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The Tree, the Compass, and the Mirror: Toward a Sacred Philosophy of History in Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a sacred philosophy of history grounded in Sarawak's political memory, symbols, and contemplative traditions. In an age of post-truth, where knowledge is often reduced to emotion, spectacle, and data, there is an urgent need to recover meaning in how history is studied, remembered and shared. Guided by Tawhidic Epistemology, this paper reimagines history not merely as a record of events, but as a field of signs and responsibilities that connect human life to higher truths. Through the metaphors of the tree (rooted memory), the compass (sacred tradition), and the mirror (collective reflection), it draws on the works of Sarawakian writers such as Sanib Said, Suffian Mansor and Yusuf to show that a contemplative, spiritually grounded approach to history already exists within local traditions. The proposal resonates with the metaphysical insights of Muhammad Umar Faruque and responds to Jason Stanley's critique of political knowledge in the post-truth era. By calling for a reintegration of the humanities and social sciences with science and technology, the article suggests that Sarawak's unique historical consciousness may offer a path toward restoring meaning, dignity, and balance in education, leadership, and global civilizational discourse.

Keywords: Sacred philosophy of history; Tawhidic epistemology; Sarawak political memory; contemplative history; post-truth crisis

INTRODUCTION

The modern study of politics and history is marked by a profound absence: the Sacred has been forgotten. Through much contemporary scholarship, political life is reduced to material processes and history is treated as a chronological series of secular events. This fragmentation of knowledge reflects a deeper epistemological crisis. This crisis is not only of method but also of meaning. In the context of Sarawak where nature, memory, and community have long reflected an underlying spiritual order, this absence is especially striking. The traditions of the Sarawak Malays and the

indigenous peoples bear witness to a worldview in which political authority was not severed from metaphysical realities. Natural features such as mountains, rivers and forests were seen as living signs of a higher truth. To address this loss, there is a need for a renewed philosophy of history and politics that recognizes the presence of the Sacred as foundational, not peripheral. This essay offers an initial inquiry into this recovery, drawing on Tawhidic Epistemology as a compass, and using Sarawak's cultural and ecological memory as both guide and mirror.

One way to begin recovering the Sacred in knowledge is to look at the tree. In Sarawak, trees are not only part of the forest. They are part of memory. For generations, the rainforest has shaped how people live, think, and govern. Large trees such as the tabang and engkabang are respected not only for their size, but also for what they represent. They remind us of strength, patience, and deep roots. In many Sarawakian communities, trees mark sacred spaces. They are not to be cut without good reason. They stand as quiet witnesses to the passing of time.

Sanib Said (1993) has shown that traditional political life in Sarawak was closely tied to the land. Mountains, rivers, and forests were not just physical features. They were part of a larger moral world. Political leadership had to follow the flow of nature, not go against it. Even among the Malays, the idea of authority was linked to the land and to the guidance of *adat*. This shows that the natural environment was part of how people understood truth and order.

The tree then becomes a symbol. It shows that knowledge and leadership must grow from the soil of memory. A tree without roots cannot stand. In the same way, political ideas that forget the Sacred cannot last. They may look strong for a while, but they will fall when the winds change.

In Sarawak, the presence of a higher order can still be felt across its diverse communities. Although modern governance often speaks in technical language, the older memories of the land remember something deeper. Mountains, rivers, trees and rituals once reflected a unity that connected human life to a sacred reality. Among the Malays, the Dayaks, the Orang Ulu and others, there existed a quiet understanding that life was part of something larger than itself.

Tawhidic Epistemology offers a way to reconnect with this memory. It is not just an Islamic framework meant for one community. It is a way of seeing knowledge itself as sacred. It reminds us that truth is not owned by any one group. Truth reflects the unity of all existence under the One, a signature. As Osman Bakar (1998) explains, Tawhidic knowledge recognizes that reality is ordered and purposeful. Knowledge, politics, and history must reflect this higher pattern.

In the Sarawakian context, Tawhidic Epistemology can help connect the cosmologies of the Malays, Dayaks, and Orang Ulu into a shared remembrance. It allows nature, ritual, and political life to once again mirror a higher truth. It brings harmony between ethnic groups without needing domination. It gives meaning without forcing uniformity. In a world often pulled apart by differences, this compass quietly points toward unity.

A mirror does not lie. It shows what is in front of it, be it beautiful or broken. Sarawak today reflects both harmony and struggle. On the one hand, it remains one of the most peaceful and culturally rich regions in Southeast Asia. People of different faiths, languages and traditions live side by side with dignity. This reflects a deep moral and spiritual strength that goes beyond official policies. On the other hand, this surface harmony sometimes hides deeper fractures. Historical forgetting, economic inequality, and cultural displacement are also part of what the mirror reveals.

Sarawak's mirror is not only of facts and statistics. It is made of rituals, silences, and the way people carry themselves. As Sanib Said notes, Sarawak's political culture has always involved

negotiation, respect and restraint. These values are still visible in many communities today. Yet, modern political life often moves too quickly to reflect. It becomes noisy, competitive, and detached from older wisdom.

Looking into the mirror is to ask: who are we becoming? The answer is never fixed. A mirror can reflect pride, but also confusion. Tawhidic Epistemology helps us read the mirror not only with the mind, but with the heart. It asks us to recognize the signs of unity behind the surface. It reminds us that even broken mirrors can still reflect light.

The Sacred has not disappeared. It waits to be remembered. In Sarawak, the landscape itself still speaks. Trees, rivers, and mountains are not only natural features. They are signs. They point to a deeper order that once shaped political life and historical understanding. What has been lost is not the reality of the Sacred, but the language to speak of it.

This paper has offered three images to begin that recovery: the tree, the compass, and the mirror. Together, they invite a new way of thinking about political knowledge grounded in Tawhidic Epistemology. They help us see that history is not only a record of events. It is also a field of signs and meanings.

This is a call for scholars in Sarawak and beyond. We must strengthen the foundations of our social sciences and humanities. They are not separate from the development of our society. They shape how we see ourselves, how we govern, and how we relate to others. The push for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is important. But it must grow together with a strong and sacred understanding of human life. The two are not in competition. They are partners.

A more balanced, more truthful, and more compassionate political future will not come from technique alone. It will come from memory, wisdom, and presence. That is the real beginning of knowledge.

APPROACH AND METHOD

The Sacred and the Philosophy of History

In Sarawak today, history is often presented in a linear and pragmatic way. From school textbooks to public speeches, the narrative usually moves from struggle to independence, from tradition to development, and from conflict to unity. This kind of history supports national harmony and progress. It helps people understand where they come from and where they are going. However, something remains quiet underneath. The sacred and symbolic dimensions of time are rarely mentioned. They are not denied, but they are not seen clearly. They exist like an undercurrent, faintly felt beneath the surface of daily life.

In many traditional societies, time is not simply a straight line. It is a cycle. It follows the rhythm of nature, the seasons, and the soul. It returns to beginnings. Mircea Eliade (1954) describes this as sacred time, a kind of time that is different from the modern clock. Sacred time is re-entered through rituals, myths, and symbolic actions. It is not measured but remembered. Festivals, ceremonies, and prayers are ways for communities to return to the moment when meaning was first revealed. These acts do not just repeat events. They reconnect the present to a sacred origin.

In Sarawak, this sacred rhythm still exists. It can be seen in the cycle of *Gawai, Nukenen, Hari Raya, Good Friday,* and the *Khutbah Jumaat*. These are not just holidays or routines. They are acts of remembrance. They carry echoes of a time that is not bound by chronology. Yet, when history is

told without this layer of meaning, it becomes thin. It becomes a list of events without orientation. It may help us move forward, but not necessarily in the right direction.

The deeper rhythms become more visible in moments of collective reflection. One example is Sarawak Day, celebrated each year on July 22nd. While the official speeches speak of strong governance, unity, and history, the atmosphere of ten more than political. For many Sarawakians, Sarawak Day is a quiet reawakening. It recalls not just a legal change, but a sense of identity that is older than the state itself. The flag, the music, the public gatherings and the stories shared during this day carry emotional and spiritual weight. Even if it is not always spoken out loud, there is a feeling that Sarawak is not only a land but also trust. She is a gift to be remembered, protected and honored.

This same sacred rhythm appears when a leader passes away. The death of figures like Tok Nan, Tun Rahman, and Tun Taib was not only a political event. It was a moment of pause. People reflected on what kind of leadership had shaped the land. During these times, the language of the public changed. It became softer. Words such as "legacy", "trust", "hikmah", and "amanah" came forward. These are not technical terms. They come from a deeper register. In mourning, people did not just think of policies. They remembered values, presence, and character. These moments show that Sarawak still carries a memory of sacred time. It may be hidden beneath layers of modern governance, but it is still there.

The rituals that follow such moments such as flags flown at half-mast, public prayers, and televised tributes, are not only signs of respect. They are forms of symbolic governance. They remind the people that leadership is not only about power but is also about meaning. Death in this sense becomes a kind of mirror. It reflects what was once linved. It invites society to reflect on what it wishes to carry forward.

Sacred time also lives in quiet places. In Sarawak's kampungs, memory still breathes through simple things. In Kampung Pinang Jawa, in Satok along Jalan Haji Kassan, and in the houses of Kampung No. 5, there are layers of remembrance not written in books. They are carried by the sound of chickens in the mornings, in the scent of food being prepared, and in the way, neighbors greet each other without needing to speak much. In Kampung Barieng Sibu, one can still hear the calls of cockerel at dawn, and the busy chirps of hen and her chicks in the morning and the afternoon. The world 'wakes' slowly. The sense of time is not rushed but felt.

As a child, moments such Ramadan nights in Kampung Pinang Jawa were filled with life. There were rows of people performing *tarawih*, the sound of laughter, the joy of playing with firecrackers and the scent of *sotong tutok* sold near Masjid at-Taqwa Kampung Gita. These were not just childhood memories. They were moments of sacred rhythm. They formed a sense of being part of something larger.

Such memories are not only personal. They form part of the political and historical consciousness of a place. They shape how people view authority, trust, and belonging. These rhythms of life reflect a structure of time that is not only linear but symbolic. They carry echoes of return, cycles and meaning that repeat with new depth.

Tawhidic Epistemology helps bring these memories into the field of knowledge. It teaches that signs of the Real are not limited to sacred texts alone. They can be found in the order of creation, in the flow of time, and in the patterns of life. Sacred time, through this lens, becomes not something separate from history, but its hidden heart. To study history without remembering is to forget what makes it human.

Contemplative History as a Method

In Sarawak, the act of remembering is more than recalling events. It is a contemplative engagement in the past. This approach resonates with Khairudin Aljunied's concept of contemplative history, which emphasizes reflection, silence, and spiritual meaning in historiography. Rather than merely cataloging facts, this method seeks to understand the deeper significance of historical narratives and their impact on identity and belonging. (Aljunied, 2025)

Sarawakian memory is not confined to official records but is lived and experienced in daily life. Described earlier were the rhythms of village life, the communal gatherings during Ramadan in the stories passed down through generations embody a historiography that is present and alive. This resonates with the observations of Sanib Said (1993), who emphasized that Sarawakian political identity is rooted not only in modern institutions but also in the lived experiences and oral traditions of the people. History in this setting is not only taught. It is also performed and flows through rituals customs, and the moral structure of daily interactions.

This approach aligns with the Tawhidic Epistemology, which integrates knowledge with spiritual understanding. By acknowledging the sacred in historical narratives, we move towards a more holistic understanding of our past, one that encompasses both the material and the spiritual dimensions of human experience. (Bakar, 1998)

Incorporating contemplative history into our academic discourse encourages scholars to engage with history not just intellectually but also emotionally and spiritually. It invites a form of scholarship that is empathetic, reflective, and deeply connected to the lived experiences of communities it seeks to understand.

FINDINGS

Sarawak Malay and the Sacred

The works of Sarawak Malay historians such as Sanib Said, Suffian Mansor, and Adibah Yusuf et al reveal a sensitivity to the moral and symbolic dimensions of political life. Although they do not always speak in explicitly metaphysical terms, their writing reflects a closeness to the inner values of Sarawakian society. Rather than focusing only on the structures of state power, they give space to community memory, oral traditions and local symbols that carry cultural and spiritual weight. Their research highlights the importance of trust, moral leadership, and amanah as foundations of political life. These are not merely ethical preferences. They are reflections of an older worldview in which politics was not separated from the Sacred.

What makes Suffian Mansor's contribution important is his commitment to grounding Sarawak's political history within a larger framework of Malay and Islamic civilization. He does not reduce history to dates and events. Rather, he frames Sarawak Malay civilization as a continuity of meaning that is rooted in memory, values, and sacred structures. Suffian writes,

> *"Peradaban Melayu Sarawak seiring dengan perkembangan peradaban Melayu di alam Nusantara yang menerima pengaruh daripada Kerajaan Majapathit, Brunei dan peradaban Islam*" (Mansor & Awang Pawi, 2019)

This framing moves beyond politics as power. It sees history as a movement of civilization, where Islamic teachings, regional unity, and local leadership form the spiritual soul of society. He adds:

> *"Peradaban itu juga harus mencakupi soal tingkah laku dan sikap… yang mempunyai kebudayaan yang luhur bagi seluruh masyarakat"*

This echoes Tawhidic Epistemology, where knowledge must not only inform but refine the soul. By drawing from both Islamic sources and classical Malay categories, Suffian offers a civilizational reading of Sarawak that is moral and metaphysical at once. His description of Santubong as a center of trade, worship, and interaction between Malays and Dayaks also hints at the cosmological dimension of place:

> *"Penempatan orang Melayu di Santubong… berkembang sebagai pusat perdagangan… hubungan dua hala antara orang Melayu dan Dayak… perdagangan ini dikembangkan lagi dengan adanya pedagang China"*

This description is not just economic. It is symbolic of order, harmony and sacred rhythm that marks a landscape where human activity reflects divine harmony.

Even in his assessment of the Brooke period, Suffian does not fall into bitterness or secular critique alone. He recognizes how the loss of traditional Malay leadership, the weakening of Islamic institutions, and the erosion of nakhoda culture were not just political setbacks. They were civilizational wounds: *"Peradaban Melayu Sarawak pada zaman British umpama perahu yang hampir karam"*. This sentence, poetic and tragic, reveals his deeper vision: that the loss of adab, memory, and sacred responsibility is the true crisis.

The work of Adibah Yusuf and her colleagues reflects a deep concern for what is being lost in the rush of modern change. Her 2018 study on Sarawak Malay traditional houses is not only about architecture. It is about memory and identity. She writes that many younger generations "do not know to identify the Malay identity [or] the actual design of traditional wooden houses." (Yusuf, Abd Rahman, & Mohammed, 2018).

Traditional houses in Sarawak are more than just places to live. They carry values and reflect the rhythm of life and the moral structure of the community. As Adibah notes, only a few houses remain in their original form. Most have been changed or modernized. She writes that the houses "have been exaggerated and made modifications without retaining the main characteristics." This quiet erosion of form is also a loss of meaning.

The parts of the house, be them the roof, the stairs, the walls, or the windows, all had their own place and purpose. They were designed not only for comfort, but also for dignity. The stairs were not only for climbing. The marked an entrance. The windows were not only for light. They opened to the world outside. These elements reflect how Sarawak Malays understood space, family and the sacred. The house, in this way, becomes a mirror. It shows how a community sees itself.

This is where Yusuf et. al's work meets contemplative history. They do not speak of philosophy directly. But her attention to space, memory and design shows that the traditional house is also a form of history. It carries stories, reflects values, and reminds us of a time when the Sacred

was not something separate from life but part of the everyday. When houses lose their form, it is not only design that disappears. A way of knowing begins to fade.

When read through the lens of Tawhidic Epistemology, Yusuf et. al's findings become even more meaningful. The house becomes a sign. Its balance, order, and relationship with nature. All of these points to a deeper truth. The house teaches *adab*, balance and reminds us that knowledge is not just in books. Knowledge lives in wood, space, and silence.

Sacred History as Memory

The greatest loss in modern approaches to history is the loss of meaning. When meaning disappears, purpose begins to fade. When purpose weakens, the sense of belonging is lost. This is not the same as wandering in an open landscape. It is wandering without direction, without a compass and a map. The result is a kind of fragmentation. The mind may still gather facts, and the hand may still build institutions. But the heart becomes quiet, unsure of what it truly serves.

Modern historical methods often claim to be neutral and objective. They focus on chronology, causality, and documentation. They treat history as a field of measurable data. In this mode, there is little room for reflection or reverence. What matters is what can be verified. The question of what should be remembered, and why, is rarely asked.

As E.H Carr (1961), who had critically examined the idea of objective history and questions the neutrality of historians, explains: *"The facts speak only when the historian calls on them… It is the historian who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."* He also writes: "*The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy."*

Carr argues that historical writing always involves choice, perspective and value. This is what modern, perhaps scientistic, historians often hide behind the language of objectivity. In the name of objectivity, history becomes disconnected from the ethical and spiritual dimension of human life.

DISCUSSION

Toward a Sacred Philosophy of History in Sarawak

This is a proposal to remember. What Sarawak needs is not simply more historical data, although the rigorous and continuous efforts to it must continue. It needs a deeper remembrance. A sacred philosophy of history in Sarawak is not a return to the past. It is a return to meaning. It is a way of reading time that respects both the seen and the unseen. It asks not only what happened, but what it meant in the order of Truth and human responsibility.

In the context of history of ideas and political life, this approach brings the political, the cultural, and the spiritual into one line of remembrance. It restores dignity to names, places, and symbols and listens to silences, respects both the wisdom of elders and the hopes of the young. By then we could see that memory is not just personal. The memory is also political and shapes how we govern, educate, and build the future.

In relation to Tawhidic Epistemology, this sacred philosophy of history becomes a natural extension. It adds to its corpus a method of remembering that integrates both the historical and the metaphysical. It brings together the outer and the inner. The world of action and the world of meaning converge, and respect that reality is not just what is recorded. It is also what is revealed.

The first step is to recognize that the social sciences and humanities are not secondary fields. They are not 'soft'. They are essential. Just as science and technology build the material strength of a nation, the humanities and social sciences build its soul. Without meaning, even the most advanced machines will serve confusion. Without memory, even the most efficient systems will forget why they exist.

Therefore, the first task is to affirm the dignity and necessity of the humanities and social sciences within national and state-level education. Universities must be encouraged to treat these fields not as technical disciplines, but as guardians of meanings, ethics, and civilizational continuity.

The second step is to train a new generation of students who could one day be scholars who can work with both memory and metaphysics. This does not mean rejecting modern tools. It means using them with purpose. Historical methods can still be critical and rigorous, but it must also be contemplative. Political theory can still be sharp, but it must also be anchored in virtue. Scholars must be given the space to explore meaning without fear of being called 'unscientific.'

The third step is to localize memory. This means working directly with Sarawak's own history, geography, rituals, and symbols. Sacred memory does not always arrive through abstract theory. It often speaks through local theories, placenames, food, architecture, and speech. Research should include oral history projects, kampung mapping, ritual documentation, and symbolic interpretation. This work can be done with the community and not with them. The challenge is exactly how are we are not to overconcentrate ourselves of gathering data and improving techniques, while 'forgetting' the very memory is supposed to serve – the remembrance.

The fourth step is integration. STEM and the humanities must not compete. They must speak to one another. For example, an engineering student learning about sustainable energy in Sarawak can also learn the sacred cosmology of rivers, forests, and balance. A medical student can learn the ethical history of healing in the local culture. These connections do not weaken science. They strengthen it and return it to wisdom.

The fifth step is institutional support. Ministries, state governments, think-tanks, religious institutions and universities must begin to support the philosophy of history as a national concern. Sacred memory is not a luxury. It is a part of resilience and shapes the way a society responds to crisis, chooses its leaders, and honours its dead. When these institutions support research, curriculum design and public reflection around the Sacred, they anchor the future in something real.

The final step is public imagination. Ideas must not stay in papers and lectures. They must reach the people. Festivals, documentaries, community storytelling nights, heritage trails, and public rituals can all carry sacred memories. The past is not only in books. It lives in the body of the people.

Restoring the Sacred Integrity in the Age of Post-truth

One of the deepest wounds of our time is the collapse of truth into emotion, spectacle and manipulation. Jason Stanley, in *How Propaganda Works* (2015), explains how public reasoning is no longer guided by clarity or honesty. Political language now appeals to reaction, not reflection. When words are used to provoke emotion rather than convey meaning, truth becomes a tool for power. Over time, people grow tired. Public trust fades. The space for careful thought disappears.

The crisis goes beyond politics. The world has lost something greater. That is the steady thread that once connected every person to the Source. Every civilization, whether tribal or royal, nomadic or settled, held on to truths that were not horizontally created and prejudiced by men. These truths gave structure to time, purpose to suffering, and dignity to life. They were not just ideas. They were reminders. They were sacred. That thread has now loosened. In its place we find images, noise, and manipulation.

The proposal for a sacred philosophy of history in Sarawak is a small step toward repair. It reminds us that history is not only about facts. It is about remembering what matters. This approach, grounded in Tawhidic Epistemology, helps return the act of knowing to its rightful place. History is no longer just a story of power or progress. It becomes a path back to the Real. In *Sculpting the Self*, Faruque (2022) offers a deeper way to understand the truth. He writes, "Truth, in its highest sense, is not merely a correspondence between statements and reality, but the unveiling of the Real itself — an event that must be prepared for by the soul".

Faruque's insight shows that truth is not just a conclusion. It is a state of the heart. This view changes how we relate to history. We are not just observers of the past. We are responsible for how we remember it. We are shaped by what we chose to honour.

Sarawak can be a place where this remembering begins again. The effort to reflect, to teach with care, to write with presence. All these are ways of healing what the post-truth age has broken. Truth does not need to be loud to be real. It needs to be lived.

CONCLUSION: RETURNING TO THE TREE, THE COMPASS, AND THE MIRROR

Among the three metaphors explored in this journey, the mirror remains the most delicate and demanding. A mirror does not lead the way. It does not grow like a tree. It does not point like a compass. Instead, it reflects. It waits and shows us what we have become and sometimes, what we have forgotten. To face a mirror honestly is never easy.

Sarawak in many ways is this mirror. It reflects more than political structures. It reflects presence. Its forests, rivers, kampungs, and languages all hold memories. In moments of quiet, they speak. In seasons of change, they still remember. But like any mirror, what we see depends on how we stand before it. Do we come with pride, or humility? With distraction, or with attention?

The mirror is also like the moon. The moon does not shine on its own. It reflects the light of the sun. Even when the clouds hide it, it is still there. Even when it shrinks to a sliver, it keeps its rhythm. The Sacred works in the same way. It may be hidden but never absent. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is often described in poetry as the full moon. The companions welcomed him to Medina with the words "*Tala'a al-Badru 'Alayna*," meaning the full moon has

risen upon us. That was not just a poetic moment. It was a moment of recognition. The light had returned. The night had meaning again.

Other traditions also speak of reflection. Some describe the soul as a still lake. Others peak of polished hearts. These symbols point to the same truth. What is clear within can reflect what is above. The work of sacred remembrance begins by looking inward. The mirror of the heart must be cleaned before it can reflect anything true.

A sacred philosophy of history does not begin with answers. It begins with attention. It pays respect to the silence. It treats memory as a trust. The goal is not to glorify the past, but to return to it with care. To ask what it meant. To ask who we were, and who we must become.

For a young Sarawakian, this kind of remembering should bring connection first. Connection to the land, the elders, the stories, and the soul. Then hope, which is the sense that we are not lost that we come from a line of meaning. Then presence, which is the ability to stand still without running from time. And finally, responsibility. A quiet duty that comes not from pressure, but from recognition. We are here because others came before us. We are part of something that stretches beyond what we see.

The scholar of the future must hold this awareness gently. They must remember where they came from, and where they are going. They may speak many languages and use many methods. But in their heart, they must not forget the original trust. The moment before time when all souls were asked, "Am I not your Lord?" and they answered, "Yes" (Qur'an 7:172). That answer is not just a matter of faith. It is part of the human story. It is the beginning of sacred history.

To be fully human is not a theory. It is a path lived through remembrance, care, and presence. The tree reminds us to root ourselves, the compass to talk with direction, and the mirror to see clearly. And all three remind us to return.

Sarawak may not always speak loudly. But its memory is deep. Its rhythm is slow. Its wisdom is still alive. Here, in the quiet land between forest and sea, a new beginning can take shape. Not by creating something entirely new. But by remembering what has always been there.

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