

Analysing the Role of Women in Early Niger Delta Economy

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of women in early history of Niger Delta with emphasis on Eastern Niger Delta. The paper x-rays the nature of the pre-colonial economy of the region, the major economic activities such as fishing, hunting & gathering, salt making, craft work, trade among others and the role of women in promoting these economic activities. To generate data for the study, the researcher employed the use of primary and secondary sources of data. In this regards, oral interviews were conducted in selected Niger Delta communities and the information generated was used to compliment archival and written materials from the archives and libraries. Furthermore, the study adopted the interdisciplinary approach and knowledge from related discipline in the Humanities and social sciences were used to compliment the available historical materials. From the study, it was observed that women in the Niger delta were major stakeholders in the traditional economy of the region. The paper argues that women and their male counterparts had equal opportunities in the economic sector and the result was high productivity and rapid development. The study established that women contributed immensely to the economic growth and development of the region. The researcher therefore recommends equal economic opportunities for both male and female folks in the Niger Delta to ensure rapid economic growth and sustainable development of the region in the twenty first century.

Keywords: Women, Economic activities, Niger Delta, Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The occupation of the Niger Delta people before the arrival of the Portuguese, the First Europeans to come to the West Coast of Africa, was predominantly fishing and salt-making which products they exchanged with foodstuffs from their farming neighbours of the interior. In the vast low-lying region of swamps and innumerable waterways and creeks, the traditional economy of the Niger Delta people has been largely limited to fishing and salt-making from sea water (Alagoa, 1980:7-8). The masses of the population on the sandy coastal belt have been, from antiquity fishermen. The predominant vegetation is the mangrove. Its aerial roots and other parts were used in the making of a peculiar type of local salt. The making of this mangrove salt and of other salt distilled from seawater was one of the most ancient pursuits of the inhabitants of this belt (Alagoa, 1973).

In the fresh water swamp delta with its clayish reddish brown soil and a vegetation of tropical rain forest with high trees, oil palms and *raphia* palms, farming is more important than fishing among some groups. Therefore, from the ancient times, the inhabitants of the Lower Delta (sandy beach ridge and salt-water swamp) have had to exchange their fish and salt for the vegetable produce of the upper delta (fresh water swamp). The people of the upper delta farmed water yam, plantain, bananas, cassava, cocoyam, and more recently, swamp rice as well as pepper, okra, sugarcane, maize and other crops in smaller quantities (Alagoa, 1980).

However, it is important to note that beside the historically dominate fishing and salt-making activities of the Niger Delta People, there were other equally important economic activities practiced by the various groups in the region. Such activities include: hunting and gathering, farming, craftsmanship, trade, amongst others.

It is a fact of history with an abundance of records and evidences from archaeological investigations that hunting and gathering was an economic activity of great antiquity and that the earliest settlers of the Niger Delta profoundly explored and exploited the potentials of their environment in this regard. It is important to note that the earliest form of hunting associated with the settlers of the Niger Delta Communities was communal. It served as a means of adding meat to the predominant fish diet and constitutes a show of bravery, which attracted celebration, and reward of title (Ejituwu, 1991). It is also recorded in the traditions of the founding of Bonny that a hunter, Alagbariye, discovered the site of Bonny during one of his hunting expeditions and brought his people to settle on where Bonny is now (Horton, 1967). This point to the antiquity of the hunting activity in the economy of the Niger Delta.

Ethnographic records of the early history of the Niger Delta established that the hunting activity was mainly prosecuted with such instruments and weapons as bows, wooden and iron arrows and clubs (Okorobia, 2000). Traps of various kinds were also used in this historic activity. With the advent of the Europeans and the introduction of guns, the hunting expeditions and activities grew in scale and the catch became profound. Albeit, it was the last and highest stage of the hunting activity.

As for the gathering activities, Niger Delta traditions hold that both the upland and riverine (as in the bush and water) environment were explored to their fullest. Gathered in the bushes of the isolated rain forest islands and sandy ridge beaches were terrestrial resources such as grubs or larvae of rhinoceros beetles, African giant snails, and fruits of oil and raphia palms for food and as fishing baits. Also gathered in this zone of the Niger Delta region include: African nutmeg, African bush mango, mushrooms and spices for food and medicines.

In the aquatic zone of the Niger Delta, evidence supported by archaeological investigations (Anozie, 1973; Nzewuna, 1980; 1983) demonstrated that the collection of mollusk such as shellfish, periwinkles; whelks, oyster, crabs, razor-shells and blood cockles among several others was common among the various groups of people in the Niger Delta region. This pure shell fishing activity successfully combined with the forest collection activity consummated the initial exploitation of the Niger Delta environment.

It is important to emphasize that Ejituwu exonerated himself, though to a limited extent, from the virus of universalized gender biased historiographic constructions in Niger Delta historical works. While doing a reconstruction of Andoni history, offered an identification of shared roles between them in the early history of the people.

According to him: whilst the men killed fish or large water mammals, their womenfolk devoted considerable time and energy to the collection of the abundant shell-fish and to the trapping of prawns, both of which activities they carried out in the smaller creeks Women went out in small ad hoc groups, constituted on the basis of voluntary association. On the whole, women seem to have operated from their home villages rather than making the long distance expeditions favoured by their menfolk (Ejitiwu, 2003)

The origin of male political and economic power has been sought in the dominance behaviour of male dominant and chauvinistic sociology of traditional societies. However, data from field research in relation to surviving traditional societies offer a corrective to this viewpoint. Severally, theorists have been attempting to develop models of early human groups that placed males at the centre and the females drawn in from the outside through exchange networks. These models contradict the known facts about early and traditional Niger Delta societies, among whom we find a social grouping consisting of both males and females at the centre. The burden of the evidence from field studies favours a model of early Niger Delta societies in which females wielding considerable social, political and economic powers and independence as well as influence (Tamuno, 2006)

The utility of the hunter-gatherer material, as presented by Ejituwu (1991), offers the basis for a coherent and more plausible model of early human groups in the Niger Delta. The hunter-gatherer group, as the earliest in the development of the Niger Delta political economy and social organization in the social relations of production, commonly has a genealogical core consisting of males and females. Statistically, mother-daughter bonds predominated in hunter-gatherer groups followed by sister-sister and brother-sister though father-son and brother-brother bonds were also found. This multiplicity of bonds has an important evolutionary implication: it clearly shows that male consanguine bonds do not form the sole basis of human group structure in the Niger Delta. The nature of the early Niger Delta society cannot be constructed or reconstructed with complete confidence; herein lays the caveat. Nevertheless, the hunter-gatherer data

should make us view with suspicion any theory that seeks to prove that male dominance in our present social order is a part of an evolutionary heritage.

However, there tend to be no unanimity on the apparent or real magnitude of the power of women in early Niger Delta societies. The controversy becomes all the more acute as we consider the distant past. This controversy concerns whether Niger Delta women have actually ever been considered equal to men. In other words, have women and men been regarded as different but equal? Or rather as different and unequal? Were Niger Delta women, *de facto* and *de jure*, systematically placed at the bottom of the social ladder, away from the centres of decision-making? Have the Niger Delta women ever been recognized and appreciated as contributing equally to the development of the Niger Delta societies?

Equality here does not mean the right of women to practice the same trades and wear the same types of cloths as men. It is defined as the recognition of the value of the contributions of men and women (Assie-Elumbua, 1997:297-8). Obviously, if one group or class establishes system of value evaluation and theorizing, and at the same time imposes same on the other then there cannot be merely difference but also inequality in favour of the group with the decision making power.

2. NIGER DELTA WOMEN IN HUNTING AND GATHERING

As a way of life, hunting and gathering, or foraging, represents the Oldest Form of human adaptation. Hunting and gathering live in 'bands'. There is a universal sexual division of labour which precludes hunting by women and a premium placed upon sharing and co-operation (Megarry, 1994:77). There was no full-time specialization of labour other than the domestic age and sex divisions that are found in any family. Among hunting and gathering peoples these divisions of labour is simply that men do the hunting, at least the kind of hunting that takes them any distance from the camp. Women, probably because of the 'relative' confinement of bearing and raising children, are left to forage near the camp for vegetable foods and such small game as can be easily caught (Service, 1994:79). But this does not mean that men's hunting is necessarily of greater economic importance than women's work.

However, neither men nor women in any society find their interest much aroused by a description of domestic tasks Dr. R.B. Lee, who did a study of consumption for a hunting and gathering culture noted that meat supplies account for 37 percent of the diet while the remaining 63 percent is gotten from vegetable food; J. Tanaka, in yet another study of a hunter-gatherer society, observes that meat makes up only 18.7 percent of the diet (Lee, 1968; Tanka, 1977). Both these reports document the fact that food gathering by women dominates the diet of hunter-gatherers culture. Yet another writer, Tudashi Tanno (1976) contended that sometimes a particular group in hunting operation involves the whole population of the band including the women. He reports that the women seemed to play the role of drivers in the hunt.

Each man owns his own net which is about 80m in length and a number of men co-operate in placing the nets to form a semicircle of about 300 mm diameter. After the setting of the nets the women combed through the forest in the direction of the nets, driving animals into the nets where they are ensnared, while the waiting men dispatched them with spears and arrows. This report confirmed the fact that women contributed immensely to the development of the political economy of the hunting and gathering cultures, the earliest in human evolution.

In all hunting and gathering societies, women play important roles as the primary gatherers, providing a stable food supply that is supplemented by the hunt. In the Neolithic period which is defined by the invention of agriculture, women had greater social and political powers. If women invented and for a time played central roles in agriculture, then women's social status must have been high (Christ, 2001:572). The egalitarian society of the Neolithic period came to an end as agriculture began to be transformed through the invention of technologies such as the iron flow which overtime allowed some individuals to control large plots of land which were worked by others. The process was hastened by the establishment of marauding and introduction of warfare or ways of life. Since women have apparently never participated in warfare on the same scale as men, the wish of the warrior to social power inevitably led to the decline in the social power of women as a group (Enemugwem, 2000).

Thus, we may argue that in the early past settlement and hunting and gathering Niger Delta societies, women had a considerably higher status. One may therefore postulate that one reason for the higher status of Niger Delta hunter-gatherer women is that women contribute, by gathering, at least 50 percent of the food consumed by a band. Since food gathered by women is so important to the group, the women, of necessity, are as mobile as the men (who hunt), and women and men

leave the camp equally often to obtain food. Both the women and men who do not seek food on a given day remain in the camp and share in taking care of the children.

Post-settlement economic history of the Niger Delta confirmed that hunting and gathering provided enough food for the earliest settlers in their subsistence economy (Nzenwunwa, 1980; Alagoa, 1972; Anozie, 1973; Green, 1985). These various writers on the Niger Delta produced evidences to support the contention that the collection of mollusk, (shellfish, periwinkle, whelks, and Oyster) may have constituted a dominant practice or activity during this period under survey. These gathering activities may be paramount or wide spread because the collection of these numerous aquatic resources did not require the adoption of any sophisticated system or method neither did it require the use of organized pickles of equipment for exploitation. All that was required was a collection container.

As has been rightly noted, the gathering operation was a predominantly women activity. The huge mounds of periwinkle and oyster shells in many excavated sites in the Niger Delta attest to the fact that gathering was an important economic activity in the area (Okorobia, 2000:25). But on the other hand it affirms that women constituted a dominant fact in the Niger Delta economy of the earliest period of the history of the Niger Delta vis-à-vis the place of the gathering activity.

Confirming the role and antiquity of food gathering in the Niger Delta, archaeologist Nzenwunwa (1980:234) argued that:

The millennia prior to the B.C. 200 would be expected to constitute the first phase of the settlement of the Niger Delta. Although the Coastal Delta may not have been fully occupied until there was a viable means of transport, its fringes may have long provided bases for periodic exploitation on food at low tide. This pure shell-fishing activity could have been successfully combined with a forest collecting activity.

The power of Nzenwunwa's postulation stands an implicit suggestion that gathering stood dominant tall in the hunting and gathering culture, and its extension that women, therefore, constituted the dominant sex and the more important contributor to the economic development of the immediate post-settlement period of the Niger Delta. This argument is supportive of the findings of Lee (1965) and Tanaka (1977).

It is important to note that the aquatic organisms that were gathered by the women in the Niger Delta possessed a common characteristic of not very mobile and mostly sessile. Some of the organisms gathered for food include oysters on the prop-roots of the mangrove trees; the periwinkles on the exposed mud-flats; clams that were collected from the bottom of the many rivers and creeks that virtually dominate the Niger Delta; crabs; razor-shells and blood cockles (Okorobia, 2000:25). Many archaeological findings in the Niger Delta confirmed the types of organisms gathered for food in the earliest times of Niger Delta history. It is interesting to note that apart from these dominant saltwater resources that provided substantial food requirements for the people during this period, the women also exploited the small and shallow ponds and lakes that are scattered in the Niger Delta and their contents collected for subsistence (Nzenwunwa 1980:236).

On the other hand, the isolated rainforest islands and sandy beach ridges also provided their own warehouses of terrestrial resources that were gathered for food. Among the resources were grubs on larvae of rhinoceros beetles, which were obtained from the decaying stems of the oil palm and raphia trees; the honey deposited by wild bees was also collected for its nutritional and medicinal values; the fruits of the oil and raphia palms gathered for food; the African nutmeg; the African bush mango; mushrooms; and other spice gathered for food and medicines (Alagoa, 2005).

3. NIGER DELTA WOMEN AND THE FISHING INDUSTRY

Therefore, here we contend that fishing also constituted another dominant economic practice or activity of the early settlers of the Niger Delta. The antiquity of the fishing occupation of the Niger Delta people has been attested to by many writers of the economic history of the Niger Delta (Dike, 1956; Jones, 1963; Horton, 1967; Alagoa, 1970; Ejituwu, 1991; Okorobia, 2000). There is the uncontestable fact that the Niger Delta region lacked sufficient arable land for farming. Therefore, from the earliest times after settlement the Niger Delta people did not practice farming. This fact has been attested to by the various traditions collected from the various communities of the Niger Delta.

However, our attention here shall be focused on the role of women in this sector of the economy. Among the various traditions, the Nembe traditions hold that the founding fathers of the metropolis had fed mainly on fish; supplemented by the few vegetable diets, gathered or imported from the hinterland (Alagoa, 1979; Okorobia, 2000). This fact was supported

by the archaeological works of Nzenwunwa (1980) at Okochiri in Okrika where fish bones were excavated; at Onyoma and Saikiripogu in Nembe and Ke in Kalabari where similar finds were recovered. The above were meant for the brushing of the moulds and to establish the antiquity of the fishing occupation.

Confirming the antiquity of the fishing occupation among the Andoni in the Niger Delta, Ejituwu (1991:48) noted that one certainty about the early ancestors of Andoni immediately after their settling down was their subsequent spread as fishermen controlling the entire system of water-ways between the Bonny River, and the Ibeno country as well as their prowess to exploit both the small creek, and the great estuaries. In his contention, whilst the men killed fish or large water mammals, their womenfolk devoted considerable time and energy to the collection of abundant shell-fish, and to the trapping of prawns, which they did in creeks (Ejituwu, 1991:49). Prawns and other fries were trapped in a variety of small basket-work devices, the most notable being Oket, Ekongh and Ukporo. In these activities, women went out in the fishing expeditions in small adhoc groups of varying numbers. They operated from their home villages as against the long distances operations of the men.

In developing their fishing skills and expertise, Obolo women acquired a deep empirical knowledge of the aquatic environment, of the vagaries of wind, weather and tide, while holding elaborate theories regarding the spiritual forces controlling and regulating the availability of aquatic contents and several other elements. Understanding of the nature and behaviour of the fish, prawns and fries modeled the design and manufacture of various kinds of instruments for the exploitation of the aquatic environment of the Niger Delta. Hence the manufacture of several kinds of traps used: such as Oket, Ekongh and Ukporo. The Oket falls within the category of fishing traps referred to as the *non-return* value traps (Okorobia, 2000:27). In this category also falls *nkata*.

The collective or common feature of the instruments in this category is that they were operated on the principle of allowing fish or pawns and other fries entry into the trap but disallowing their exit or escape by means of the preventive values. The *oket* and the *nkata* were of different designs and sizes. They were usually made from either the hard mid-rib of the oil-palm trees leaves, the prop-roots of the mangrove trees, or from the hand branches of the raphia palm, and women to produce a conical-shaped trap. The *oket* is usually larger than the *nkata*. While the *nkata* was usually used particularly for such fish as mudskippers, the *oket* was mainly used to trap Cray-fish and prawns. They are common among the Kalabari, Okrika, Andoni, Ogoni and the migrant Ibibio and Efik fisher folks. The important point here is that the use of *oket* in the fishing operations in Andoni was the responsibility of the women and their exclusive preserve (Ejitiwu, 2003).

Another important and one of the earliest methods of the fishing occupation of the Niger Delta people is the hook-and-line fishing. In this method, bait (fish food) was hooked to the hook at the end of the line so that if any fish swallow the bait, it would swallow the hook also and got caught. From archaeological evidence we were made to understand that bone and wooden hooks were used before the coming of the Europeans (Nzewunwa, 1980:147). A particular method of the hook system of fishing is the poled hook-and-line that possessed just a single hook, tied to the loose-end of the line. It was in turn tied strongly to a short or long pole, depending on the nature of fish being sought. According to Okorobia (2004:30), this type of gear and fishing method was commonly used among the womenfolk and children in smaller streams, flood plains and marginal plains of the Delta. Another important point to make here is that women cannot be removed or separated from this fishing method as their contributions in this area traversed many aspects. Apart from playing the role of drivers to their husbands, they usually provided the bait (the fish food).

What about fishing with nets? It appears this was one area where Niger Delta women contributed immensely. Before the advent of the Europeans, Niger Delta women developed the act of net fishing with profound ingenuity. The available nets in use then were locally woven from local fibre and canes (Okorobia, 2000:30). These were the nets with which the Niger Delta exploits their immediate environment. The nets called *ukporo* by the Andoni and *piri-ori* or *nunu* by the dominant Ijo groups were used principally in the Niger Delta to scoop prawns, fishes and various crustaceans in the shallow creeks and alluvial banks of the rivers and rivulets.

According to Nzewunwa (1980:150), Niger Delta women weave large ground nets of cotton yarn or cane, which they used to filter shrimps and prawns; sometimes they set them at the band of streams. The *ukporo* (scoop-net) and *ekongh* (lift-net) were the oldest indigenous fishing gear in the Niger Delta.

In the early Niger Delta fishing occupation, fishing with poison has been identified as one of the earliest methods of effective large catch. For Talbot (1969:919), the most effective way of obtaining large fish catches was by poisoning of pools and drained up rivers, while Alagoa (1971:354) and Nzenwunwa (1980:15) asserted that fishing by poisoning in shallow tidal and fresh waters, was quite an ancient practice in the Niger Delta. However, what was not clear was the involvement of the womenfolk in this particular method of fishing. Here it is contended that since it has been established that the early economic practices always share the involvement of a good number of members of the band, there cannot be a denial of the fact the women did involve in the practice and therefore did contribute to its existence, evolution and innovation or otherwise.

In this contention, we extend the argument to the extent that this fishing by poison was practiced with the use of the scoop nets, hence the acceptability of the women factor in this ancient practice. That when the poison is dropped in the river and the fishes affected by the effect of the poison, the scoop nets would be used to bring out fishes (Okorobia, 2000:32). It is plausible to argue that women undertook the process of fish preservation for sale.

4. NIGER DELTA WOMEN AND THE SALT MAKING INDUSTRY

Another important and indispensable aspect of the early Niger Delta economy that has attracted attentions is the historic salt making practice of the people. It was, indeed, one of the earliest occupation of the people of the Niger Delta particularly of the salt-water zone. Alagoa (1970:1971), Ejituwu (1991) and Okorobia (2000) among others have tried to establish the antiquity of this great indigenous practice of the people. To Alagoa, the people began to make salt out of the brine (sea water) or part of the mangrove tree right from their settlement period. Because this is an already established fact beyond any scholarly doubt, the question one needs to address is, what was the role of the women in this historically acclaimed industry of repute?

Historical records (Alagoa, 1970, Ejituwu, 1991) description of the techniques of the indigenous salt-making or production processes as boiling of seawater in earthenware of native manufacture or the burning of mangrove seedlings and the secondary prop roots, the question is who did the collection of either the sea water or the prop-roots of the mangrove? This is where the historical records tend to be biased against the womenfolk and women were written out of history. A brief description of the salt production process goes like this: mangrove seedlings and the secondary prop roots of the red mangrove were collected and burnt into ashes. The ashes were then collected into baskets and water passed through the ashes to deposit the liquid potash in a receptacle, or container. The water in turn boiled in big clay pots (locally produced) until it dried up to form a cake. The pot was then carefully cracked and disposed to release the salt for use or for sale.

It is absolutely correct to posit that women dominated the processes of the salt-making or production and therefore deserve serious attention and mention in historical records. Asarama oral tradition, which was not contested, hold that the people, on their arrival in the Niger Delta, first settled at a place called Ayama (present day Peterside in Bonny). They arrived in their hunting and gathering bands. The summary of this presentation is that while the men went for the hunt, the women did the gathering and in the process would gather the mangrove seedlings, prop-roots as well as fetch the salt water for boiling into salt. This was the origin of the traditional slogan in Asarama Community, which says: "*Asarama ebi iwop ukwii*" (meaning: *Asarama people who boiled salt*"). It was the women who did the gathering of the material content of the salt-making industry, prepared the native clay pots and actually did the burning and boiling to produce the salt for use and sale.

5. WOMEN AND TRADE IN PRE-COLONIAL NIGER DELTA

Another important aspect of the early Niger Delta economy was trade where women also found profound influence in the evolution and development of the Niger Delta. The successful exploitation of the Niger Delta environment necessitated the generation and production of surpluses for distribution and exchanges. Distribution and exchange, which are otherwise called or referred to as trade among the Niger Delta communities was not well developed (Gabriel, 2003:169), probably for the major reason that the communities were almost self-sufficient. However, with the challenges of societal development and evolution in the post-settlement period, the natural tendency towards a self-sufficient and autarkic option for survival proved unrealistic paving way for the exchange of the riverine products of the Niger Delta with the upland products of their hinterland neighbours. Hence the development of both short distance trade and the long distance trade.

It is plausible to contend that the development of exchange or trade within the Niger Delta region and with the outside neighbours could have been necessitated by: firstly, the varying levels of individual households' or bonds' involvement in such different occupation as fishing, salt-manufacturing, canoe-making, and pottery. Secondly the differences in the natural endowments of the different micro-environments of the Niger Delta; and, thirdly, different levels of natural endowments between the Delta Communities and their hinterland neighbours. It is important to stress here that every writer on the Niger Delta region has come to the conclusion that there was a great deal of trade and exchange in the Niger Delta in the post-settlement preceding the trans-Atlantic trade. Also, that trade contributed to the establishment and development of some Niger Delta communities. In fact, women contributed and participated in every aspect of the trade. And therefore women would have contributed to these series of evolutionary trends and developments (Okorobia, 2003).

6. CONCLUSION

Women have, largely been written out of history. Their presence has, and continues to be, either ignored or subsumed under the generic man, which erases womanhood from historical records. In order to bring into visibility that which was invisible, we painstakingly scrap away all the years of accumulated sentiment to present a more complex historical narrative and analysis of human experience. A narrative that does not simply add women to the mix and stir but an analysis that have, in definitive terms, presents the account of the woman in clear terms.

Apart from writing women into Niger Delta history, this work has made an attempt at analyzing the role of women in early Niger Delta economy. The study of the role of women in early Niger Delta economy has broaden and contributed to the breadth and depth of knowledge and theorizing of African realities in a number of diverse ways by bringing to lime light the importance of women not simply as passive breed but also as economic agents in creating new developments, in resistance to and in collusion with oppression also.

This work has added fuel to the questioning of assumptions and generalizations about the beneficial nature of the colonial experience and the development of capitalism and modernization in Africa by demonstrating that for many women these processes have frequently meant a decrease in economic autonomy, access to resources, status and security.

This work has further contributed to the demythologizing of both the golden age of pre-colonial Africa and the 'backward' uncivilized primitive Africa thesis through investigation as to women's positions in Pre-colonial Africa, which turnout to have been neither a happy complimentary with men's roles nor the dumb beast of burden remarked on by the early anthropologists³.

By considering women's unremunerated work as family labour in subsistence activities and in domestic labour in historical perspective, this work to a large extent made us realize that wage labour and commodity production are not the only forms of work which exist or which contribute to value. It has also helped in facilitating the realization that the dual sector thesis on the rigid distinctions between the so-called formal and informal sectors are not tenable, as women and capital transfers move between these alleged sectors constantly and sometimes operate simultaneously in both arenas.

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