



HELPING A NEIGHBOUR IN NEED: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF LIVED-HADĪTH CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

This study presents specific ahadīth (sing. hadīth) which inform neighbourly relations on a day-to-day basis. I interpret my actions towards a neighbour, who was experiencing personal problems, as lived-hadīth citizenship. That is, my interactions with my neighbour were infused with Prophet Muhammad's teachings and instructions as found in ahadīth. Aspects of Prophetic wisdom, such as care and easing somebody's burdens, align with contemporary sociological, anthropological, and psychological definitions of citizenship. This study thus shows that Islamic scripture has a positive role to play in Western societies, shaping daily behaviours such as being a good citizen in one's neighbourhood.

Keywords: *Lived Hadīth, Citizenship, Auto-Ethnography, Neighbour, Islamic Scripture*

Abstrak

Kajian ini menyajikan hadis-hadis khusus yang menginformasikan hubungan bertetangga sehari-hari. Saya menafsirkan tindakan saya terhadap tetangga, yang mengalami masalah pribadi, sebagai warga negara yang menghidupkan hadis. Artinya, interaksi saya dengan tetangga saya diresapi dengan ajaran dan petunjuk Nabi Muhammad seperti yang ditemukan dalam hadis. Aspek-aspek hikmah profetik, seperti merawat dan meringankan beban seseorang, sejalan dengan definisi sosiologis, antropologis, dan psikologis kewarganegaraan kontemporer. Studi ini dengan demikian menunjukkan bahwa kitab suci Islam memiliki peran positif dalam masyarakat Barat, membentuk perilaku sehari-hari seperti menjadi warga negara yang baik di lingkungan seseorang.

Kata kunci: *Living hadis, Kewarganegaraan, Auto-Etnografi, Tetangga, Kitab Islam*

A. Pendahuluan

Reflecting recent attention in Western societies on Muslim belonging and integration, researchers have explored how Muslims in the West engage in citizenship practices. They report a variety of practices across a range of social spaces.

A thread running through this literature is that Islam inspires citizenship practices. It is surprising then to find a lack of attention given to scripture as a textual or religious basis of citizenship. This lack of attention creates an area of potential research *vis-a-vis* the relationship between religion and citizenship, which the present study explores. It does so by showing how *ahadīth* (sing. *hadīth*) inspire my behaviour towards a neighbour in his time of need, and thereby lead me to be a good citizen of my neighbourhood.

The outline of the paper is as follows. In the next section I contextualise this study by providing an overview of recent literature on Muslim citizenship. I follow with an overview of the meaning and definition of the terms *hadīth* and *Sunnah* to show the importance of *hadīth* in Islam. After that, I briefly describe the method of auto-ethnography used in this study. I then provide an auto-ethnographic narrative of my interactions with my neighbour. I then read this narrative data in reference to several *ahadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion, I highlight the importance of *ahadīth* in understanding the relationship between religion and citizenship, and offer directions for future research.

B. Muslim Citizenship in the West

The importance of Muslim citizenship in the West is evidenced in a number of recent studies that explore how Muslims practice citizenship. Scholars report “Muslim consumer citizenship” (Voloder, 2015); “Muslim active citizenship” (Peucker, Roose & Akbarzadeh, 2014), “Muslim citizenship” (Roose & Harris, 2015), “multicultural citizenship” (Patton, 2014), and “lived religious citizenship” (Nyhagen, 2015).

A pattern in these studies is that religious values underpin much of what Muslims do that can be described as citizenship. Nyhagen’s (2015) study is particularly insightful in this regard. In interviews with Muslim and Christian women in England and Norway, she finds that the women report religious values and beliefs as underpinning their conduct as citizens: being religious and being a citizen are described as one and the same thing.

Nyhagen (2015) describes the religious inspired practices as lived religious citizenship which comprises identity, belonging, and care. She concludes that “Interviewees across both the Christian and Muslim faiths and the two countries identified strong connections between their own faith and

citizenship, in that they saw their own religion as providing them with guidance on how to be a good citizen” (Nyhagen, 2015, p. 781)

For these insights, the present study owes much to the literature on Muslim citizenship. However, I identify a limitation in them, which is the following: they do not provide the specific scriptural sources which inform people’s behaviours. For example, in saying, as Nyhagen (2015, p. 775) does, “Both Christian and Muslim interviewees saw their own religion as providing instructions and guidance on how to act as a good citizen” leaves open the issue of exactly what instructions these are and where they are found. From my own experience as a Muslim, and hearing other Muslims describe their sources of religious-inspired behaviour, I suggest that the sources of such instructions are the *ahadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad.

Nyhagen (2015) describes lived religious citizenship as combining two phenomena: lived religion and lived citizenship. In this study, I offer the concept of “lived *hadīth* citizenship” to describe the combination of these two activities of human life. I focus on *ahadīth* in this study because they are much simpler units of analysis than religion. The definition of *hadīth* does not change over time and across place because an individual *hadīth* as written and oral text is passed from generation to generation, and thus unchanged. The terms “religion” or “religious”, however, mean different things to different people across time and place; therefore it is harder to define and analyse.

For these reasons, I use the phrase lived *hadīth* citizenship to describe my actions towards my neighbour, as these actions were inspired by *ahadīth*—therefore the *ahadīth* are lived—and because the instructions in the *ahadīth* align with definitions of citizenship given by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists. I will come these definitions in the Section E.

C. Importance of Hadith in Muslim Life

The term “*hadith*” in Arabic means “new”; therefore, it came to be used by people to define relating news, a tale, a story, or a report (Siddiqi, 1996, p. 3). In the Islamic tradition, *hadīth* thus came to used to define a report from a Companion of the Prophet Muhammad about an action the Prophet performed or words he said. *Ahadīth* have been passed down from generation of Muslims to generation since the first community around the Prophet. A Muslim today can read or listen to the same report that was transmitted orally from the Prophet's Companions to the next generation, and so on.

Because of its connection with the Prophet Muhammad, collections of *ahadīth* have prestige in the Muslim community, amongst both scholars and the laity. Muslims revere anybody who has memorised and learnt *ahadīth*, because such individuals preserve the teachings of the Prophet.

The model of the Prophetic conduct is called the *Sunnah*, which in pre-Islamic times simply meant “precedent” or “custom” (Siddiqi, 1996, 4). *Sunnah* is the way the Prophet Muhammad applied the teachings of the Qur'an. The *Sunnah* is the second source of Islamic law and ethics after the Qur'an. *Ahadith* relate to the *Sunnah* by providing the raw material or the “unit through which the *Sunnah* was preserved, transmitted, and understood . . .” (Brown, 2018, p. 3). Because the *hadith* is the text through which the *Sunnah* is derived, it will always have an important place in Muslim lives. Indeed, Jonathan Brown (2018) observes that *ahadith* are used in numerous fields and spheres of life, including Islamic law and legal theory, theology, Sufism, and politics.

Most if not all Muslims have at least heard *ahadith* either in their exact form or paraphrased in lectures by Muslim scholars. By the time a lay Muslim becomes an adult, he or she is aware of several *ahadith*, and acts by them. Often, when Muslims discuss or debate an important issue with religious underpinnings, they will refer to *ahadith* to support their arguments. I have experienced this numerous times, even with people who are not considered scholars or experts on hadith.

The upshot of these points is that the *ahadith* are certainly alive in Muslim communities. This is because at a basic level, the *ahadith* are instructions either directly or indirectly on how to live in the world. Supporting this view is the fact that several Companions of the Prophet Muhammad are shown to have acted on particular instructions of the Prophet Muhammad. Take the following example from Mujahid, a Companion of the Prophet Muhammad:

I was with ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr while his slave was skinning a sheep. He said, ‘Boy! When you finish, start with the Jewish neighbour.’ A man there exclaimed, ‘Jewish? May Allah correct you!’ He replied, ‘I heard the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, recommend that we treat our neighbours well until we feared (or we thought) that he would order us to make them our heirs’ (*al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Book of Neighbours, *hadith* no. 128).

In this *hadith*, the Companion ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr practiced what he heard the Prophet Muhammad say during the latter’s lifetime. His giving food the Jewish neighbour is an example of living *hadith* in the sense of him actualising Prophetic values. In this study, I show how I followed the Prophet’s teachings on being good to neighbours.

Auto-ethnography is a viable methodology because it aims to provide inclusionary narratives of daily life. In my case, as seen in the next section, I include my neighbour as an important part of my life, and in doing so perform community and solidarity.

Heewon Chang (2016, p. 48) posits three criteria for a work to be considered auto-ethnography; these are, that they (1) be ethnographic in their method; (2) be cultural in interpretive orientation, and (3) be autobiographical in content. My study meets these criteria first by presenting data from the field (i.e. my neighbourhood); second, by interpreting this data through the concept of lived-*hadith* citizenship; and third, by collecting and presenting as data events from my life, especially interactions with my neighbour and my wife.

Chang (2016, p. 49) says that an auto-ethnography frames the story of an individual or group within the bigger story of society. The present study explores my story in the context of the broader phenomena of living *hadith* and Muslim citizenship. It looks at how interactions with my neighbour provide an example of these two phenomena.

The interactions between my neighbour and I took place in 2020, between the months of April and July. They took place in a suburb of Sydney, Australia, and within the building in which my neighbour and I live in separate apartments on separate floors.

D. Helping a Neighbour in Need: An Auto-ethnography

The apartment's basement door opens, and I drive in. The basement is shared amongst the apartment residents and it is not unusual to find a neighbour arriving or leaving at the same time. Today, I notice Jerry is in the basement standing next to his car. It takes only a quick look at him to notice that he looks distressed. I park my car and then walk over to him.

"Hey mate, is everything okay?" I ask. Jerry does not immediately reply. He is crying, and shakes his head as if disturbed by my question. He is looking down, and not making eye-contact with me. Although I have just returned from work, and am very tired, I remember the importance of neighbours in Islam. I feel worried about Jerry, and knowing that he lives alone I want to make sure he is okay.

The perseverance pays off. Jerry begins to share his frustrations. "I do not know what is wrong with me. I feel very low, and do not feel like leaving my bed. I don't know what to do." He starts to bang the car with his arm. He begins to say, "I don't know what's wrong with me." I sense a cry for help in Jerry's words and tone. It sounds like he really needs somebody to talk to. Although I do not know Jerry that well, I think that we have met tonight in the basement for a reason. I remember the narrations of the Prophet Muhammad's conduct towards those in need. I feel compelled to offer Jerry a caring ear.

"How about we go and get a coffee and talk", I say. Jerry appears to calm down a little, and suggests that we go up to his apartment.

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In his apartment, Jerry tells me about events of the last month which have culminated in his low mood and distress. The *sīra* (Prophetic biography) is filled with stories of difficulties and trials. Yet throughout these stories what stands out to me is the sense of community care taken from the Prophetic example. As a Muslim, I strive to embody the Prophetic character in every interaction.

Jerry says he feels desperately lonely as his family is abroad, and he has been struggling at work. "Each night I am okay. I like the night. But when the day comes, I feel scared. I don't want the morning to come because I want to stay in the darkness. When the day comes I don't want to see it." Jerry's feelings are intense, and I want to give him a sense of hope. I am also aware that dark thoughts can lead to dangerous consequences.

"Jerry, I understand that things are bad now, but don't lose hope that they will improve", I reply.

"I know. Yes, I will try to make things better", he says.

"Have you seen a therapist", I ask.

"I've got an appointment at the hospital to see the mental health team. It is tomorrow morning", he replies.

I suggest that I go with Jerry to the hospital as a support person. Jerry is very grateful at the suggestion.

The following day, Jerry and I visit the hospital. He sees a mental health specialist. I wait outside, and reassure Jerry that I will wait for him to have his appointment, and be here when he finishes. After 40 minutes, Jerry exits the specialist's office. I ask him how the meeting went. Jerry's mood is uplifted. "It was very helpful", he says.

Jerry and I make our way back home, and during the car journey I try to talk to Jerry about more uplifting subjects. By the time we return to our apartment building, Jerry's overall mood has improved significantly. I tell Jerry that I will check in on him that evening.

The night before, I had told my wife about Jerry's situation. She was very worried, and asked if she could do anything to help. As I enter the home, she greets me at the door with two containers of food. She says that they are for Jerry. Once again I reflect on the duty of neighbours in Islam and feel grateful that I am in a position to help Jerry.

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At 8pm I knock on Jerry's door. He opens it with a smile and invites me in.

"It is good to see you", he says.

"Good to see you too. My wife thought you might like this." I offer Jerry the container of food.

"Wow. This is great! Thank you so much. Come inside, let's talk."

Jerry and I sit while he eats. He seems to be in a much better mood than yesterday.

"You look a lot better than yesterday, Jerry."

"Yes, I feel much better. Thank you. The meeting with the specialist gave me some hope. Thank you for going with me."

I give Jerry a hug as I leave that evening. I hope that Jerry feels that he has a neighbour who cares.

Over the next few weeks, I spend a lot of time with Jerry. We go for walks in the neighbourhood, and out to cafes to eat. Throughout this time, I reflect on social responsibility and the Prophetic teachings in this regard. I also reflect on first seeing Jerry at his car some months back in a state of deep distress. I felt a commitment towards him as my neighbour, brother, and friend. We had grown closer through this period.

Postscript

Four months after seeing Jerry in a distressed state that night in the basement, my wife and I move to another suburb. I stop seeing Jerry each day, but keep in touch with him via the phone. One day he calls me.

"How are you, brother?"

"Jerry, I'm good. How are you?"

"I am okay. Listen, I need a favour if you can do it."

“Yes, sure, what is it?” I ask.

“I am moving apartments. I have some big items that I can't take with me. I'm wondering if you can store it for me.”

“Of course”, I say, “I can keep it in my garage.”

“That's great. I will bring it today if that's okay.”

Seeing Jerry that afternoon is very enjoyable. He appears to be in much better spirits. He is still looking for a job, but not staying in his apartment all day. He is very grateful for the time I spent with him. He says that he wishes he could repay me in some way. I reply that it was my duty as a neighbour to be there for him. I am glad that we can continue a relationship as friends despite not being neighbours anymore.

E. Analysis

In the time spent with Jerry, I felt a sense of responsibility for helping him feel better. Despite being tired after work, I would visit him and have conversations that were emotionally intense. However, always, I tried to maintain a positive energy and expression so that he would mirror that positivity and try to feel better.

While all this was not easy on my part, I felt a source of support from the Prophetic teaching to help people who are in need. This section mentions several *ahadīth* that I have learnt over the years, and which provide a religious context to how the manner in which I acted towards Jerry. I begin with a *hadīth* narrated by Abu Hurayra, a Companion of the Prophet Muhammad:

The Messenger of Allah said: “Whoever relieves a Muslim of some worldly distress, Allah will relieve him of some of the distress of the Day of Resurrection, and whoever conceals (the faults of) a Muslim, Allah will conceal him (his faults) in this world and the Day of Resurrection. And whoever relieves the burden from a destitute person, Allah will relieve him in this world and the next. Allah will help His slave so long as His slave helps his brother” (*Sunan ibn Majah*, The Book of the Sunnah, *hadīth* no. 225).

This is a famous *hadīth*, one that is heard frequently in lectures and talks. It urges people towards brotherly feeling between each other. By it, I was drawn to see Jerry as a brother in humanity, and therefore his pain is my pain.

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Helping a member of the human race is a charitable act. The following two *ahadīth* describe helping people as a form of *sadaqa*, which is Arabic for charity. Abu Hurayra says,

Allah's Messenger said: "There is a (compulsory) Sadaqa to be given for every joint of the human body, (as a sign of gratitude to Allah) every day the sun rises. To judge justly between two persons is regarded as Sadaqa, and to help a man concerning his riding animal by helping him to ride it or by lifting his luggage on to it, is also regarded as Sadaqa and (saying) a good word is also Sadaqa, and every step taken on one's way to offers Salat (the compulsory congregation prayer in the mosque) is also Sadaqa and to remove a harmful thing from the way is also sadaqa." (*Sahih Muslim*, Book of Zakat, *hadīth* No. 72).

Abu Burda, another Companion of the Prophet Muhammad, relates from his father, who narrated from his father, the following:

The Prophet said, "Every Muslim has to give in charity." The people asked, "O Allah's Prophet! If someone has nothing to give, what will he do?" He said, "He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity (from what he earns)." The people further asked, "If he cannot find even that?" He replied, "He should help the needy who appeal for help." Then the people asked, "If he cannot do that?" He replied, "Then he should perform good deeds and keep away from evil deeds and this will be regarded as charitable deeds." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Zakat, *hadīth* no. 48).

These *ahadīth* are relevant to my actions toward Jerry. At a time when he appealed for assistance, I stored his belongings for him. Easing somebody's burden is mentioned directly in the following well-known *hadīth*:

The Prophet said: "Whoever relieves a Muslim of a burden from the burdens of the world, Allah will relieve him of a burden from the burdens on the Day of Judgement. And whoever helps ease a difficulty in the world, Allah will grant him ease from a difficulty in the world and in the Hereafter. And whoever covers (the faults of) a Muslim, Allah will cover (his faults) for him in the world and the Hereafter. And Allah is engaged in helping the worshipper as long as the worshipper is engaged in helping his brother" (narrated by Abu Hurayra, *Jami'at-Tirmidhi*, Book of Righteousness and Maintaining Good Relations with Relatives, *hadīth* no. 36).

In this *hadīth*, helping the needy is a means to felicity in the Afterlife. Like the ones mentioned above, this *hadīth* is famous as it is oft-repeated in sermons and advertisements of Muslim charity organisations to encourage people to assist needy people.

The previous *ahadīth* show that the Prophet Muhammad urged people to treat all of humanity with dignity and importance. However, he elevated neighbours to a special rank in one's dealings. In the collection of *ahadīth* titled *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Imam al-Bukhari, author of the collection known as *Sahih al-Bukhari*, compiled several hundred *ahadīth* on good conduct. In *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, there is a chapter specifically for neighbours. The following *ahadīth* are from that chapter:

'A'isha reported that the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "Jibril, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, kept on recommending that I treat neighbours well until I thought that he would order me to treat them as my heirs" (*al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Book of Neighbours, *hadīth* no. 101).

Abu Shurayh al-Khuza'i reported that the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "Anyone who believes in Allah and the Last Day should be good to his neighbours" (*al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Book of Neighbours, *hadīth* no. 102).

Ibn 'Umar said, "There was a time when no one was more entitled to a person's money than his Muslim brother. Now people love their dirhams and dinars more than their Muslim brother. I heard the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, say, "How many a neighbour will be brought together with his neighbour on the Day of Rising! He will say, 'Lord, this man closed his door to me and refused to show me common kindness!'" (*al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Book of Neighbours, *hadīth* no. 111).

The section on neighbours in *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, is a clear injunction to proper conduct towards them. The *ahadīth* mentioned above have had a deep impact on my attitude towards my neighbours. I am encouraged to invest time with them to ensure mutual positive attitudes and behaviours, but also because often when we need assistance, our neighbours are the closest people in proximity who can help us.

Being neighbours with Jerry prompted him to disclose his innermost feelings to me. In light of the above *ahadīth*, I felt responsibility to reply to this disclosure with practical action, which included taking him to the hospital, and spending time with him.

Being so close to Jerry made it seem like we are relatives, even brothers. Anas bin Malik, a servant of the Prophet Muhammad, says that the latter said,

“None of you [truly] believes until he loves for his brother that which he loves for himself” (*Sahih Bukhari*, Book of Belief, *hadith* no. 6). Listening to Jerry and seeing him cry made me contrast his situation with mine. He was so alone in his apartment, while I had a partner whom I could return to in my apartment. I wished that Jerry could have the same fortune that I had. And while this was not possible because his family was abroad, I could at least give him some company so that he would feel supported.

Helping Jerry can be seen as both an act of citizenship, which is good for the social cohesion of our local community, and a religious act that pleases God. The Prophet Muhammad said, “The companion who is the best to Allah is the one who is best to his companion. And the neighbour that is the best to Allah is the one that is best to his neighbour” (*Sunan at-Tirmidhi*, Book of Righteousness and Maintaining Good Relations with Relatives, *hadith* no. 50). Being a good neighbour, and pleasing God provided extra motivation for helping Jerry in his time of need.

F. Conclusion

In the above analysis, I have interpreted my actions toward Jerry in reference to several *ahadith*. The analysis leads to the main finding of this study that there is something that people practice that may be called lived-*hadith* citizenship. This is the case if we define citizenship, as sociologists and anthropologists have, as consisting of care (Nyhagen 2015), and respect and dignity (Rosaldo 1994). Seligman and Peterson (2004) identify citizenship as one of 24 character strengths. Alongside the term citizenship, Seligman and Peterson (2004) include the correlates social responsibility, loyalty, and teamwork. Together, these attributes produce in an individual “a generative spirit and a sense of responsibility for the community . . .” (Seligman & Peterson, 2004, p. 370). Indeed, a generative spirit is encouraged in the several *ahadith* mentioned in the previous section. They inspired or generated within me a spirit of charity and care towards Jerry.

I turn to these non-Muslim academics to show that there is no need for Muslims to create a definition of citizenship that aligns with *ahadith*. Rather, Nyhagen’s (2015) and Rosaldo’s (1994) ideas of citizenship, in combination with Seligman and Peterson’s (2004) concept of citizenship as a character strength, affirms that the Prophetic conduct as found in *ahadith* are examples of citizenship, even though, as Hashim Kamali (2009) notes, the Prophet Muhammad and Muslim jurists after him have not conceptualised a concept called ‘citizenship’ in literal terms.

The phrase lived-*hadīth* citizenship suggests that citizenship is an Islamic practice. Scott Lucas (2008, p. 232) says, “Basic social interactions, such as greetings and the proper response to a sneeze, are made ‘Islamic’ through *hadīth*.” Taking Lucas’ point, we may posit that through their basis in *hadīth*, citizenship practices are also Islamic. In fact, using Positive Psychology’s concept of citizenship as a character strength, we may posit that citizenship and its correlates social responsibility, loyalty, and teamwork, are components of the ideal Islamic character.

What strikes me about the *ahadīth* mentioned in the previous section is that they enable the Prophet Muhammad to be a social actor in the present time and place. The Qur'an describes the Prophet’s mission as follows:

Just as We have sent among you a Messenger of your own to recite Our revelations to you, purify you and teach you the Scripture, wisdom, and [other] things you did not know (Surah al-Baqarah, verse 151).

The *hadīth* literature enables the Prophet's mission of teaching to be conveyed to each generation of Muslims after the Companions or first Muslims. Through living the *hadīth*, Muslims respond to the Prophetic mission in the affirmative. Thus, *hadīth* will always have an important place in contemporary Muslim life, even in secular non-Muslim societies.

Indeed, because *hadīth* inculcate in their reader or listener good conduct in civic spaces and interactions, Islam has a positive impact on society. This finding is important because it shows that there is something that works within Islam, something that promotes social responsibility for one’s community, even if the people in that community are not Muslim and practice a different religion or way of life.

With these points in mind, I describe the interactions between Jerry and me as the micro-religiosity or micro-Islam of everyday life. In other words, through *hadīth*, I practice Islamic values in my day-to-day interactions with my neighbours. *Hadīth* are thus very relevant and important to ordinary people's lives and circumstances.

Future studies of lived-*hadīth* citizenship can pursue two distinct strands of research: (1) how *hadīth* inspire the actions of major stakeholders in society such as political, economic, and social institutions; (2) inter-faith studies that compare the scriptural bases of different religious communities, for example, we may compare lived-*hadīth* citizenship with “lived-Bible citizenship” or “lived-Torah citizenship.”

To conclude, I remark that *ahadīth* provide material which Muslims can learn and remember during their interactions with people in society. As such, I hope that *ahadīth* continue to inspire people to engage constructively and positively in civic spaces such as neighbourhoods.

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