

## A Yearning for Social Inclusion in the Poetry of Niyi Osundare

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**Abstract:** If literature is a reflection of any given society, then literary artists are critical factors in actualizing all aspects of a society's narratives and history. A society's experience is largely inseparable from its citizen's existential reality, which is often reflected in literature, as literature cannot exist in a vacuum. The concept of social inclusion is an existential reality that characterizes most contemporary discourses and debates. Social inclusion is a recurrent issue in the literary discourses of most developing countries necessitated in part by leadership failures. The discourse on social inclusion has made Marxist Studies increasingly relevant in African literary spaces. Many writers have explored the issue of social inclusion as class divides have continued to widen. As a result, contemporary African literature seems to be producing a class of "weeping" authors, each bemoaning the fate of their country in the hands of greedy and clueless leaders. This paper reinforces and problematizes criticisms on class differences and social inclusion. It launches incisive insights into one of the works of an award-winning Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare, highly acclaimed and regarded as one of the exponents of the second-generation Nigerian poets, and a foremost literary stylist. Osundare's poem, *Village Voices* offers a rare insight into the discursive intricacies of social inclusion. With poetic lines laced in African folklore, Osundare condemns the widening gap between the rich and the poor in Nigeria, occasioned by leadership failures, greed, selfishness, mal-administration, and gross ineptitude. The methodology deployed in the study is qualitative as relevant excerpts from the primary text, *Village Voices* and other texts (secondary works) are explored, highlighted and interrogated. A key finding of the research is that African literature from inception is still a reflection of an impoverished people yearning for social inclusion and possibly, a revolution.

**Keywords:** Literature, Social inclusion, Marxist Studies, African literature, Class differences, Inept leadership.

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### Introduction

The German philosopher, Karl Heinrich Marx (1818 – 1883), and Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895) were the exponents of communism—a school of thought, which centers on economic dynamics and state ownership and control of industries and means of production. Their initial groundwork into this aspect of social science gave birth to the social and economic concept that have framed the widely acclaimed Marxist ideology. Marxism is a theory that springs from much of the theorization on the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. It envisions a classless society devoid of exploitation by a dominant group. The Marxist tradition remained a potent tool for criticizing capitalist institutions and ethos. The influence of Marxism has been vast on world politics and economy. Similarly, Marxist ideals have had a tremendous impact on literary and cultural criticism. Habib (2015, p. 111) posits that the Marxist tradition gave birth to many branches of modern criticism including "historicism, feminism, deconstruction, post-colonialism and cultural criticism.

Marxism critiques the ideals of a capitalist society and the institutional factors that gave rise to it. Marx objected to the concentration of the means of production on the bourgeoisie who consequently oppress and exploit the working class. The Marxist thought adapted to the Hegelian dialectics of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Hegel sees the dialectic as a product of history while Marx sees the dialectic of history as motivated by class struggles. Marx also asserts that society consists of two parts: the base and superstructure. The base refers to the forces of production while the superstructure refers to the aspects of the society including culture, institutions, religion, media and state. Implicated in the Marxist tradition also is the concept of ideology which sprouts from the relationship between the different classes in a society. Most times, ideology is formulated to serve the interest of a repressive regime. Louis Althusser (1970), in his seminal work on ideological state apparatus revealed that the dominant class deploys ideology to exert control over the people. Similar to Althusser's ideology is Antonio Gramsci's (1971) idea of cultural hegemony in which Gramsci highlights the way the elite-ruling class dominates the rest of society not only through force, but also through shaping social ideas, culture, and other variables that influence the direction, policies, ideals, practices, policies, and values of a

society. The quest to dominate others has always being a critical concern in social, literary, and cultural discourses.

The present study is developed using reflectionism as its theoretical framework. Reflectionism is a strand of Marxism developed by Georg Lukacs (1885 – 1871), a Hungarian Marxist apologist. Reflectionism is a belief that literature is reflection of the society that produced it. Essentially, this study examines the various scenes of alienation in Osundare's poem, *Village Voices*. It enriches the corpus of literature which repudiates class struggle and fragmentation. In looking for scenes of deprivation and social exclusion which are the ills of a capitalist society, this paper aligns with the thought that no society progresses where a huge gap exists between the rich and the poor. Poverty according to Okere (2023) is the deprivation that comes with unequal distribution resources.

### **Osundare's Poetry and A Yearning for Social Inclusion**

A yearning for social inclusion is a declaration that the circle is not yet complete. It is a testament to the longing for justice and fairness. It is an extended proof of the huge societal gaps created by the activities of a privileged few and the opposite reality of "the wretched of the society and of the earth." It highlights the status of the bourgeoisie, who alienate the rest of the society, creating a class structure that is unfavourable to the masses. Osundare's *Village Voices* (2009) is therefore both a warning and a reminder to the ruling class about the social inequality in the society which breeds underdevelopment. A lot has been written on Osundare's *Village Voices* since its first publication in 1984 because it is one text that resonates the social realities and disparities of the Nigerian nation. Since literature reflects the society that produced it, Osundare's *Village Voices* aptly represents the social disparities in most African countries.

Niyi Osundare was among the first poetic voices of the 80's who showed clear commitment for social inclusion. He came with a refreshing poetic style that appealed to a large section of the people compared to the esoteric style of his forebears. He demystified the obscurity and estrangement that defined the poetry of the first Nigerian poets with its limited readership and modernist diction. Yet Osundare's style is not given to popular culture neither is it simplistic. Rather he make poetry more accessible to a larger section of the Nigerian audience. Osundare's art is people-oriented as he attempts to gauge the pulse of the ordinary and oppressed humanity in the society. Both his *Songs of the Market Place* (1983) and *Village Voices* (1994 & 2009) bear images of the rustic, the neglected and the base as opposed to the superstructure super structure of the society.

Stephen (2005, p. 1) examines Osundare's *Village Voices* (2009) in light of "its aesthetics of commitment and its substantive encoding of the qualitative voicing of the predicament of the unlettered peasants towards the upliftment of their socio-political and economic predicament." The foregoing established Osundare as a writer yearning for social inclusion in a milieu of social inequalities and repressive leadership. The aim of this yearning is envisioned in egalitarianism and socio-economic development. This is because social inequalities breed contempt, frustration, hate, suspicion, disenchantment and ultimately, revolution. In fact Althusser (1918 – 1990) argues that if the dominant class keeps manipulating the working class to accept its ideology (a process which Antonio Gramsci terms hegemony), the working class may in the long run produce a new hegemony or power base which will lead to a revolution (Dobie, 2012, p. 86).

The uniqueness of this research does not necessarily lie in its title but in the refreshing interrogation of Osundare's *Village Voices* with the theoretical framework of Reflectionism – a theory that views literature as the mirror of the society that produced it. In this paper, a number of poems reflecting the unpleasant social condition of the Nigerian society are appraised in light of the objectives of the study.

The poem "Killing without Sword" is one of such poems in Osundare's *Village Voices* that reflects a society yearning for social inclusion. The poet's persona artistically deploys a folklore to illustrate how the ruling class "kills" the working class without using a "sword". There is the imagery of an avaricious and demanding man whose sole business is to subject his friend to do his bidding. Parasitic in approach, the character inundates his friend with several requests. The first thing he requests is pounded yam:

My friend asked for pounded yam  
I gave him pounded yam  
with egusi soup whose taste  
stuck the tongue to the palate (p. 13)

The image of the character above is that of a dictator who wants to be satisfied by others. There is the repetition of the local cuisine "pounded yam", a metaphor for material possession. It is symbolic that the character's friend is not aloof to his request. He yields to his demand – giving him more than the pounded yam asked. He adds a delicious plate of egusi soup whose taste "stuck the tongue to the palate." Like a greedy fellow, this character does not stop asking his willing friend for help. Next, he asks for clothes:

My friend asked for clothes

I fleeced the loom of bales  
He spreads out in "sauyan"  
Alabangada adorns his head (p. 13).

The foregoing further paints a picture of a willing giver. After giving out pounded yam and egusi soup, he is ready to part with some clothes. The man is undoubtedly a kind and unassuming person because he does not relent in satisfying the needs of another man. It is telling that his friend does not stop making requests as he yet again asks for another difficult item:

Now my friend asks me  
to give him the moon  
I perch on my toe  
and stretch my body like rubber  
but my hands never reach the sky (p. 13).

The demand for the moon is quite an impossible request. The recurrence and preponderance of demand shows that the character is a greedy man. He takes advantage of his friend whom he sees as plaint, vulnerable and foolish. Predictably, his friend makes an effort to fetch him the moon. The dramatic effort of a stretching "my body like rubber" and perching "on my toe" points to the readiness of the man to make sacrifices for his avaricious friend.

The three verses of the poem already discussed above is a satiric presentation of the relationship between the ruling class and the working class in society. The former is used to asking the latter to make sacrifices by withstanding tough economic policies. These policies are orchestrated to exploit the masses and keep them vulnerable, subjugated and impoverished. The folkloric poem recreates the exploitative relationship where the ruling class feeds fat on the working class. It is ironical that the latter is ready to make sacrifices for the common good of the land – parting with the little they have and buying into the ideology of the ruling class. Thus, they are ready to build the country by making necessary sacrifices. However, when the ruling class presses them to do the impossible – the task of fetching the moon, they suddenly realise they are being taken for granted and exploited. While they are ready to display patriotism in the face of difficulties, their leaders are not ready to follow suit. Theirs is to subject the working class to the slavery of burning their fingers for them.

The Althusserian prediction of a revolution which typically arises from the exploitation of the working class is seen in the last stanza of the poem. There is an epiphany as the people realise that they have been deceived and exploited by those who should protect them. The poet's persona captures this epiphany and the resolution that comes with it:

Tonight I will send  
a message to my friend  
our worst enemy is he  
who send us to pluck  
a fruit deliciously beyond our reach (p. 13).

The tone of the verse above is rebellious. It marks a break with the patriotic tone of the preceding stanzas. The same character who made sacrifices earlier suddenly realizes that the person to whom he had shown love is actually "our worst enemy" who should be resisted. The resolution to send a message to his friend turned enemy is a decision to draw the battle line against a man killing others "without a sword".

The yearning for social inclusion also resonates in Osundare's "Eating with all fingers", a satire against greedy ruling class who mindlessly fritters the commonwealth of the people, leaving them in penury. The poem just like "Killing without a Sword" is also rendered in a folkloric style. It captures a mythic greedy character who tries to eat more than the people who own the food. The first stanza presented a dramatic picture of the greedy character upon waking up and the rebuke he gets from the poet's speaker:

You jerk up from sleep  
and find us eating  
you immediately want a scoop  
just wait  
if we started this way  
would you wake up  
to a single morsel?

The above stanza raises a deeply moral, philosophical, and logical question, "if we started this way/would you wake up/to a single morsel?" Apparently argumentative and confrontational, the stanza

questions the behaviour patterns that depict greed, selfishness, avarice, and self-preservation at the detriment of others. In interrogating this malaise and depraved behaviour, the character who wakes up to “scoop” food instead of eating like others is rebuked as that episode serves as social commentary on expected and appropriate ways to live, act, and behave. Ironically the character is not the owner of the food. He is being accommodated by the benevolence of others, yet he is eager to usurp that benevolence. As he tries to take advantage of the benevolence of the original owners and eaters of the food, his action is criticized, rebuked, and ultimately corrected. The rhetorical question at the end of the stanza shows that the greed of the ruling class is at the core of the poverty suffered by the people.

A yearning for inclusion in our commonwealth has become a recurring theme in contemporary literature and discourses as national leaders have failed to use their positions to improve the lives of the citizens. Where national leaders steal public resources to enrich themselves, nothing will be left for social and economic development of the land, and the end-product is widespread poverty and a widened gap between the haves and the have nots. The rhetorical question is also revolutionary as it captures the psychological disposition of a marginalized people with an unassuming resort toward the axis of revolution in the face of continued oppression and mistreatment.

The nature of greed is further amplified in the second stanza of the poem, thus:

The affairs of this life  
are like people eating  
some dip ten fingers  
and clog their throats  
their greed chokes the land  
with sprawling dirt (p. 15).

With its didactic tone and pre-occupational focus, the second stanza highlights two categories of people at a dining table where some eat with moral values and decency in consideration of others and normalcy, while others “dip ten fingers” in the plate, a depiction of greed and selfishness that ultimately “chokes the land/with sprawling dirt.” Those with five fingers are the people who work hard for the good of the land; others who eat with ten fingers are the ruling class who purloin the people’s resources in the process of which “their greed chokes the land/ with sprawling dirt.” As those with ten fingers plunder the wealth of the nation in an abysmal parasitic engagement, the land becomes a huge site of neglect, poverty, corruption and dirt. The use of the adjectival phrase “sprawling dirt” symbolizes a land where things have completely fallen apart as a result of leadership ineptitude and failure. The image “chokes” further presents the land as uninhabitable, uncondusive, and one that stifles economic life from its inhabitants.

The last stanza of the poem presents a type of revolutionary alternative in the face of mounting economic, leadership, and social tension. People no longer want to die in silence. In fact, they have become emboldened by the apparent system of injustice, oppression, and lack of inclusion to the point that their resolve could be likened to Claude McKay’s “If we must die, let it not be like hogs/Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot/....Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack/Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.” In Osundare’s poem, the citizen-victims do not want to remain quiet while leaders exhibit crass greed which makes life unbearable for the working class hence they raise an alarm of resistance:

We will raise our voices  
and tell the world  
we will not be watchers  
of others eating (p. 15).

The resolution to raise a voice of resistance is a demand for social inclusion. The people are tired of being taken for granted by their leaders and as such, as they feel pressed to the wall, they are left with no option than to rebound or respond. Although Osundare’s poem did not overtly call for revolution, arguably, it is implied, “We will raise our voices/and tell the world/we will not be watchers/of others eating.” Selfish and greedy leaders must re-think their stance and ensure effective inclusion of all citizens as that is the only way to avoid the inevitability of breakdown of law and order. From antiquity to the present, revolution has often been a way of gaining social inclusion in a clime where the ruling class is determined to perpetually exclude the people.

Further, the yearning for social inclusion is expressed in Osundare’s “The Land of Unease” where the poem persona continues the exploration of greed and selfishness exhibited by the ruling class. Characteristically, the persona sustains his folkloric style of railing against capitalism thus: “That land never knows peace/where a few have too much/ and many none at all (p. 45). The opening lines exposes the “unease” inherent in the land occasioned by opportunistic and greedy leadership. This type of leadership does not create room for social

inclusion as many people are left impoverished when a few have too much only for themselves. The poet sustains a prophetic vision when he declares that a land where people are frustrated and deprived of their due resources “never knows peace.” In other words, lack of social inclusion breeds crisis and violence in the long run, a reality that the Nigerian state is currently facing as several parts of the country has witnessed untold chaos and insecurity for over two decades.

Niyi Osundare is a native of Ikere, Ekiti State of Nigeria. Arguably, he had the Nigerian nation in mind when he wrote *Village Voices*. Breytenback (2007, p. 166) posits that “a writer, any writer, to my mind has at least two tasks, sometimes overlapping: he is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society, but he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people.” Here, Osundare assumes the role of an “implacable critic” of the class crisis in his society. His criticism is essentially prophetic too, as he pontificates about the fate of a land devoid of social inclusion. Arising from this, it may be safe to postulate that the various shades of crises: banditry, terrorism, insecurity, violent extremism and kidnapping, beclouding the Nigerian nation since the dawn of the century, may be tied to the crisis of class where “a few have too much/ many none at all.”

The folkloric trajectory of the poem sets in from the second stanza where the speaker tells the story of the yam being enough for “all mouths” until greed suddenly makes it insufficient for everyone:

The yam of this world  
is enough for all mouths  
which pay daily homage  
to the god of the throat  
enough for the aged  
awaiting day’s dusk  
and the young peeping  
at tomorrow  
from mother’s backs (p. 45).

Yam in the foregoing verse is a metaphor for the abundant resources which providence has made available in the land. The sufficiency of the yam is in its capacity to feed “all mouths” – including the aged and the young still “peeping at tomorrow/ from mother’s backs.” The sufficiency of the yam is however disrupted by the entry of greedy men, as captured thus:

But alas,  
men forge unequal knives  
a few slashing the yam  
with machetes greedier  
than Esimuda’s sword  
leaving mere peelings  
for the many others (p. 46).

The tone of the above stanza is regretful and mournful as the poet’s speaker bemoans the fate of the people in the hands of greedy men – who “forge unequal knives” to amass more yams to themselves. As they appropriate, they leave nothing other than “mere peelings/ for the many others.” These greedy men who leave nothing for others are the “merchants” of poverty and social exclusion in the land. For while the “big knives/ push bellies bloated by excess”, the many others “die hungry deaths/ in village streets.” The elegiac tone of the foregoing reinforces the fate of the people in the hands of the avaricious leaders who only leave “mere peelings” for them while taking all, everything, the commonwealth. The symbols “bloated”, “unequal” and “excess” – illustrates how a society is alienated and fragmented by the crass greed of a privileged few. There are also symbols of impoverishment, inequality and social exclusion, such as: “mere peelings, many others, small, die, hungry deaths, village and streets”. The poor and frustrated of the society survive on yam peelings left by the men who forge “unequal knives”. They are the men who die small and hungry across the villages and streets of the land. At every turn of the poem, the concept of class struggle and the divide between the rich, powerful, privileged, and the poor is amplified—a reality that is known to all Nigerians.

Revolutionary aesthetics, undertones, and perspectives characterize most of the poems in Osundare’s *Village Voices*. In “The Land of Unease”, the impoverished of the land do not keep calm at the face of frustration. They confront the greedy lot on the rationale for their action: “And when we ask why/ they say fingers are not equal” (p. 460), reinforcing the social inequality that is replete in the poem and by extension, the society. While the rich and the privileged of the land are deliberate in perpetuating class conflict in the society, the ordinary citizens represented in the poem do not relent in drawing the attention of the world to the injustice meted out to them by the ruling class:

We ask again  
why have a few chosen to be thumbs  
and the many others “omodindinrin”  
clinging precariously  
to the periphery of the palm? (p. 46).

The above lines draw the binaries in a bid to graphically present the lack of social inclusion experienced by the people. There are “a few chosen” at war with “many others”. There are also the “thumbs” and the small fingers (omodindinrin). While the thumbs are firm and confident, the small fingers are “clinging precariously” at the fingers of the palm, a re-creation of the impoverishment and vulnerability of the poor of the society.

Osundare’s “A Village Protest” is another verse that yearns for social inclusion. Essentially, the poem recreates the pathetic fate of the masses in the hands of the ruling class. Knowing that they are vulnerable, the political class devises a means of taking advantage of them. During electioneering campaigns, they come to them as friends, making promises of grandeur which at best remain unfulfilled. The first stanza of the verse captures what happens during elections:

They come more times  
than the eye bats its lid  
when they need your vote  
at cockcrow  
at noon  
at sundown  
when red rays  
are bidding farewell  
to the western sky (p. 47).

The theme of desperation is evident in the above stanza as it captures in graphic terms the political class which crawls to the masses ceaselessly to ask for their votes. The allusion to the reflex action of eye lid bating less times than the frequent visits of these politicians reinforce their desperation. There are allusions to symbols of time depicting how the greedy political class is all over the masses during elections. Phrases such as “cockcrow”, “noon”, “sundown”, “red rays” and “western sky” are symbolic of the progression of a typical day – from morning to nightfall, a depiction of their desperation and willingness to get the votes at all costs.

The political class also comes with “sugar coated tongue” to hoodwink the masses to do their bidding. The second stanza of the poem captures their rhetorical floweriness:

They come  
armed with sweet words  
inflated promises  
and a chest that bribes  
with countless procrastinations  
like the “agama” on the rock (p. 47).

The above stanza is replete with Vignettes of deception. All the acts of camaraderie stand in irony to their actual intentions. First, the political class come with “sweet words/ inflated promises”, prostrating countlessly and dolling out “bribes”. The simile in the last line shows how desperate they are to earn the trust of the people. The rhetoric deployed to bait the people form an ideology used to keep the majority of the people socially excluded. Their intention to bribe the people shows how patently corrupt the political class can be. The inflated promises made to the people are captured in the following lines:

We’ll build schools  
We’ll build hospitals  
We’ll bring water  
To every backyard  
And turn all nights into day  
We’ll turn every footpath  
Into a motorway  
And fashion out a city  
From every hamlet  
We’ll give the farmer  
The best for his sweat  
And make poverty

A thing of the past (p. 47).

These promises are empty and lies, a depiction of the unreliability of politicians and their character. The stanza is replete with hyperboles that appeal only to the imagination as they cannot be actualized by the present crop of politicians. These promises are pieces of ironies because both the ruling class and the citizens know that such promises are lies and cannot be fulfilled.

The promises started with “we’ll build schools/we’ll build hospitals” but we know that the education and health sectors are in deplorable conditions. The road infrastructure of Nigeria from independence has remained inadequate, just as the rate of development is anything but consistent. The poem is therefore an indictment of the political class that only knows how to play on the minds of the voters, making flowery promises of grandeur which eventually end up as a mirage. Ironically, while the people wallow in poverty, the ruling class enjoys all the luxuries of modern life.

The political class with their firm grip on power, influence, and control, does not have an intention to end the cycle of poverty prevalent in Nigeria. Their ultimate focus is getting into political office, which is synonymous with power, and staying there for their self-enrichment and security. This is little wonder the politicians neglect all campaign promises as soon as they get into political offices:

Now in  
and promises forgotten  
fat cars, juicy damsels  
and the best there is  
in the world of softness  
consume fat salaries  
and constituency allowances  
The mouth is now too honourable  
to greet, the belly too obese to bend  
our man becomes a locust seen but once  
in several seasons  
his Mercedes thunders through the streets  
Our dust-laden mats announce the departure  
of the man of power (p. 48).

The fourth stanza of the poem bears the tone of social exclusion, deprivation and frustration. It reinforces the deceitful inclinations of the ruling class. They never keep the promises made to the people. They see power as a guarantee to acquire “fat cars” and frolic with “juicy damsels”, a metaphor for pretty women. They also “consume fat salaries” and utilize their “constituency allowances” on their fancies. The imagery of their pot bellies reinforces their craving to eat portions meant for others. Then the poem likens the political class to a “locust”, a metaphor for creatures seen seasonally. It is ironic that they no longer “come more times/than the eye bats its lid” (p. 47) to ask for votes. It is also a piece of irony that the same people that prostrate countless “like the agama on the rock” (p. 470) while seeking the people’s mandate now spill dust on the people with the big Mercedes.

The closing parts of the poem capture the thoughts of a people who are eager to resist the ruling class that has kept them impoverished. They also capture the mindset of vast majority of a traumatized people who have become wiser, more informed, and are ready to take their fate in their hands:

Men of deep unwisdom  
Knowing not that  
power is the bird of the forest  
which nest on one tree today  
and tomorrow pitches its tent  
on another  
  
Another rain will fall  
(its cloud already gathering)  
and the distant wayfarer  
will come seeking shelter  
in huts long neglected (p. 48).

The ruthless ruling class in the foregoing comprises thoughtless people – “men of deep unwisdom” who forget that power is ephemeral. This is captured in the mythical narrative of the bird of a tree which “...nests on

one tree today/ and tomorrow pitches its tent/ on another.” Since they have determined to be inconsiderate and unwise in their treatment of the people, the poem predicts a revolution – “Another rain will fall” – which will compel a “distant wayfarer” to return to “huts long neglected”. Perhaps, that is the time the people would assert their collective will on the men of power that have marginalized and impoverished them for a long time.

### Conclusion

The evolution of committed poets in Nigerian literature has produced literary works that objectively reflect the society’s heartbeat and yearning. Niyi Osundare has been on the vanguard of writers of commitment who are conscious of engendering social inclusion in a nation that is ruled by a greedy political class. Published in 1984 and reprinted in 2003, 2004 and 2009 by Evans Brother Limited, Osundare’s *Village Voices* has greatly expanded the frontiers of Nigerian poetry of commitment, advocating through a robust creativity the elimination of the nauseating social gap in a society bedeviled by leaders who eat “with all ten fingers” amid the protest of the people. They also kill “without a sword” and turn the country into “The Land of Unease”. The four poems so interrogated bear a paroxysm of revolution, underpinning the Althusserian postulation that a working class that is held down by an ideology may someday form a new ideology aimed at a revolution that would dismantle the superstructure.

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