

Gerontology in Igbo Religion

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Abstract: *In traditional African society, there are no old people's homes where the elderly are isolated with the view to caring for them. Both the aged and aging people are cherished members and respected elders of the family who are cared for within the frameworks of African gerontology. Gerontology in Igbo Religion is a specimen of gerontology in African Traditional Religion. This paper discusses Igbo gerontology with interest on the care for the aged and the aging as found in the contents of doctrine and practical contexts of Igbo Religion. This underscores the facts that the care for the elderly in Igbo society has not only some secular characteristic but has, in addition, some religious meaning. Understanding the porous demarcation between the secular and the sacred in Igbo cosmology makes its gerontology acquire a force and significance that are critical to the folk religion. The findings of this paper reveal, inter alia, that in Igbo traditional society, the aged and the aging are highly esteemed part of the population and to grow old is the honest wish of every Igbo person. Igbo people are the indigenes of Southeast and parts of South-South Nigeria; they are found as well in North-central parts of the country as indigenes. A great number are in Diaspora across the globe. Their language is Igbo taken from the tribe's name. However, it was discovered that this age-long practice has some setbacks in the contemporary times due to influences that are strange to its original forms and have distorted its perceptions. Based on the findings of this study, therefore, the study recommends, among others, the need to care for the aged and the elderly. The methodology employed in this work is Culture Area Approach which means that the study focused largely on the theory and practice of gerontology as a value in Igbo religious metaphysics.*

Keywords: Gerontology, Igbo Religion, Values, Issues, Solutions.

Introduction

The traditional African family is a complex tie of sanguinity or affinity that emanates in the past, exists in the present and continues in the future of the yet unborn. This implies that the dead in the immediate or far past are critical members and irreplaceable parts of the family; these are the forebears, ancestors or ancestress-matriarchs called "the living dead" in that right: they are dead but living and thus constitute important family members in the socio-religious population of the family. They are invited at meals, consulted in the face of issues, invoked in prayerful veneration, housed in family shrines, visited in their sacred graves and celebrated in feasts. The remote or recent activities of these figures make up some essential aspects of the family history.

In the present, the living in the bio-social sphere, the aged or the elderly, adults and children sustain the family metaphysics in the *Now* without whom the family, kindred or clan will go into extinction and the futuristic realities of existence would be grossly impossible. In this sense of safeguarding the future in order to ensure fertility and continuity, the yet unborn are huge concerns in the socio-religious metaphysics of the traditional African family. Descendants yet to be born are inestimable persons and consequently, provisions are made for them in the likes of family or community land that are kept safe and not sold because they too are owners of those parcels of land. Again, the family name is kept untarnished for the sake of the yet unborn; evil deeds are avoided in order not to make the prospective descendants suffer some wrath or afflictions in the hands of the gods. In like manner prestigious pearls, crowns, awards and rewards are maintained for the sake of the yet unborn. This explains in part the entrenchment of monarchy in some families as a recognition or salutation of their noble past.

However, in this study our interest is in the care for aged and the elderly who are alive in the present from the perspectives of Igbo Religion. It is implied that for this indigenous religion, gerontology is not only a social fact or a political and economic affair but also a religious one. In Africa where there are interwoven constants and variables between the sacred and the secular, the care for the aged and the elderly has serious religious underpinnings. In this paper the specimen of African Traditional Religion whose gerontology would be largely discussed is Igbo Religion. Reference, however, would be made to gerontology found to exist among other African indigenous communities to buttress our points made in Igbo care for the aged and aging or for comparative analytical reasons. In order to comprehend the discourse, we shall explain the referent values of the key words that make up the title topic by way of conceptualization. To this we now turn.

Conceptualization of the Key Concepts

Gerontology

Gerontology is a concept got from two Greek words; namely *geron* which means "old man" and "logos" or "logia" which is "science, study, discourse or word." Etymologically speaking therefore gerontology is the scientific study of, discourse on or word about an old man. Old Man here is to be understood in its generic anthropological value to depict man and woman, that is, human persons in their old age. Historically, the word gerontology was "introduced in 1903 by Nobel Laureate, Elie Metchnikoff (1845-1915),

professor at the Pasteur Institute of Paris” (Birren, 2007). Gerontology is a coinage of Metchnikoff from the two aforesaid Greek words in 1903.

One does not just in dramatic suddenness become old. Old age is grown or arrived at through the process of aging. In the light of this reality of chronological fact in one’s arc of life, gerontology involves the process of aging. In the words of Grabinski (2007), gerontology is “the study of the biological, psychological and social aspects of aging.” For Nancy L. Nadon (2006), “Gerontology research involves the study of normal aging processes and age-related diseases.” Describing the experience that comes with old age, Burdick (2012) wrote that “With advanced age, humans experience the natural processes of ‘senescence’ – reduced viability and increased vulnerability – and are less able to respond effectively to a variety of environmental demands. Aging brings about notable changes in biological, psychological, and social functioning.”

Gerontology has multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary dimensions. Such dimensions include anthropology, medicine, religion, politics, culture, economics, geography and environment, peace and conflict, science and technology, among others. Gerontology as a multi-variant phenomenon has been there right from ancient civilizations but as an academic discipline it is a recent subject matter. Igbo society in its morality and oral histories has an articulated practice of care for the aged and the aging which has been transmitted from generation to generation. This practice is critical to its religion and forms its essential parts.

Igbo Religion

The Igbo people of Southern Nigeria have an Igbo traditional religion which is indigenous to them. It is a religion founded by the fore-fathers of the Igbo (*Ndi Igbo*). Igbo religion is a specimen of African Traditional Religion. In the words of Mbiti (1975:24) “African religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our fore-fathers. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious ceremonies and rituals, they held proverbs and myths, which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs, which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community”.

African Traditional Religion is not a revealed Religion like Judaism and Christianity. However, it is a monotheistic religion like the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the words of Omoregbe (2006: 64) who argues in favour of “indigenous” religion instead of “traditional” religion wrote that “Like many other religions, African Indigenous Religion is a monotheistic religion, though its monotheism is not a rigid one like that of Islam or Judaism. It is like that of Christianity, a liberal monotheism which allows that God be approached through subordinate beings who are his servants. Like other monotheistic religions, African Indigenous Religion teaches that there is only one God, and that is supreme, unique and without equal. The word for God has no plural form in any African language, and it is never applied to any other being”.

African Traditional Religion is the articulated experience of African ancestors in their quest for meaning beyond themselves. In the search for the ultimate concerns and the anthropological capacity of auto-transcendence beyond their immediate material extensions, they arrived at the beliefs in the existence of the realities that are supra-sensible, supernatural and these they placed at the other end of the bi-polar facts of religion. This religion has beliefs and practices proper to it which are transmitted by orality from age to age, from progenitors to descendants.

Basic Beliefs in Igbo Religion, a Specimen of African Traditional Religion

These are:

1. The universal idea of God, the Creator - the Supreme Being. This being has different names across Africa and his existence is affirmed by all African people. Among the Igbo people, God, the Supreme Being is called **Chukwu**, **Chineke**, **Olisabin’elu**, **Osebuluwa** to mention but four.
2. The existence of spirit forces – **chi** (personal god, deities (gods/goddesses) like the **Ani** goddess, divinities, ancestors, the evil, malevolent spirits (**ekwensu**, **ajo mmuo**).
3. Sacrifice, priesthood – the medicine men, magician, divination, sacred places: shrines, grooves and festivals- new yam festival, naming ceremony, music and dance, masquerades, peace and conflict resolution through **inu iyi** (oath-taking) and **igba ndu** (covenant making).
4. The African Morality – **nso ani**, sense of justice. African Traditional Religion is a religion with taboo and moral values. This is where one could see the moral obligations to one’s parents, the aging and the aged.

The first problem one would face in the studies of Igbo Religion is to interpret its religious experience using western categories. The Second is to fail to realize that African religion is part and parcel of African cosmology that has porous demarcation between the sacred and the secular; they are inextricably interwoven. The third is to study it with the negative interpretation of its values as if it has no positive contributions to integral human progress. Fourthly, the derogatory approach in the studying of its symbols, rituals and acts constitute yet another problem in the study.

African religion is about man – it is anthropo-centric, the welfare of man is central to African worldview; hence, *mmaduka aku/ego, nwakaego, ndu bu isi* even *mmadu bu chi ibe ya*. Poverty in African cosmology is not limited to the lack of the materiality of possession (*ogbenye*) but bemoaned uncontrollably when it is relational (*Mgbenye*), that is, lack of relations, kith and kin, orphan and most abhorred when it is anthropological-structural like the effects of marginalization, suppression and oppression (*mmegbu*). In the understanding of Igbo worldview the human person is of inestimable worth and no one wishes to lack blood relations. The human persons – foetus, infant, young and old are precious in Igbo Religion and constitute a central reference to its sacred values. The old people and the aging are cherished so much and cared for fundamentally by the family, nuclear or extended and through the kinship networks. Death at very tender age or early stages of adulthood is abhorred while old age is the wish of everyone. The traditional Igbo Society has strong and functional communal living that supports actively the practice of caring for its aged and the aging members. These aged and aging people are known as elders (*ndi okenye, ndi nka, ndi agadi, ndi ogerenyi* (males), *ndi okwuleje, ndi okwunyemka* (females)).

Care for the aged and the elderly in Igbo Religion

1. Respect for the aged and the elderly

Respect for the aged and care for the elderly is a cultural practice in Africa. This cultural index dates back to the time immemorial and it is often closely associated with the spark of the divine put it in the hearts of our forebears. The practice is found too in Judaism legislated within the framework of the Torah; thus: Honour your father and your mother so that you would live long (Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-3). To keep this commandment has an immediate reward; namely: longevity. In Africa, “The respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the maintenance of custom and tradition. The young are always looking forward to being elders and they are often told that if a child respects an elder, he would be respected by the young when he becomes an elder (Onwubiko: 1991:28-29). In this understanding, respect is reciprocal and banked for one by gods who would ensure the deposits are withdrawn at one’s old age. Hence, the Igbo proverb has it that *Onye fee Eze, Eze eruo ya aka*. On the contrary, the one who disrespects the parents, the aged or the elderly faces the adverse consequences. This idea is articulated in the proverbs: *Onye tulie nna ya elu, ogodo awuchie ya anya* and *onye anughi okwu nne na-ahu ushua ya*.

In traditional African society there are no old people’s homes where the aged are dislocated from their bio-social environs and contracted out for care to otherwise strange fellows. There is a good disposition to provide the care for the aged within the families in Africa. In the words of Onwubiko (1991: 29): “The care for the aged, as an African institution, is situated within the family. It is so cherished and so organized that there is no need, in the African setting, for cheerless nursing homes for the aged as it exists in Europe and America. The idea of old people’s home and its introduction into Africa would lead to the abuse of the African sense of and respect for old age.”

In typical Igbo socio-religious contexts, provisions for sustenance are made for the aged and the elderly. Land and cash crops are allotted to them. For instance, there are *al’uhu* (land attached to the palace and portfolio of the elder) given to *Okpara umunna* (the oldest male in extended family and *Onyishi Nkpuru* (the eldest male in the village) respectively to cultivate for life. The provision of land goes with the economic trees such palm trees (*Elaeis guineensis*), *ogbono* trees, *ujuru/ugiri* trees (*Irvingia gabonensis*), *ukwa* trees (*Artocarpus altilis*), *Oji* and *umimi* plants (*Dennettia tripetala*), among others which help the aged and the elderly live and thrive in Igbo society. Both the land and economic trees are taken over by their successors when they join their ancestors. And those are not usurped nor forcibly taken from the bereaved until after the stipulated period of time. This handover in some areas go with ceremonies and rituals. These parcels of land are not private property but family owned types (*al’oha*) and the economic trees are not meant for sale for any reason. This legislation against sales are sustained by the rituals that commit the dead and the yet unborn to the cause.

The elders, paternal and maternal, are not isolated from the rest of their respective families. Rather than deserted, they are accommodated within the houses of the family members, nuclear and extended. Some are meant to live in the homes of their children, grand children and great grand children while others are to dwell in the homes of their relatives. It is a blessing in the eyes of Igbo people (*Ndi Igbo*) to be so blessed with aged parents and the elderly in their homes. Even their daughters, who had been married into other families, far and near, take their turns to come on visits to their aged parents. They come with money, food items or warmth to stay with them for days and weeks. In the neighbourhoods, some good-spirited individuals fetch firewood or water for these old women and men whose children for genuine and excusable reasons are not readily available to care for them. Some could have lost their offspring to death, migration or had no child (*ren*) due to gynecological or environmental issues. Other persons of goodwill work for them in their farms, cook for them, sweep their compounds, clean their homes and wash their clothes.

One other feature in this practice is the provision of meat for the elderly within the family or kindred. In funeral ceremonies, cows are used as a ritual animal whose thoracic parts (*obu eshu*) belongs to the eldest male in the village as *ochoro onyishi*. In like manner, hunters relinquish some games which they kill to the *Onyishi* who displays the skins of such wild animals in the palace halls (*obu ogwa onyishi*). In *Onunu* feast that is the feast of ancestor veneration, some juicy portions of fowls and goats (chicken and mutton respectively) used as ritual sacrifices are given to the *Okpara umunna*. This explains in part the sources of fresh and dry meat found in their houses in every season throughout the year.

These obligations toward the aged and the elderly are also reciprocated by them in many ways. Some of them who can by their sound health and graceful aging render services in the homes. The elderly women or grandmothers help in caring for their young grand and

great grand children. These very young ones get so attached to their grand mummies that one is attracted to understudy their ways and manners in which they care for these little ones which are not found in the approaches of their young mothers. So the elderly and the aged are not social parasites who contribute nothing to the progress of the family. They do. And neither are they burdens in the understanding of Igbo religion.

The *Okpara* and the *Onyishi* serve as priests in *Egba Chukwu* and *Onunu* festivals in Obukpa religion for instance (Ele, C.O., 2017: 113 & Ele, C.O., 2017: 76). And this role they play in the context of other plural religious contexts. They also serve as custodians of history, customs and tradition. On several occasions they settle disputes in the family and among families, within the villages and outside the village in the wake of inter-villages conflicts. In a very critical way, they are educators of the young through their didactic stories drawn from their calabash of wisdom.

However, the presence and roles of the aged and the elderly in Africa has got challenges in contemporary Africa. These issues shall occupy our discourse below:

Issues

a. Urbanization

Urbanization as a contemporary reality in Africa is dealing deadly blows on the care for the aged and the elderly in modern Africa. The young ones who care for the aged and the elderly in the villages have left for the cities in search for education, government work or job in the private sector, skill acquisition, apprenticeship, in fact greener pastures. As succinctly put by Echeta & Ezech (2017: 141), "Exposure to western civilization and technology introduced a paradigm shift in the lifestyle and philosophy of the younger people. They began to lose their attachment to the family and village life and in fact many migrated to the urban centres. The mass exodus of the younger and middle aged people has created a gap in the traditional Igbo structure and the welfare of the elderly. The result is that in contemporary Igbo society, the old people are faced with the challenge of loneliness and neglect among others." The elders and the aged in more families than one are left in big houses with no one to stay with them and care for their gerontological needs. The window of leaving for the city with their children would have been a choice to explore and embrace if their children were not living in slums, indecent housing accommodation and having difficulties in feeding well. Living in the urban area is not synonymous with economic well-being. The philosophy of their children that are expressed in their thoughts and actions form aspects of the reasons why the aged parents are left behind in rural areas of peasant variety. Some suspicion and suppression add to its difficulties; some daughters-in-law do not want to live with their mothers-in-law and such other reasons like that. There are pandemic and poverty that have complexified global crises. These indices boomerang very negatively on the welfare of the aged and the elderly back in the villages. Those who live in the cities as retirees or whose children took with them to developed areas with social amenities are not insulated from the harsh realities of global crises.

b. Global Crises – pandemic and poverty

The economic meltdown, recession, inflation and the recent Covid-19 pandemic are issues that challenge the needed care for the aged and the elderly across Africa. Many governments and institutions of governance contribute to the economic woes of their citizens by mismanagement of both natural and human resources. Nigeria is a case in point. There is no reason under the sun why Nigeria with its ocean of wealth and abundant human capital retrogressed into the shameful status of the poverty capital of the world. They reported thus: "Nigeria, a third world country in Africa, is known as the poverty capital of the world. The nation just exceeded India with the largest rate of people of people living in abject poverty. In Nigeria, about 86.9 million people live in severe poverty" (Staff Reporters: 2020). As we discuss, a litre of fuel is sold above 200 Naira and gas above 800 naira, in the areas where they could be found, exchange rate is in excess of 800 Naira per dollar. The poverty situation is getting absolute by the day and its hazardous consequences on gerontological care are embarrassingly in worse proportions.

The Federal Universities were shut down since February 2022 due to the industrial action embarked by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) only to be tricked to resume on October 14 2022 without the satisfaction of their grievances; in fact they were paid "half Salaries for the month of October. The prices of food stuff have skyrocketed beyond the purchasing power of the average Nigerian for instance a tin of rice is purchased with sums above 12,000 Naira and the orchestrated minimum wage is 18,000 Naira.

The elderly are dying in their numbers due to lack of adequate care from their families and friends due to the culpable gaps in the governance of the country. The welfare package for the aged receives little or no attention from the state.

This is a country blessed with arable land and teeming youths that would have given big boosts to agriculture and massive food production but it cannot feed its citizens. Civil servants struggle to live as the minimum wage promised them by politicians in their bid and electioneering campaign to power ascendancy are not materialized; the promise is playing out deceit. The ripple effects of the economic crunch reach the aged and the elderly in many devastating and suffocating ways. Their care-givers are not paid for those who are employed, others are under-employed, yet many more are unemployed; it is becoming difficult by the day to care for these old parents and dependants. The retirees among them do not receive regularly their monetary entitlements as senior citizens. The hospitals cannot provide their medical needs either due to lack of drugs and facilities or exorbitant prices of their prescribed drugs. This has quickened a great number of them to the grip of mortality. One of the obvious realities of old age and aging is failure or deteriorating health. Many have resorted to Afro-traditional health care which either worsened their health or eroded their Christian

faith like those who resorted to sacrifices in Igbo religion or consulted diviners, witch doctors or fortune tellers. However, it is on good records that African herbs and roots have brought cure to many who were lucky to access the services of genuine providers. The ripple consequences of inept governance include but not limited to the drugs of the aged and aging that are not supplied, their physical bodies that are not clothed decently and their stores and kitchens that are not replenished with food items. With age, nutrition and dietary demands change yet these are not provided regularly or sufficiently. At the emotional level, they are going through trauma and much stress occasioned by these deficits. In Igbo society, the social net frameworks that are found to be active within the extended family system where suitable helps are given to those who need such assistances like the aged, the elderly, the poor, the bereaved and the sick to mention but five are suffering some setbacks in many places due to the financial challenges of members. The ugly datum that happened in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic was the hoarding of food items donated by humanitarian agencies, philanthropists, faith-based organizations like the churches, non-governmental organizations by more government agencies than one. Of course, some of the warehouses where the goods were shamefully but not safely kept were forced open by protesters who demanded their own legitimate shares of the life-saving items. As many of the aged and the elderly were lost to death in the scourge of the pandemic so were some adults and children lost to the cold hands of death leaving behind their aged parents and grandparents with no one to care for them.

c. Influences from foreign cultures

The acculturation processes in Africa where the influences of foreign cultures are felt could be counted in plural examples. The communitarian spirit across Africa is fast dwindling due to these influences from the occidental West that sells individualism and materialistic views about man and his world to Africans. Unfortunately, many uninformed Africans use these negatives values so advertized as yardsticks for human progress. Arua (2014:51) described individualism as “a philosophy of life stressing the priority of individual needs over group needs, a preference for loosely knit social relationships, and a desire to be autonomous...” “An individualist,” he continued “is self centered and cares less about the needs of others.” The ugly development is a strange phenomenon, *ab initio*, in Igbo society and Africa at large. Individualism has eroded to its ebb the otherwise care for the aged and the aging in many ways. A few citations in context can buttress the point: Within the traditional set up, individualism has cut into shreds the assistances that come from relatives and friends in many places today. In line with this view, Ani (2014: 21) wrote that “With rising acceptance of western values, the bonds in the traditional extended family increasingly became weakened. As secularization and individualism which are the basic tenet of modernization held sway in a modern industrial society, emphasis was laid on nuclear family with a minimal care and support of the elderly. Latently, the elderly also lost their significant roles and statues.” It is even worse within the circle of civil governance, the welfare of the citizens are jettisoned into the dustbin of neglect in order to functions the individualistic tastes of politicians.

The spiritual worth of the human person is no longer respected. The poor and the aged are bought for “a pair of sandals” (Amos 8:6) and viewed as “things” and “commodities” to be used and discarded in ignominy. The looters of the common wealth of the people think that the splendour of the human person lies in the wealth gotten by foul means. But this world view is wrong, unethical and sinful. In all these the aged and the aging suffer variously as the cares they grew up to know and practiced are unavailable in their case.

Very close to materialism is the moral depravity of get-rich-quick syndrome found among the youths who have been brainwashed that “having more” is better than “being more”. Some of these people have engaged in money rituals that had their parents or siblings as victims. Others lost their lives in prostitution, pushing drugs or armed robbery among other shameful incidents. These died and left their aged parents with no body to care for them.

Another grave aspect of western influence is the throw-away-culture. It is unfortunate the Igbo people who cherish their aged parents have got a new perception of seeing them as old enough to be thrown as waste. It is now rampant to hear the young telling their parents that they belong to the past and therefore have become as good as waste (*oge nke unu agaala*).

In the **Magisterium** of Pope Francis (2017) he taught that we must counter the harmful throw-away culture that marginalizes the elderly, considering them unproductive. The Holy Father calls on peoples and nations to care for the aged and the elderly.

d. Witchcraft allegations

There are debates in many circles and fora on the reality of witchcraft. For Parrinder, it is a “pathetic fallacy” but for Babalola (1991 56-57), to the Yoruba at large and to the Africans witch-craft is “a real reality”. Many have abandoned their aged parents and aging relatives with the allegations that they were witches. This accusation has turned apart families especially when it is unfounded and irredeemably left the defenseless aged parents and grandparents vulnerable to extra-judicial killings as some have been lynched, tortured or stoned to death, ostracism, exilic experience, neglect as care is withdrawn, frustration, depression, grief and death. Some of these victims laboured so hard to raise their children who now pay them back in bad coins. The accusations are induced largely by wicked and jealous daughters-in-law and by fake pastors and prophets who allege that people are witches without proofs. This phenomenon has erroneously truncated the needed trust within the family and switched off the channels of warmth and care meant naturally for the aged by their offspring, relatives and friends.

e. Infertility/Childlessness

As the aged have no biological children of their own who would care for them, it becomes increasingly difficult to cope with life at this dim stage. Infertility is a sour taste in Igbo society. In the words of Rasak & Oladipo (2017), “Childlessness has major psychological and social implications for affected persons, especially in settings where fertility is highly valued.” In contemporary

Societies, the effective care of the aged by children is fast diminishing as family ties are no longer as it was in the olden days. However, the childless find help “through greater contact with other relatives, friends, and neighbours, as well as with organizations such as clubs and churches.”

f. Conflicts and wars

It was Herodotus who said that under normal circumstances, the young bury their parents but in times of war parents bury their children. In Nigeria, there are extreme violent escalations.

Sacredness of human life is no longer respected as it used to be; human beings are killed by kidnappers, bandits, hired assassins, ritualists, political killings, et cetera. The Fulani herdsmen are on rampage in the country killing the youth, children and adults with the view to fulfilling the Fulanization-Islamization agenda. This ugly phenomenon has sacked farm settlements in more zones than one, displaced peoples from their homes and left the aged and the elderly with no one to care for them, that is, where their lives were spared. In Igbo society many families are victims of these violent conflicts and no adequate measures have been kept in place to curb future occurrences.

Recommendations/Conclusion

Based on the findings of this paper, it is recommended that there is need to eschew any approach to the care of the elderly that tends to diminish the dignity of the human person; any efforts to eclipse the hallowed intrinsic and extrinsic patterns of care for the aged and the aging that put further stress on those already imposed by the facts of chronology process and the environment should not be made.

In Igbo society and Africa at large, longevity is regarded as a blessing and it is their honest desire to die at a ripe old age. It is therefore a hallowed action to assist the elderly and the aged in such a manner that would live gracefully and celebrate a fulfilled long life.

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