
**Socio-economic, Cultural and Literary Paradigms of Lakshadweep
Tribal Community**

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Abstract:

Lakshadweep is an archipelago, a typical area exclusively for Muslim tribal community. This cent percent tribal retreat is situated in the Arabian Sea at south western side of Indian peninsula being a union territory under Govt. of India. Despite its geographical isolation it has its own culture and tradition having special religious concerns, socio-economic activities, flora and fauna, language, arts and literature, etc. As in the case of seascape it can be seen several range of tides in all spears of island life like social, educational, cultural and economic sectors. The geographical isolation may have cherished various identities of folk culture and tradition, but as the time passes, it can be seen both the symptoms of resurgence and resilience. Thus it is significant to pull together all these unexplored areas to feast the craving reading public and curious explorers. So this paper aims at comprising various renewed perspectives, traditional pronouncements of island community and issues, challenges and opportunities related to the topic.

Keywords: Lakshadweep, Coral, Island, History, Acculturation, Ethnicity, Language, Economy, Arts, Education, Health, Flora, Fauna, Cuisines

Introduction:

Lakshadweep, the coral archipelago, the tiniest Union Territory of India is a group of 10 fully inhabited islands, 2 agricultural seasonal inhabited islands, 1 fully tourism island, 13 uninhabited islands, 3 reefs and 6 submerged banks. These coral systems are safely based on 12 independent atolls. These islands are situated on the western side of Kerala state at a distance of 200-480km in the Arabian Sea between 8 and 12-30 degree north latitude and between 71-74 degree east longitudes. These coral islands are in the sea route between Africa, Arabia, South Indian ports and the Far East.

It is interesting to note that while the geographical area of this territory is just 32 sq. km. Her lagoon area measures 4200 sq. km. and territorial waters 20000 sq.

km. These tiny islands also add 400000 sq. km. of exclusive economic zone of India. Thus in a way it is larger than Rajasthan, the largest state of the country. The realisation of these aspects makes Lakshadweep a very important territory not only for economic angle but also for strategic location. These islands were earlier known as *Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands*. It was on 1st November 1973 that the name Lakshadweep was adopted following a decision by the parliament.

Kavaratti Island is the administrative capital of Lakshadweep. It is recently considered as one of the smart cities of India. Kavaratti situated in approximately central position of the archipelago, as such Indian Navy, Coast Guard, and other Para Military group are head quartered there. The tomb of renowned Sufi leader, Mohammed Kasim Valiyullahi is situated at Kavaratti adjoining to famed *Ujra Mosque*. Other inhabited islands are Kalpeni, Androth, Minicoy, Agatti, Amini, Kadmat, Kiltan, Chetlat and Bitra. Thinnakara, Parali are partially inhabited islands and Bangaram inhabited exclusively for tourism purposes.

The organisational structure of Lakshadweep ruling system is in two-tier system. The whole territory is under the direct control of the administrator appointed by President of India. Under Panchayath Raj system only two types of Panchayaths, they are Zila Panchayath and Village Dweep Panchayath. Only one Zila Panchayath and 10 Village Dweep Panchayaths are there, for ten inhabited islands. In Minicoy apart from one Village Dweep Panchayath, there are ten villages also in a limited dense populated area. For whole Lakshadweep there is only one Parliamentary Constituency.

Lakshadweep is a cent percentage Muslim Tribal area. The total population as per 2011 censuses is 64,473. Among which a limited no. of peoples are floating population which may other than Muslim community. The people of Lakshadweep profess Islam and the majority of them belong to the *Shafi* School of the Sunni sect. There are also a few *Wahabi* and *Ahamadiyya* among them but they constitute only a microscopic minority of the Lakshadweep inhabitants. Before going to the deep study of Lakshadweep tribal community one has to know the chronological evolution of Lakshadweep to present status.

History and Evolution of Lakshadweep

While discussing about the historic existence, the oldest information about Lakshadweep is from different travellers of various time. It was first mentioned by a Greek sailor in the 1st century CE as a source of tortoise shell. Later in 7th century, Arab travellers, Al Biruni and Abu Zayad mentioned in their chronicles about this pristine islets. It is evident that the first European to visit this area is the Italian traveller Marco polo. He mentioned in his 13th century travelogue about a female island. It is said that it may about Minicoy Island, where females have dominance. As per the reference, in 1498 Portuguese arrived in various islands under the leadership of Vasco de Gama. He was the first European who invaded these Virgin Islands. He used this island as a centre of flourishing maritime trade and followed

plunder, pillage and tyranny here. Earlier, the route to Indian subcontinent was showed to him by an Arab navigator Ibnu Majid. These incidents are chronicled by Ar Later successive Indian rulers ruled over this area till 1947.

Meanwhile various Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic rulers ruled over here in various times. Sometime before 1100 a small Hindu kingdom, Kulashekhara on the Malabar Coast annexed the islands, and after the fall of this dynasty in 1102 they passed to the Kolathiris, another small Hindu dynasty. Later in the 12th century, after a Kolathiri princess married a Muslim convert, a separate kingdom (including the islands that eventually formed Lakshadweep) was set up in the Kannur area of Kerala so as to protect the tradition of matrilineal descent. Successive female rulers and their husbands ruled these islands until control of the northern group of islands, the *Amindivis*, passed to Tippu Sultan, the sultan of Mysore, on the mainland, in the 1780s. When Tippu was killed in battle with the British in 1799, the *Amindivis* came under British control. During then these islands are called South Canara District under Madras Presidency. The *Bibi* and her husband were permitted to retain islands and receive income from them in exchange for an annual payment to the British. These payments repeatedly were in arrears, and in 1908 the *bibi* ceded to the British direct administration of these islands. Sovereignty was transferred to India upon Indian independence in 1947, and the islands were constituted a union territory in 1956. Till 1973 this archipelago is known as *Laccadive, Minicoy, and Amindivi Islands*
Acculturation and Cultural Transformation

The exploration about the cultural transformation brings us to the prehistoric era. Dr. Muthukoya depicts a clear picture about the pre historic existence of these islands. As per various references he concludes the earliest existence of inhabitants in this area. When Robinson visited Bitra Island in 1835, the whole area was the habitation of birds. Later after the migration of people there, birds shifted to humans. As per his assumptions all islands may be like this the habitation of birds. The study of Indian Bureau of Mines in 1960s shows the existence of phosphate in every island, which is the dung of birds.

It is very exertion to identify who were the first inhabitants there. The archaeological excavations in various islands discovered different cultural evidence existed here. Among which Buddhist statues and some coins are very relevant. But considering present sketch of various items, resembles the migration of Polynesians in these islands. Still some of the Polynesian cultures melted inseparably in the culture of Lakshadweep. The building ships (*Odam*) and boats and related customs and traditions and various agricultural traditions are still similar to Polynesians. The descriptions of various writers, resembles of Lakshadweep traditions as well. J. E. Weckler clearly says in his book about Polynesia, on the marine skill ab Traveller Ibnu Bathutha.of them and their habitation in various islands. They also cultivated coconut trees, breadfruit, etc. their housing habitation similar to Lakshadweep, using coconut leaves. The matrilineal tradition also came from them. The construction of

Uru (Boat) in Lakshadweep not at all similar to the same in mainland or Arabian culture, which affirms RH Ellis in his study about Lakshadweep, titled “A short account of the Laccadive Islands and Minicoy”.

In AD 1st and 2nd Century Roman and Greek people used these islands, as it is evident from the roman gold coins found in various islands of Lakshadweep. Some of the coins found from Kadmat Island in 1948 which is caught by then government authorities.

V. R. Krisnayyar says once in AD 2nd Sanga Dynasty King Nedum Cheralathan ruled over here. In AD 4th Pallava King Narasimha Varma mentioned about it in Vaylur inscription. In AD 404 Christian Missionaries reached here. It mentioned in some Christian scripts.

The archaeological excavations say, before the Islamic embracement the beliefs and ideologies were Buddhism. The study says, the whole history of Buddhism in India is more or less same in Lakshadweep. If the invasion of Aryans uprooted Buddhism in mainland, it may be the Islamic missionaries migrated islanders to Islam. The presence of Buddhists evident from the finding of Buddhist statue from Androt and other islands, which is still kept in Agatti Museum, likewise it is found that the remnants of Buddhist Viharas are proofs of their presence. Big urn and its stool also excavated from Androt Island. Still Buddhist styles and signs can be seen in Lakshadweep language and culture especially in house names. Palli, Peepal Tree, etc. are still Buddhist remains in island. King Asoka’s Language scripts also till recent times used by islanders.

The present culture and status are after Arab traders and Islamic missionaries, which caused mass migration of inhabitants to Islam. The evidence of Islamic acculturation is clearly written in *Futhuhathul Jazair* of Hazrath Ubaidullah, the grandson of Caliph Aboobacker. It was in 7th Century that Hazrath Ubaidullah reached in Lakshadweep at first in Amini Island. Unfortunately enough no one except Fiziya, a woman from Amini embraced Islam. He changes her name Hameedathbi and married her. From there he travelled to Androt, which resulted to the conversion of majority of the people in Androt to Islam. It was in AD 662, who established a mosque and Islamic rule in island being Androt as the centre. Then every island attracted to Islam, even Amini more vigorously accepted Islam. However the influence of Arabic language to Lakshadweep mother tongue is not connected to Islamic invasion, as Ubaidulla himself said that he hasn’t any obstacles while communication islanders, because they already know Arabic; it may be because of the relation of Arabic traders to islanders.

The previous name of Hameedathbi was Fiziya which already Arabic name. So it was evident to Arabic culture already existed here, but their belief may

Buddhism as they thrown away dead bodies to wilds in forests, which is also mentioned in *Futhoohath*.

Ethnicity of Lakshadweep Tribal Community

The history of Lakshadweep ethnic groups can be traced back to pre historic era, which is already mentioned. After studying about the human habitation in island, *Amindivis* are the oldest ethnic group, who may have lived in present Amini Island or other northern islands. The people of this community are known as one of the original and oldest clans of the place.

After religious and political hegemony in later periods these Amindivi groups further divided in to three categories, they are *Koyas*, *Malmis*, and *Melacheris*. Amidst all these extreme diversity, there was a unifying factor that is Islamic tradition and rituals. During the time of prayer and other ritualistic ceremonies all these groups stand alike as per religious teachings. However the supervision of mosques and other worshipping place are under the control of the elite of them. These three tribal groups are separated on the ground of family status and occupation. In a nutshell they are summarised as follows. The community of *Koyas* were once the land-owners of Lakshadweep who used to possess a powerful position in the island. Till the people of this particular community enjoy the benefits of a superior social rank. The community of *Malmis* were originally the tenants of *Koya* community. The people of this group transport goods through boats from one place to another. The community of *Melacheris* are engaged with the occupation of gathering and climbing and plucking coconuts as well as extracting sweet toddy. This ethnic group of Lakshadweep is considered as the last social rung of the island. These ethnic groups collectively showcase the diverse socio-cultural features of the tribal people of the island. Let me discuss various social statuses of these groups.

Koya:

The term *Koya* is a corrupt form of the word *Khoja* which means “the respected”. *Koyas* are in top position of the hierarchical order of social status. They once referred by the names of *Karanavar* or *Tarawadis*. These groups preside over the matters of island; the ultimate verdict of the issues will be from the head of a *Koya* family. They were land owner community as the status of feudal. Apart from land revenue, all ferries and boats are belonging to them in recent past. They are always in touch with ruling personals. As such they preside over Panchayaths of islands. Likewise they were in the various prominent government posts of Lakshadweep. According to their belief, other two sects are the servants of them. *Koyas* have their own festivals in previous times based on their proud heritage.

Presently *Koya* families are rich in Amini, Androt, Kalpeni and Kavaratti Islands. Traditionally, the *Koya* men wear a white or coloured *lungi* and shirt, but nowadays the youngsters wear shirts and trousers. The *Koya* women’s traditional dress is similar to that of the Kerala Muslim women. They wear a white or coloured cloth (*kachi*) and a tight-fitting blouse with long sleeves (*kuppayam*).The head-dress (*thattam*) covers the head and shoulders. The women have a great proclivity for

ornaments. Eardrops and ear-rings are common adornments. *Koyas* are not ready to marry from other two classes.

Malmis:

The word *Malmi* or *Mali* is derived from Arabic word *Muallim*, meaning the leader of a crew. It is mentioned already that the duty of *Malmis* is carrying goods of *Koyas* from one place to another through vessels or boat called *Odam*; as such they play the role of Steward. Some skilled *Malmi* workers also assist the *Koyas* by reading the nautical texts. They are basically sailors. *Malmis* are in second position in the hierarchy of social stratum. As one of the core communities of Lakshadweep, *Malmis* have an ancient heritage that coincides with the earliest civilizations of the place. During their gradual evolution, the *Malmis* of Lakshadweep were known to have served their superior counterparts - the *Koyas*. Apart from major local festivals, the *Malmis* have their own folk celebrations too where they perform various music and dance shows all of which represent the vibrant cultural tradition of Lakshadweep. *Malmis* can be seen in every island, where *Koya* present. Presently *Malmis* are economically self-sufficient as equal to *Koyas*, moreover they became dominance in other islands as well.

Melacheris:

The word *Melacheris* means those who living in ghettos of the high side of island, which is normally in western side. *Melacheris* are the lowest group of tribal community present in Lakshadweep. They are meaner workers of *Koyas*. As Coconut is the main economy of *Koyas*, the duties of *Melacheris* are to climb over coconut trees, and collect coconuts. Likewise they are tapping the Toddy from coconut tree in order to make vinegar and Jaggery. *Melachery* communities were provided lands in less inhabited islands in order to look after and nurture coconut trees. As the time passes, they gradually recovered their lower social status, as such they presently reached in various post of government jobs. Once they were not provided education, but now they had become educated. The *Melachery* community once found in dominant place under *Koyas*, is dominant in other islands like, Kadmat, Chetlat, Kiltan, Bitra, etc. their cultural fests are more or less similar to other two sects.

Like all other islands of Lakshadweep, in Minicoy Island also these kinds class differences. Like three categories mentioned above, Minicoy people also divided in to three hierarchical social orders such as *Raveris*, *Thakurs* and *Manikfans*. *Manikfans* are in highest status seconding *Thakurs*. Like *Koyas*, *Manikfans* are in most of the government positions of Minicoy. There is also village system having head of the clan, like *Moopan*. They called them *Bodukaka* and *Boduthatha*. While discussing Lakshadweep tribal community, Minicoy is more special. They have their own culture cherished by centuries, which is still unaffected by modernity. They are entirely different from other islands. The limited dense populated area is divided in to ten villages among the inhabitants. Each member of the village has special duty to do under the headship of Village *Moopan*, and *Moopathi*, *Bodukaka* and *Boduthatha*. In the case of Marriage they follow monogamy. However, they follow matrilineal system as other islanders.

Matrilineal system is followed in every island unlike Islamic tradition; it may because of the historic influence of island to other communities. There are special customs and tradition in connection with marriage. Polygamy is accepted every island except Minicoy.

Language of Lakshadweep

Language is the integral part of every human being. It acts as a mirror to reflect their culture. So each cultural group has their own language as an outcome to their culture. The famous anthropologist Claude Levi Straus and Ferdinand de Saussure are in the opinion of language origin or evolution as the by-product of culture.

Mother tongue of Lakshadweep is originally Malayalam. But language spoken in Lakshadweep is not proper Malayalam; it is more or less different from actual Malayalam. There is a unique language spoken in every island with slight dialectical variation. Some of the scholars in Lakshadweep termed it as Jasari. But as per the official statement it is only a dialect of Malayalam, like Malappuram slang dialect, or Kozhikode slang dialect. Or it may be called an archaic form of Malayalam. But those who support it as independent language without letters, compares it to Arabic-Malayalam, or Chenthamil.

This is the case of nine inhabited islands, but in Minicoy Island, which is neared to Maldives, people speak entirely different language named Mahal. It is a dialect of Dhivehi language of Maldives. People of Minicoy different from all other island not only in language but in culture too.

The evolution of Jasari has influences from various invasions from pre historic to present era. One can see the terminologies of Buddhist era as well as pure Malayalam words. This language transfers generation by generation only through spoken language. The most influences from Arabic by way of Arab traders. Later there is English, Portuguese, Malabar dialect of Malayalam, Hindi, and Tamil. Tamil and Arabic and Malayalam have most contributions. So Jasari is a creolized language of various linguistic groups. This Jasari language can be seen as immortalized in Mappila literatures, like Mala, Safeena songs and Mappila songs.

According to Dr. Muthukoya, the language of Islanders, called as *Jasari*, is the by-product of Classic Tamil language. So the alphabets used for that language is same as the then Tamil script, *Vattezhuth*. Islanders are not the migrants of Kerala. People lived in Lakshadweep since the time immemorial. The same language originated before Malayalam origin. Then why did it call *Jasari*? The meaning of *Jasari* in Arabic is island. So *Jasari* language means island language. There are several similarities between *Jasari* and Tamil languages. Famous Malayalam Scholar, K. E. N. Kunhahammed recognizes the *Jasari* language as an independent language and supports islanders love towards their mother tongue *Jasari* in his island memoir written in '*Rakkunathi Magazine 2010*' of Calicut University Centre,

Kadmat. But the islander Dr. Mullakoya denies these assertions and affirms it as a dialect of Malayalam.

Lakshadweep Economy

Since historic time itself major economic activity is coconut cultivation and its processing being a cash crop. Unlike mainland, islanders use this really as Kalpavriksha. They produce multiple items from it. Its logs are used for making furniture of houses along with laying roofs. It becomes essential parts of wooden and fibre boats. Its leaves use for roofing the building of kacha or pakka. Uses of its fruits are in different types. Once it become ripe it uses for making curry or drying for oils. The unripe tender one uses as soft drinks or it uses for the preparation of unique cuisine of Lakshadweep, Dweep Halva. There are so many other products are from this tender one. Tapping the tender shoot for toddy is big business in Lakshadweep. Fresh toddy is used as soft drinks and medicine and after the process of it; it may change as Jaggery or Vinegar. Coconut husk is used to make fibres and coir products. In every island there is a fibre factory to process in government sector. In the same way there were coconut oil factory cum powder factory in all islands in government sector. Now it is running in private sector. To conclude coconut cultivation is a big economic income of Lakshadweep.

Apart from coconut cultivation, there are other agricultural activities flourished in fertilised island land. Recently seaweeds are cultivated in the lagoons of various islands. It is a long-term prospecting economic activity. The international value of seaweeds is very high. Likewise once the seaweeds increased, the school of lagoon fish also will increase. There is a department to promote agriculture in Lakshadweep. Under government sector, some lands are occupied for unique agricultural needs.

Another big economy is fishing. Mostly the islanders prefer to catch Tuna fish. Traditionally islanders are skilled in catching it. People will get bulk number of Tunas in one time, as such skip other items to prefer it. There are also the most precious and valuable lagoon fish, Tuna also converted in to *Mass* during summer season in order to use off season. Different types of *Tunas* catching here, such as *Chebiyan*, *phallan*, *Quintel*, *leddy*, *Ravundi*, *Mas*, etc. Tunas are used to prepare Pickles known as Lakshadweep Tuna pickles. It is also used to prepare various cuisines. Like agriculture department there is fisheries department in government sector to promote fishing.

Tourism is another money income sector. Along with government tourism, private sector also is flourished in various islands. Lakshadweep has great future in the tourism map of the world. Even though this was the case, Per Capita Income and Human Developmental Index are depending on government jobs. Government job is the main income source of islanders. As this is the central government area, most of the offices are made available in every island, so it is favourable to the one who lived here.

Arts, Literature and Festivals

Land of Lakshadweep is rich with various cultural arts, literature and festivities, which reflects the tradition and culture of this tribal community. Influence of different culture also can be seen in some arts forms. Majority of the items are connected with Malabar Muslims due to their historic connection. Some kinds of them connected with Sufi sects of Islam. The typical arts forms of Lakshadweep are *Kolkkali*, *Oppana*, *Parichakali*, *Ulakkamuttu*, *Attam*, *Kattuvili*, *Sarikkuthu*, *Bandiya*, *Lava Dance*, etc. *Bandiya* and *Lava Dance* are performed only in Minicoy Island, as it is connected with them only. *Daffmuttu*, *Dikr*, *Ratheeb*, *Dolippattu* are connected with Sufi sects. *Dolippattu* is more popular among islanders. It is common to see *Dolippattu* during marriage ceremonies. Unlike other tribal community, nospecial folk dance can be seen here. Presently new media like drama and film are being initiated.

The tradition of literature can be traced back 7th Century, with the writings of Hazrath Ubaidullah's *Futhuhathul Jazair*. It discusses the status of Lakshadweep in his time. Traditional literary writings are mostly seen in Kiltan Island, the literary capital of Lakshadweep. So many Arabi-malayalm literary scripts are found by Kiltans. *Safeena* songs similar to *Mala* songs of Malabar are famous in island. Comparing oral tradition written tradition not popular among the islanders, it may be because of illiteracy of majority. Lakshadweep islands are rich with several oral folk songs and folk stories, most of them are connected with sea and sea journey. There are several myths and legends in this oral literature namely, *Omanapoo* and *Sanam Kadiya*. Both are ideal form of beauty among the islanders.

As every community, here also there are several festivals. Every one of those is connected with religion. So it is more or less similar to nearby state Kerala Muslims. Unlike Kerala, they are celebrated in different way, including traditional arts forms. *Bakrid*, *Eid-ul-Fithr* and *Milad-un-Nabi* are mostly celebrated. There are some celebrations in connection with the inauguration of new boats. Marriages are also celebrated in colorful way. The official celebrations of Lakshadweep administration are, Independence Day of August 15, Republic Day of January 26 and Lakshadweep Day of November 1.

Unlike other states of India, islanders are very skilled in fine arts also. The beauty of island also can be seen in their canvas. In order to coordinate all these aesthetic activities a Kala Academy is constituted in Kavaratti Island.

Education and Health sectors

In previous time only elite class is permitted to acquire knowledge, but nowadays all people are educationally sound, including females. Literacy rate of Lakshadweep is above ninety percent. Students were provided primary, secondary and higher secondary in every island, except Bitra, where only primary education is provided due to less population. For secondary or higher studies they have to set off other islands. There are five higher education institutions presently running under

Lakshadweep administration. Among which two of them are arts and science colleges and one training college, one paramedical college and last one is a poly technique college. One Arts and Science College and one training college named Government college of arts and science and College of Education respectively situated in Kadmat Island.

Health sector also comparatively better in related to other states of India. Every inhabitant is provided free medical facility in all islands. Community health centres, Hospitals and other medical clinics are made available for free of cost. However for major health issues they have to approach mainland hospitals.

Flora and Fauna

While asking about the flora and fauna, apart from an abundance of coconut palms, common trees include banyans, casuarinas, pandani (screw pines), breadfruits, tamarinds, and tropical almonds. There are some medicinal plants abundantly grown here. Among the most notable marine fauna are sharks, bonitos, tunas, snappers, and flying fish. Mantarays, octopuses, crabs, turtles, and assorted gastropods are plentiful. The islands also are home to an array of water birds, such as herons, teals, and gulls. While discussing about the flora and fauna, Corals and algae are can't be skip at all. The existence of island depends upon corals. The beauty of crystal lagoon is very much indebted to the coral forest.

Cuisines

Lakshadweep is famous for its cuisines as they have their own traditional typical food culture and unique cuisines. It may be due to their culinary connection with Kannur. Most of their items are made up from fish or coconuts. Thengachor, Ittubendath, Ada are the common food item in every island. Hiki Thava, Hakuru Folla, Kirufolla, Hunihakuru fukkuthu, Modelangam, Rihakuru Fathufoli, Riha Appam, Handumau Bonda, Bodudhiri Appam are famous in Minicoy island. Kilanchi, Dweep Halwa, Batlappam, Panchara Patta are famous in Androt Island. Yela Ada, Kaypola, Tharipola, Avalayssa, Mass Puttu, Chakka Kattiyittathu, etc. are common in Agatti Island. However, all these items will be in every island. Tuna Fish Pickle is very famous among islanders. Because of the rich tradition of various food items, it is said that islanders are in mainstream in the case of hospitality.

To conclude each island has its own socio-cultural, economic and literary traditions as every island is separated by deep sea. It reflects in every spears of their life. For example in Kalpeni and Androt islands, due to their nearness to Kerala they are more educated and placed in government jobs. However in Androt women get less freedom due to their extreme orthodox status as opposite to Kalpeni, where women more educated than men. In Kiltan and Chetlat islands people tends to literary careers, nowadays they are in the forefront of Lakshadweep literary activities. Amini and Androt more caste oriented. Minicoy has special culture in everything. Kavaratti and Agatti are stepping to modernity.

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