A Linguistic Investigation of the Main Concepts of Amazigh Poetry in Morocco and Algeria

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In this paper, I undertake a linguistic investigation of the main concepts used for poetry in Tamazight in Morocco and Algeria. My choice of this topic emanates from the growing mutations to which the Amazigh language is subject and the emerging problem of terminology this language is facing owing to the lack of the exact terms for different literary forms especially after the introduction of this language into education, academia and scholarly research. As will be noticed, both Tamazight and the Amazigh language will be used interchangeably in this paper. Furthermore, Tamazight designates the Amazigh language in its general sense which encompasses all the linguistic varieties spoken in North Africa (Tamazgha). However, one should bear in mind that Tamazight refers also to a specific linguistic variety spoken in the Middle and High Atlas, and in the South East region of Morocco. The word Amazigh is used instead of Berber (adjective) and Tamazight instead of Berber (noun) because Berber is considered by Imazighen (Berbers) to be offensive, derogative and foreign (not local).

This paper is divided into six parts. The first part introduces Amazigh literature and gives an idea of its present state, its main characteristics and some challenges it faces. The second part tackles the question of orality in Amazigh literature since oral tradition stands as a major source of its diverse literary expressions. These literary expressions of Amazigh literature basically include poetry, proverbs, folktales, riddles and myths. Recently, Amazigh literature has witnessed the emergence of some written literary forms like novel, novella and play with the advent of cultural associations especially Morocco and Algeria paving the ground thus for this literature to be written as well. In the third and fourth parts, I give a working definition of Amazigh poetry and demarcate its sub-genres namely in the Moroccan regions like Souss, the Riff, Middle and High Atlas, and the South East. In the two final parts, I dwell on a linguistic study of three most common concepts used to designate poetry in Tamazight in Morocco and Algeria (Kabylia and Aures in particular) and argue that tamdyazt is a linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal literary term for Amazigh poetry.

It should be noted that, in addition to amarg, asefru and tamdyazt, there are other terms that refer to poetry in other Amazigh areas though they are less common or too specific. Having such a variety of terms designating poetry reflects the lexical richness of the Amazigh language:

A. Lavnuj is used in Riff (North of Morocco) and is less common and region-bound.
B. Izli (pl. Izen) is sometimes used to designate poetry in the High and Middle Atlas, and in the South East region of Morocco. Hence, people when describing a person who produces or recites poetry say ‘bu-izen’ (a poet). The term izli also refers to a very specific sub-genre of the Amazigh poetry.

Amazigh Literature

According to Amar Laoufi, Amazigh literature, which designates all the literatures of the Amazighophone areas and countries, has recently been subject to unusual amount of reflection.
and mutation.\textsuperscript{1} This is made easier since the Amazigh people ‘have always a very vigorous and diversified literary tradition: poetry, tales, [proverbs], legends, riddles and puzzles’.\textsuperscript{2} The diversity of Amazigh literary tradition and the manifest interest shown by a great number of researchers and writers in reviving and rethinking such a vigorous literary tradition have undoubtedly led to a remarkable literary renewal of Tamazight.

The literary renewal of Amazigh literature is clearly seen from the ample, diversified and salient body of creative work and research recently done on it either by individually motivated scholars, researchers and poets or by research groups formed, directed and sponsored by governmental institutes like the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture in Morocco (known as IRCAM in French), and non-governmental organizations and associations such as the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange (known as AMREC in French) starting from the colonial period up to the present time. In this regard, Chaker explains that:

> It was thus necessary to wait for the colonial period and the significant influence of school and the French culture to see a substantial written literary production in the Berber language. This Berber literary production was still tentative and developed unequally across different regions. As in most of the other aspects, the Kabylia (Algeria) made a great advancement; it was followed by Chleuh region (South of Morocco) which also experienced remarkable written literary development followed by considerable activity in the Nigero-Malian Touareg region and finally, though very limited, by the Mzab.\textsuperscript{3}

In spite of its richness in terms of literary tradition, Tamazight still lacks in universal concepts that can be used consensually by scholars and researchers to designate its diverse literary forms. Poetry, as one of the most important forms in Amazigh literature, is designated by different terms across various Amazigh regions within Morocco and Algeria. This raises debate on the linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal literary term for Amazigh poetry. In this paper, my intention is to linguistically investigate only three main concepts which refer to poetry in both Morocco and Algeria. Yet, the Amazigh people may use other names for poetry other than the ones I have investigated in this paper and that there might be other unknown appellations especially if we take into consideration the richness of Tamazight in terms of its linguistic varieties (Tachlhiyt, Tamazight, Tachawiyt, Taqbayliyt, Tarifiyt, Tasiwiyt etc) and the very great geographical extension of Amazigh areas and regions (Siwa in the West of Egypt, Canarias, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria).

The focus concepts of this study which etymologically differ one from the other are: \textit{amarg}, \textit{asefru} and \textit{tamdyazt}. My linguistic investigation of these concepts is based on already existing literature on the etymology of the word \textit{amarg} and on some personal propositions concerning \textit{asefru}, \textit{tamdyazt} and \textit{amarg} as well. These personal propositions on the etymology of these concepts constitute the original part of the present study. My final thesis is that the concept \textit{tamdyazt} is linguistically appropriate and thus it can be used as a universal literary term to designate poetry in Tamazight. As will be shown in the section on \textit{tamdyazt}, this concept, apart


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3}Chaker.}
from its clear cut meaning and its widespread usage across various Amazigh areas, exhibits linguistic features from which all the basic derivatives can pertinently be obtained. However, a number of derivatives may also be obtained from both amarg and asefriu but seem, etymologically speaking, vague, debatable, less inclusive and thus inappropriate.

**The Question of Orality in Amazigh Literature**

A great number of researchers, sociologists, folklorists, ethnographers and linguists agree that Amazigh literature is mainly based on an oral tradition. The rich oral tradition of Amazigh literature makes it very dynamic, animated and intact. First, such outstanding characteristics result from the fact that the Amazigh oral tradition dates back to ancient times. This quality has paved the way for successive generations to enrich this literature as it was in a direct contact with a number of the world’s ancient and prominent civilizations such as the Roman, Phoenician and Arabo-Islamic, and with the French and Spanish civilizations during the colonial period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the colonial period, Morocco was subject to colonization in the early twentieth century by both France and Spain. The first colonial power dominated the middle of the country while the second took control of the North and the South of the country. Secondly, Algeria was colonized by the French powers in the thirties of the nineteenth century up to the beginnings of the sixties of the twentieth century.

Second, this literature is drawn from its direct origins mainly from rituals and local celebrations making of it, consequently, a very rich one. In Souss and the South East regions of Morocco for instance, there are tens of such local celebrations which take the form of open festivals that may last for more than four days as is the case with the festival of Sidi Hmad Omuissa in Tazrwalt (South of Morocco). These festivals are called ilmuggarn (singular: almuggar) in Souss and igdudn (singular: agdud) in the South East of Morocco. Both the two words suggest social and cultural events in which traditional music (known as apwach or apidous) and poetry recitation constitute important aspects.

In fact, the richness of Amazigh literature reflects the richness of its various expressions along with the diversity of its culture and geographical extension, and the multiplicity of its literary forms and genres. Though most of Amazigh literature is based on orality as it draws heavily from oral tradition, this literature should not entirely be associated with orality. The fact that the Amazigh people possess their own alphabetic scripts called Tifinagh which date back to the ancient times and are still in use up to the present mainly in Morocco and Algeria, and by the Touareg people (or Imuagh) stands as evidence that Amazigh literature has also been written though most of the written documents have not reached us due to loss and negligence.

On account of different cultural associations aiming at revitalising and promoting Tamazight mainly in Algeria and Morocco, a very important body of written literature in this language has been taking shape and a great number of writers especially poets and novelists start publishing their works. These writers include among others the following: Mouloud Mammeri, Mouloud Feraouni, Mouhamed Akounad, Ali Sedki-Azayku, Mohamed Moustouoi, Omar Derwich, Ayad Alhyan etc.

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Moreover, with the emergence of a considerable body of written works in Tamazight including mainly: poetry (prevalent), tales, fables, novels, plays and novellas (limited) starting from the twentieth century, one can say that Amazigh literature is now living through a critical transitional phase as it is moving from orality to literacy. In this sense, Literacy stands for the state of writing that Amazigh literature starts to embrace after long periods of orality and of writing in the languages of the dominant people by the Amazighophone writers. These languages are specifically Arabic and French. Most of these written works are basically concerned with the issues of identity, culture, land, immigration, belonging, history, activism and nostalgia for the ancestral traditions and past.

**Defining Amazigh Poetry**

Poetry is one of most ancient and important literary forms in Amazigh literature. It also constitutes one of the most widespread means of recreation, instruction and daily life expression for the Amazigh community. That is why it is enormously prevalent across most of the North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Libya, etc. The fact that poetry is widely memorized, produced, recited and highly valued throughout these countries has made it possible for the Amazigh people to possess a significantly large repertoire of poetic productions. This large repertoire has evidently made of poetry a significant and an indispensable literary form in Amazigh literature although most of its classical genres are still oral which may lead to the loss of a considerable part of it if it is not preserved by writing.

Generally speaking, Amazigh poetry is divided into classical poetry and modern poetry. The first is considered as classical or traditional as it respects certain rhythmic patterns and qualities. Timmaäin (in the South East of Morocco) is a clear illustration of this category. Modern Amazigh poetry is a kind of free verse that does not comply with the rhythmic patterns followed in the classical Amazigh poetry. Modern poetry is almost produced by intellectuals unlike the traditional one which remains popular, spontaneous, proverbial and handed down orally from generation to generation and most of the time, the poet remains unknown. Modern poetry deals with modern issues and reacts to its current events using a simple language and sometimes mixes more than one Amazigh linguistic variety and it may contain cross and intercultural elements since it is produced very often by intellectuals. Another characteristic of modern poetry is that it is composed and published in chapbooks and poetry collections using a particular diction to be read by individuals while classical poetry is produced orally and it is performed spontaneously in cultural and social festivals.

**Sub-Genres of Amazigh Poetry**

Before tackling the different concepts assigned to poetry in Tamazight and the problem of not having a unified and universal literary term for poetry in this language, I shall list some important sub-genres of Amazigh poetry mainly those that are found in different Amazigh regions of Morocco such as Sous, the Riff, the Middle and High Atlas, and the South East. According to Omar Amarir, Amarg which encompasses all the different sub-genres generally refers to poetry in Sous region. Amarg may be divided into the following five major poetic sub-genres: asalaw, tamazvit, tamarirt, aqšiä and anzibar.
In the Riff region, poetry has many appellations and appears in various poetic forms. *Lavnuj* is considered as the equivalent term for poetry in this region. The poetic heritage in the Riff is characterized by the existence of various poetic types that differ from one another in terms of their aesthetic and artistic aspects along with their functions and purposes. The poetic types that are found in the Riff region are mainly: *izran, tiqsisin, tamdyazt* (as a sub-genre not as a concept) and *izran n rbyuz.*

In the Moroccan Middle and High Atlas, Amazigh poetry takes form of diverse poetic sub-genres that are remarkably various and rich in cultural aspects. Generally speaking, each of these poetic sub-genres which basically include *tamawayt, izli, tayffart* and *tivuniwin* has many distinctive characteristics depending on the situation it emerges from.

In the South East region of Morocco, poetry appears in various sub-genres whose usage differs from one social and cultural context to another. It is worth noting that this region consists basically of five major tribal units or confederations which are Ait Atta, Ait Yafelman, Ait Tdght, Ait Sddrat, and Imghran. These confederations are:

A. **Ait Atta** is the largest tribal confederation or alliance of the South eastern Morocco. This tribal alliance is formed by the following tribes: Ait Ouallal, Ait Ouahlim, Ait Isisoul, Ait Yazza and Ait Ounbgi.

B. **Ait Yafelman** as a confederation or tribal alliance consists of four tribes: Ait Merghad, Ait Haddidou, Ait Izdeg and Ait Yahia. This tribal confederation is located in eastern High Atlas of Morocco.

C. **Ait Tdght** tribal alliance is located exclusively in Todra Valley which is the actual city of Tinghir. The population of Todra Valley speaks an Amazigh linguistic variety close to the central Tamazight of the High and Middle Atlas which constitutes together with Tachlhiyt and Tarifiyt spoken in the South West and in the North of Morocco successively the major linguistic varieties of Tamazight in Morocco. Ait Tdght as a tribal alliance is divided into two further sub-alliances: **Ait Salh** and **Ait Gmat.** The first sub-alliance is supported by Ait Yafelman confederation in times of wars and tribal conflicts while Ait Gmat sub-alliance is supported by the confederation of Ait Atta. This division (**Ait Salh** and **Ait Gmat**) is basically taken from Afanour tribe which is one of the oldest tribes that settled in Todra valley (Tinghir) and applied to the whole city of Tinghir as a means of protection from continuous foreign raids by Ait Atta and Ait Yafelman.

D. **Ait Sddrat** as a tribal unit or alliance is located in the southern slopes of the High Atlas in the South East of Morocco. This confederation consists of four large tribes: Ait Zouli, Ait Mahlli, Ait Mlwan and Ait Toukhisn.

E. **Imghran** is an alliance that consists of the following tribes: Ikran, Ait Affan, Kantoula, Ait Okour, Ghessat and Imi n Wassif.

The most important sub-genres of poetry found in this region, though some of them have already begun to disappear, are: *izli, amziyar/asaar, aznzy, tasudut, waru, timmaän, abavur, baybi* and *taskrawt.*

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10Hamzaoui 24-28.
11Hamzaoui 33.
Main Concepts of Amazigh Poetry in Morocco and Algeria

Poetry in Tamazight is designated by several concepts. Such a variety of concepts poses a genuine problem as to the most appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal literary term for Amazigh poetry by researchers in Tamazight. In fact, concepts that are used for poetry in Tamazight differ from one Amazigh region to another. Put otherwise, even within the same country as is the case with Morocco, names designating poetry are not the same and sometimes have different meanings in a given Amazigh region (amarg for example). This originates basically from dialectical and linguistic variations that each region is characterized with. My purpose here is to study three major concepts designating Amazigh poetry and which are widely used by Imazighen particularly in Morocco and Algeria. For Algeria, my study concerns only Kabylia and Aures. Thus, this study does not include the names that other Amazigh linguistic groups in this country like Touaregs of the South Algeria use for poetry. As stated earlier, the focus concepts to be investigated are asefru, amarg and tamdyazt. My ultimate objective here is to attempt to solve the problem of the linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal term for Amazigh poetry by researcher in Tamazight and to enrich the debate on the literary terminology of the Amazigh language as well.

1. In Morocco

Amarg

Amarir advocates that amarg, which encompasses further poetic sub-genres, is the most widely agreed upon term for poetry in Souss region; a large Amazighophone area in the South West of Morocco where Tachlhiyt (a variety of Tamazight language) is spoken. Amarg refers to the talent one may have for poetic creativity and production. The plural of the word ‘amarg’ is ‘imurag’, which refers to poetry. It also carries further meanings such love, excessive longing and nostalgia as in the following expression ‘yaav i umarg nnk kigan’ translated as ‘I miss you so much’. As will be shown in the following section, the use of the term amarg, despite the significance of Amrir’s proposition, is unconvincing and unable to definitely settle the problem of the most appropriate concept that can be applied as a universal term for poetry in Tamazight.

Tamdyazt

It is my contention that tamdyazt derives from two basic consonantal roots. The first proposition is that tamdyazt derives from the consonantal root ‘mdz’. ‘Mdz’, here, refers to the activity of producing, reciting and repeating poems that the Amazigh poet (amdyaz) is expected to perform within the Amazigh community. We can say for instance: ‘A amdya az mdz av d yuwt tmdyazt iddzan’ meaning ‘Oh poet, recite, produce, repeat or write a very expressive and refined poem for us.’ In Tamazight, a person who produces, recites or memorizes tamdyazt (poetry) is called amdyaz. Morphologically speaking, Amdyaz, which is an Amazigh noun, is a bi-morphemic word. The first morpheme constituting this word is ‘am’ which is generally added to

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12Amarir 86.
13 This is my own assumption and proposition. No one else as far as I know has ever studied or suggested this in a written document.
verbs in Tamazight to form the ‘agent’; the doer or the producer of something (poetry for example). Therefore, ‘am’ + ‘dz’ (morpheme of agency + root) forms the ‘agent’ (amdyaz).

The second proposition concerning the etymology of the concept tamdyazt is that tamdyazt derives from the monosyllabic root ‘dz’ or ‘ddz’. Both ‘dz’ and ‘ddz’ constitute two variants of the same consonantal root from which the concept ‘tamdyazt’ derives. ‘Ddz’ in which the sound ‘d’ is geminated is used especially in Tinghir (South East of Morocco) and within the same region, ‘dz’ as variant of the word ‘ddz’ is also used for example in Tighremt n Imgourn, Dades and Tazarin. Both ‘dz’ and ‘ddz’ literally mean ‘to grind, to crush and to hit’ and when used metaphorically, they both refer to speech which is highly refined, carefully pronounced, concise and pertinent. Of course, a speech with such characteristics is simply poetry.

Therefore, tamdyazt which derives from the two suggested roots ‘mdz’ and ‘dz’ with its variant ‘ddz’ may be considered as the most linguistically (etymologically) appropriate concept for poetry in Tamazight. The significance of this suggestion lies in coining two verbs for Amazigh poetry that are directly derived from their original root. The following diagram sets out some basic derivatives of the concept of tamdyazt (poetry):

![Diagram](image)

2. In Algeria

**Asefru:**

In Algeria mainly in Kabylia and Aures, people use asefru to designate poetry. The plural form of asefru in Tamazight is isefra. Etymologically speaking, firstly, asefru derives from the verb

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15Chafii 77.

‘fru’ which is, in turn, derived from the consonantal root ‘fr’. ‘Fru’ as a verb literally means ‘to pay back one’s taxes, debts etc’. When used figuratively, I think that it may refer to poetry if we take into consideration the very competitive and artistic atmosphere in which the Amazigh poets in different cultural festivals and social celebrations compete with one another to show their creativity and talent to the audience and to artistically prevail over one another through an exciting exchange of verses. Put simply, in festivals involving poetry recitation, each poet should wait for their turn to convincingly and amusingly react in verses and thus ‘riposte’ (fru in Tamazight) for what the previous poet has said. In other words, in social and cultural Amazigh festivals (ilmugarn/ ilmuqqar or igdudn), poets find themselves in an environment that requires cleverness, dynamism and high competitiveness to prevail over one another by verse (tamdyazt). However, the first assumption on the etymology of the concept asefru still needs further investigation and elaboration to be more convincing.

Secondly, people in Kabylia use the verb ‘issefruy’ which means ‘to explain, to make something more explicit, to render something more intelligible and to unravel its enigma.’ The different connotation carried by the verb ‘issefruy’ is related to the activity and the role of the Kabylian poet in particular and of the Amazigh one in general within the Amazigh society. Amazigh poets, through poetry, introduce their experiences and speculations on the world to the audience endeavoring to render them simple and comprehensible via language.

Likewise, elderly people in Tinghir specifically in Afanour tribe also use the causative verb ‘ssefru’ which has almost the same meaning as the verb ‘issefruy’ used in Kabylia as in the expression ‘ssefru asl awal’ translated as ‘make your speech clear to them’. Here, ‘ssefru’ means ‘to make, render and turn clear, refined and balanced, and to be to the point, precise, concise and convincing as well’. It becomes clear that the second etymological suggestion in its relation with the term asefru (meaning poetry) seems contradictory as it does not reflect the qualities of Amazigh poetry such as the use of figurative language and symbolism even if it makes use of simple vocabulary and concise linguistic constructions. To conclude, both the two previous propositions on the etymology of the term ‘asefru’ remain questionable but are of great significance and hence worthy of further investigation.

Why Opting for Tamdyazt?

On the basis of the previous linguistic (etymological) investigation of the three major concepts referring to Amazigh poetry and regarding the debate on the most linguistically appropriate concept that can be applied as universal literary term for Amazigh poetry, I see that the concept tamdyazt stands as an inclusive concept for poetry in Tamazight. First, amarg as a concept designating Amazigh poetry that Amarir proposes in his important book titled The symbols of Amazigh Poetry and Islam’s Influence on them is only limited to Souss region. According to him, the concept amarg is a bi-morphemic noun formed by the morpheme ‘ama’ which joins the verb ‘arg’ meaning ‘to bless’. Both the morpheme ‘ama’ and the verb ‘arg’ form the noun amarg which refers to Amazigh poetry. However, it is difficult to find a linguistic and a

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17Chafii 75.
18Tamdyazt in this sense is uncountable. It stands for poetry in general. In its countable form, tamdyazt stands for a single poem. The plural of ‘tamdyazt’ is ‘timdyazin’ (poems).
semantic relationship between the act of ‘blessing’ and the term poetry in Tamazight as advocated by Amarir.

Furthermore, the word amarg has other meanings such as nostalgia, longing and love and thus remains a broad term and hence less suitable to be used for poetry in Tamazight. In other words, the etymological proposition of the term amarg that Amarir puts forth seems linguistically questionable and semantically inappropriate to designate Amazigh poetry because, as Paulette Galand-Pernet argues, the very etymology of the word amarg is very problematic and hard to define.19

For the etymology of the term amarg, I add that it is mainly formed by two morphemes. The first morpheme is ‘am’ when added to the verb ‘arg’ that is derived from the consonantal root ‘rg’ refers to the act of irrigation and watering of the fields. Hence, the word ‘tarāa’ meaning ‘a valley’ and ‘water channel’ in Souss and the South East region (Morocco) in this sense stands as a nominal stem derived from the root ‘rg’. I thus propose that the term amarg can also be used to designate ‘a person who does the activity of irrigation of fields and farms’ in Tamazight and metaphorically to refer to ‘poets who quench the thirst of members of the Amazigh society through art and poetry’; a significant proposition that Amarir did not include in his study regarding the etymology of the word ‘amarg’ to support his assumption concerning the appropriate term designating Amazigh poetry.

In an attempt to settle the issue of the most linguistically appropriate concept for poetry in Tamazight, I would therefore suggest the term tamdyazt for the following reasons. Firstly, tamdyazt as a concept is largely used by people in more than one Amazigh region and country unlike the terms amarg and asefrou which are limited only to Souss and Kabylia/Aures where they refer to poetry successively. Put otherwise, people in Algeria (Kabylia and Aures) and in the Moroccan Rif use the term tamdyazt. Tamdyazt is also used in most of the remaining Moroccan regions such as the Middle and the High Atlas, and the South East region. Moreover, it is even used in Souss region particularly by some modern Amazigh writers, poets, and intellectuals.

It becomes clear that the etymological analysis of the concept amarg advocated by Amarir to designate poetry in Souss (Morocco) is broader, more complex, incomplete and, as Paulette Galand-Pernet believes, hard to define.20 Furthermore, the previously discussed etymological assumptions of the concept asefrou referring to poetry in Kabylia and Aures (Algeria) still need further study and elaboration to be convincing. Therefore, the etymological contention regarding the concept tamdyazt that this paper puts forward can, evidently, enrich and why not settle the debate on the most appropriate, pertinent and universal term for poetry in Tamazight thanks to the linguistic (etymological) derivational properties of the concept tamdyazt.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued, from a linguistic/etymological perspective, that the concept tamdyazt can be used as a universal literary term for poetry in Tamazight. This study will, no doubt, contribute to settle the debate on the problem of the most linguistically appropriate concept for poetry in the Amazigh language. My final conclusion in this paper is the outcome of a linguistic (etymological) investigation of three major concepts designating poetry in Tamazight namely in Morocco and Algeria. These three concepts, as the study shows, are amarg, asefrou and tamdyazt.

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19 Amarir 86.
20 Amarir 86.
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