitic linguistic register. A more speculative interpretation could associate *gom* with the Persian word قوم (qawm/qom), meaning "people," "tribe," or "nation," whose plural form اقوام (aqvām) is widely used in Persian to denote ethnic groups or peoples. If such an association is accepted, the expression *Gom Jabbar* could be interpreted as a hybrid construction drawing on both Arabic and Persian lexical material, although this connection remains conjectural and should be treated with caution.

Within the hierarchical nomenclature of Arrakis, the lexeme *Shai-Hulud* functions as the profound manifestation of an ecological theology. Unlike the term *Mahdi*, which maintains a strict

formal adherence to Arabic morphology, *Shai-Hulud* operates as a stylized, pseudo-Semitic hybrid. It is a construction that prioritizes “auratic” resonance over grammatical precision, effectively transforming a biological organism into a primordial deity through selective linguistic borrowing. This naming convention ensures that the creature is perceived not as mere fauna, but as a manifest god whose existence is the precondition for all life on the planet.

The official lexicon in the *Dune Appendix* characterizes *Shai-Hulud* through a series of evocative, anthropomorphic honorifics: “Old Man of the Desert,” “Old Father Eternity,” and “Grandfather of the Desert” (Herbert, 2003). These titles suggest a kinship that transcends the biological; for the Fremen, the planet itself is synonymous with the spirit of *Shai-Hulud*. As the “Grandfather of the Desert,” the worm is positioned as a progenitor, an entity that is both the “bane and the boon” of human existence. It is a dualistic force that devours the unwary yet provides the very substrate of Fremen culture: transportation, the sacred crysknife fashioned from its teeth, and the transformative Water of Life.

Philologically, the term’s gravity is anchored in a speculative yet potent Arabic resonance. The first component, “shai”, finds a parallel in the Arabic شيء (shay’), denoting a “thing,” “entity,” or “being” (Almaany). The second, more substantial element appears to derive from the root خ ل د (kh-l-d), from which the noun خلود (khulūd), meaning “eternity,” “immortality,” or “enduring existence,” is derived (Almaany). While a grammatically precise Arabic construction might require a form such as shay’ al-khulūd (“the thing of eternity”), Herbert’s hybridized rendering *Shai-Hulud* instead produces a stylized phonetic compound that evokes Arabic lexical structures without strictly adhering to their grammatical rules. By naming the creature the “Eternal Entity,” the narrative elevates it beyond the realm of mere fauna; it becomes an embodiment of temporal permanence that predates and outlasts all imperial regimes.

The socio-religious dependency of the Fremen upon *Shai-Hulud* creates a unique cultural matrix where biology and liturgy are inseparable. To the foreign occupiers, the worms are a mere mechanical interruption of productivity, a “pest” that destroys spice harvesters. However, for the indigenous Fremen, the worms are the “Makers,” the literal architects of the sand and the spice. This disconnect highlights a central theme in Herbert’s work: the inability of colonial powers to perceive the sacred nature of ecology. The Fremen’s survival is a “symbiosis” that depends on the worm for everything from religious rites to the “Water of Life,” the lethal biliary secretion that allows for spiritual transcendence.

Crucially, the evolutionary trajectory of the narrative reaches its zenith in the figure of Paul Atreides, whose ascension to a “human super-being” is predicated entirely upon the existence of the worms. By consuming the Water of Life, Paul fulfills a prophecy that is biologically rooted in the worm’s chemistry. Here, Herbert sheds light on a central tenet of human history: the role of the non-human animal as a catalyst for evolutionary development. The worm is actually the very engine behind the human progress rather than a hindrance. The symbiosis achieved during the ritual of the Water of Life represents a moment where human evolution is physically fused with the life cycle of the “Old Father Eternity.”

Ultimately, *Shai-Hulud* demonstrates Herbert’s broader strategy of cultural transposition. By associating the desert ecology of Arrakis with the linguistic textures of Arabic-derived terminology, the lexeme performs a dual function: it designates a biological organism while simultaneously constructing a sacred signifier. The guttural onset and elongated vowels reproduce the acoustic solemnity of antiquity, ensuring that even the reader unversed in Semitic philology perceives the worm as a manifestation of cosmic continuity. Through *Shai-Hulud*, ecological power is linguistically sacralized and thereby rendered an absolute and unappealable law of the Arrakeen universe.

### Conclusion

The analysis of Arabic and Islamic-derived lexemes within *Dune* has revealed that Frank Herbert employs linguistic borrowing not merely for ornamental purposes, but as a structural mechanism to communicate authority, belief, and ecological order. Through scrutiny of terms such as *Mahdi*, *Muad’Dib*, *Gom Jabbar*, and *Shai-Hulud*, it becomes evident that Herbert integrates attested roots and stylized pseudo-Semitic formations to construct a layered hierarchy of power. These lexemes operate across multiple interrelated domains, where religious legitimacy, pedagogical discipline, juridical enforcement, and ecological sacralization prove that language functions as the primary medium wherein sovereignty is both articulated and stabilized.

The research further indicates that Herbert's philological approach oscillates between direct borrowing and creative linguistic adaptation, resulting in a lexicon that conjures historical authenticity and maintains the autonomy of speculative fiction. The resonance of Arabic phonology and semantic patterns enhances the feeling of antiquity and inevitability within the diegesis, rendering the institutions of the Imperium historically grounded. In this sense, linguistic designation justifies the action, where natural forces are sacralized through connotations with permanence and eternity, prophetic power is framed through inherited religious terminology, and judicial violence is ritualized through naming. Therefore, language is constitutive of sovereignty rather than just descriptive. This aligns with Michel Foucault's observation in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* regarding the productive nature of discourse:

Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this 'more' that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe.  
(Foucault, 1972, p. 49)

This "more" in Herbert's work stands for the institutionalized and sacralized authority that turns a biological organism into a manifest deity, a needle into a juridical verdict.

At the same time, the analysis acknowledges that Herbert's constructions do not always adhere strictly to formal Arabic grammar. Rather, they exhibit a deliberate stylization that puts symbolic resonance over philological precision, which produces an "auratic" effect. Such hybrid formations instantiate how selective linguistic borrowing can generate cultural depth within speculative diegeses, giving fictional systems of belief, law, and ecology the illusion of inherited legitimacy.

Ultimately, the linguistic architecture of *Dune* exposes how language itself becomes a tool of authority. By embedding political, ecological, and religious structures within lexemes that evoke real historical traditions, Herbert transforms a speculative universe into one that is culturally and temporally grounded by incorporating political, ecological, and religious systems into a lexicon that evokes actual historical tradition. In this way, the novel demonstrates that the power of language in literature lies not only in its capacity to describe imagined worlds but also in its ability to endow those worlds with the weight of history, belief, and enduring significance. Whether it be a poisoned needle or a 400-meter sandworm, the object is never reduced to descriptive neutrality; it is always framed within a lexeme that evokes absolute dominion. Through the synthesis of ecology, theology, and linguistics, *Dune* continues to be a comprehensive study in how a "fictional" world can achieve a state of inherited legitimacy, rendering its laws as irrevocable as the desert itself.

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