

# Analysis of the Sociolinguistic Status of Saudi Female Personal Names

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## Abstract

Names are more likely to be considered as cultural tags used to signify some deep-rooted aspects within the culture of a given speech community. In Saudi Arabia, naming is linked with religion, traditions, values, beliefs, and events in people's lives. This paper aims at investigating Saudi female personal names from a sociolinguistic perspective and it suggests that these names are not mere arbitrary tags, but socio-cultural labels that occupy socio-cultural meanings and functions. For this reason, the current study draws on a stratified sample size of 280 Saudi female personal names collected by the researcher qualitatively by means of oral interviews as the tool for data collection. The analysis takes the form of a typology of Saudi female personal names and they were classified into different categories such as names relating to religious backgrounds, Bedouin-bound names, kinship names, family names, circumstantial names, foreign names, etc. As a result, the study will be a valuable contribution to the body of Arabic anthroponomy as it shows how the selection of Saudi female personal names is influenced by the ideology, culture, religion, attitudes, and social values of Saudi communities. The study concludes that the spread of foreign names may constitute a threat to the cultural identity of Saudis, an argument that calls for further investigation to either confirm or disconfirm it.

**Keywords:** Anthroponomy, Personal names, Culture, Sociolinguistic

## 1. Introduction

Names are commonly viewed as cultural words or words that refer to elements deeply rooted within the culture of a given speech community (Al-Quran & Al-Azzam). Naming system as a subject matter is a broad area of research which has received a special consideration of multitude people especially linguists and a considerable number of language philosophers.

The investigation of the names of human beings is attributed to anthroponomy which binds to genealogy, sociology, and anthropology and it is considered as a branch of the science of onomastics which studies language innovation and attitude towards language as a cultural phenomenon on a sufficient comparative principle for all groups (Thonus, 1992).

Culturally, we use personal names to characterize, identify, and eventually to connect. Personal names have a series of changes comparable to that of the other lexical elements of the language as they alter, develop, and die out over time (Rosenhouse, 2002). Naming can be regarded as a universal norm that is common to all human cultures, where each community around the world assigns names as labels to its people. Besides labeling people, personal names also fulfill other additional roles. According to Machaba (2004), these roles involve easing tension amongst members of a certain society, mirroring on people's communal, cultural, and religious beliefs, along with the events and circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. Yet, the implications behind personal names differ from culture to culture and from one community to another (Al-Zumor, 2009). Bach and Moran (2008) argue that personal names are meaningless tags; however, a study conducted by Al-Zumor (2009) claims that they are not. He believes that personal names are meaningful tags that are based on socio-cultural and pragmatic contexts.

As pointed out by Al-Zumor (2009), a few number of investigations have been carried out in such significant field of research, specifically Arabic personal names, and such studies that determined in the literature of Arabic anthroponomy are almost entirely linguistic. He further stated that these studies “basically deal with the structure of Arab names in terms of ism, kunya, nasab, laqab, nisba, etc. These studies on Arabic anthroponomy show that this field of research, perhaps, has not received adequate attention from a sociolinguistic perspective in the Arabic context.” (p. 17) Therefore, the current paper attempts to address this gap.

### *1.1 Context of the Problem*

Personal names are usually constructed historically, maintained socially, and they are based on the shared assumptions and expectations of members of the society concerned (Akinnaso, 1980). Naming system is a broad area that has been of consideration to multitude people especially linguists and anthropologists. However, the study of personal names within the field of sociolinguistics has not occupied much attention in the framework of linguistic research.

Moreover, some of the studies that have been carried out in the area of Arabic anthroponomy are almost entirely linguistic, and some are not comprehensive (Auda, 2003; Beeston, 1971; Mary Ann Walter, 2002; Omer, 2006; Rosenhouse, 2002; Saadi, 2006); as they basically look at the formation of Arab names in terms of ism, kunya, nasab, laqab, nisba, etc (Al-Zumor, 2009). As a result, those previous studies on Arabic personal names demonstrate that this research area has not occupied considerable consideration from a sociolinguistic point of view in the Saudi context.

### *1.2 Problem of the Study*

As noted above, numerous studies mainly look at the formation of Arab names, yet such names have not received considerable consideration from a sociolinguistic perspective in the

Saudi context. In this respect, the current paper attempts to address this gap through analysing the sociolinguistic status of some of the most common Saudi female personal names. Moreover, as stated by Bach and Moran (2008), personal names are regarded as meaningless tags that indicate specific concepts. However, this paper suggests that Saudi personal names are no more considered as meaningless tags, but socio-cultural labels that fulfill socio-cultural meanings and functions.

### *1.3 Research Questions*

In an attempt to achieve the aims and objectives of the current study, the following questions will be addressed:

- 1 What do Saudi female personal names stand for?
- 2 To what extent the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic implications influence the selection of personal names among Saudi societies?

### *1.4 Objectives of the Study*

Personal names are of interest to the society as a whole. In line with the theory which states that there is a solid relation that links people's language and their cultural traditions; names can be plainly perceived when situated in socio-cultural context (Barany et al., n.d.). When studying and analysing personal names, we should therefore focus more on the functional theory for names are not mere meaningless tags as perceived, bearing the society and culture in mind. Since Saudi personal names can be perceived and interpreted more efficiently within the context of Saudi Arabia, members of the society who thoroughly know their language and culture are more eligible to convey the meaning of such names consequently. Thus, the current research aims at analysing the sociolinguistic status of Saudi female personal names, bearing the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic interpretations of these names in mind.

### *1.5 Significance of the Study*

The present study is of importance for several reasons:

- It suggests that Saudi personal names are no longer viewed as meaningless tags, but socio-cultural labels which occupy socio-cultural meanings and functions;
- It provides a fresh insight into the study of Saudi anthroponomy and sociology, and it also contributes in mapping out the general worldview of Saudi culture;
- It aims at analysing Saudi female personal names from a sociolinguistic perspective, bearing in mind the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic interpretations of these names.

### *1.6 Review of Literature*

#### *1.6.1 Theoretical Background*

Anthroponymy is considered as a branch of onomastics which studies the etymology of personal names as a cultural phenomenon (Thonus, 1992). The current study is a contribution to the field of linguistic anthropology which deals with how language influences social life

and sociolinguistics. It supports the theory which states that there is a solid interface which binds people's language and their social traditions. It reflects on (i) the way in which language is utilized as a cultural resource that mirrors on the values of people as well as the whole society; and (ii) the way in which language is perceived as a vehicle for signaling attitudes and philosophy of a particular society (Nkamigbo, 2019). As pointed out by Agyekum (2006), language can be viewed as a microscope that goes beyond what is expressed and settles upon what is practiced in the real socio-cultural world. Foley (1997), on the other hand, sheds light on the function of linguistic anthropology and its contributory role as follows:

Anthropological linguistics is that sub-field of linguistics which is concerned with the place of language in its wider social and cultural context, its role in forging and sustaining cultural practices and social structures. It views language through the prism of the core anthropological concept, culture, and as such seeks to uncover the meaning behind the use, misuse or non-use of language, its different forms, registers and styles. It is an interpretive discipline peeling away at language to find cultural understandings. (p. 3)

#### 1.6.2 Related Studies

The field of studying anthropology has received a special consideration of multitude people especially linguist, anthropologists, and psychologists throughout the years. A literary survey of studying personal names indicates that few investigations have been carried out in such significant field of research, specifically Arabic personal names (Al-Zumor, 2009). The book of Sharma (2005) entitled "Panorama of Indian Anthroponomy" shares a historical, socio-cultural, and linguistic analysis of the latest trends of the names chosen by various Indian classes, societies, and regions. By contrast, Koul (1995) studies personal names in Kashmiri from a linguistic perspective including surnames and nicknames of Kashmiri; however, such study poses a number of issues since it does not cover the socio-cultural implications of such names. Thus, it is important to bear in mind the socio-cultural aspect of the society concerned. Furthermore, a study conducted by Ogie (2002) studies Edo personal names and states that such names are utilized to emphasize and represent significant aspects of Edo culture. In an attempt to affirm the connotation which states that personal names mirror significant aspects of the culture of a given society, a study carried out by Agyekum (2006) analyses Akan personal names within the linguistic anthropology and discusses the typology of such names as a fundamental aspect of the Akan society. The study argues that names are no longer viewed as arbitrary tags, but socio-cultural labels that occupy socio-cultural interpretations.

The linguistic and socio-cultural motives bind to personal names were also of interest to Al-Zumor (2009). He studied almost 300 Yemeni female personal names placed in different districts of Yemen in an effort to perceive the anthropology of the Yemeni society together with disclosing the nomenclature followed in these districts. In accordance with his study, the typology of Yemeni female personal names along with the socio-cultural and linguistic analysis of such names reveal that they mirror the social and cultural beliefs of the Yemeni society. Correspondingly, in a sample of Jordanian community, Al-Azzam and Al-Quran

(2014) studied varied social and cultural allusions carried in a sample of Arabic names and shared the multifarious motives behind opting for particular names that are associated with climatic, religious, political, and romance backgrounds. The paper reveals that people of Jordan society vary in the tendency behind naming their children, as conservative people are more likely to name their sons after grandparents, while young parents tend to borrow the names of well-known figures or perhaps socially unfavorable persons for their children. The paper further concludes that translating Jordanian proper names may pose some cultural, historical, and other extra-linguistic issues due to the lack of such varied significations related to the target language culture. Another study carried out by Abdul (2014) analyses the types of Ewe names, their variations, the dynamics of their choice, and the people's preferences for and attitudes towards their choice. The study shows that the Ewe naming system has subjected to some shifts due to certain factors related to language and religious contacts. The analysis also shows that some Ewe personal names may vary depending on the geographical as well as age-based variations, as the older members bear more Ewe names than the younger ones.

Another study that emerged from a sociolinguistic consideration is Al-Qawasmi and Al-Abed Al-Haq's work (2016) which investigates many differences in naming newborn children of both genders in the Jordanian community over the past decades from the 70s to the early year of 2015. Results reveal that the choice of newborn names for male and female of Jordanian society was strongly associated with certain socio-cultural backgrounds in relation to religion, politics, naming after relatives, the surrounding environment, and certain phonetic changes in sound pattern of personal names specifically in female ones. One of the recent studies conducted by Bisilki (2018) sheds light on the African anthroponomy and cross-sectionally studies traditional personal names among the Birkpakpaam people in northern Ghana. The scope of the study subsumes the typology, the changing patterns, and the linguistic structure of personal names in the linguistic context of Birkpakpaam and argues that native Likpakpaln personal names among this group can be classified into six categories, of which insinuating/proverbial names, as attested by the author, constitute the predominant category. Another most recent work carried out by Aljbour and Al-Haq (2019) investigates the feminine personal names among the people of Beni Sakhr (a large Bedouin tribe living in Jordan) with reference to the social and cultural implications related to such names and the changes in naming conventions over three generations (grandmothers, mothers, and daughters). The study finds evidence to suggest that the alteration in the behavior and attitudes of Beni Sakhr tribe does influence the naming practices within this group. Similarly, Nkamigbo (2019) examines the naming system of Igbo society within the framework of social and cultural dynamics. The study reveals that names are no longer driven by the traditional Igbo philosophy, but rather by some external factors like new religions, urbanization, and Western philosophy.

However, as described in the literature of Arabic anthroponomy, studies carried out in this significant field of research are predominantly linguistic, they tend to look at the structure of Arab names as to ism, kunya, nasab, laqab, nisba, etc (Al-Zumor, 2009). A part of these studies includes: Beeston's (1971) "Arabic Nomenclature", Auda's (2003) "Period Arabic

Names and Naming Practices”, Omer’s (2006) “The typology of Arabic Proper Nouns”, and Saadi’s study (2006) “Behind the Name: Etymology of Arabic Names”. Furthermore, Rosenhouse’s study (2002) examines some similarities and differences between Hebrew and Arabic personal names from phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic point of view. Mary Ann Walter (2002), on the other hand, studies the naming system of Hadhramaut (Yemen), however the study is not thorough and the data obtained is inadequate. As a result, the earlier studies on Arabic anthroponomy indicate that this research area has not received a considerable consideration from a sociolinguistic point of view, especially in the Saudi context. Thus, the current paper attempts to address this gap.

## **2. Method**

This study adopts a synchronic sociolinguistic analysis of Saudi female personal names with the intention of exploring and studying the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic interpretations of these names and their semantics. In this light, the present paper relies on the theory which states that personal names are no longer mere arbitrary tags, but socio-cultural labels that occupy socio-cultural meanings and functions (Agyekum, 2006). The study draws on a stratified sample size of 280 female personal names found commonly in Qassim region of Saudi Arabia.

### *2.1 Instruments*

To fulfil the purpose of the current study, the data needed to conduct this study were collected qualitatively by means of oral interviews with parents, grandparents, and older members to find out meanings of names and their motivations behind bestowing such names on their children. Three different groups were investigated: (a) elders above 70 years, who are the actual custodian of the Saudi tradition and culture; (b) those between the ages of 40 and 60 years, who have digested mixed culture owing to language contact and western education; and (c) parents of children below 20 years who are youthful enough to share some stylish and trendy names in naming patterns.

## **3. Data Collection and Analysis**

This section considers Saudi female personal names analysis together with revealing the findings of this analysis. The analysis takes two-fold: (a) sociolinguistic analysis that binds the meanings of names to the socio-cultural background of the society at issue; and (b) semantic analysis that discovers the meanings of names. This part of analysis lays emphasis on the typology of Saudi female personal names based on their meanings. It also subsumes the social and cultural implications behind opting for such names.

## **4. Typology of Saudi Female Personal Names**

The classification of types of Saudi female personal names is discussed in this section. Here, emphasis is laid on the description of names that existed in the society. It looks at both purely traditional and modern names, together with providing the translation and the ethnography background of the names.

#### 4.1 Names Relating to Religious Backgrounds

Concerning religion, Saudi Arabia is an Arab-Islamic country which governed by Quranic precepts in every aspect of life. Naming is regarded as one of the greatest things in Islam and Muslims should opt for their names so carefully, ensuring that each name has a pleasant sound and meaning. In Islamic sociolinguistics, parents can name their female newborns after the wives and daughters of the Prophets and messengers. Such names include: *Aaeesha* “life”, *Asma* “supreme”, *Hind* “brave courageous girl”, *Khadeejah* “early baby”, *Maria* “luminous”, *Maymunah* “auspiciousness”, *Safiyyah* “pure” : after the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); *Fatimah* “one who weans”, *Ruqayyah* “ascent”, *Zainab* “fragrant flower”: after the daughters of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); *Asiyah* “one who tends to the weak and heals them”: the Muslim wife of Pharaoh, *Hajar* “lotus flower”, *Sarah* “lady”: after the wives of the Prophet Ibrahim; *Mariam* “virtuous”: mother of Isa (Jesus); *Sereen* “full of beauty and splendor”: daughter of the Prophet Abdullah Ibn Masood; *Ayah*: a verse from Quran/a sign from God.

#### 4.2 Bedouin-Bound Names

Saudi Arabia is embedded and deeply rooted in Bedouin culture. Therefore, Saudi female Bedouin-bound names are chosen in order to convey meanings of varied positive social beliefs and values, especially among Bedouin-Arab societies. Names in this category are old-fashioned names and include: *Alanoud*: opinionated, *Alhanouf*: cheerful woman, *Aljazi*: philanthropist, *Badriah*: moonlike, *Bashayer*: good tidings, *Bedoor*: full moons, *Heelah*: small pearl, *Hamdah*: grateful, *Meznah*: a piece of rain cloud, *Muneerah*: illuminous, *Nourah*: radiant, *Nashmiah*: magnanimous woman, *Shaikhah*: princess, *Fayzah*: winner, *Wajid*: existence.

#### 4.3 Family Names as Individual or Group Identity Markers

One of the societal contexts concerning names amongst Saudis is that they are being utilized as social tags to mark individual or group identity. This is quite with family names obtained from the fathers’ patrilineal lineages that are given to children as a means of tracing their patrilineal lineage. According to Opoku (1973), a child who traces his/her genealogy to one patrilineal father might share the same family name. Some of these names include: *Bassamah*: from the patrilineal family “Albassam”, *Fahdah*: from the patrilineal family “Alfahad”, *Fayzah*: from the patrilineal family “Alfayez”, *Habeebah*: from the patrilineal family “Alhabeeb”, *Harbiah*: from the patrilineal family “Alharbi”, *Majedah*: from the patrilineal family “Almajid”, *Maymunah*: from the patrilineal family “Almaymouni”, *Saadiah*: from the patrilineal family “Alsaaid”, *Shaikhah*: from the patrilineal family “Alshaikh”, *Salehah*: from the patrilineal family “Alsaleh”, *Turkeyah*: from the patrilineal family “Alturki”.

#### 4.4 Names Relating to Unique Circumstances Surrounding the Childbirth

Circumstantial names are names built upon unique circumstances surrounding the childbirth. Such names might relate to the time period of child-birth, occasions taking place at the time of birth, manner of birth, etc. In accordance with Blum (1997, p. 364), “these names are viewed as governing the child’s fate in some ways, they should harmonise with the time and

often place of the child's birth." Such names include: *Amal* "hope": born after infertility, *Asiyah*: associated with winning Asian Champions League, *Bushra* "good news": associated with announcing the birth of a new baby, *Fajr* "dawn": born at the crack of dawn, *Million*: associated with making the first million riyals, *Raba'ah* "fourth": associated with having a fourth child, *Raghad* "pleasant": associated with a pleasant life, *Watan* "homeland": born on Saudi National Day.

#### 4.5 Kinship Names

According to Saudi socio-cultural norms, conservative families tend to name their children after their parents and grandparents as a means of showing some veneration for their bearers. Naming a child after its kinsmen serves as a link between two alternate generations – grandparents and grandchildren (Nkamigbo, 2019). The child may be given names such as: *Fatimah*: one who weans, *Fawziah*: victorious, *Hessah*: destiny, *Huda*: right guidance, *Izdehar*: flourishing, *Lulwuh*: pearl, *Madawi*: light, *Muneerah*: illuminous, *Nada*: dew, *Najla*: beautiful large eyes, *Nourah*: radiant, *Shurooq*: sunrise.

#### 4.6 Names Relating to Fauna, Flora, and Objects From Nature

In regard to this category, there are several names borrowed from objects occurring naturally in the environment. These include preferable fauna and birds: *Arwa*: female Alpine ibex, *Hadeel*: the cooing of a dove, *Nauurus*: seagull, *Rasha*: young gazelle, *Reem*: beautiful gazelle, *Shaden*: young beer, *Shihanah*: female peregrine which signifies an attractive woman, *Yara*: little butterfly. Others derived from preferable flora and flowers: *Abeer*: rose, *Areej*: the fragrance of a flower from an orange tree, *Azhar*: flowers, *Jana*: yields of trees; *Jehan*: beautiful flower, *Khuzamah*: lavender, *Leena*: palm tree, *Narjis*: narcissus, *Nesreen*: wild rose, *Rayhana*: a handful of sweet basil, *Renad*: fragrance of Arabic bakhour or scent of aleo, *Sausan*: lily, *Tala*: little palm tree, *Wardah*: rose, *Yasmin*: Jasmine.

However, names derived from precious natural objects include: *Almasah*: diamond, *Durrah*: pearl, *Fairouz*: turquoise, *Fareedah*: unique precious gem, *Jumanah*: silver pearl, *Jawaher*: jewels, *Lamees*: pure silk, *Ruba*: red gem, *Shayla*: little mountain.

#### 4.7 Names Expressing Social Values

Several names in this category express desirable meanings and social values of Saudi community, as for instance hospitality, integrity, kindness, loyalty, beauty, and happiness. Such names include, amongst others: *Afaf*: chasteness, *Afrah*: happiness, *Ahd*: pledge; *Eimaan*: faith, *Ghadah*, *Jameelah*, *Khawlah*: all express beauty, *Hanan*: kindness, *Joud*: hospitality, *Latifah*: friendly, *Maram*: aspiration; *Manal*: attainment, *Safa*: serenity, *Saja*: calm/serene, *Salmaa*: peaceful, *Tahani*: best wishes; *Wijdan*: sentiment; *Wafa*: loyalty.

#### 4.8 Foreign Names

A great number of Saudi female personal names are found in this category. Such names are derived from different foreign origins and some have more than one possible origin and meaning to reflect modernism, prestige, and vanity. To the contrary, the researcher believes that the phenomenon of opting for foreign names is more likely to be a manner of shifting



away from one's traditional values. Some of these include: *Aleen*: Celtic origin meaning "good-looking", *Aram*: Armenian origin meaning "royal highness", *Areen*: Persian origin meaning "noble and pure", *Dareen*: Hebrew origin meaning "wise", *Eilan*: Hebrew origin meaning "oak tree", *Elia*: Spanish/Italian variation of the Hebrew name Eliana, *Jwan*: Kurdish origin meaning "pretty", *Lamar*: French-Norman origin meaning "the pond; pool", *Lana*: Slavic origin meaning "light", *Lima*: Portuguese origin meaning "one who lives on the banks of the river", *Leena*: Greek origin meaning "light", *Mai*: French origin meaning "coyote", *Mayar*: Turkish origin meaning "rose of paradise", *Miram*: Hebrew origin meaning "an ancient flower", *Rahaf*: Urdu origin meaning "delicate, fine", *Refal*: Hebrew origin meaning "a long beautiful hair", *Shahla*: Persian origin meaning "beautiful eyes", *Yafa*: Hebrew origin meaning "beautiful", *Yara*: many possible origins (Turkish "a beautiful flower", Arabic "butterfly", Persian "honest").

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

The current study which emerged from a sociolinguistic perspective is a contribution to the field of linguistic anthropology. It supports the theory which states that there is a solid relation which links people's choice of names and their socio-cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, we have argued that the current work reflects on how language is perceived as a vehicle for signaling philosophy, attitudes, and socio-cultural practices of the society concerned (Nkamigbo, 2019). The naming system of Saudis is more likely to be regarded as a manner of echoing people's ideology, belief, religion, tradition, worldview, and attitude. From a philosophical standpoint, names can be best analysed and perceived when the actual member of a given society, in this case Saudi Arabia, has an in-depth knowledge of the ethno-pragmatics, language, social and cultural backgrounds of the society. The present paper has asserted that names are no longer viewed as mere meaningless tags, but rather have indexical relation to socio-cultural functions, people, time, and events (Al-Zumor, 2009). As a result, Saudi female personal names may represent people's identity and reveal certain cultural aspects and attitudes of the culture concerned.

The above Saudi female typological names show how social norms, practices, and attitudes have an impact on the choice of personal names. Typologically, these personal names subsume under eight broad categories, of which foreign names constitute the preponderant category. These are: (a) names relating to religious backgrounds, as daughters were named after the wives of the most famous religious figures as Prophets and messengers in Islam; (b) Bedouin-bound names to express the socio-cultural values and beliefs of the Bedouin tribes of Saudi Arabia; (c) family names to trace the patrilineal clans of the fathers; (d) circumstantial names relating to the time period and occasions taking place at the time of birth; (e) kinship names, where family traditions have an important role to play in the selection of names, as granddaughters were named after their grandmothers; (f) names relating to nature and precious natural objects, as parents opt for elegant names that are attractive not only in sound but also in meaning; (g) names relating to favored social values of Saudi society; and (h) foreign names which the researcher interpreted as a manner of shifting away from one's traditional values towards modernism.

It is worth noting that some female personal names could be written/uttered in different sorts of ways, such as the name Nourah (نورا ، نوره ، نورة) which can be written with three possible variant endings in Arabic " ه " or " ة " or " ا " , all conveying similar meanings and utterances, but have different spellings. Gradually, this phenomenon of female names ending in –h morpheme is falling behind and a new wording of these names is perhaps taking its place as a result of globalization, technology, modern media, intercultural communication, and so on.

The investigation of the naming system of Saudis is considered as a cross-disciplinary approach to research for scholars in sociolinguistics, anthropology, ethnography, and philosophy. From this perspective, and in light of the cruciality of studying personal names as a way of showing the socio-cultural values and beliefs dominant within a given community, the current study will be a valuable contribution to the body of Arabic anthroponomy as it shows how the selection of Saudi female personal names is influenced by the ideology, culture, religion, attitudes, and social values of Saudi communities. Thus, it is considered as a significant field for understanding the Saudi culture, an area that should not be overlooked nor disregarded in any further sociolinguistic and anthropological researches. The study concludes that the spread of foreign names may constitute a threat to the cultural identity of Saudis, an argument that calls for further investigation to either confirm or disconfirm it.

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