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## **Afrocentricity: The Evolution of the Theory in the Context of American History\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The African Americans or Black Americans continue to be one of the largest minorities in the USA. The descendants of the African slaves they encountered discrimination, came through racial segregation (1865–1955) and fierce fighting for civil rights (1954–1968). Different social conceptions and movements sprang up inside the Black community in response to discrimination. Afrocentricity as one of them is considered to be the paradigm combining theory and practice, social movement and methodology of research, culture and lifestyle. The main goal of the Afrocentricity is to rehabilitate the Blacks from every corner of the globe. This article demonstrates the evolution of the Afrocentric socio-cultural paradigm in the USA from the early 1960s, when the conditions for its origins were created, up to the present. The author analyzes the evolution of the fundamental basis of the Afrocentric theory, as well as the mechanisms of spreading Afrocentric ideas and influence across the African American community upon the background of contemporary American history.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

At the turn of the century, racial, ethnic and religious conflicts have emerged very high on the list of global problems. The United States is one of the most multicultural countries, in which issues of racial relations have been acute. For a long time governmental officials, representatives of different communities, including African American, are looking for the ‘right way,’ the new strategy of intercultural communications. As a theory, Afrocentricity became a response to racism and nationalism, and also a reflection of the African American identity crisis.

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Earlier the search for identity occupied the minds of public figures – poets, writers, musicians, priests, *etc.* It was reflected in their attempts to create black music, black literature, black cinema, and black church. Among them were poet Langston Hughes (1902–1967), author Richard Wright (1908–1960), writer and social activist James Baldwin (1924–1987), musicians Louis Armstrong (1901–1971), Max Roach (1924–2007) and Abbey Lincoln (1930–2010). Between the 1930s and 1950s their perceptions of the African American identity were dualistic and controversial. On the one hand, each of them had to encounter segregation, often had to be ashamed of his or her blackness and intended to become a true American, that is a *full-fledged* member of *American* society. On the other hand, each of them tried to get rid of the inferiority complex by all means. The lyrics of popular at that time Louis Armstrong's song 'Black & Blue' includes the phrase, which was indicative of the self-perception of the African Americans: 'My only sin is in my skin. What did I do to be so black and blue?'

The African Americans' increasingly radical views were related to segregation and the Ku Klux Klan's activity, above all, but the Africans' intellectual rise affected it either. The first Congress of the Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956 demonstrated that the African Americans differed from the Africans, the latter were typically better educated and more successful in their professions and in the fight for their rights. The American participants, among whom were writer Richard Wright (he did not even finish high school), historian, the first African-American president of Lincoln University Horace Mann Bond (1904–1972), philosopher William Thomas Fontaine (1909–1968), expected to see savages and barbarians (Diawara 1998: 9–10). But the Africans, such as writer, editor and member of the French Senate Alioune Diop (1910–1980), the famous Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986), and state secretary of the Council's president of French government Leopold Sedar Senghor (1906–2001), looked and spoke like European intellectuals (Gavristova 2015). The complex of inferiority became more acute. Following the intentions of the members of the American delegation, Molefi Kete Asante, the author of the Afrocentric theory, put on a mission to enlighten and 'civilize' his people (Asante and Abarry 1996: 227).

In the middle of the twentieth century, the consciousness of Black Americans was aroused.

This was a period of history when the African Americans became more powerful and proactive in defining the way in which their image and identity were portrayed by the broader society. Much of conceptualization of the African American racial identity reflected this new sense of cultural autonomy and power. Whereas racial identity was originally conceptualized as a way to demonstrate a deficit in the African Americans' psyche resulting from their stigmatized status, the African American scholars of the 1970s re-conceptualized the racial identity as an example of African Americans' resilience and strength in the face of oppression. Much of this work focused on the process by which a healthy Black identity developed from a psychologically-enslaved Negro identity (Marks *et al.* 2004: 384).

The leaders of the Afrocentric movement proposed a universal method – ‘group therapy’ – for overcoming the complexes of all representatives of the African American community.

Over more than 30 years of its history, Afrocentricity has experienced up and down growth. In the process of its evolution, the Afrocentric idea has been transformed, some components have been added, while others eliminated. Due to the charisma, activity, enterprise, and the eloquence of its leader, Asante, who knew how to provoke interest, the Afrocentric movement became familiar among the African American academic community. While several scholars completely refuted fundamental assertions of Afrocentricity, others accepted it, trying to expand and further define it.

The theory of Afrocentricity began to develop in the USA in the 1980s, when the book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Asante 1980) was published. However, its author, Asante (born as Arthur Lee Smith Jr.), Professor with the Department of African American Studies at Temple University (Philadelphia), affirmed that his brainchild had begun to develop much earlier. He always connected his paradigm with his personal life and maintained that Afrocentric ideas came into his mind when he was a child. Asante said about himself: ‘I am a child of seven generations of the Africans who have lived in America. My entire life, including career, struggle against oppression, search for ways to overturn hegemony, political outlook, fortunes and misfortunes, friends and detractors, has been impacted by my Africanness. It is an essential reality of an African living in America’ (Asante 2007: 2).

The mastermind of Afrocentric movement, Asante was born on August 14, 1942 in Valdosta, 'a town in south Georgia with pleasant weather and a history of violent race relations' (Asante 2011: 21). He was the eldest of thirteen children in the family of an odd-job man named Arthur Lee Smith. His father inculcated the pride of the African origin and blackness in him: 'I've been in the North and I've been in the South, and I ain't never seen a white man that could do something a black man couldn't do. In fact, if you asked me, nine times out of ten, he could do it better than the white man' (Asante 2011: 38). Asante was educated in Tennessee, Oklahoma, and California where he received an MA from Pepperdine University (1965) and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles (1968). His first book *The Rhetoric of Black Revolution* was published in 1969 (Smith 1969). It clearly demonstrated the moods and the views of the young author Smith, Jr, who was carried away by the civil rights ideology.

### **THE 'GENETIC SUBSTRATA' OF AFROCENTRICITY AND CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

The civil rights movement was the mass protest of the African Americans against racial discrimination, segregation, and disenfranchisement. The first signifying event for its emergence was the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The Supreme Court recognized that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Later Asante said that it was the most important event that influenced his career.

The culmination of the civil rights movement occurred in the 1960s and Asante took part in it during his studentship. 'This phase of his development during the mid to late 1960s, paralleling the American Civil Rights and Black Power/Revolution, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, led him to develop the early formulations of what would later be called Afrocentricity' (Anderson 2012: 761). There were the women's movement, the Latino movement, the Native American movement along with the civil rights movement. On the wave of social activity Afrocentricity developed not only as an approach but as a socio-political movement. From the very beginning the Afrocentric theory was utilitarian that is it was a guide to action.

Many activists of the civil rights movement, including author Maya Angelou (Marguerite Annie Johnson; 1928–2014), poet Amiri

Baraka (Everett LeRoi Jones; 1934–2014), professor of Africana Studies and public figure Maulana Karenga (Ronald McKinley Everett; 1941) later became Asante's associates. They participated in the already existing organizations such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) or founded new organizations and groups which quite often were radical and nationalistic (*e.g.*, Karenga's US Organization). All these groups included or were created on the basis of the ideas of the predecessors and under the influence of some external factors. The Vietnam War (1955–1975), in which Black American *soldiers* took part on a par with *White Americans*, increased their confidence; the Year of Africa (1960) forced many of them to think about the Africans' experience of struggle for freedom and equality.

The 'genetic substrata' of Afrocentricity is rather complex. Like any other synthetic theory, Afrocentricity represents a mixture ('cocktail') of thoughts, ideas, and emotions. The long list of Asante's 'Teachers' includes various names: from Pharaoh Unas and Confucius to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ali Mazrui (Asante and Abarry 1996).

The roots of Afrocentricity can be divided into three basic groups: African, African American, and 'External.' Speeches, writings and conceptions of the first President of Senegal, the poet and philosopher, the creator of the *Négritude* theory Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first President of Ghana, one of the most prominent proponents of Pan-Africanism Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) and the outstanding Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop can be interpreted as African sources. The thoughts of these 'Teachers' (or 'Prophets') were borrowed and transformed by Asante and his followers. Thus, the concept of the uniqueness of African people and their descendants was adopted from *Négritude*. Some ideas of Senghor's African Socialism and Nkrumah's Consciencism were integrated into the Afrocentric corpus. Like Diop, Asante adopted diffusionism and used its instruments in the process. Following Diop, he believes that 'Kemet' (Ancient Egypt) was founded by black Africans and became the cradle of the whole human civilization (Asante 1990).

Similarly, Afrocentricity emerged from the ideas and works of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), the educator Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856–1915), the sociologist and

civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868–1963), the Muslim minister and activist Malcolm X (Malcolm Little, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1925–1965), and others. The rhetoric of F. Douglass has been frequently used by Afrocentrists to remind the Black Americans about slavery and the struggle for freedom. They were attracted to ideas about social order and education reforms, which belonged to both Washington and DuBois, in spite of the clash of their views. Asante was impressed by the emotional speeches of Malcolm X as well as the orations of Martin Luther King, Jr (1929–1968), the leader of the Civil rights movement. The theory of Asante grew out of Pan-Africanism, Garveyism, Harlem Renaissance, and Black Nationalism.

The third group of sources included the works and ideas of Gandhi and Confucius which were used by the Afrocentrists for argumentation of their views.

The turn to origins required both intuitive perception and cognitive processes. In addition to the research of the intellectual heritage of his predecessors, Asante resorted to the study of history, languages, cultures, and traditions of African people. He studied African names and place names, analyzed Orisha<sup>1</sup> worship, looked into Adinkra symbols,<sup>2</sup> *etc.* Realizing that he has blood (according to the DNA test he has passed, he has Nubian and Yoruba roots) and spiritual bonds with Africa, in 1972, Smith changed his 'slave name' to an 'African' one – Molefi Kete Asante.

The civil rights movement, which had a political nature, influenced the evolution of Afrocentricity. Asante borrowed several attributes (*e.g.*, slogans) of political movements and used them in his ideology. Then the ideology went through commercialization. Asante was one of those people, who were inspired by the results of the civil rights movement, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The euphoria of the victory induced him to continue the fight against the inferiority complex.

### **THE AFROCENTRIC CORPUS: AFRICANS OR AMERICANS?**

At the beginning of the post-civil rights period, in 1968, when legal segregation ended and the political and economic position of the African Americans improved, the new movement, which was directed to the assertion of the new identity, became more popular.

In the 1980s, Asante was the one to coin the terms Afrocentricity, Afrocentrism, and Africology (Afrocology). He argues that Afrocentricity is 'a paradigm based on the idea that African people should re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity' (Asante 2008: 104), 'the total use of method to affect psychological, political, social, cultural, and economic change' (Asante 1987: 125). For him and for his adherents, Afrocentricity has been both epistemology and the cognitive method, cultural and political movement, scientific approach and lifestyle simultaneously.

Following the ideas of Edward Wadie Said (1935–2003), whose book *Orientalism* (Said 1977) declared the new methodological principles of historical and cultural studies, the Afrocentrists challenged the theory of Eurocentrism:

Unlike the Eurocentric view of black relationships, the Afrocentric view places great emphasis on the existence of distinctive and common cultural expressions such as music, dance, and folk tales. Unlike the Eurocentric view, which traces the origins of black Americans to urban ghettos in the North or slavery in the South, the Afrocentric perspective traces distinctive black American social-cultural patterns to their rightful origins, the larger continent of Africa (Moikobu 1981: 7).

They frequently searched for negative aspects of a worldview centered on the Western civilization:

Afrocentrism presents and deals with an authentic and specific culture and history – a cultural history that did not begin in Father Europe but a human/world history that began in Mother Africa. Indeed, the stark reality is that Eurocentrism had to – and still continues to – falsify, misrepresent, and distort human/world history as His-Story, His-Eurocentric-Story in order to maintain European global dominance/hegemony. Eurocentrism indeed represent racist, divisive, ahistorical, and dysfunctional view of world history (Hoskins 1992: 247).

According to the Asante's writings, Afrocentricity is a multi-dimensional notion. First of all, it is a kind of philosophy, which sometimes verges on ideology. Secondly, it involves a particular method of research. The point of this mode comprises the interpretation of Africans as subjects rather than objects. Thirdly, Afrocent-

tricity continues to be a significant social-cultural and aesthetic movement, as well as a lifestyle. Asante subdivided his paradigm into several branches and defined the Afrocentric paradigm both as a whole and its elements.

Afrocentricity is a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture trans-continentially and trans-generationally. This means that the quality of location is essential to any analysis that involves African culture and behavior whether literary or economic, whether political or cultural. In this regard it is the crystallization of a critical perspective on facts (Asante 2007: 2).

Asante developed the Afrocentric idea in order to examine why Black people were so disoriented. By Afrocentrists' views, the inferiority complex of the Blacks was formed by the domination of the white people over a period of five hundred years. Slavery, racial segregation, and humiliating Jim Crow laws contributed to the obliteration of the African/Black identity. Being dark-skinned, the African Americans did not feel like full-fledged Americans. Many of them were ashamed of their blackness and were trying to copy the appearance and behavior of the white majority by blanching their skin and straightening natural hair. The identity crisis is regarded as one of the reasons for the emergence of Afrocentricity.

Asante is one of those scholars, who decided to create the new identity of the African Americans. His Afrocentric idea was urged to eliminate their inferiority complex.

Asante defines the Afrocentric idea by five crucial points:

1. An intense interest in psychological location as determined by symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs.
2. A commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, or religious phenomenon with implications for the issues of sex, gender, and class.
3. A defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, and literature.
4. A celebration of 'centeredness' and agency and a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about Africans or other people.
5. A powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people (Asante 2008: 104–108).

He appealed to Black people from every part of the world to refuse all types of the European domination (psychological, cultural, economic, and political), to resist all forms of discrimination (racial, sexual, gender, and class), which, in his opinion, comes from the Western/European civilization, and urged them to study African heritage, 'to return to African spiritual base.' He aimed at implementing the achievements of the research into practice. Asante elaborated the Afrocentric corpus, which, like 'rhizome' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980), he disseminated across all areas of knowledge and all spheres of life.

In spite of the aspiration for creating a new 'African' identity, Asante and his adherents are veritable Americans, they belong to culture and lifestyle of the Western, American Civilization. They have been born, educated and living to the present day in the United States. 'There are many ironies and contradictions in Afrocentrism. One of that is that Afrocentrism is most appealing to Blacks who have had significant experience outside Africa. The Afrocentrism of the Afrocentric era was born in the United States, not imported from Africa' (Austen 2006: 112–114).

### **AFROCENTRICITY AND THE AMERICAN CONSUMER SOCIETY**

The famous French philosopher, theorist of Consumer Society, Jean Baudrillard (1998: 26) wrote:

There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects.

At the end of the twentieth century, Afrocentrists began to change their theory into the object – the object of consumption, the object of purchase and sale. In the twenty-first century, the American version of Afrocentrism became a typical product of mass culture, related to such terms like 'variety,' 'replication,' 'mass communication,' 'accessibility,' *etc.* Asante as an expert in Communication Studies used these principles to popularize the Afrocentric

movement. In order to achieve this, he and his adherents applied a great number of skills, methods and mechanisms, including quotation (citation), visualization, carnivalization, and performance.

Following their 'Teachers' – the great theorists and orators, the Afrocentrists concentrated on the linguistic aspect. Playing with the audience, they used youth slang and language of the undereducated public (*e.g.*, greeting 'Brotha and sistah'). By means of borrowed words from the best known African language – Swahili (*e.g.*, 'Habari gani?' – 'What's the news?', 'Umoja' – 'Unity') and quoting famous 'Teachers' (*e.g.*, Garvey's appeal 'Back to Africa!' which Afrocentrists recommended to understand as 'Back to African Roots!'), the Afrocentrists are trying to enhance their authority.

Visualization is one of the most popular modes used by Asante and his colleagues to make the idea more memorable and recognizable. To get across essential information the Afrocentrists transformed it into the image. They also used traditional African symbols, for instance, some of Asante's books and his website are adorned with Adinkra pictorial symbols. The portraits of the 'Teachers' and their quotations were printed on t-shirts, caps and banners, and thus, were changed into commodity. The pro-Afrocentric documentary films became the apogee of the visualization process. Three documentaries, 'The 500 Years Later' (2005), 'The Black Candle' (2008), and 'Motherland' (2010), were shot with the participation of Asante and his son Molefi Khumalo Asante, Jr., and each was devoted to the history and culture, to the past and contemporary issues of Africa and its descendants.

By means of carnivalization and performance, the Afrocentrists could present their ideas in more attractive and effective forms to the mainstream audience. Thereby they try to effect on emotional perception. The majority of the African Americans have never been to Africa, but in the process of the game they get closer to that continent. An example is the list of the Afrocentrists' major regular actions, events, and festivals: Kwanzaa,<sup>3</sup> annual Pan-African Festival, Odunde<sup>4</sup> Festival in Philadelphia, Colorado Afrocentric Heritage Festival, *etc.*

The carnivalization of history implies hyperbolic images, corrupted plots, and counterfeited data. Afrocentricity can be compared with the pastiche, where history was overturned. Several actions of the Kwanzaa, Kuumba festival,<sup>5</sup> related to the historical

performance in which all comers can take part, are striking examples of carnivalization. The plots of these performances are different: the history of Ancient Kemet (Egypt), the history of slavery in the USA, Maafa (from Kiswahili – ‘the Great Disaster’), or ‘African Holocaust,’ as radical Afrocentrists called it, referring to the oppression of Black people.

Ambivalence as a characteristic feature of carnival (Bakhtin 1984) accurately reflects the essence of Asante's Afrocentricity. Along with real life, Asante and his followers have ‘player space,’ where they feel like Africans.

Afrocentrism becomes a system of signs that is transformed into a simulation of reality <...> Afrocentrism is centered on, in Baudrillard's language, the reduplication of a monolithic Africa that in turn, reinforces communal principles in African America. The ideal Africa articulated in Afrocentric signs is one in which, to paraphrase Baudrillard, nostalgia is energized, in which... ‘there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality’ (Stoller 2002: 85).

The monolithic image of Africa, which Afrocentrists call ‘Mother Africa,’ represents a system of codes. Asante and his adherents have created it by mixing truth and fiction, African and American values, academic manner and informality. This system of codes includes the most recognizable elements of African culture such as Kiswahili, clothing and accessories (*e.g.*, *dashiki* – West African colorful shirt), folklore, dances, and etc. The commodification of Afrocentric codes inaugurated a new stage of Afrocentrism's evolution.

## CONCLUSION

Afrocentricity was spreading rapidly among the representatives of the African American community until the mid-1990s. The growing number of Afrocentric elementary schools and universities with special educational programs, the number of Kwanzaa's celebrants, music, fashion, the references to Asante's writings and notices of critics indicated interest and demand for Afrocentricity. Then the popularity of the movement declined. There are objective and subjective reasons for it.

First of all, the decline objectively has been connected with the crucial changes and revisions, which were going on inside both

the socio-racial consciousness of the American society as a whole, and of the African American community in particular. Secondly, the leader of Afrocentricity was getting older and his charisma did not impress the young African Americans, who needed new idols. This can be considered as the subjective reason.

The new American society is characterized by the acceptance of the idea of equivalent different cultures. The amount of immigrants increases. Under the conditions of multiculturalism the US Government has set a course for political correctness and tolerance, declared as one of the ground rules, and there is an increasing acceptance of the Blacks by the Whites in all social spheres and situations.

With the increase of the amount of the Africans in the USA, the popularity of Asante's Afrocentricity diminished. Newcomers never really became a part of the Black community, that Asante meant. They preferred to create ethnic diasporas: Nigerian, Ethiopian, *etc.* (Bondarenko 2015), and they were simply not interested in the image of Africa, which Asante offered.

The evolution of Afrocentricity has occurred simultaneously with the evolution of the views of Asante himself. From 1942 to the 2010s, the positions (economic, political, and *psychological*) of the African Americans have changed. The African Americans gradually began to receive education, vote, run businesses, *etc.* The literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr 'goes on to suggest that middle class Africa-Americans often feel "the guilt of the survivor" and buy Afrocentric items as a way of maintaining cultural fidelity with blackness' (cited in Stoller 2002: 75). However, currently Black Americans position themselves as absolute, true Americans, and the boundary between the White middle class and the Black middle class has become more blurred.<sup>6</sup>

The ambivalence of Afrocentricity is expressed in a dualistic process: separation of the movement into different streams (aesthetic, educational, and political) on one hand, and consolidation of African Americans on the basis of democratization and liberalization, on the other hand.

Analyzing the data on the rise of Afrocentricity, different scholars, including philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah and H. L. Gates, Jr. became skeptical about it. At the beginning of the 1990s Asante was frequently accused of nationalism and falsifica-

tion of history. Dr. John Henrik Clarke, historian and supporter of the turn to African roots, drew the public's attention to the discordance in Asante's terminology. He began to develop his own theory as an alternative, which he called Africentricity (and not 'Afro-'), and which, in his opinion, more adequately reflected Black consciousness.

Afrocentrists are sure that the current position of African Americans was achieved by the merit of their movement, too. At present, they intend to unite all Black people under the aegis of the African American community. They are ready to offer their paradigm and methodology to representatives of the African Diaspora throughout the world, and, to that end, the leaders of the movement founded Afrocentricity International, the organization devoted to the economic, cultural and educational renaissance of the African descendants.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Orisha (Orishas) – general designation of deities and spirits in traditional beliefs of the Yoruba.

<sup>2</sup> Adinkra – graphic symbols originally created by the Akan of Ghana and the Gyaman of Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa that represent concepts, legends, proverbs and maxims. It is used to decorate articles, clothes, and books.

<sup>3</sup> Kwanzaa – the pan-African holiday celebrated annually from December 26 through January 1, was invented by Maulana Karenga in 1966. See the Kwanzaa official website: <http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/index.shtml>, accessed on Feb. 5, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Odunde – the largest annual African American street festival organized for the first time in 1975 by Lois Fernandez and Ruth Arthur. It takes place annually on the streets of South Philadelphia over the second weekend of June. The idea of this festival originates from the Yoruba culture and celebrates the coming of another year. See <http://odundefestival.org/>, accessed on Feb. 5, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Kuumba (from the word meaning 'creativity' in Kiswahili) is an annual cultural African American Art festival started in 1989.

<sup>6</sup> For the last 30 years the educational distribution and employment rates of African Americans have changed. See 'The Demographic Profile of African Americans, 1970–71 to 2000–01.' URL: <http://www.blackcollegian.com/the-demographic-profile-of-african-americans-1970-71-to-2000-01/>; The *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. URL: <http://www.bls.gov/>, accessed on Feb. 26, 2015.

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