

Identity, Dialogism and Liminality: Bakhtinian Perspectives on the *Cialomi*

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ABSTRACT / RESUM / RESUMEN

In this work I attempt to formulate a series of hypotheses on the *cialomi* (the songs that accompany the traditional Sicilian tuna fishing known as *mattanza*), in light of Bakhtinian philosophy. During the *mattanza* the fishermen (*tunmaroti*) perform an initial antiphonal song, based on verses sung by the lead singer (*cialumaturi*) alternated with a choral response from the rest of the company; later, before the most frenetic phase of the *mattanza*, the fishermen sing in a very rhythmic fashion.

Taking the identarian nature of the fishing practice as a fundamental premise, I attempt at describing the *cialomi* as rituals of assertive performance of identity: in this context, it could be argued that the dialogic nature of the songs favours the construction and negotiation of a shared identity; it is a shared identity which perhaps, despite being steadily inscribed in a hierarchical system (due to the undisputable leadership of the crew leader, called *rais*), could nevertheless set the premises for forms of horizontal cooperation. This, in turn, could suggest a specific liminal function of the *cialomi* in the context of the *mattanza*: in other words, the songs delimit the passage into a critical and transcendent dimension where hierarchical structures are suspended.

En aquest treball s'intenta formular una sèrie d'hipòtesis sobre el *cialomi* (les cançons que acompanyen tradicionalment la pesca de la tonyina a Sicília, coneguda com *mattanza*), segons les idees de Bakhtinian. Durant la *mattanza* els pescadors (*tunmaroti*) canten una cançó antifonal inicial, basada en versos cantats per el cantor en cap (*cialumaturi*) alternat amb respostes corals per la resta dels pescadors. Després, abans de la fase frenètica de la matança, els pescadors canten d'una forma molt rítmica.

Prenent la natura identitària de la pesca com a premissa fonamental, es tracta de descriure el *cialomi* com uns rituals de comportament assertiu de la identitat: en aquest context, podria argumentar-se que la natura dialogant de les cançons afavoreix la construcció i negociació d'una identitat comuna. És una identitat compartida que, tal vegada, a pesar d'estar inscrita constantment en un sistema jeràrquic (degut a l'indiscutible lideratge del cap de la tripulació, anomenat *rais*), podria no obstant, fixar les premisses per a formes de cooperació horitzontal. Açò, successivament, podria suggerir una funció específica del *cialomi* en el context de la *mattanza*. En altres paraules, les cançons delimiten els passatges dins d'una dimensió crítica i transcendental on les estructures jeràrquiques quedarien suspeses.

En este Trabajo se intenta formular una serie de hipótesis sobre el *cialomi* (las canciones que acompañan tradicionalmente la pesca del atún rojo en Sicilia, conocida como *mattanza*), según las ideas de Bakhtinian. Durante la *mattanza* los pescadores (*tunmarotti*) cantan una canción antifonal inicial, basada en versos cantados por el cantor jefe (*cialumaturi*) alternado con respuestas corales por el resto de pescadores. Después, antes de la fase frenética de la matanza, los pescadores cantan de una forma muy rítmica.

Tomando la naturaleza identitaria de la pesca como premisa fundamental, se trata de describir el *cialomi* como un ritual afirmativo de comportamiento de la identidad: en este contexto, podría argumentarse que la naturaleza dialogante de las canciones favorecen la construcción y la negociación de una identidad conjunta. Es una identidad compartida que, tal vez, a pesar de estar inscrita constantemente en un sistema jerárquico (debido al indiscutible liderazgo del jefe de la tripulación, conocido como *rais*), podría no obstante, fijar las premisas para las formas de cooperación horizontal. Esto, sucesivamente, podría sugerir una función específica del *cialomi* en el contexto de la matanza. En otras palabras, las canciones delimitan los pasajes dentro de una dimensión crítica y transcendental donde las estructuras jerárquicas quedarían interrumpidas.

PARAULES CLAU / PALABRAS CLAVE / KEY WORDS

Fishing; Dialogism; Bakhtin

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The *mattanza* as an identarian practice

The *mattanza*² is a traditional tuna fishing practice, which has been spread for centuries in the Mediterranean, and especially in Sicily, Malta and Sardinia,³ and has almost disappeared due to the unequal competition of industrial fishing (Giarelli, 1998: 132).⁴ The fishing is based on a trap (*tunnara*), composed of a series of open chambers delimited by net edges, which lead to a last chamber (*coppu*), the only one with a net base: the tunas are gradually herded through the various chambers and then assembled and killed in the *coppu* by the fishermen of the crew (*tunnaroti*) directed by the crew leader (*rais*). Although the practice is characterised by a spectacular display of violence and blood, the structure of the *mattanza* actually allowed for a sustainable selection of the biggest and oldest tunas, which let younger individuals escape the trap in order to reproduce and repopulate the Mediterranean (Addis et al 2012; Salvatori, 2009: 27).

As well as referring to the trap, the word *tunnara* also denotes the buildings where the fish was stocked and canned: by advocating the architectural importance of these buildings, Lentini claims the existence of an important identarian function attached to the whole phenomenology of the *mattanza* (2011). The consciousness of this relevance in terms of identity and heritage preservation is certainly reflected in many other works on the *mattanza*, such as Giarelli's essay (1998), or Theresa Maggio's reportage (2000). These two authors in particular, implicitly suggest that the perception of the identarianness is not only shared by the observers, but is actively felt and explicitly by the fishermen themselves: both authors report the words of the last two *rais*, Salvatore Spataro and Gioacchino Cataldo, the former declaring that the *tunnaroti* are not "barbarians", in proud defence of the dignity of their practice (Maggio, 2000: 18,21); the latter arguing that the *tunnara* should not die (Giarelli, 1998: 132), or even lucidly talking about the *tunnara* as a Sicilian and Italian "national patrimony" (Maggio, 2000:248). Maggio's work also illustrates how *rais* Cataldo, at the end of the 1990s, proudly took control of the *tunnara* in Favignana despite the fact that the crew was let down by the previous *rais* and by the owner of the *tunnara*, and tried to continue practicing the *mattanza* regardless of its unprofitability, by running the *tunnara* as a cooperative (Maggio, 2000: 246-257).⁵

In commenting this last fact, van Ginkel argues that the "identity matters" became, in the last stage of the history of Favignana's *mattanza*, the only reason why it was still practiced: "[by] performing the *mattanza*, the Favignanesi recreate[d] their sense of selves" (Van Ginkel, 2010: 52).

² This term, generally translatable as "killing", is of Spanish origin, and replaced the original Sicilian term *accisa* in the 19th century (Ravazza, 2010: 68). Incidentally, in contemporary Sicilian and Italian, the term *mattanza* is often used to refer figuratively to human massacres.

³ In this work I will mainly focus on Sicily and in particular on the island of Favignana, where I also conducted some fragmented fieldwork: after an initial trip in May 2013, I visited the island again for a short period in May 2014, and met some of the last *tunnaroti* still living in the island, such as the last *rais* Gioacchino Cataldo (who authorised me to use his name and report the main point of our personal conversation) and other members of the last crew. In particular, in a personal conversation Cataldo stressed on a few main points, such as the idea that the *rais* is not necessarily the soloist, as normally the most endowed singer among the *tunnaroti* takes on the role of *cialumatori*, initiates and leads the songs, while the *rais* normally directs spoken prayers and invocations, which have a dialogic form as well; he also pointed out the abundance of obscene songs alongside the religious invocations; importantly, he then highlighted the importance of conceiving the role of the *rais* as a promoter of cooperation between the *tunnaroti*, as opposed to an authoritarian leader; finally, he said that the *cialomi* are normally sung up until the first 60 metres of the *coppu*, as later the fishing becomes too frenetic and challenging to allow for the distraction of singing.

⁴ The *mattanza* is still practiced in Carloforte, in the island of San Pietro, in Southern Sardinia (Johnston, 2014).

⁵ The events in Maggio's report stop in 1999, Cataldo managed to keep the *tunnara* active until 2007, the year of the last *mattanza* in Favignana.

Aspects of rituality

The identarian nature of the practice transforms it, in turn, into performance of identity, a ritual that van Ginkel describes as intimately attached to blood and to the struggle of human versus animal, and to the power, disgust and carnal fascination these elements evoke (2010:61-63). The notion of “ritual” associated to the *mattanza* is recurrent in a lot of the literature on the subject (Torrente, 2002; Ravazza, 2010; Guggino, 2008). Among the other elements that compose the ritual, it is possible to list the prayers and all the other manifestations of religious worship that accompany the practice (van Ginkel, 2010: 63; Torrente, 2002).

Among these manifestations, it is possible to mention the *cialomi*,⁶ the characteristic chants that accompany the *mattanza*: these are a number of different traditional songs, all characterised by an antiphonic relationship between a lead singer (*cialumaturi*), who initiates each verse, and the rest of the *tunnaroti*, who respond in unison, in a strongly pronounced dialogic fashion. Importantly, the *cialumaturi* and the *rais* are not necessarily the same person. Among the different *cialomi*, it is possible to mention *Aiamola*, which might be described as a dialogic prayer, and *Gnanzù*, a more rhythmic song of both religious and secular content, normally sung just before the most frenetic phase of the fishing; alongside these devotional chants, there are also obscene and irreverent songs (*Lina, Lina, Zzà Monica n cammisa*), which usually make fun of the *rais*.

Liminality and dialogue

Aiamola is arguably the best-known *cialoma* sung by the *tunnaroti*. It is based, as most of the other songs, on a continuous call and response between the choir leader, *cialumaturi*, and the rest of the crew. The literature suggests that this *cialoma* was sung especially in the initial phases of the *mattanza* or even prior to it (Giarelli, 1998; Maggio, 2000; Ravazza, 2010). The call and response chant is based on a series of religious invocations sung by the *cialumaturi*, to which all the *tunnaroti* respond in unison with the word *Aiamola*, a phrase of obscure meaning:⁷

(leader)	E aiamola aiamola.	Aiamola Aiamola
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!
(leader)	Ggesu Cristu cu lli santi.	Jesus Christ and the Saints
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!
(leader)	E aiamola aiamola.	Aiamola Aiamola
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!
(leader)	E llu santu Sarvaturi.	And the Holy Saviour
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!
(leader)	E aiamola aiamola.	Aiamola Aiamola
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!
(leader)	E ccriastu luna e ssuli.	You created the moon and the sun
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!
(leader)	E aiamola aiamola.	Aiamola Aiamola
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!
(leader)	E ccriastu tanta ggenti.	You created many people
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola!	Aiamola aiamola!

⁶ From the Greek *kéleusma* (“cry”, “shout”) (Bonanzinga, 2013: 212; Guggino, 2008: 88).

⁷ Guggino (2008) suggests a derivation from the Arabic *ai ya manla* (“oh my Lord”), whereas Torrente (2002) proposes to translate it as *forza moro* (“go on Moor”).

(leader)	Vèrgini santa parturienti.	Holy Virgin in labour
(choir)	Aiamola aiamola! ⁸	Aiamola aiamola!

I propose to interpret the call and response structure that characterises the *cialomi* in light of Bakhtinian dialogism, which presupposes an encounter of different entities and perspectives resulting in the creation of a space where identities and narratives can be negotiated or renegotiated (White, 2009). Wegerif (2007: 20-21) argues that the dialogic in Bakhtin is not only epistemological, but also and primarily ontological, and thus related to being and identity:⁹ in other words, this could perhaps suggest that, if the *mattanza* is a ritual of assertion of identity, this assertion is facilitated by the dialogue performed during the *cialomi*. What is more, dialogue in Bakhtin is liminal, that is, it functions as a threshold to access a critical and transcendental dimension (Bakhtin, 1984: 101-180): I claim that this is also true of the *cialomi*, and will attempt to demonstrate it further on.

Elements of carnivalesque

Guggino suggests a connection between the whole phenomenology of the *mattanza*, including the *cialomi*, and Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque: she focuses mostly on the liberating power of the ritual, that momentarily frees both the *tunnaroti* and the wider community from the usual apprehensions that characterise their life, by temporarily suspending or questioning hierarchical relationships (Guggino, 2008: 96-97). With regards to this, I would like to draw attention to the dynamics of interaction between the *rais* and the *cialumaturi*. Alongside the chants, the *tunnaroti* also pronounce a spoken prayer, which has a similar dialogic structure to the chants and is led by the *rais*: Torrente suggests that here the *rais* assumes the function of a religious minister or a shaman of the *mattanza* (2002). When leading the song *Aiamola*, the *cialumaturi* replaces the *rais* in leading the invocation and worship of the Virgin Mary, Jesus and the saints, arguably functioning as an alter ego, or a double, to the *rais*. This takes us back to Bakhtin, who asserts that the double is a fundamental element of the carnival and the carnivalesque: to every leading figure, to every higher authority corresponds at least one double in carnival (Bakhtin, 1984: 127). The function of the double is precisely that of parodying and mocking the leader: this is what Bakhtin calls "decrowning double" (1984: 127). Importantly, by ridiculing and decrowning the leader, the double ultimately reasserts the leader's very same authority (Bakhtin, 1984: 126-127). As anticipated earlier, alongside the devotional songs, the *tunnaroti* also sing obscene comical songs, such as *Lina Lina* and *A zžá Monica n cammisa*, whose precise aim is to question and parody the undisputable leadership of the *rais*:

(leader)	E Lina, Lina	Lina, Lina
(choir)	Lina, Lina	Lina, Lina
(leader)	Chi beddi occhi teni	What beautiful eyes she has
(choir)	AS signorina	That young lady
(leader)	Chi beddi occhi teni	What beautiful eyes she has
(choir)	A signorina	That young lady
(leader)	E Lina, Lina	Lina, Lina
(choir)	Lina, Lina	Lina, Lina

⁸ Transcribed by Sergio Bonanzinga in Favignana in 1991 (Bonanzinga, 2013: 212).

⁹ I am aware of the fact that it is highly problematic to mention the concept of identity in relation to Bakhtin's thought: as pointed out by Wegerif, Bakhtin questions the concept of identity and considers the formation of the self as dependent on the dialogic act (Wegerif, 2007: 21).

(leader)	Chi beddi cosci teni	What beautiful legs she has
(choir)	A signorina	That young lady
(leader)	Chi beddi cosci teni	What beautiful legs she has
(choir)	A signorina	That young lady
(leader)	E Lina, Lina	Lina, Lina
(choir)	Lina, Lina	Lina, Lina
(leader)	E ci la ramo o rais	We'll give her to the <i>rais</i>
(choir)	A signorina	That young lady
(leader)	E ci la ramo o rais	We'll give her to the <i>rais</i>
(choir)	A signorina ¹⁰	That young lady

In *Lina, Lina*, after listing the details of the young lady's beauty, often with reference to obscene particulars, the *cialumaturi* and the other *tunnaroti* sardonically offer her to the *rais*, in total irreverence to his leadership: as van Ginkel puts it, here "the singers can even poke fun at the *rais* – the only time his authority can be freely mocked"(2010: 61). I claim here that this mockery has the precise aim of reasserting the leadership of the *rais*, by urging the renovation of his authority before the most arduous and critical phase of the fishing: in this context the *cialumaturi* acts as a decrowning double of the *rais*, as he initially usurps his role as leader of the religious invocations, and then transfers the singing from a devotional domain into an obscene and derisive domain.

Death and regeneration

In Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque, the decrowning double's mockery of the authority is called "ritual laughter", and has the function of forcing the authority to renew itself: "Ritual laughter was always directed toward something higher: the sun (the highest god), other gods, the highest earthly authorities were put to shame and ridiculed to force them to renew themselves" (Bakhtin, 1984: 126-127).

Importantly, the authority in Bakhtin's carnival is not only represented by the human leader, but also to more abstract entities, and transposing this to the *mattanza*, one can argue that the renovation that takes place is closely linked to the killing of the tuna: reporting an insight of anthropologist Serge Collet, van Ginkel suggests that the blood of the tuna is a symbol of regeneration and reproduction (2010: 61), and then goes on to illustrate the extreme respect and tie that links the fishermen with the tuna, despite the gruesome display of violence embedded in the practice (2010: 62). In more general terms, thus, it could perhaps be argued that, apart from mocking and reasserting the authority of the *rais*, the ritual laughter serves to exorcise and deny the gravity of the imminent carnage: in support to this thesis, I can again resort to van Ginkel, who quotes *rais* Gioacchino Cataldo who, in turn, minimises and denies the blood bath involved in the *mattanza*, claiming that the *tunnaroti* only fish the tuna, and that they do not really kill it (Van Ginkel, 2010: 62).¹¹

¹⁰ This transcription is a personal elaboration based on the transcription by Guggino (2008: 95) and on a recording taken by Maggio (Tonnaroti di Favignana, 1994b).

¹¹ A similar mechanism of denial, employed by the *tunnaroti* of Favignana, but this time associated to the general decline of the *mattanza*, has also been observed by Maggio (Marino & Maggio, 2005).

The final stages of the *mattanza*

While entering the last phase of the fishing, the *tunnaroti* sing another song, *Gnanzù*, which is characterised by a more frenetic rhythm, due to the fact that the *mattanza* is entering its more demanding and critical phase: also, the more pronounced rhythm serves to synchronise efforts. While retaining the same dialogic structure of the other songs, *Gnanzù*¹² is characterised by a more blurred distinction between the participants to the dialogue, as the part of the choir repeatedly overlays that of the *cialumatori*:¹³

(leader)	Aè assumma u coppu	Raise the <i>coppu</i>
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up! ¹⁴
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	San Cristofaru	Saint Christopher
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Ranni e grossu	Big and sturdy
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Sù purtava	Carried Jesus
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Gesù addosso	With himself
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Sò lu figghiu	The son
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Ri Maria ¹⁵	Of Holy Mary

Here the intermissions of the choir repeatedly break the sentences sung by the *cialumaturi*, making the dialogue much more dynamic and frenetic. It could be argued that this slightly different structure signals a mutated relationship between the *cialumaturi* and the other *tunnaroti*: now the hierarchical distinction between the choir leader and the rest of the crew is less pronounced, and this in turn could perhaps suggest the passage to a dimension where cooperation is more horizontal. In spite of this, the undisputed leadership of the *rais*, which had been freely mocked in *Lina, Lina*, seems to be fully restored and reasserted, perhaps validating any argument made earlier about the regenerative function of the mockery. Alongside the acknowledgment for the authority of the *rais*, a mention is made to show respect and admiration for the owner of the *tunnara* (*patruni*):

¹² Reported here as transcribed by Guggino (2008: 89-90), is it also transcribed as *Gnanzòu* (Ravazza, 2010: 78-79), *Gnanzòu* (Guggino, 2008: 90), or *Nianzò* (Torrente, 2010). The word *Gnanzù* means “lift up” (Ravazza, 2010: 78).

¹³ More precisely, the last syllable of each of the verses sung by the choir temporally overlaps with the first syllable of the following verse sung by the leader.

¹⁴ Here I propose to interpret the syllable *zzà* as a contraction of the verbal imperative *isa* (“lift up”).

¹⁵ The transcription adopted here is an elaboration based on the transcriptions reported in Guggino (2008: 90-92) and Ravazza (2010: 78-79), and on a recording taken by Maggio (Tonnaroti di Favignana, 1994a).

(leader)	U patruuni	The owner
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Gran signuri	[Is] a great gentleman
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	E lu rais	And the <i>rais</i>
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Nzu zzà	Lift up!
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!
(leader)	Cumannaturi	[Is our] leader
(choir)	Gnanzù	Lift up!

Further on, the chant reveals carnivalistic elements and playful invectives¹⁶ directed at the other key members of the crew of the *tunmaroti*: someone is called a drunkard, another one a scoundrel, a third one is alleged of stealing the interiors of the tuna (Guggino, 2008: 89): this sheds a new light of ambivalence on the praises aimed at the *rais* and the *patruuni*, as they might be interpreted as sarcastic comments. Coherently with Bakhtin's insights on parody and ambivalence (1984:127-128), it could be argued that here the sarcasm might concur with a genuine praising attitude: in other words, as seen above, the mockery coexists with, and is precisely aimed at, the validation of the authority of the *rais*.

In the final stages of the *mattanza*, happening in the last 60 metres of the last chamber, the *coppu*, the chants stop, primarily because the fishing enters its most critical phase and the *tunmaroti* need to be more concentrated (Gioacchino Cataldo, personal conversation).¹⁷ The singing is now replaced by the frequent whistles of the *rais*, again aimed at coordinating efforts (Ravazza, 2010:79; Guggino, 2008: 92). In the context of the hypotheses proposed in this paper, I claim that the chants have functioned as a threshold for the *tunmaroti*: trespassing this threshold has helped them move from an ordinary dimension into a transcendental one, based on extreme physical efforts, the struggle with the tuna, and a spectacular and gruesome blood bath.

The end of the *mattanza* is marked by a final cry of the *rais*: “E ssemprì sia laratu lu nnomu di Ggesù!” (“May be the name of Jesus always be praised!”), to which all the *tunmaroti* respond: “Ggesù!” (“Jesus”) (Ravazza, 2010: 79). The *rais* fully reinstates himself as the religious minister of the *mattanza*, after his role had been momentarily usurped and carnivalised by the *cialumaturi*, and announces the end of the ritual.

Remarks and conclusions

To summarise, in this paper I have tried to interpret the ritual of the *mattanza*, and in particular the *cialomi*, the traditional songs in Sicilian that accompany the fishing, in light of Bakhtin's insights on dialogue, parody, authority and carnival:

¹⁶ It is perhaps worth noting that the version of *Gnanzù* reported in Torrente (2002) is considerably different from the one analysed here, and contains invectives against the Turks and the Moors on the ground of their different religious faith.

¹⁷ See note 3

- I have argued that, by singing in a dialogic form, the *tunnaroti* construct and negotiate a shared identity.
- Expanding on an initial interpretation proposed by Guggino (2008: 96-97), I have further connected the comical obscenity of some of the songs, and their irreverent attitude towards the *rais*, to Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and in particular I have claimed that:
 - the *cialumaturi* functions as a decrowning double of the *rais*;
 - the irreverence towards the *rais* functions as a ritual laughter that, on one hand, questions and, on the other hand, renovates his authority;
 - this same irreverence is not only directed to the *rais* but, in more general terms, exorcises the seriousness of the imminent tuna carnage.
- Finally, I have shown how the less strict dialogic form of the song *Gnanzù* could perhaps signal the passage to a climate of horizontal cooperation, necessary to coordinate shared efforts in the final phase of the fishing.

While asserting their own identity through the *mattanza*, the *tunnaroti* use the singing as a threshold that allows them to access the most critical, violent and transcendental phase of the ritual. I would like to conclude by quoting Maggio, who seems to perceive this liminal function of the singing when, listening to the chant of the *cialumaturi*, she observes: "He sang, the melody was a plaint, a rolling wave of lament. The chorus answered 'Ai-a-mola, ai-a-mola'. What does it mean? What door does it open?" (Maggio, 2000: 254).

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