Feast, Race and Power

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In advanced societies, advanced studies take into consideration all sorts of social structures with relation to power, and what this means regarding power relations. Modern analyses consider family, work, play, sport, gatherings and even idle time when trying to understand how hegemonies create their domination, and how they are reflected and interrogated.

One indicator that we face, or are on our way to consolidating into advanced society, can be found in the proliferation of studies in increasingly specialized, and their respective connections to the hegemony and power of certain elites.

Society's complexities do not stem so much from the established division between modern and pre-modern societies, but more so from the ability of each society to perceive and understand its own complexity and examine it critically in its knowledge production. The concept of civilization has more to do with this than with what we understand today as civilized people: a creative mix of two ingredients—knowledge and tolerance.

The world of the Incas was as extremely complex and complicated as the most contemporary of societies, the difference being that they were not aware of this. Beyond possessing knowledge of themselves—a critical selfconsciousness—they reproduced knowledge about themselves without the minimal openness necessary to allow themselves to evolve from their own complexity. They perceived everything as a complete totality, without noticing the autonomy of its parts, the functionality or dysfunctionality of these parts, and the critical message these parts themselves might communicate to the whole at some determined moment.

The more specific the perceptions about a society, the more enriched it is. The most frequent error committed by certain cultures is not noticing when they are ceasing to be a community and starting to become a society. Put more rigorously, it is when the idea and reality of community begins to have a tense and critical relationship with the idea and reality of society. This is an unavoidable development.

Communities began their journey towards modernity during a process of observing that the undifferentiated ties that united them began to mingle with the differentiated ties that socialized them. Put differently, sociability differentiates us while community only binds us, which explains why communities know less about themselves than societies do. A focus on and studies about community do not open themselves up to themselves, whereas sociological studies do, which is why Western anthropology and sociology "discovered" all the other societies and cultures that perceived themselves as only communities. In fact, the West began this process of examination with itself.

Thus, the focus got turned around: it began with what was specific to each society, and how it connected to the whole; how it reflected, distorted, critiqued, exceeded, or simply constituted it.

Community studies, which are nothing more than studies of power, do not allow one to examine traditional subjects ranging from the State, the people, State-established religion, to broader categories that can also be traditional, or reflect tradition, but do not fit in well with the assumed sense of community. These are the economy, family, groups, mentalities, psychology, class, and culture. These fields are the ones that express differences and even divulge preconceived or inherited communities.

One of those fields is feasts, and their relation to power and culture. So far as I know, studies of feasts in Cuba have not systematized the connection of feast with power relations in society. Fundamentally, the studies have been ethnographic and, at best, see feast as expressions of popular culture. A proliferation of minor studies about carnival, and its rise and fall, conclude as much.

Thus, the power of sociability and sociability of power reflected in Cuban feasts is reduced to its ethnographic dimension, or its mere connotation as a space for the expression of a special type of Cuban anthropology. I hope critics correct me, but studies of feasts as play and manifestations of power do not seem welcome in Cuban sociology and anthropology. Yet, feasts, as a phenomenon, are very tied to social and political power relations in any society. Feasts are linked to numerous spheres and interests concerning power and social interaction, as a form of sociability and social manifestation.

What is a feast? Let us leave to one side its historical origins and say that its roots are deep, and go back to time immemorial. Their cultural roots are not of interest here. Its Latin etymology is simple: *festa*, a gathering for expressing happiness. Its essential elements include light, music, wine, treats, and dancing. In this revelry, a panoply of entertainment destined to help people momentarily forget and break the recurring ties that bind us in our normal lives are dissolved, invested, blended and confused. Paule-Monique Vernes has defined this as "an excursion outside our everyday social condition."

Uwe Shultz's definition, which counters a perception of feasts as never having corresponded to their real nature, is interesting. It says that they are marked by a contrast between order and spontaneity; that through feasts "man approaches divinity, but also his animal nature, losing himself in irrationality." This is crucial, because this reference for divinity means that feasts were born as a response to a specific order, and attended to specific rules. From their birth, in what were originally religious societies, come their limits (controls), whose responsibility it was to organize the disorder, spontaneity, transgression and lack of control built into the shared idea we have of what a feast is.

So it is. Feasts are like "an intensification of life in a short period of time" (Uwe Shultz), like a scene, a place for the uncertainty of the fleeting, the disorder of a lack of control, the



Carnival scene in Havana, 1915.



Carnival scene today.

disappearing borders, the mocking *comparsa*, our nostalgia for ephimera, the happy feeling, and the superimposition of transversion with reversion. For all these reasons, and more, feasts are seen as the dangerous dissolution of the necessary social order that must regulate life in a community.

Yet, in principle, and as a rule, practically, none of the above enumeration corresponds with reality. The religious and ritual origins of feasts contradict these perceptions. What feasts do and precisely seek to accomplish is to reconstruct the community link that everyday (social) life constantly dissolves. This allows one to speak of them as a unanimous space in which the individual sees himself as equal to his 'Other.' If everyone conceives of feasts as a place in which roles are reversed and dissolved, this is because hierarchies, qualities, rigid borders, inherited orders, and even birthplaces briefly disappear-and all this occurs while dancing and drinking.

The sense (of community) experienced at feasts forges a necessary illusion of community that those in power very much need because it permits disorder, since the feast's ancestral rules spontaneously control trances and drunkenness. Whosoever falls uncontrollably into a trance or gets drunk is taken to a room (cell) to refresh him or herself, recover, and get through the hangover as a process of remembrance and reconstitution: both serve as a way to restore the everyday, boring binds of life with his or her concrete role in it.

Originally, feasts were meant for full 6participation. There were no spectators. Everyone participated in complete equality, and individuals lost their autonomy; they ceased being individuals. This explains why feasts are 7the very highest expression of power.

French historian Roger Chartier is one of the scholars who has best analyzed feasts as an expression of traditional structures. He believes that feasts allow a society's constitutive structures to be revealed, which have been understood from two angles. For history, it is a story of a place from which one can observe a social structure and system of culture. Seen otherwise, feasts have left murals filled with picturesque images revelatory of the gaps, tensions and representations that plague societies. They end up being something like theater, in which there are actors and spectators, but with wine and dance, hence the following seven concepts concerning what feasts are:

- 1- A special and reiterated moment for deciphering the rules of social functioning (although in antiquity it was a greater moment, in which popular and dominant cultures had their encounter).
- 2- An intersection of two dynamic cultures: the traditional one and the dominant class's acculturating project.
- 3- A place of conflict where two, existing, cultural contradications confront each other.
- 4- A conciliator of opposites: an encounter of multiple differences.
- 5- An encounter between folklore and religion, depending on which of them is controlling the feast's time: for the ecclesiastic sector, feasts are a place for disorder and dishonor, an excellent place for incivilization. The dominant culture's response had been to confine them.
- 6- A place for exposing an urban ideology, which explains the municipalization of feasts, and their lay nature, all controlled by virtue of parades and calendars.
- 7- As a reflection of how public powers modify happiness.

If we reduce all this to two basic premises, feasts express the joy of tradition, which in and of itself contains social and hierarchic order, and the construction and public use of what those in power make happiness as a method of social control, maintenance, and reordering.

From their very inception, there is only one reason this dynamic between feasts and power will be clearly and vividly expressed in our culture: the racial origin of feasts in Cuba, including the aborigines, who I do not mention here because their feast traditions never get absorbed into the culture and socialized. In this case, traditional feasts are born in slave barracks, among black men and women who reproduce them just the way they were in a religion that for the dominant culture meant (and still mean) abasement, lack of culture, and uncivility-even if its social conventions hide it. Traditional slave barrack feasts are seen as the equivalent of something prehuman, depending on how much the dominant culture accepts uncritically Catholicism's rigid view of African bodies and spirits.

The historical-cultural fact that these black feasts would not disappear as a result of the Catholic church's strong evangelizing efforts, is due, in part, to the healthy pragmatism of Cuban sugar barons. It was necessary to let blacks live and reproduce their illusion of community through their feasts, in order to get the most productivity out of them when they were cutting cane and working the sugar press. Where and whenever the Church tried to make it disappear through catechism and obliging every "child" of God go to mass every Sunday, feasts had to be allowed-but controlled. Catholicism excommunicates feasts and sees wine only as a libation, something tasty, not drunkenness. Never mind how it feast can be identified and confused with ursees dancing.

African tradition is successful in showing its social resistance strategies through feasts: through the body, imagination, dancing, treats and wine, which is the same as saying that the African gods are saved for two reasons-because they dance and are allowed to be (re)produced.

The question asked by French thinker Mona Ozouf, who has expertly studied the relationship between feast and revolution, and examined whether or not the interests of the saints and those of the people are compatible, is answered in Cuba by a doubly pragmatic factor: economic interests. One of them is, after all, that black Africans were brought to America to produce; the other, tradition's cultural resistance, which survives by "corrupting" the hagiography and religion of those who are dominant.

Here, feasts are power; they are interclassist and interracial, not fundamentally intracommunitary. This is not about rituals celebrating the nature of man's triumph over it, nor about a festive gathering one must await till later, with the appearance of the rural festival, which was already devoid of any religious sense, and reflected the power structure of agrarian families, and of these with relation to urban feasts.

Above all, the slave barrack feast was a place for dissipating strong social tensions that came from the brutal conflict of exploitation and the clash with another religious system, where erotic bodies, a moderate amount of wine, and strongly gestural, social movements-like the spirituals one heard in the cotton-producing South of the United States-which were later emancipated as aesthetic expression, without regard for their ethical qualities. Later on, the slave barrack ban feasts, like carnivals, which causes these

characteristics to become disarticulated from reappear along with a different sort of feast: their specific origin, although they also contain joyful expression. They are exploited by the dominant, criollo, revolutionary elite to dissipate social tensions and reproduce the very same structures of domination.

Feasts reflect a racial power structure and also fix and structure the natural place of races. African tradition resists the onslaught of dominant classes. The price? Being denied high positions in the social structure. You may dance, but you have nothing and have no power. Or worse yet, you are condemned to dance because you cannot have anything, not even power.

How does one derive power from a feast, if the only power you really have is to have feasts? Well, by managing to get the dominant classes dancing at your bembés, like at carnivals. This represents the partial triumph of the underdogs through feasts, in large cities, principally, but in a space delimited and controlled by municipal powers: the same people who are in charge of the dates on which the feasts fall, how long they can last, and even what can be worn to them.

By the time the feast that has been organized by those in power appears on the scene, and the power also found in salon dancesboth of which serve as models for middle-class dances-the feast tradition in Cuba, with its roots in African religiosity, remains confined by dominant ideology, and rejects anything purely black. This reproduces a cycle of economic and social poverty for Cuba's blacks. Much later, the traditional feast makes a strong reappearance, for reasons not anticipated by revolutionary ideology. Yet, it ends up being a way to reinforce the revolution's domination at times of great tension, and serves as evidence of a system of ideas and values in total decline. Furthermore, it will

revolutionary and republican ones.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's republican feast is the feast of democracy. According to Rousseau, feasts bring the people of a republic together as a way to organize a kind of assembly and create among its members pleasant ties and happiness that can keep them united as a community. Spectators should become actors to feel like part of anything. Spartan feasts are the model: with them, "everything was pleasure and spectacle; it was there that crude work mixed with recreation, and the smallest rests breaks brought on public instruction and allowed citizens to continuously gather and consecrate part of their lives to pleasure, as part of the State's policy." Thus, "there were no better feelings of satisfaction than those that publicly offered happiness, and they always came from the people."

If the best illusion of community can be seen in three basic places-cities, feasts, and democracy-Rousseau finds it easy for modern States to connect all three to achieve that complete happiness of which the States, themselves, try to become the source. The commemorative calendars of all modern republics owe a great deal to this Rousseauian view, and to his model, based on ancient Sparta.

Rousseau's community is democratic. If the idea of a general will derived from his social contract was understood to be something above or superior to citizens, it is still the case that Rousseau's community is driven by the idea of a mutual reciprocity and the exchange of free wills (of people of open consciousness) where language serves a form of immediate communication. That is the true core of his social contract. Thus, feasts are community and unanimity. Feasts gather citizens in a "state of innocent spontaneity," at the brink of great changes, such that remembering, or commemorating is an act of maintenance, above all. This is the republican conception of feasts, in which what is produced is displacement, inversion and equality. There are no spectators, just actors. According to Paule-Monique Vernes, what occurs is an inversion of the social subject. The loss of identity occurs at the same time as a general displacement of the 'Other's' position.

That illusion of community created by feasts is, perhaps, the same illusion of community created by democracy, except that during a short, intense period of time, feasts allow illusions to exist as reality, under the effect of drink and dance. The republican feast allows the maintenance and restitution of shared public order. According to Vernes, community derives from the Latin sense of communisa place that is accessible to all, in which each and every one of its members can participate in whatever collective deeds it proposes for itself, share the same feelings and beliefs, and achieve its best definition in the res publica's feast. This feast turns us all into equals before the State, or without the State, in the best of all cases.

Public feasts are in opposition here to all manner of traditional feasts of religious origin because they are imminently secular. The same is true for feasts of rural origins, because they, too, reveal a social structure that would deny civil equality to everyone in a republic. If the rural feast is more neutral, because in its own way it celebrates the successful productivity of laboring under a hot sun, feasts of African origin-which cannot be seen as separate from their religious origin—are still seen as the confines of illicitness, a refuge for criminal practices glorified by strange rituals in which subjects become inexplicably entranced and even get drunk. This feast, confined and limited to one race, the black race, also emits a republican feasts that places us before others

sound that disturbs the peace of new and measured neighborhoods, especially in Havana. It is a feast for the margins, for the marginalized, that should be held at the periphery, not the center...of power. Such is the dominant view.

In Cuba, the republican feast is a feast of enabling democracy-of money-and then restriction. It has no major problems with traditional feasts of African origin. They serve as a place in the cultural ghetto that guarantees hegemony-at a distance. Since laity has no strong pedagogical rhetoric of conversion, because Catholicism is content with indoctrinating the elite and protecting its own hegemony with a veil of moral justification, "indecent"noise and uncontrollable bodies can and do live intensely and permanently in the feast's illusion of community. It is like a constant cultural rehearsal whose public performance will be in the main square of power, under the control of the "uncontroled feast" of carnivals-the closest blacks can get to power, that is, if they can get those in power to dance to their dances with their rhythm and intensity. After all, the feasts of republican communities are secular because they are tolerant.

Patriotic feasts are another thing. They serve as a model for the revolution-feast so well theorized by Mona Ozouf, and are different from Rousseau's republican feasts. Patriotic feasts-with their theatricality, fixed dates, celebratory spaces and rituals-are ruled and regulated by those in power. The republican feast, on the other hand, stages a sense of will, of abstract unanimity that nullifies the power of those responsible for aesthetically staging patriotic rituals. This difference means that we can be free in two ways-from external oppression (the power responsible for celebrating revolutionary-patriotic feasts), or from internal oppression (the basic ritual of

in an egalitarian orgy). In a very limited number of examples, such as in modern France or the United States, if the two converge it means that the nation has matured. This is reflected in the weighty content and authenticity with which their national holidays are celebrated. July 4th and 14th are celebrated in the United States and France, respectively, with more anthropological weight, that is, constitutive force, than January 1st or July 26th in Cuba.

On the contrary, revolutionary feasts generally, as is the case in Cuba, are at multiple odds with all kinds of traditional feasts. In principle, revolutionary feasts are normally feasts of unanimity—but not for all. As revolutionary feasts, they begin by excluding someone. Not everyone is included or can participate in the same manner. They are more like theater, with actors and spectators; its form is based on the Spartan model, but only after it has excluded those who do not share revolutionary methods and goals from the city, that other place with an illusion of unanimity.

In 1959, there were four traditional feasts: the feast of African religiosity (be it strictly religious or carnavalesque); the rural feast, salon feasts, and private feasts. This last kind was very modern, and began to be severely affected by the revolutionary feast, which was commemorative, overwhelmingly public, solemn, cooptive, and monopolizing, as an inebriated and inebriating reflection of the revolution's pedagogy and politics. The feasts most affected by the effects of this leveling, flattening feast devoid of cultural substance are black feasts. If the African gods survived during colonial times because they danced and sang to challenge the Christian gospels in their slave barracks, on the plantations, during the revolution, these same gods must disappear. This challenge by the gods, through dancing and singing, suffers the worst of sentences: social ostracism as well as legal punishment. There were no more religious dances because there were no more rituals or gods. They all go underground and hide in simulacra.

The Catholic mission of evangelizing others, which starts in the eighteenth century, now has help, not from pragmatic sugar plantation owners, but rather from the revolutionary plantation, with two kinds of destructive logic that both crush tradition: socialist productivism (which does not tolerate weekend rest for African feasts or Mass) and the concept of the"new socialist man" (who must abandon religious "opium" and "superstition"). The intensity of religion is folklorized, that is, it comes to be seen as theater, like an aesthetic art, devoid of ethics and spirituality, and is relegated to urban carnivals, but destined to die a revolutionary yet lingering death. For the Catholic mentality, what has occurred is a loss and a gain. The loss? Sunday ceases being for Mass, and are for work, instead. The gain? The "indecency" of African bodies and spirits disappear in favor of good Christian customs, the ones in which all the grand and petite bourgeoisie who made the revolution were educated.

The triumph of Catholic culture and morality was complete, for a long time, at least. All the gods went into hiding, even the Catholic god, society began to fake public decency, a piety and rigid morality that was and is ignored in the private lives of Cubans. They are always addicted to corruption, which also derives from prohibition.

This is how feasts of African origin are seen, as a corruption of mores (customs that are more like behaviors) and as the voluptuosity of the marginalized. They continue to reflect, although even more anxiously, petrified power relations. The revolutionary feast may enjoy resources, legitimacy and publicity, but none of that is the case with feasts of African on as tradition in many of the victorious solorigin. If the Abakuas' diablitos, spirit dancers, are disappearing from the streets, this is parallel to the disappearance of the Abakuas themselves from revolutionary history, even after having given the revolution their lives, passion and discretion, during its early years. This also has meant the disappearance of blacks from power.

The revolutionary feast does not acknowledge tradition. Yet, it is confused with it. Which one? A tradition based on deeds. not culture. This model of feast is like the Spartan one, but stripped of its republican sense. The deeds that are paraded in this feast have nothing to do with the unanimity with which power disappears into a city of equals. In reality, it only reproduces the heroic deeds of men and women immersed in hard combat and covered in medals and military laurels, thus reaffirming the positions they have won because they faced death. It is a feast of victors, but in this case, the victors have a transformative ideology about man, and about all the situations and conditions that have gone before. This revolutionary feast acquires its sense and substance not only because it praises certain deeds, but because it also affirms and justifies a doctrine.

For the revolutionary feast in Cuba, warriors are not masons, santeros, Abakuas, practitioners of rituals, or people who make the sign of the cross, all of whom are allowed to go back to their traditional feasts after the revolution's public feast. Instead, they are people who were transformed, and eventually left their ancient cultural celebrations behind them. The revolutionary feast sings to two victories: an exterior one (against enemies of the new formal order) and an interior one (against the enemies of the past, which lived

diers).

With each annual celebration, the revolutionary feast celebrates the division of previous unanimity that existed through the republican feast, and the split that occurred in the culture that was experienced intensely in traditional religious and rural celebrations. To these, we must also add those that celebrated settlers absent from many quiet communities, in their inner lives, and far from the noise of the city.

What we are faced with is a feast of power, not a community feast. It reproduces the very same structures the revolution sought to eliminate, and are now stagnant, due to a lack of festive circulation, and because the new revolutionary pedagogy lacks legitimacy. Thus, from time to time, and celebration to celebration, traditional feasts cease reflecting the unanimity they did. They can no longer exude equality through dance, wine, transversion, inversion and displacement, because the potential participants are not permitted to play themselves, as actors, and possible spectators are punished if they try to revisit the past-even for the sake of drunkenness and extroversion.

Denying feasts of religious origins, or forcing them to hide, which makes public gathering for the joy of others impossible, are ways of showing that blacks have not attained power in the new revolutionary order. In cultural and aesthetic terms, the ability to celebrate a feast is an expression of crystalized power in society. Yet, the revolutionary feast is losing significance with the passage of time. Why?

Ozouf's revolution-feast must be understood fundamentally in this other sense, as the violence-feast of Jacques Heers. It is the feast that attempts "to humiliate the beaten" to

reinforce the idea of community, displaying the "solidly rooted survival of the civil war's spirit."The power-feast serves only to exhalt the position and values of the victors. In time, it becomes an exhibition of "lordly" feasts destined to ensure the loyalty of the nobility, and the primacy of a power than can subordinate subjects. It is Machiavelli's Bread and Circuses: the prince must offer his people feasts and games at certain times of the year.

This kind of public feast exhalts power and returns us to a system of traditional feasts where we find, as always, traces of society's evolution. The public organizers are so pleased with their myths; they do not realize that this feast is a return to a tradition model of celebration. Yet, if one could reveal the traditional power structure behind these revolutionary feasts, one must ask what becomes of their basic promise to celebrate the unanimity of new equals that the real, everyday revolution was supposed to have brought about? Roles become reversed, and even disappear in all feasts. This is their fundamental nature. So, if the revolutionary feast is going to aesthetically celebrate the things that go on in ordinary, everyday life, it is no longer fulfilling its essential function of taking us outside of normal, everyday life. So, what purpose do they serve?

Traditional feasts are celebrated with authenticity because they remind us of our community ties, despite difference. In them, and through an inebriated state, we experience that which we desire-it is the sense of what we desire over the sense of real life. However, the revolutionary feast loses impact, not only because it is violent, but also because it reproduces the differences we experience in everyday life in its rituals, and this after having made an unfulfilled promise of equality. It does everything backwards: it projects a sense of real life ceremonies and parades. Yet, it also surrepti-

over what we desire. In addition, it is a feast filled with prohibitions and constraints, based on a mutilated version of the Spartan model. It no longer celebrates the newly achieved unanimity; it cannot do so through deeds, after having established itself in a festive guise that served only to confirm the rupture and exclusion of earlier republican unanimity. In a parody of false collective memory, according to Ozouf: "the revolutionary mania for feasts hides the history of an enormous deception."

What is left to the revolutionary feast? To transverse itself? This is what Michel Vovelle has asked in two questions: "¿Los ceremoniales surgidos de la revolución se insertan en las estructuras antiguas?; ¿las nuevas fiestas surgidas de la revolución coexisten como fiestas paralelas o rivales con las de larga duración?" [Do the ceremonies that emerged from the revolution insert themselves in ancient structures? Do the new feasts that emerged from the revolution coexist as parallel or rivalrous with historical ones?]. Of course. The revolutionary feast appears to be transversed. At this time, its impact is expressed as a manipulated return to what it prohibited. In Cuba, this means an appropriation of the conga, drum, and rhythmic gestures of bembés in order to laud the now old laurels of the victors. Tradition is coming back in this manipulated way, and is also fractured by the manipulative power of a lack of social agreement or consensus.

Drunkenness, eroticism, rituals and trances occurred together with singing, projected voices, a lack of control, and liberated energies at traditional feasts of religious origin. The current revolutionary feast conveniently uses what in tradition seemed compacted and offers a sense of religious spirituality. On the one hand, it uses the conga and drum to achieve a sense of belonging at its patriotic ness and music in a sort of irrational dance, change. What was once considered illicit is in order, in a controlled manner, to channel acquiring civil legitimacy, a complete triumph and dissipate the social tensions accumulated for Cubans in Cuba through feasts. because of the revolution. This explains the decline of the public feast and consequent reinforcement of private, authentic, independently organized and very modern feasts, that joyfully unite small groups through which socially known clients and roles are reinforced. To hold a private celebration today is synonymous with two forms of power, status and the ability to socially convoke and convene.

With the exception of private celebrations, feasts are the only social institution where Cuba's democratic society can gather today, and it continues to reflect a place where one race, the black race, comes together; except that traditional feasts are confused with revolutionary ones today, whereas they were not allowed in public, or of the public, before. This is a return to tradition that is beginning to confer a spiritual sort of power to the black race.

It is common knowledge that the socalled, African-inspired feast also blesses, sanctifies, cures and initiates the elite. This is resulting in, or better yet, occurring to the elite during its growing loss of spiritual orientation and ideology. If this sort of return takes place through spiritual coopting, the black race is beginning to acquire power through its ability to fill a void that is obvious at any and every revolutionary feast.

The elite's Catholic morality and rigidity is crumbling, even if it refuses to share its power, wrapping and shielding itself in it. Yet, this power admits other influences. It, too, gets drunk, agitates men, still dances clumsily, and unmasks its sexual hypocrisy.

Race, power and feasts still reflect the criollo Cuba that has always existed, but the

tiously organizes public drinking, drunken- relationship amongst them is beginning to

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