

**THE COUNCIL OF YAHWEH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A FUNCTIONAL
RECIPE FOR AFRICAN TRADITIONAL CUM POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

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ABSTRACT

Most scholars begin the study about divine council with the texts found at Ugarit or Mesopotamia, outline a structure based on those religious traditions, and then explore the material in the Hebrew Bible in order to determine how it fits with the other religions. The ideology of a council, which is greater than human, has being discovered to be dated to a very long time in the ancient world. The concept of a divine assembly (or council) is traceable to the understanding that in the ancient world, there were many gods that people believed in and worshipped at that time just as it is in the world today. These religions which range from people of various countries/sections etc have the belief in a divine gathering and this made them to have various names for the “Chairman” or “Head” of the gathering as the religion might suggest. This research presents a discourse on the Council of Yahweh which is headed by God (Yahweh). Therefore, the reference to divine council is not to be generalised as it is being used for other gathering of gods in some other religious sense of it but rather to the supreme God.

THE DIVINE ASSEMBLY FROM ANCIENT PERSPECTIVE/CULTURES

In ancient times, there were various names used to refer to the divine assembly and this was due to their various cultures but with the belief that there is a particular council bearing “Divine Assembly”. The names and the chief god heading the council are vividly listed according to the Wikipedia;¹

Archaic Sumerian: One of the first records of a divine council appears in the Lament for Ur, where the Pantheon of Annunaki is led by An with Ninhursang and Enlil also appearing as prominent members.

Akkadian: This divine council is led by Anu, Ninlil and Enlil

Old Babylonian: In the Old Babylonian pantheon, Samas (Shamash) and Adad chair the meetings of the divine council

Ancient Egypt: The leader of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon is considered to either be Thoth or Ra, who were known to hold meetings at Heliopolis(On).

¹www.Wikipedia.com/divine/council/ (Accessed on September 14, 2017).

Babylonian: Marduk appears in the Babylonian Enûma Eliš as presiding over a divine council, deciding fates and dispensing divine justice.

Canaanite: Texts from Ugarit give a detailed description of the structure of the divine council which El and Ba'al are presiding gods.

Hebrew: In the Hebrew Bible, there are multiple descriptions of Yahweh presiding over a great assembly of Heavenly Hosts. Some interpret these assemblies as examples of Divine Council.

Ancient Roman: Jupiter presides over the Roman pantheon who prescribes punishment on Lycaon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as punishing Argos and Thebes in *Thebaid* by Statius.

The list goes on and on. But a particular thing that is very cogent to the study is that all the names listed above present that there is definitely a chief god presiding over the council/gathering. Although, not Yahweh in those cases, but it helps to have a glimpse of how the real council of Yahweh looks like considering the Old Testament Passages making a scene of the council of Yahweh and which this paper would deal with in subsequent sections.

DIVINE COUNCIL: DEFINITION

The divine council can be viewed as the heavenly government which most likely resembled the earthly royal court since this would be the council that is most familiar to the authors of the texts. Divine council text is a scene in which the fate of the world or an individual is being debated and/or decided, which often involves courtroom imagery or uses conciliar language.² This narrow definition obviously means that there are numerous scenes involving divine beings that are excluded from the divine council tradition; while they may have some council connection.

Furthermore, another theological scholar, Fisher did well in his own capacity to define the divine council by stating that “the divine council is the Jewish theological idea that Yahweh holds court in heaven and consults other divine beings (best understood as spirits and angels).”³ The scope of approach given to the subject matter by Fisher is creditable except the

² Marylyn Ellen White, *The Council of Yahweh: Its Structure and Membership* (A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology of the University of St. Michael's College in Partial Fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology, 2012), 15.

fact that he never made mention of the fact that the divine council is not only a Jewish idea as it had been portrayed in the above section where other nations also have the concept of a council of the divine beings.

But despite his limitation to make note to the other idea of a divine council, it can be discovered from his write up that he wrote extensively on the issue of a Divine council making reference to the Bible; he said that “in several Biblical descriptions is the setting of a royal court. God has a throne room and His subjects approach Him. Sometimes these divine beings report their activities to God, sometimes God consults these beings, and sometimes God reprimands these beings; from this setting God rules the heavens and the Earth.”⁴

All divine Council is not headed by Yahweh, but for the sake of this paper and with the limitation to the Biblical view of the subject matter, a concise definition that the researcher of this term paper would go with after consulting various definitions by various scholars is that, the Divine Council is the gathering that is quite different from other religious concept of a gathering of various gods, where God (YAHWEH) is the head and he presides over the affairs of the gathering where some issues are concluded. The final say lies with the pronouncement of Yahweh.

THE STRUCTURE OF DIVINE COUNCIL

Definitional logic suggests that the divine council consists of gods; humans, by nature, cannot be members of the council. However, Jer. 23:16-22 challenges this assumption. In this passage, the term רָד appears twice in reference to the Council of Yahweh. On behalf of the Lord of Hosts, the prophet is speaking against “pseudo-prophets”, in this case those who are speaking of peace. In verse 18, he says to the people that the prophets have not stood in the council of Yahweh and therefore, have not heard his words. Then in verse 22, the text says that if they had been in God’s council, they would have been proclaiming his words. This juxtaposition between false and true prophecy revolves around the Council of Yahweh. It is

³Christopher Fisher, *The Divine Council* (www.councilofyahweh.realityisnotoptional.com Accessed on September 20, 2017).

⁴Ibid.

explicit that true prophets must have access to the Council of Yahweh in order to convey the words of the Lord (Jer 28:20; 15:19). Fretheim says:

The council demonstrates that God is not in heaven alone, but that a complex sociality is basic to the divine life. In other words, relationship is integral to the identity of God, independent of God's relationship to the world. In some sense the prophet was invited to participate in this relationship. The boundary between human and divine communities is not seen to be fixed or impenetrable. The human is caught up into the divine life and together they become involved in the becoming of the world. In so doing the prophet retains his individuality, and his humanness is not compromised. Yet, the prophet, in leaving the council table with a word to speak, becomes the embodiment of the word of God in the world. The prophet is the vehicle for divine immanence.⁵

Thus, the divine tiers or hierarchy goes thus:

1. The first tier belongs to the chief god, but since this paper is referring to the supreme God, Yahweh is the presiding officer in the council.
2. The second tier is called the councillors and the two divisions are the advisors and the officers. Satan, angels/messengers etc
3. The third tier is the agents and the two divisions on this tier are the commissioned officials. Isaiah, Joshua.

ELEMENTS OF THE COUNCIL OF YAHWEH

The first is that it must take place in Heave as reflected in the word "divine" within. It provides clarity of context for the narrative.

The second is that it must contain multiple divine beings. This criterion develops from the definition in that it recognizes that in order for it to be a "divine" council there must be deities present to engage in the council's activities.

Third, it must contain some form of dialogue among the members. Stemming from the previous criterion, this criterion recognizes the "council" part of the title and definition. In order to be a council proper, the members must engage in some discussion, otherwise they would merely be a royal retinue.

Fourth, it must contain some form of judgement on an individual or group. This criterion flows naturally from the rest. If the purpose of a council is to govern, then it must make

⁵ Terence E Fretheim, *Jeremiah*. Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary 15. Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2002), 237.

resolutions that are binding on its constituents. This criterion gives focus and meaning to the criterion of discussion. In fact, the two are so closely tied to each other that there are times when they may be woven into the same narrative elements.

Finally, Yahweh must be in charge of the council. This final criterion is specific to the Hebrew Bible and the current study. Since the objective of this study is to gain insight into Yahweh's council, and not just divine councils in general, this is a necessary criterion for the present work.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE COUNCIL

A "member" is defined as a being who is present and performs a role essential to the actual function of the council meeting itself (e.g., engages in discussion, provides advice, etc.). Presence alone is not enough to constitute membership, since a defendant could be present within the council in order to be judged, but would not be a member.

When the discussion is being stated following the addition of the name of the subject matter "Council of Yahweh" or "Divine Council", one would think that members that would be involved there would be mortal beings. But contrary to that idea, Mullen has mentioned, there are reasons to understand the prophets as members within the council.⁶ This view of Mullen which is strongly supported by this paper holds the position that the council does not only comprise divine beings but rather, there is a spot for human part in the council.

There are more important things to know about the membership of the divine council; these are the three criteria for membership in the divine council, Ellen White did a compiled list of these criteria which would be stated below;⁷

First, the character is named (not necessarily by personal name, but at least by title). This poses that there is no compulsion for the name to be mentioned as title is the most important to note. For example, there are some unnamed council members who appear in 1 Kings 22,

⁶ Theodore E. Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature..* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980.), 24.

⁷Marylyn Ellen White, 72-74

e.g., the reader is told “one said one thing, and another said another” (1 Kings 22:20b), but at no point does the reader learn the identity of these characters.

Second, the second criterion is that the character is a witness. This criterion seems obvious, but it is also problematic. One can certainly assume that if a being is a member of the council, that being needs to be present for some council meetings. However, the being does not need to be physically present, but it must be able to witness the council through a vision or dream sequence. There are some inconclusive deliberation on this criterion as some hold that event, those not aware of their act for the council are members of the council while some others hold that these people (e.g. prophets in 1 Kings 22) are not members of the council. But as this paper is concerned and to take a position, the latter would be supported where even a prophet should be aware that he is running a message for the council like the case of Isaiah, who is fully aware of his mission from the council.

The third and the last is that the character is involved in the council’s purpose. A member must have a particular role or purpose to play in a council gathering either little or much.

At this juncture, the members of the divine council would be considered quickly.

Yahweh (יהוה), the God that the Israelite knew from the ancient times is the one in reference here. He is the Head of the council with no one being able to dethrone Him. He chairs the council and he has the final say in the council. There is no case where another representative made a decision on his behalf and whatever verdict he passes in a given situation is the final.

Angels (המלאך), are also part of the members of the council, only that the number of angels that are members have not been emphatically stated in any of the text portraying the council of Yahweh. The fact that is only stated is that angels are also members of this council as they appear in all the texts.

The Satan (השטן), is also seen as a member. Fisher explained in assertion of this that an angel labelled “A Satan” (probably not to be misunderstood as the traditional character of Satan) explains to God where and what he was doing.⁸ Making it clear that Satan could be a particular designation or office in the divine council; this could also be traced to the use of article “the” placed before Satan. And the fact is that an individual has to occupy that spot.

⁸Christopher Fisher, *The Divine Council* (www.councilofyahweh.realityisnotoptional.com Accessed on September 20, 2017).

Thus, it should be noted that Satan is more of man's adversary than God's. These six characteristics are significant about this member of the council; they are:⁹

1. He appears within the Council
2. The narrative has a governmental/legal context
3. He makes an accusation based on justice
4. He is under God's authority
5. He is not independent
6. He is ultimately demonstrated to be incorrect

The Prophets (אֵיבִיב) are mostly the human representative in the council. They are there to carry out the verdict of the council and more or else act like the "Publicity Secretary" or "P.R.O" of the council to human being. They are the medium of relating the decision of the council to whosoever it may concern, specifically as the case might be. There are different prophets that represented humans in different texts of the council of Yahweh like Isaiah son of Amoz, Micaiah son of Imla, Daniel, etc.

Council of Yahweh Texts

Five criteria must be considered before determining a Council of Yahweh text. These criteria are stated below;

- 1) Multiple gods are present (in this case we can refer to them as the trinity)
- 2) The setting is Heaven
- 3) There is judgment (a Verdict is made)
- 4) There is some form of discussion (an interactive session) and
- 5) Yahweh is the leader of the council

After considering the five criteria for the selection of a Council of Yahweh text, the following text would be vividly discussed as they meet each criterion listed above.

1 Kings 22: This is a Council of Yahweh text having considered that it contains all the criteria for discovering a text about the council. As a matter of fact, Barker and Kohlenberger in support of the passage as a divine council scene commented that, "... Micaiah described a heavenly scene in which the Lord and his hosts discussed the best way to get Ahab to Ramoth

⁹E. C. Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1964), 284-285.

Gilead.”¹⁰ This presents that there was a “plot” and a topic of discussion which eventually led to the final conclusion of the council. Walsh stated in regards to this text in clarifying the statements of the 400 prophets involved in this passage and their role in the delivery of the council’s verdict, he stated that:

First, the prophets do not name the “lord” who will deliver the victory. Second, there is no direct object for the verb “deliver.” English requires a direct object here, and the NRSV’s “it” clearly points to Ramoth-Gilead. The Hebrew, however, does not specify what will be delivered. Third, the prophets do not identify “the king” who will gain the victory either. Ahab certainly understands it to be himself, but the prophets do not in fact say so.¹¹

He (Walsh) was only trying to justify the acts of the prophets but though he might be correct which this paper is not fully in support with, the truth remains that the council decided to use those prophets because they possibly had been involved in lying to the king before that particular day which made prophet Micaiah to be distinguished. Thus, the passage is seen to portray the scene of the council.

Job 1 and 2: The African Bible commentary is largely in support of the fact that this passage is a Council of Yahweh scene and this is obvious when it stated that, “the idea of God sitting on His throne with the angels presenting themselves before him is not unique to the book of Job¹². After stating this, reference was made to some other passages which happen to be among the passages that would be considered in this book as the Council of Yahweh texts. The focus here is the section where Satan is seen accusing Job but in this scene other members of the council were not seen to have contributed but the statement that “the sons of God came to present themselves before God” shows that other members of the council were also present in the scene and the discussion transpired as a topic of discussion in the council at that exact scene.

Barker and Kohlenberger further added in talking about the divine council that there are two scenes in heaven, each depicting the divine council. Each is followed by series of events that result from the encounter between God and Satan.¹³ Thus, at this juncture the researcher

¹⁰Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger (eds.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan, 1994), 535.

¹¹J.T Walsh, *1 Kings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 345.

¹²Tokunbo Adeyemo (ed.), *African Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 572.

¹³Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger (eds.), 746.

would like to infer as it had been said earlier on this point that “Satan” could be a designation or office and this could be possibly seen in his accusation of Job before God. Besides, an important point to note from the passage is that God was the one that started the discussion with Satan and not Satan raising the discussion.

Isaiah 6: In this Passage of the Scripture, the angels are referred to as “Seraph(im)” which means the burning ones. Thus, they are to serve in the presence of Yahweh. The book “Old Testament Survey” in regards to this chapter of Isaiah stated that, before that event, Isaiah saw only the glories and splendour of the royal court; but when Uzziah died, God was able to break through Isaiah with a vision of the heavenly court¹⁴. This poses that there is a court in Heaven and that was the scene when Isaiah was legally and officially inaugurated as a member of the council.

Daniel 7: This passage tends to be different from the other passages in identifying a Council of Yahweh text but it is evidently seen that it is one of the text about the Council of Yahweh. Only that the passage can be seen to be a completion of what is said in chapter two and to be a complementary link for the halves of the book of Daniel. In support of this point, Redditt and Collins claimed that Daniel 2-7 is a chiasm and that the purpose of chapter 7 is to balance out chapter 2.¹⁵ Thus, the major emphasis that depicts the council of Yahweh scene is the section that talks about the son of man appearing before the throne of God in chapter 13-14.

Zechariah 3: Zechariah 3 is clearly a Council of Yahweh passage as it contains all the criteria required to be included in the council corpus. It contains multiple deities; Yahweh is named and in charge; an exchange among the characters takes place; and judgment is placed on Joshua (or perhaps all of Israel).

Ellen puts it that, Yahweh plays the role of judge, השטן the role of prosecutor, יהוה מלאך the role of defence attorney, and Joshua is the defendant.¹⁶

¹⁴William S. Lasor, *et al*, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 379.

¹⁵John J. Collins, *Daniel, with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature: The Forms of the Old Testament Literature XX* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 30.

¹⁶Marylen Ellen White, 63.

TRADITIONAL AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

G.A Cole tried to define leadership and stated that leadership is often described as a dynamic process in a group whereby one individual influences others to contribute voluntarily to the achievement of a group task in a given situation.¹⁷ Thus, leadership encompass the ability to influence the attitude of others. There is a popular saying that if you think that you are leading, and no one is following, you are only taking a walk. Therefore, leadership deals with leadership and followership. In defining leadership, it has been discovered that there is no strict or universal definition for leadership as various individuals have their definitions for leadership. The Websters dictionary defines leadership as the ability to lead, to show the way, conduct, guide and direct the course of others by going before or along with them.¹⁸ Leadership can also be seen to motivate and provoke people to rationalise things for achievements of a common goal which the organization had set down.

A very critical point to note in the various definitions from different authors of leadership is that they fail to includethe ingredient of a leader taking care of the social relationship of the followers. This is stated because directly or indirectly, there would be dispute among followers and it is right and expected of the leader to interfere into the cause of the dispute. This is noted as this paper is centred on passing justice and ensuring proper leadership.

Thus, this paper has discovered this fault in the leadership style of the African leaders in which self centeredness has made them to neglect the responsibility they are to shoulder as leaders of the people. Perhaps, some are only partially doing what is expected of them while others are totally out of point in carrying out their proper responsibility.

PROCESS/MEANS TO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN AFRICA

In modern Africa, leaders are either appointed or elected; the former is common with the traditional leaders in most cases while the latter is a trait in political leadership since most African nations practise democracy as a system of government.

¹⁷G.A Cole, *Management: Theory and Practice 2nd Edition* (Eastleiggh, Hants: D.P Publication, 1987), 14.

¹⁸P.R Gove, (ed.), *Webster's third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield: G and C Merriam , 1976), 11.

Iwuchukwu, in her write up on Nigeria leaders, remarked that the process of getting into these positions are disheartening and calls for a review.¹⁹ This, thereby expresses that many people in their quest to become leaders in the nation would ‘soil’ their hands with corrupt acts just to get the benefits that are in leadership position. A position that ought to be a place of service to humanity has now been converted to a place of lordship over the people they ought to serve.

The mode of leadership in many African nations is very disheartening as it is nothing to write home about. Iwuchukwu in line with this presented that; Successive governments hardly feel the people’s pulse through their bureaucratic and dictatorial policies²⁰ but instead they only deal with their immediate surrounding and their own self satisfaction they mostly turn out to be like ethical egoist rather than being a utilitarian.

Right Traits in Leadership

This sub-section would point to things that are to be expected in leadership but which are lacking in the African political and traditional leadership style.

First, leadership should have empathy, since this is putting oneself in the place of another individual and to sense what the other person is feeling in a particular situation. A fellow that is empathetic enough would rarely do his fellow brother or sister any harm as he would have considered how the fellow would feel after causing the act. He would rather go through suffering for his people to enjoy than having pleasure at the expense of his followers’ happiness. This trait is not something that is common in African leadership both at the traditional level and even in political circle.

Furthermore, leadership should be seen as a responsible role. Responsible in the sense that, like a parent would take responsibility for his wards, leaders should be ready to satisfy and take responsibility for their followers. They should ensure that they get the very best of life that is achievable for their followers. The Biblical Hero, Moses is a very typical example of this, who was always ready to take responsibility for his followers’ goodness. He was ready

¹⁹Rebecca C. Iwuchukwu, “A Comparative Analysis of Gideon’s Leadership and Contemporary Nigerian Leaders in National Development” in S. O Abogunrin *et al* (eds.), *Biblical Studies and Leadership in Africa* (2009), 83.

²⁰Ibid, 83.

to go any length to convince God in not losing hope in the Israelites. Rather than African leaders having such trait, they seek only the good of their relatives leaving others to wallow in suffering on their own without a sense of responsibility or any reasonable attitude to alleviate the sorrow of the poor masses.

Also, leadership should be representative of the populace, whether in the case of the appointed (traditional) or the elected (political), they are to stand and speak on behalf of the people they are representing since they are to be the voice of the people. African leaders must always uphold justice. Unfortunately, instead of African leaders to be seen to always uphold justice, they themselves trample upon the very principle that holds society together.

In addition, leadership should carry every citizen along in the formulation and implementation of policies. M. Dokubo reacted to this by stating that, the economic policies of this government is not for the poor people.²¹ Instead, the rich are always considered with high esteem over the poor and to many who consider the poor in their budget and policies, it is not always followed but in most cases, such are used for personal gains rather than for the growth of the society

The list of things expected in proper leadership which are totally absent or very limited in the African political/traditional leadership style are endless; only these limited ones that have been discussed would be used in this paper work.

INFERENCES FROM THE “COUNCIL OF YAHWEH” AS A GUIDE FOR AFRICAN LEADERSHIP

This section of the paper is set to meet the need for applying some practices seen in the Council of Yahweh to the political and traditional leadership style in Africa for an all inclusive leadership participation.

Co-Reasoning: This is seen in the passages talking about the Council of Yahweh, where God is seen not making an immediate conclusion to the case that is being dealt with in each scene

²¹M. Dokubo, *Weekly Spectator* (April 29, 2007), 33.

but rather, there is room for other members of the council to contribute their own quota to the development of a particular case and this would then lead to the final decision of the head of the council who is Yahweh Himself. If traditional and political leaders can recognise this fact and deal with issues appropriately without jumping to a biased conclusion to a particular issue, then there would be proper flow of leadership activities in the society. People would be glad to bring their reports and misunderstanding to the leaders since they are rest assured that they would be glad at the end thereof.

Justice: This is a very cogent characteristic of the Council, where they would not declare the righteous guilty or the guilty righteous but rather they would make sure that all goes well with any classification the prosecuted falls. The leaders and rulers in the traditional settings and even in the political world should try as much as possible to make the right judgement in their dealings with the people. This is expedient for especially the traditional leaders, who people see as their judge but in most cases they would judge a case for their own personal and selfish gain and interest which is not always good as the people would not always trust the judgement of their leaders.

Purity of Heart: This could be seen in the Isaiah chapter 6 scene where Isaiah was purified in order to be among the council. This suggest that every member of the council are pure persons and that is why, for Isaiah to be a member like the others, he has to go through a process of cleansing. Thus, for leaders in politics and in the local traditional setting, they have to be a pure for them to be able to lead well. When the heart is pure, there would be no bias in making judgements for people as there is “No skeleton inside his cupboard”.

Condemnation: A very significant trait in the council is that they do not just condemn as they always have hope in man. They do not see man as being despicable and gullible that he cannot again be useful because of a particular shortcoming but rather they give second chances for men to prove and to certify the trust that God has in them; for example, Isaiah, Zechariah etc. As a matter of fact, one of the responsibilities of the members of the council is to plead for mercy.²² This is presenting to the traditional and political leaders that they are not just to think that nothing good can come out of a person that probably committed a mistake in

²²K.P. Kareem, *Course Note on Old Testament Theology* (2015), 21.

doing a particular act that goes against the societal norm but instead, a second chance should be given for individuals to be better.

CONCLUSION

The Divine council is very popular Jewish theology. God established a court in heaven. In this court, God entertained angels, passed judgment, issued decrees, and engaged in all types of Kingly functions. God is shown to have absolute power, but often entertains the ideas of His subjects. Subjects are allowed, at times, frank conversations with God. God hears them out and answers them. In all of this, God is portrayed as obliging yet sovereign.²³

Therefore, as a rule for leadership and ruler-ship in the traditional and political context especially here in Africa, leaders should take a glimpse at the mode of the operation in the council of leadership especially when it comes to making judgement and they should deduce a proper attitude from the exercise as it had been revealed in various biblical passages that had been considered in this work. By observing this and letting away the self-centredness in leadership that is rampant in the society today, the society and the world at large would be a better social-religious place for people to live in as there would be respect to all with no segregation at all.

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²³Christopher Fisher, *The Divine Council* www.councilofyahweh.realityisnotoptional.com

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