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The African Philosophy of Forgiveness and Abrahamic Traditions of Vengeance

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Abstract

This papyrus suggests that penal abolitionism without forgiveness of the unforgivable may be a license for self-help or vengeance. The papyrus offers a radical deconstruction of the essay, ‘On Forgiveness’, by Jacques Derrida, to reveal that contrary to popular misinterpretations, Derrida was demonstrating that forgiveness is more common in African traditions than in Abrahamic traditions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This papyrus goes beyond Derrida’s examples from the recent history of South Africa and delves back to classical African civilization to demonstrate that the forgiveness of the unforgivable is indeed a long-running African tradition as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, among others, suggested. The papyrus ends with a call for people of African descent to apply this philosophy of forgiveness to one another and demand that the principle be integrated into public policy along with policies for reparations of historic wrongs.

Introduction

The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court - in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness. He couldn’t imagine that. (Applause.) ...It would be a refutation of the forgiveness expressed by those families if we merely slipped into old habits, whereby those who disagree with us are not merely wrong but bad; where we shout instead of listen; where we barricade ourselves behind preconceived notions or well-practiced cynicism (President Barack Obama, 2015).

The prevalent testimony of forgiveness is indicative of the grace and faith with which we have been blessed (Council of Bishops, 2015).

It is remarkable that I, a descendant of some of the African ancestors who survived the slave raids in Africa, am privileged to speak with the African descendants of those ancestors who survived the genocidal middle passage and the unforgivable plantations, as one survivor speaking with fellow survivors of the African holocaust, sharing about the ancient African tradition of the forgiveness of the unforgivable that continues to endure against incredible odds. It is a miracle because, as James Baldwin told Chinua Achebe the only time that they met in 1980, when they marched our ancestors in chains through what they wished were ‘doors of no return’, they never intended that we should survive to meet again (Achebe, 2002). For as Bob Marley sang in the eponymous album, ‘Survival’, we are survivors (Marley, 1980).

It was daunting to be asked to speak with the great African Methodist Episcopal congregation¹ that emerged from the Free Africa Society in 1816 in the city of brotherly love, Philadelphia, as the first congregation that developed out of a sociological critique of the segregationist practices by white-supremacist church members during slavery rather than from the more common theological and doctrinal disagreements of Protestants. In humility, I chose not to lecture to the congregation but started by sharing a testimony about the forgiveness of the unforgivable from my African background where I was raised in Catholicism as well as in African spirituality. As a child, I survived the Biafra war in which three million people, mostly Igbo, died in Nigeria. What is remarkable about the survival of the Igbo is that they did not obsess about seeking revenge but appear to devote their energy to the rebuilding of their communities in record time with little or no external aid (Ekwe-Ekwe, 2011). Yet, throughout Nigeria, the cycles of killings of mostly Igbo residents within and outside their South East enclave (or what Ekwe-Ekwe calls phase four of the Igbo Genocide) continue periodically but the Igbo have resisted the temptation to retaliate by trying to kill fellow citizens from other parts of the country who reside among them in South East Nigeria. Amnesty International documented in 2016 that hundreds of Igbo suffered extra judicial killing for peacefully demanding a referendum on Biafra and for honoring their loved ones who were killed in the Biafra genocide.

¹ I was invited to give a talk on African Culture and the History of Christianity by St. Paul AME Church in Blacksburg, Virginia, on February 9, 2014 as part of Black History Month. I chose to focus the talk on Forgiveness as an African Tradition. This papyrus is an expansion of the talk. I thank the congregation for the opportunity to engage with the community that led to this papyrus.

The genocidal crimes in Africa (from slavery to colonialism and neocolonialism) were almost always committed by adherents of Abrahamic traditions even though the Bible commands, Thou Shall Not Kill; and the Quran commands that if you destroy one of the children of Allah, you destroy all of the children of Allah. Surprisingly, none of the hyper-religious African genocidists (in Biafra, Rwanda, Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, for instance) has ever prayed for forgiveness for killing millions of God's children. And even more surprising is the willingness of the survivors to forgive their oppressors to the extent that they do not clamor for punitive justice but tend to seek reparative justice with rare exceptions of the jailing of Charles Taylor, the indictment of the President of Sudan by the International Criminal Court, and the jailing of some of the leaders of the Rwanda genocide while most were forgiven in Rwanda and none was prosecuted in the case of Biafra. Whereas almost all those who have suffered historic wrongs (Jews who survived the holocaust, Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II, and Indigenous peoples who were granted land rights, for example) have been offered some form of reparations, people of African descent remain the only group that have not been offered any reparative justice (in the case of descendants of enslaved Africans in the Diaspora and Africans who survived slave raids in Africa, the case of the survivors of apartheid, the case of survivors of colonial violence in Africa, and the survivors of the postcolonial genocides in Africa) and yet we are not running about seeking revenge, but we are late-comers to the demand for reparations given the recent demands from Caribbean nations for slavery reparations and the demand for land reclamations in Southern Africa (Agozino, 2004). I wish that people of African descent will extend this legendary spirit of forgiveness to their fellow poor African brothers and sisters at home and in the Diaspora for no matter who is right or wrong, 'we want peace in Liberia', according to Alpha Blondy who sang this while Liberian women rose to 'Pray the Devil Back to Hell' (Leticker, 2009).

I admire the fact that the founding Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, named the congregation 'African' at a time that such a name was synonymous with barbarism and dehumanization. In 1837, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania was started in the same city of Philadelphia but the initial name of Institute for the Training of African Youth was quickly discarded in preference for 'Colored Youth' (Williams, et al, 2004). The retention of 'African' in the AME church and in the name of its university in Liberia, remains a prophetic choice of name by people of African descent who wandered through the wilderness of America in search of a more appropriate name and stumbled through derisory labels such as

Nigger, Negro, Black, Colored, and Afro only to finally settle for the original 'African' that the AME church bore with honor, but with no hatred towards those who tried to render the name pejorative to keep the people in bondage.

No other group of people have endured and survived the chattel slavery peculiar experience of people of African descent in modern history. Yet rather than be consumed by hatred, people of African descent and other Indigenous peoples, have demonstrated their forgiveness by using their conscious human agency to name their children after the very people who enslaved their ancestors and committed genocide against them; by seeking to affiliate with religious congregations founded and dominated by people who despise them; by sending their children to be educated by institutions and teachers that denigrate the rich contributions of Africans and Indigenous peoples to civilization; by seeking to work for employers who openly discriminate against them; by shopping in stores where they are routinely profiled in racially degrading manners; by yearning to sleep with and marry their own enemies; by dressing in the styles of their oppressors; stretching their hair to look like the style of the oppressors; and lightening their skin to pass for someone who could be mistaken for one of the oppressors. Is this forgiveness or the meekness that weakness breeds? I think that it is forgiveness all right and not just the weakness of the oppressed.

Deconstructing Abrahamic Traditions

An Africa-born philosopher, Jacques Derrida, argued that the only thing worth forgiving is the unforgivable because forgiving what is forgivable is no big deal. However, according to him, forgiveness is conceived as a language that came to modernity from Abrahamic traditions, or what he called religions of the book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He set out to deconstruct this belief that forgiveness is rooted in Abrahamism but paradoxically revealed that the tradition of forgiving the unforgivable is more common in African culture than in the religions of the book (Derrida, 2001). Derrida is probably right here in the sense that Judaism celebrates the annual ritual of atonement during the closing of the New Year celebrations, Yom Kippur, with the prayer for forgiveness that also indicated that some exceptional wrongs remain unforgivable (Cook, 2010).

As a Jew he was born in Algeria, Derrida was stripped of his French citizenship at the age of 10 and expelled from school for looking too dark and a little Jewish under the Vichy regime during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II. He consistently argued that the shock of that identity crisis at such a young age remained the source of all his philosophical quests to deconstruct Western philosophy by radically exposing the will to power

that is hidden behind every claim to truth and every claim to white supremacy. He obviously forgave that violence against his person for he subsequently accepted French citizenship and travelled on a French passport with his French name (perhaps to conceal his Jewishness from anti-Semites, as his parents advised him) throughout his life, but without denying his African origin and his Jewish background in his writings, though he could have easily adopted another nationality as a global scholar (Agozino, 2011).

With this background biographical information that is not always explicit in his work, readers of his essay, 'On forgiveness' (Derrida, 2001), will more easily grasp his radical conclusion that forgiveness is not rooted in the Abrahamic tradition, contrary to preconceptions, but more in African tradition. In that essay, Derrida reviews the opinion of Jewish philosophers (such as Jankelevitch (1971) in '*L'Imprescriptible*' and Arendt (1958) in '*The Human Condition*') who suggest that the Shoah or the Holocaust is unforgivable and that the perpetrators should be hunted down and brought to justice as part of the efforts to make sure that such a huge crime against humanity never again takes place.

Derrida used the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa to illustrate his argument that a crime against humanity such as apartheid is not only forgivable but should be forgiven unconditionally. He was critical of Archbishop Desmond Tutu for trying to infuse the theology of his Anglican congregation into the proceedings of the TRC by insisting that the condition for forgiveness is a confession from the offender who must appear before the Tribunal to ask for forgiveness. Even when the Prime Minister of Japan asked for forgiveness from Koreans and Chinese for the war atrocities committed by Japanese troops, as Derrida indicated, there is no guarantee that he spoke for all Japanese, including those who still worship at the shrine for the war heroes, nor is there a guarantee that every Chinese and every Korean was ready to forgive without reparations (Coicaud, 2009; Dominello and Pereyra, 2016).

Derrida radicalized the concept of forgiveness by demonstrating that even when the state is ready to forgive the offender, the radical individual victim may insist that what was done to her beloved was unforgivable and that she was not ready to forgive, as one widow did (Derrida, 2001). The reverse is also true because the state may insist on punishing the offender despite the fact that the victim may have offered to forgive the harm. Without explicitly stating so, Derrida was suggesting that South Africans appeared to have forgiven unforgivable wrongs even when some of the offenders refused to appear before the TRC to ask for forgiveness. Karenga reminds us that the deep concern for social justice or *Maat* among people of African descent is a

continuation from classical African civilization as documented in ancient Kemet (ancient Egypt). He uses *The Book of Khunanpu*, commonly known as ‘The Story of the Eloquent Peasant’, to illustrate the fact that, as far back as 1800 BC, a poor farmer who was dispossessed and tortured by a rich man was able to pursue justice and win non-violently through the application of intellectual and moral persuasion (Karenga, 2004).

Mandela led by example because he personally forgave those who unjustly deprived him of his liberty for 27 years. He could have launched a race war against the white minority rulers or an ethnic war against the Zulu-led Inkatha Freedom Party that resisted the rise of the African National Conference to power during the period of ‘Black on Black violence’ (Mandela, 1995). If Mandela had tried to push the white South Africans into exile many around the world would have said that it served them right because some of the white minority thugs actually formed an Afrikaner Brotherhood to use armed violence to intimidate the majority and carve out what they wanted to declare as an exclusive white homeland in South Africa. Mandela forgave the provocation and delicately led the nation towards reconciliation and a non-racial democracy that is rooted in African traditions of tolerance rather than in the vindictive traditions of apartheid, common in Abrahamism, as this papyrus argues.

Bill Clinton stated in his autobiography that he challenged Madiba Mandela to admit that he is a normal human being and that he must have had even a tiny bit of hatred towards the people who did such unforgivable things to him. On the contrary, Mandela told him that his ability to love all of God’s children is part of what makes him human and that if he allowed anyone to deny him of that ability, he would be allowing the person to deny his basic humanity and he would never do that. He told Clinton that neither should he fail to love all, and Clinton said that his jaw dropped (Clinton, 2004).

Followers of the Abrahamic traditions will be surprised to learn that the very first time that the word ‘forgive’ was used in the Bible, was in Chapter 50 of Genesis with reference to the exercise of power and authority in Africa by Joseph over his brothers who sold him into slavery. It was not until the New Testament that Jesus brought the gospel of forgiveness back from his upbringing in Egypt where he was taken as a baby to escape the mass infanticide by King Herod. He preached about the virtues of forgiveness and mercy repeatedly, especially during the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus fled to Egypt before returning to the place of his birth, Moses fled from Egypt before returning as a leader, Joseph was sold to Egypt where he became a leader and sent for the rest of his family, and Jacob fled from Esau before returning prosperous. Ancient Egyptians had a similar story of Sinuhe who fled from

Egypt in 2000 BC and joined the ruling elite in a foreign land before praying in his old age to be allowed to return to the ‘eternal city’ and he was allowed to return without penalty (Parkinson, 1999). The ancient Egyptians believed that Humankind was one family under the theology of monotheism as the AME church motto proclaims whereas other nationalities tended to believe that they had their own national deities. They demonstrated this belief with the power of the sun to shine for all, not just for whites, nor for just the rich, nor just for men, but for all – Jews, Gentiles, friends, foes, immigrants, citizens, animals, and plants – without discrimination. The book, *A Tribute to African Civilization*, reports that the Prince of Damascus once led an uprising against the rule of Pharaoh but rather than wage war to suppress the rebellion, the Prince was invited to Egypt where he was feted and told to go and tell his people that they were free to rule themselves (Kamara, 2005).

Malcolm, Martin, Mandela and Me:

The papyrus now turns to the teachings of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. on the theme of forgiveness. Brother Malcolm stated in his autobiography that when he learned that his revered leader, Elijah Mohamed, was messing with some of the ladies in the Nation of Islam, he nearly lost his faith because he thought that such a moral weakness was unforgivable in a leader (Malcolm X, 1965). However, one of the sons of Mr. Mohamed sat Malcolm down and they studied the Bible and the Quran together. From the study, Malcolm came to the realization that all the great men in the Bible did something that was seriously naughty but that they were honored for the good things that they did. Recent revelations about clergy abuse in the Catholic church and in other Christian denominations, go to show that even religious leaders are not free from blame of the sexual abuse of children that is widespread across the world.

Also, the Quran (42:40) commands the faithful to be merciful to those who offend against them so that Allah will also be merciful to them on judgment day, for Allah is the most merciful. Thus Muslims believe that; ‘The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah: for (Allah) loveth not those who do wrong’ (Holy Quran, 42:40). However, the Quran also teaches that; ‘Allah forgives what is past: for repetition Allah will exact from him the penalty. For Allah is Exalted, and Lord of Retribution’ (Holy Quran, 5:95). This is similar to the Bible book of Revelation that predicts that when Jesus comes again, he will not be coming as a lamb to be slaughtered or as the Prince of Peace but as a conqueror and destroyer of the wicked (Holy Bible, Revelations). Malcolm therefore rededicated himself to

following his flawed leader and submitted to his authority fully even when he was grounded for speaking out after the assassination of President Kennedy. Eventually, he was forced to break away to form his own Muslim Mosque, Inc., after realizing that all white people were not devils and after deciding to tie African American Unity with African Unity. Unfortunately, he was assassinated by suspected members of the Nation of Islam, according to Manning Marable (2011), showing that the message of measured retaliation as justifiable in Abrahamic traditions, when forgiveness is not possible, may be encouraging the faithful to commit acts of violence against even their fellow believers. Christians have wage crusades against fellow Christians, Muslims wage jihad against Muslims, Semites fight against Semites, Asians against Asians, Europeans against Europeans, they do not spare out-groups either. But Africans tend to fight against only fellow Africans while being more willing to forgive wrongs done by non Africans.

In the collection of his speeches, *Where Do We Go From Here: Community or Chaos?*, Martin Luther King Jr. included three speeches on the concept of the 'World House' (King Jr., 2010). He said that a famous writer had a draft for a novel about a World House that was inherited by the descendants of the owner of the house and that their task was to figure out how to live in that house amicably as one Humankind family, as the African Methodist Episcopal Church proclaimed when the last part of the motto was changed from 'Man my Brother', to 'Humankind my Family' in 2008, to make it more gender-neutral. The first speech was given by brother Martin, regarding the struggle for Civil Rights in America, to urge all Americans not to see one another as their enemies but as members of their family who should be won over with love and not with humiliation or retaliation even in the face of provocation. The second speech urged Americans to see Vietnamese as brothers and sisters rather than as enemies to be annihilated with cluster bombing and napalm. The third speech on the theme of the World House referred to South Africa to urge the residents to treat one another as members of the same family who must learn to live together or destroy one another.

In support of the idea of a World House advocated by King above, Africans have similar beliefs in tolerance and love for all. Chinua Achebe used the Igbo communal sculpture, *Mbari*, to capture this spirit of tolerance as an African tradition that is at risk of being wiped out by the genocidal state that European domination imposed on Africans (Achebe, 2012). Here, Achebe was wondering why the rest of Nigeria decimated their Igbo brothers and sisters with the aid of foreign backers when all Nigerians could share the shelter of the *Mbari* irrespective of differences in language; or let the Igbo

go and construct a new *Mbari* if they were not wanted in the federation. Desmond Tutu uses the concept of Ubuntu to talk about the same African belief, that we are a bundle of humanity and so the oppression of some will result in suffering for all (Tutu and Tutu, 2015). In the judgment on the case of African National Congress Youth Leader, Julius Malema, Judge Colin Lamont applied the principles of Ubuntu to say that restorative justice is favored over retributive justice (Afri-Forum and Another vs. Malema and others, 2011).

Earlier at the beginning of his ministry, brother Martin preached sermons repeatedly on 'The Meaning of Forgiveness' (King, Jr., 1948-1954). The Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project documented this sermon note dated from 1948 to 1954 on the theme that became the foundation for the non-violent strategy of resistance to the unforgivable wrongs of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. He started the sermon with the story of the prodigal son from Luke 15:20 and highlighted how much the father kissed and celebrated the prodigal son when he returned and asked for forgiveness after blowing his inheritance; whereas the obedient brother was never celebrated. He concluded the sermon by stating as follows:

'Here then is the Christian weapon against social evil. We are to go out with the spirit of forgiveness, heal the hurts, right the wrongs and change society with forgiveness. Of course we don't think this is practical...This is the solution of the race problem' (King, Jr., 1954)

Here Martin is suggesting that forgiveness is not enough because hurts will also need to be healed and wrongs righted in order to change society with forgiveness. He called this forgiveness a Christian Weapon even though the people in the Ku Klux Klan saw themselves as Christians out to kill those they hated and despite the fact that the last book in the Bible, Revelations, never mentioned forgiveness even once. Where did brother Martin get this philosophy of forgiveness which he admitted that his Christian congregation did not think was practical? The answer lies that Martin borrowed the philosophy from Mahatma Gandhi, according to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial exhibitions in Atlanta, Georgia. But Gandhi himself learned this lesson from the Zulu in South Africa, according to his autobiography (Gandhi, 1990).

Of course, brother Martin did not have to give credit for the African philosophy of non-violence and forgiveness to Gandhi. He could have referred to the fact that Richard Allen, founder of AME, forgave the injustice against people of African descent and rather organized volunteers to treat the

infected and bury the dead during the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, irrespective of race or class and without prejudice against congregations that had discriminated against Africans up to 1807. Rather than seek to kill people in revenge, he went to court and won the right to organize an independent congregation of African Methodist Episcopal Baptist church that St. Paul's represents today. Although the Church is named African, it remained open to all of Humankind who wanted to fellowship with the congregation. That is forgiveness in action as Allen himself observed (Allen, 1831).

This African forgiveness that Allen spoke about was not extended to Denmark Vasse, the enslaved African who bought his freedom with a lottery winning but could not afford to buy his wife's freedom too and who became a teenage minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He was hanged with his followers just because they preached the gospel according to Prophet Jonah as a warning to America to end the evil of slavery or face the wrath of God. They were accused of plotting a rebellion, they burnt down his church and hanged him (Johnson, 2001). Instead of repenting like the people of Nineveh, the hearts of Americans were hardened until the prediction of punishment for wickedness came to pass in the American Civil War with about 600,000 Americans killed, most of them poor whites. All those lives could have been spared if the Confederates did not launch a pro-slavery rebellion aimed at spreading slavery to other states as state right.

Conclusion - We Need to Make Changes:

This papyrus ends with a message of peace and love, not just for those who wronged us and to whom we have more or less forgiven the unforgivable, but also for one another as people of African descent and as Indigenous peoples, and as members of the family of Humankind. Let us extend the love that Jesus commanded us to show to our enemies to our own brothers and sisters and bring the inner-city gang warfare, domestic violence in our homes, ethnic and religious wars in Africa and bloody resources conflicts to an end, by recovering our African traditions of forgiveness, or what the Rasta call *One Love*, that an unforgetting Eurocentric system of oppression and exploitation for selfish gains have tried to beat out of humanity. The people of Columbia recently voted against a peace plan to end the decades old civil war because they insisted that the rebels must be punished for their atrocities but their President won a Nobel Peace Prize for insisting on forgiveness (Newman, 2016).

Obviously I am not advocating that Africa is superior to Europe because Africa, like the rest of the world, has been Europeanized to a great extent. What Afrocentricity presumes is that when we put Africa at the center of our

critical and activist search for knowledge, we are more likely to discover original principles and technologies that white-supremacy may have been trying to suppress to the disadvantage of humanity (Asante, 2011). The genocidal wars that are fought with European weapons of mass destruction across Africa are among the legacies of the relative loss of agency in non-violent indigenous African knowledge systems, and the Africa-centered perspective in Africana Studies challenges us to rediscover the originality of our people to help to make the world a better place for all.

Let us also aim to inform abolitionist praxis with this African spirit of forgiveness especially towards those who committed non-violent and or victimless crimes. Forgiveness is not just for the benefit of those who wronged us but also for our own benefit given evidence that ‘resentment is like drinking poison and hoping that it will kill your enemy’, according to Nelson Mandela (2013). However, we must still demand that the hurt against people of African descent should be healed, as King insisted, in order for the forgiveness to work. The historic wrongs done against the people of African descent still cry out for reparations in order to make the forgiveness of the unforgivable real for the benefit of all of God’s children. We all should support the efforts to end the war on drugs which has unfairly targeted poor youth and resulted in the escalation of violence in the inner cities and internationally. We can always use teaching and healing to reduce the harm of drugs in the community. We all should support the payment of reparations for slavery. We all should support efforts to peacefully unite all Africans in the ‘Federal Republic of Africa’.

Maybe we should add one more principle to the annual Kwanzaa celebrations (the annual celebration of African culture by African Americans, celebrated around the world from 26 – 31 December): the principle of *Mgbaghalu* (to run past an offense) or forgiveness in my native Igbo language, a language that has no equivalent for the English word, unforgivable. The healing *huna* that Native Hawaiians call *Ho’oponopono* (Dupree, 2012) also captures this spirit of forgiveness that President Barack Obama brought to his administration by deliberately including his rivals in his administration, culminating in the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba and the legalization of marijuana by voters in some states. Jacques Derrida was right that we can find more examples of forgiveness of the unforgivable in the traditions of colonized people than in the Abrahamic traditions which have themselves been violently transformed by the logic of capitalism and by imperialist reason which seek to repress poor innocent immigrants as if they were all violent criminals.

It could be countered that what this papyrus has been analyzing as forgiveness could be dismissed as the meekness that goes with weakness. It could be said that in all the examples where weaker people ‘forgive’ their oppressors, it is a survival strategy because doing otherwise would be disastrous for them. However, the forgiveness of white minority rulers in Zimbabwe and in South Africa after the African majority won power, and the examples from powerful classical African civilizations, go to show that this tradition of forgiveness is not exercised solely from a disadvantaged position of weakness, but from an admirable moral strength that should be emulated by all, strong and weak, for their own benefit and for the benefit of the entire world. Dismissing the practice of forgiveness as a sign of weakness would be meaningless to those who believe in divine mercy and in the unconditional forgiveness of flawed human beings by the God of the Abrahamic traditions. Forgiveness is not just for the weak, it is for everyone (Tutu and Tutu, 2015). Penal abolitionism would be incomplete without the practice of forgiveness by the victimized.

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