

“Return the lake to the people”: Populist political rhetoric and the fate of a resource frontier in the Philippines¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the shifting political ecologies of governance of Laguna Lake, Philippines in the context of historical and contemporary populist political rhetoric. Rodrigo Duterte, who was elected president in 2016 through a platform of change, brought national attention again to the lake by promising to give it back to the people marginalized by decades-long elite capture. This populist rhetoric is the latest in attempts to manage an urban resource frontier with conflicting demands and uses. By narrating a history of governance of Laguna Lake, I trace parallels between current and past strategies of addressing resource conflicts: from Ferdinand Marcos’ authoritarian rule in the 1970s-1980s and the pluralist modes in the years that followed to Duterte’s law-and-order vision of development. By comparing the populist narratives of Marcos and Duterte, I demonstrate that populist rhetoric in authoritarian forms entails the contradictory processes of politicization of the problem and depoliticization of solutions. Authoritarian populist narratives transform the framing of environmental problems through antagonistic politics even as solutions are constrained within existing depoliticized technologies of government that limit the spaces of contestations.

Keywords: *authoritarian, populism, Duterte, Laguna Lake, Marcos*

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Introduction

What is the place of populism and narratives of the people in authoritarian and pluralist modes of governing contentious resources? How does populist political rhetoric attempt to justify authoritarian and technocratic rule in resource conflict? In this paper, I take the problem of Laguna Lake, the largest in the Philippines and a significant urban resource frontier, to examine how populist narratives have unfolded in over four decades of state intervention in resource conflicts. Comparing the authoritarian populist political rhetoric of the former president Ferdinand Marcos and the current president Rodrigo Duterte, I find a contradiction: populist narratives about resource conflicts entail a dual moment of politicization of the problem, and depoliticization of solutions that appear to challenge yet maintain existing modes of governance. While politicizing antagonistic relations between the people and its enemy, authoritarian populist narratives also limit the possibilities of political engagement through a recourse to technocratic, depoliticized solutions.

Populism in its authoritarian form is not new in the spaces of governance in the Philippines and in the post-colonial global South. However, its re-emergence amid a supposed post-political condition of neoliberal, pluralist, consensus-based environmental politics necessitates empirical work sensitive to the multiple historical and contemporary forms of populism. I contribute to this task by investigating the politics of resource governance of Laguna Lake.

Decades of resource conflict in Laguna Lake between small-scale fisherfolk and large-scale fishpen owners have captured the national imagination as an example of elite-driven social justice problem that the state had routinely failed to address. Through the fishpen technology, the state introduced aquaculture in the lake to improve incomes of small-scale fisherfolk and increase fish productivity. However, elite capture by middle-class entrepreneurs and fishing corporations from outside the lake led to the unchecked proliferation of large-scale fishpen structures that displaced fisherfolk from their traditional fishing grounds and resulted in recurring conflict. In many ways, Laguna Lake's

aquaculture problem has symbolized many of the country's developmental ills and has subsequently attracted exercises in authoritarian interventions.

Seeking to depart radically from the status quo, both Marcos and Duterte deployed populist rhetoric by coupling narratives of conflict and social justice with authoritarian techniques of management. Marcos, the late strongman who was president for 20 years, sought to solve the lake's aquaculture problem by employing a rhetoric that was pro-poor and anti-elite. Yet, his interventions were restricted to the authoritarian developmentalist modes of efficient planning, anti-conflict compromise, and the rule of law, which legitimized capitalist aquaculture in the lake.

The promise of change and the specter of a return to authoritarian rule accompanied Duterte's election in 2016. Despite lacking a coherent vision for the environment, Laguna Lake became a testing ground for his law-and-order developmentalism not very different from Marcos. Duterte in his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) instructed state agencies to review permits granted to Laguna Lake aquaculture, punctuating a procedural administrative order with the populist language of protecting the country, giving the lake back to the marginalized, and promising fisherfolk "priority in its entitlements" (Duterte 2016). Yet, his government's subsequent actions and plans mirror past strategies that constrict possible socioecological futures for fisherfolk.

Drawing from an analysis of secondary sources and other published materials on Laguna Lake during the Marcos and Duterte presidencies, I probe the contradictions of authoritarian populist political rhetoric where politicization of the problem through antagonism is paired with depoliticized modes of state governance. I begin with a brief discussion of debates linking populism and the political, then describe Laguna Lake resource controversies and the response of Marcos' authoritarian developmentalist regime. Next, I discuss the re-emergence of populist narratives in Duterte's revival of the lake's antagonistic relations. Last, I reflect on both moments to illustrate the place of populist political rhetoric in environmental governance, and its implications for the future of resource production and relations in the lake.

Populist Politics in Resource Governance

Political ecologists have documented in rich historical-geographical detail the multiple evolving forms that environmental governance has taken, in the process posing questions about what constitutes the state, the political and the people (Bridge 2014; Robertson 2015). In Latin America for example, political ecological work on neo-extractivism and hydrocarbon governance have contributed to these debates by tracing the links between narratives of the people, resources and the nation (Perrault and Valdivia 2010; Kohl and Farthing 2012). Revisiting the state, the political and the people becomes even more relevant with the recent global resurgence of populist politics in an era where environmental issues have taken on a post-political character.

Swyngedouw (2009) has perhaps provided the most explicit theoretical engagement of populism and contemporary environmental politics in geography, arguing how populist tactics are “the symptomatic expression of a post-political condition” (611). Post-politics is characterized by the replacement of the political - conflict, dissent and contestations - with the politics of consensus and technocratic management, wherein contentious problems are reduced to matters of policy technologies and administration (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Symptomatic of a liberal democratic order, post-politics narrows down possibilities and downplays conflict. Good governance discourses via compromise, consensus, inclusion and participation among various stakeholders have been widely deployed in place of the political. Because much post-political literature deploys a highly specific definition of the truly political, the analytical implications and usefulness of such restriction has also been contested by some critics (McCarthy 2013; Beveridge and Koch 2017).

For Swyngedouw (2009), populist imaginaries contribute to construct the post-political condition characterized by depoliticized governance and the evacuation of the political in resolving environmental problems. If the political is necessarily antagonistic (Mouffe 2005), his diagnosis however misses a crucial element of tactics to deploy populist narratives: they entail moments of

politicization as much as depoliticization. Populism relies on antagonistic politics in identifying a problem, which may pave the path for the particular, often depoliticized solutions familiar to scholars of the post-political. In challenging the status quo, populist politics builds on a necessary conflict between the people and its Other (Panizza 2005), which is assigned blame for (environmental) problems. In authoritarian forms of populism, this is accompanied by a narrowing of the possibilities of how such matters might be addressed. Identifying the enemy and taking action against the enemy lends strength to the power of populist narratives. This dual moment of politicization/depoliticization serves multiple purposes, including the hegemonic legitimation and construction of a political project, a regime or the state, such as in authoritarian populism (Scoones et al. 2018). Authoritarian populism challenges the dominant pluralist modes of governance by politicizing the problem, yet it mirrors the latter's strategy of depoliticizing the spaces of engagement.

Defining populism and identifying its place in politics and democracy continue to be the subject of debate in political theory and beyond (Laclau 2005; Ranciere 2016). However, I find Panizza's (2005) non-essentialist approach to the term useful for this paper as it views populism as a "mode of identification" rather than an inherent characteristic possessed by individuals or social movements. Antagonism is the mode of identification central to populist strategies. It constructs both the people to whom the populist speaks to (Ranciere 2016) and the Other or the political frontier that needs to be defeated for the people (Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005). Both the people and the enemy are empty signifiers, in that they may take various discursive forms. Populist narratives often pose the need to undermine existing social order, and disrupt status quo by vanquishing the enemy that oppresses the people and by giving control back to the underdogs. They invoke a "promise of plenitude" once these antagonisms have been resolved (Panizza 2005).

In its authoritarian guise, populism negates politics by creating a shared vision of people and leader working together toward one solution (Panizza 2005), which parallels the post-political mode of anti-conflict, consensus-based and inclusive pluralist governance in non-authoritarian contexts. However, populism simultaneously politicizes by elevating antagonistic relations. This duality is crucial in the

narrative power and the eventual outcomes of populist politics in different historical contexts. In the global South with authoritarian post-colonial histories, we need to ask for example: how does a resurgent populism intersect with, undermine or support existing structures transformed by adoption of post-political modes of governance? The interplay of politicization/depolicitization therefore deserves further place-based empirical investigation to understand how populist narratives shape the contemporary landscape of environmental governance.

Marcos' Populist Political Rhetoric: Authoritarian Developmentalism and Managing Resource Controversies

Laguna Lake has presented the state with a host of problems rooted in its complex historical production as an urban resource frontier. Since 1966, the lake has served as a site for pioneering, foreign-loan funded projects aimed at harnessing it as a resource - from improving fish production through aquaculture to serving as sink for urban stormwaters and a source of domestic water. The lake has been a site of several governance innovations - state regulation, community-based projects and hybrid private-public partnerships, among others – to manage such multiple conflicting demands (Saguin 2016). These often came with a developmental and urban justification, reflecting both its location and connections with nearby Metro Manila and its place in the history of 20th century high modern, grand plans of controlling nature (Saguin 2017). The modern visions of harnessing the lake as a resource reached its peak under Marcos' infrastructure-driven authoritarian developmentalism in the 1970s and 1980s.

The history of Laguna Lake fisheries presents a classic political ecological case of the state attempting to manage the contradictions of resource frontier production. Aquaculture became an important governance problem for the state because of the rapid, unregulated proliferation of fishpen structures and the social unrest that followed. Initially introduced to improve incomes of poorer fisherfolk

communities, it quickly became an elite venture, as knowledge and financial capital of Manila-based entrepreneurs and fishing corporations enabled them to take over fish production in the lake.

Owing to the high profitability and cheap appropriation of the lake's ecological surpluses in the 1970s, several urban middle-class groups (politicians, celebrities, foreigners) also invested in aquaculture operations, contributing to the fishpen rush that by the early 1980s had occupied close to a third of the 90,000-ha lake space. This rush has been met with resentment by lake fisherfolk, whose fishing grounds have been severely reduced. Fisherfolk developed antagonistic relations that have escalated to violent encounters with armed fishpen guards employed to watch over what has now become highly-valuable fish. Fisherfolk have continually framed the problem as a social justice issue, claiming prime legitimacy of use and advocating their right to continue to freely make a living off the lake (Saguin 2016).

What came to be known as the fishpen controversy took off in the national imagination after the deaths of fisherfolk and fishpen workers in 1982 and 1983. The state had long attempted to regulate fishpens through demolitions of unlicensed structures outside zoning belts but institutional confusion between the lake management body and local government units, and the strong political clout and connections of fishpen owners and associations have made these piecemeal efforts routinely ineffective.

Plans for Laguna Lake's production as an urban resource frontier preceded Marcos's imposition of martial law in 1972, which paved the way for centralized, authoritarian rule for more than a decade. However, the lake became an arena for his visions of development, playing a role in his desire to create a "New Society" out of the destruction of the old political and social order. With the support of technocrats, business cronies and the military, he ruled through constitutional authoritarianism (Noble 1986; Teehankee 2017) and continually deployed elements of populist discourse to legitimate his regime. Appealing to the poor and the people's sense of being marginalized by the ruling elites, he sought to correct structures that caused persistent inequality and hindered development by targeting

two enemy groups: the communists and the rural landlord elites (Anderson 1988). The strong antipathy toward elites might have little to do with a genuine concern for the plight of the poor and more with his desire to rule over the established oligarchs and consolidate local political and economic elite power at the national level (Anderson 1988; Teehankee 2017; Bello 2018).

Through his technocrats, he crafted an economic strategy that relied on securing foreign borrowing to fund large-scale, grand infrastructure projects, including several Laguna Lake development projects such as a hydraulic control structure, flood control structures, a fishpen development project and a cooperative development project. More than his predecessors, Marcos espoused a form of populist nationalism (Webb 2017) that promised change for the non-elites long marginalized and indignified by those in power. This intersected with a developmental regime characterized by technocratic solutions to social problems, effectively cultivating an image of a strongman with political will and efficient planning tools empathetic to the plight of the poor. It must be pointed out however that technocracy under the Marcos authoritarian regime was peopled by elites with multiple, sometimes competing, economic and political interests (Tadem 2013).

The fate of the lake during the martial law years articulated Marcos' mixing of populist nationalism and technocratic developmentalism in managing environmental problems. When the fishpen controversy exploded, Marcos intervened through a series of Letters of Instructions, ordering various agencies to regulate fishpen sprawl. He simultaneously secured foreign loans to fund a national cooperative development project designed to enable displaced fisherfolk access to the fishpen technology. Marcos sought "to democratize the benefits derived from the lake by providing the marginal users of the same opportunities to own, manage and operate fishpens" (Marcos 1984) to ensure "the participation of lakeshore dwellers...in the development of the lake" (Marcos 1983b). To the elites, he was quoted as saying that they would be asked to share the pens with the small fishermen: "This is social justice in action" (Ng 1983: 16).

While ringing with the high politics of long-overdue redistributive justice, this strategy effectively flattened the highly unequal relations between fishpen owners and fisherfolk in the lake. Rather than a radical reordering of lake social relations and spaces of politics, the selective demolitions and cooperative projects ended up legitimizing elite fishpen presence in the lake as long as they remained within the zoning belts, while building fisherfolk capacity to compete side-by-side these privately-owned pens.

For Marcos and his propagandists, a peaceful coexistence and a “happy compromise” could be reached between the two antagonistic parties through proper planning and management without undermining the ability of fishpens to make money off the lake (Samonte 1983). Then First Lady Imelda Marcos, after meeting with both sides, concluded that “with better planning and technology, both pen operators and fishermen could make a living off the lake without conflict” (BPT 1983: 1). What began as a political project that highlighted the antagonism as the root cause of lake problems, ended up as a compromise between the two parties, mediated by technologies of government to avoid conflict: characteristics of depoliticized governance. Quelling rural unrest and communist influence in the lake provided immediate justification for the Marcos regime to contain the conflict. As part of his authoritarian developmentalist model, the need for compromise and efficient planning was a reaction to “the increasing pressure of urban growth and development” which needed to be “responsive to the demands of the various beneficial users thereof” (Marcos 1983a). This marked the beginning of a governance shift from the sectorally-specific fisheries regulation to a multi-use lake resource management.

Through the dual strategy of proper zoning and demolition of unruly and illegal fishpens while redistributing freed up space for fisherfolk to engage in aquaculture, Marcos was able to strike a solution that was both populist and anti-elite but without undermining the status quo of capitalist-driven aquaculture. Addressing the fishpen controversy became politicized through a mode of identification that antagonized the elites and the people while bringing in notions of social justice, both of which aligned with his vision of the New Society. However, fishpen governance became

immediately depoliticized through a recourse to the technocratic solutions of adhering to strict zoning of use arranged according to neat, geometric belts based on a computed carrying capacity (“rationalization”) complemented by the simultaneous redistribution of demolished fishpen sites and building of financial capacity of fisherfolk (“democratization”). The two anodyne terms of rationalization and democratization - limiting the fishpens to legal limits while attempting to give fisherfolk a chance at the fishpen technology - would recur throughout the next three decades of lake management.

Subsequent administrations would adopt similar technocratic governance mechanisms to lake problems while downplaying the antagonism between pens and fisherfolk. Through a discourse of good governance, the post-Marcos administrations would use the lake as an experimental site for innovations - increasingly turning to neoliberal modes of addressing the environmental problems of the lake - to maintain the multiple resource use of the lake. Fisherfolk interests needed to complement a broad set of other user needs: the narrative shifting to that of integrated management of various stakeholder at the scale of the watershed. The role of a strong state armed with a discourse of returning the lake to the dispossessed fisherfolk would emerge again in the wake of Duterte’s election as president.

Duterte’s Populist Political Rhetoric: Returning the Lake to the People and the Promise of Plenitude

Duterte shares with Marcos an affinity for populist rhetoric and authoritarian tendencies. The 30-year interim between Marcos’ forced exile that ended his dictatorship and Duterte’s rise to the presidency has been characterized by successive governments that promoted the virtues of liberal democracy, employed a discourse of good governance, embraced neoliberal economic policies, and saw elite reshuffling of power at the national level (Thompson 2016; Teehankee 2017; Bello 2018). Duterte’s emphasis on change, his illiberal language and his steadfast promise of ridding the country of the drug

menace - constructing drug users and drug lords as the primary enemy - contributed to his broad appeal across all classes discontented with the failures of status quo.

Duterte has publicly admired Marcos' strongman qualities, and has mirrored a few of his policies, including an infrastructure construction push and subscribing to his brand of authoritarian developmentalism. Even if he lacks a coherent strategy, like Marcos before him, he has emphasized the importance of law and order as a prerequisite to addressing poverty and delivering development (Quimpo 2017). His brutal "war on drugs" has been his administration's most radical break from previous governments, even as he has not steered too far from his predecessors in many other aspects, such as his continuation of neoliberal economic policies.

Bringing attention back to the 40-year-old Laguna Lake fishpen controversy provided Duterte with an opportunity to display this strongman vision of development via order and his politics of change. In a little over a year, he and his technocrats have mobilized a populist narrative that targeted elites, where the country's social and environmental ills may be solved through political will coupled with proper management and deployment of police or military force, if necessary.

Duterte would mention seeing from an airplane crowded structures sticking out prominently in the lake's landscape, observing the nature of the problem from afar: "Whenever I look down there...those triangles...you could not see (spaces)...and the fishermen are left with nothing" (Nilles 2016). The sight of geometric fishpen structures crowding out the space for small fisherfolk seems to encapsulate government inaction, unbridled influence of elite power, and neglect of social justice. Part of the appeal of turning attention to the lake's fishpen problem was that it was visual and affective; images of fishpen structures being dismantled showed a state in action. After months of uncertainty as to whether to remove all pens (zero-fishpen policy), state agencies used scientific studies on the lake's carrying capacity to rationalize or determine the total size of structures to be demolished (a quarter of the 13,000-ha structures) (Geronimo 2017).

Laguna Lake was important to the administration as it was to be a “showcase of social justice” (DENR 2016). The success of fishpen demolitions became even more crucial to show the change his administration had promised, following the fizzling of a mining operations crackdown that saw the suspension of more than a hundred mining operations before being revoked after staunch opposition from the sector and from within the government (Bello 2018). The controversies surrounding mining showed competing interests among technocrats within the administration, which have not played out to the same degree in Laguna Lake.

After Duterte’s statements, technocrats would repeat a similar populist discourse on Laguna Lake: with the new administration focused on law and order, it was time for the elites to return the lake to the people. The goal was to bring the lake back to its glory days of bounty (the “promise of plenitude”) after decades of exploitation. After the first round of demolitions, the environment secretary was quoted: “(This is) how (the lake) should be - for the people and not for big corporations who don’t even give back to the people” (Pazzibugan 2017). The elite constructed as the enemy in this case were fishpen operators, who “have benefited and profited from the lake region since the ‘70s” (ibid.). It was time for the ordinary people to benefit from the lake.

The rhetoric of antagonism between a simplified elite and people was supported by Duterte’s embodiment of the collective desire to take back power from the few. It also justifies the means necessary for this to happen, including using, as one lawmaker put it, “military, navy, all forces of government at the fingertips of the President” (Geronimo 2016). Duterte’s threats against fishpen operators resembled similar statements he made against those he identified as enemies of the Filipino people (drug users, vocal critics of human rights violations, opposition politicians), with threats often taking on a personalistic tone: “If you don’t want to make it smaller, I will destroy it...it will be my direct order and I will assume full responsibility for them” (Ranada 2016). This reflects a key populist mode of identification that makes the political personal (Panizza 2005). The effect of such rhetoric is to bring dignity to the marginalized and wresting power away from the elites to the benefit of the

leader (Thompson 2016). It also shows the continuing process of state construction and legitimization through these narratives and practices.

Fishpen owners have responded by reiterating their contribution to the fish supply and food security in Metro Manila, their economic links with fisherfolk livelihoods, and their minimal ecological impacts on the lake (Cinco 2017). Yet, as with past government threats, they promised to cooperate in regulating fishpens and emphasized their place in any efforts to plan and govern the lake. Fisherfolk, meanwhile, have long lamented the ineffectivity of attempts to remove illegal fishpens from the lake and have recognized the role of elite power in their continued plight (Saguin 2016). Marcos's failure to resolve the fishpen controversy had made Laguna Lake fisherfolk carefully optimistic when Duterte brought up his fishpen plan. After Duterte's initial statement, the largest national fisherfolk alliance mentioned how the fisherfolk had long waited for "a leader who will address the welfare of small fishers" (Nilles 2016) and expressed support for the demolition drive. Several months later, they commented that is one of the administration's prominent achievements but that it was not nearly enough (Cinco and Celis 2017).

Several fisherfolk expressed worry that a zero-fishpen policy would create income losses for lake dwellers who have forged livelihood connections with the deeply embedded fishpen economy. Forty years of fishpen presence in the lake has enabled thousands of fishers and lake dwellers to engage in fishpen-related work such as drag seining for harvest, fish trading/transporting and seed production. As fishing-based lake dwellers formed strong economic linkages with fishpens in a time of subsiding violence and conflicts, they have developed a more ambiguous opinion about continued fishpen presence in the lake. The simple antagonism between the fisherfolk and fishpen betrays these multiple livelihoods and relations that also condition how particular fisherfolk view the fishpen dismantling issue (Saguin 2018).

Despite the politicization of the lake issue through antagonistic politics, the governance strategy has remained firmly within the technocratic management language and practice of rationalization and

democratization reminiscent of Marcos-era strategies. This has taken the form of plans to organize fisherfolk into cooperatives to increase fishpen ownership and provide them with greater space in fishpen allocation (Geronimo 2017). The solution, methods and spaces of engagement have been predetermined by the state to follow its vision of law-and-order development. It is notable how fisherfolk remained passive and absent apart from being rendered as recipient of state development plans or as one in the many stakeholders in the lake. Similar to the good governance discourses, solutions to the lake's problem have been constrained by a narrow optic of how fisherfolk could participate in shaping their futures. The unambiguous antagonism between fisherfolk and fishpens is a powerful but reductive narrative about resource conflicts in the lake that enabled ready solutions to be implemented. The history of lake governance to address resource conflicts therefore has exhibited a mixture of both depoliticized authoritarian and liberal democratic strategies.

Perhaps the biggest irony of the "return the lake to the people" narrative is the proposal to bring the lake back to its "original, pristine condition" and convert it to an ecotourism zone (Gamil 2017). Dismantling unsightly fishpen structures therefore becomes a precondition for transforming the lake "into a vibrant economic zone showcasing ecotourism" (Duterte 2016), an activity that undermines the productive use of the lake for fisheries. Business interests have expressed support in formulating a new master plan for the lake (Mercurio 2016), which fisherfolk groups have opposed and read as attempts to privatize the lake (Alcober 2017).

Conclusion

In this paper, I showed how populist political rhetoric serves to both politicize environmental problems and depoliticize efforts to address them. Laguna Lake under Marcos and Duterte demonstrates this contradiction in resource governance. Unlike leaders who remained firmly within the reformist liberal democracy tradition that extolled the value of pluralist good governance, both promised a change in status quo by eliminating the old configuration of elite power and giving control

back to fisherfolk. The lake - a visible, social justice problem - served as a showcase for their vision. For Marcos, it was the New Society and authoritarian developmentalism in action that was at stake. For Duterte, it was the change he promised to deliver through political will and law and order. However, rather than matching the radical vision promised by their populist narratives, the actions they have mobilized and solutions proposed have remained largely within the confines of existing repertoire of governance strategies. In the lake, this has taken the form of the technocratic language of rationalization and democratization not fundamentally different from status quo of post-political modes of governance. The politicized antagonistic construction of political identities has been matched by depoliticized methods that flatten conflicts.

Plans for ecotourism similarly undermine the productive use of the lake for fisherfolk. This political ecological tension between a productive and a pristine future signals how crises may serve a crucial role in the regulation of capitalist relations in a resource frontier. In Laguna Lake, populist narratives have enabled depoliticized modes of governance to maintain and legitimize the presence of fishpens. Yet the very same narratives open the possibility for the restructuring of agrarian relations once entrenched institutional frameworks and regimes of accumulation are rendered obsolete.

Authoritarian populist rhetoric transforms the framing of environmental problems even as solutions are constrained within technologies of government that do not open up spaces of contestations. Populist rhetoric draws strength from its ability to navigate this contradiction. Calls for emancipatory politics therefore need to recognize and confront the vision of radical democracy that underpins the power of such rhetoric.

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