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Rural transformations

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As Malaysia has rapidly developed and urbanised over the past fifty years, so has rural Malaysia seen rapid transformations. These changes involve all aspects of rural Malaysia – economic, political, social and others. This chapter provides an overview of these rural transformations, particularly with respect to the changing topics of rural-based research conducted by social scientists.

In the mid-twentieth century, a great deal of attention was given to rural development, in keeping with a broader context of a development paradigm in Malaysia and elsewhere in the post-colonial, developing and so-called 'third' world. Rural development and transformation were primarily understood in terms of agricultural development (Sivalingam 1993). More recently, rural-based research has moved away from development and toward paradigms of rural transformation and agrarian transition. Again, these shifts parallel and fall within broader changes in and beyond Malaysia.

The first section of this chapter addresses the need to broaden considerations of rural Malaysia beyond those concerned with Malay society alone. The Malay *kampung* (village) has provided the archetype for rurality in Malaysia for a century or more of social science scholarship. Yet, rural society encompasses a broad range of Malays, non-Malays and increasingly non-Malaysians. A view of rural transformations needs to bring these communities into the account.

Subsequent sections turn to considerations of the economic, social and political transformations taking place in rural Malaysia. While a reasonable body of research exists, particularly from decades around the mid-twentieth century, attention to rural society in Malaysia has to some extent dwindled. Although a few excellent studies provided us with insights into contemporary rural Malaysia, there are significant gaps in our knowledge, particularly with respect to local, rural social change and the dynamics of local, rural politics.

Rural society: Malay and non-Malay

As Zawawi Ibrahim has argued, research on rural society in Malaysia has been dominated by attention to rural Malay society (Zawawi 1996). Malay *kampung* are the archetype of traditional rurality in Malaysia (Thompson 2007). Traditional and transitional Malay rural society

has been examined from a variety of political, economic and sociological perspectives in twentieth-century social science literature. Non-Malay rural dwellers in Malaysia, with some exception for those in Sarawak and Sabah, have often been marginal to and represented in the social science literature and in popular imagination through relatively narrow, one-dimensional perspectives. As Zawawi (1996) argues, until recently, research on Orang Asli (the most common term for indigenous non-Malays on the Peninsula) has been cast in terms of primitive culture, analysed in terms of 'tribal' rather than 'agrarian' issues, thus excluding them from significant theorisation of rural, agrarian transformations. Similarly, other non-Malays have been at the periphery of studies of agrarian transformations in Malaysia, including Indians and Chinese as well as newer immigrants from Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and elsewhere.

In many places, Orang Asli on the Peninsula and various groups in Sarawak and Sabah have been subject to resettlement schemes, both to encourage settlement of formerly mobile, swidden-farming populations as well as to move them off land claimed for other purposes (Rusaslina 2013: 279–81; Zawawi 1996: 187–96). The most high profile of the latter cases include resettlement of Iban villages to make way for the controversial Bakun Dam in Sarawak and the displacement of Orang Asli villages for construction of the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Bunnell and Nah 2004). Eighty-five percent of Orang Asli live in rural areas, and more than other groups, they have been left behind in Malaysia's economic development projects (Rusaslina 2013: 267). Orang Asli have been treated as much as problems of administration and governance as they have as a set of citizens on whose behalf the government should function (Rusaslina 2013: 278–81). In the 1950s and 1960s, managing Orang Asli populations was treated as a security concern, as they were considered possible recruits for the Malayan Communist Party. From the 1970s onward, the main thrust of government and non-governmental interventions has been toward assimilation and Islamisation (ibid.; Nobuta 2009).

Beyond Orang Asli on the Peninsula and other indigenous groups in Sarawak and Sabah, even less attention has been given to rural Indians, Chinese and others. Malaysia's population of Indian origin traces largely to migrants who came under the aegis of British colonial authorities, as plantation workers and colonial civil servants, creating a split between working-class 'estate' (plantation) Indians and urban-based professionals, which continues to resonate into the present. Research on Indian communities in Malaysia, which is less common than scholarship on the Malay or Chinese populations, has largely been urban-based (e.g. Willford 2006; Baxstrom 2008).

Chinese are also largely absent from rural-based scholarship. In part, this bias reflects the extensive resettlement of Chinese out of rural areas and into towns during the 1950s and 1960s in an effort to cut off Chinese support to the Malayan Communist Party operating in the jungles and countryside. While Chinese are important traders and brokers of agricultural commodities, they are largely otherwise absent from the agrarian economy and rural society outside of small market towns. De Koninck and Ahmat (2012: 58) note, though, that with the scaling up and gradual consolidation of agriculture in areas such as the Kedah rice belt, some Chinese entrepreneurs have become more directly involved in agriculture as relatively large-scale farm operators.

Perhaps the most neglected population, at least with respect to research on rural social change, has been newer immigrants from Indonesia, southern Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and elsewhere. De Koninck and Ahmat (2012: 65–66) argue that these groups constitute the new rural poor in Malaysia, doing the labour and underwriting the profits of Malay family farms, whose owners and family members are engaged in more lucrative,

urban-based employment elsewhere. Their presence is essential, yet economically and socially underappreciated with respect to both large- and small-scale rural projects.

Despite the increasing sophistication of social science analysis and research, by local and foreign researchers alike, greater integration of analysis of rural transformations across non-Malay and Malay communities would be desirable. The following sections of this chapter turn to a review of the work that has been done in terms of economy, society and politics in rural Malaysia in the more than five decades since the country's independence from British colonialism. While most of the work has focused on the transformation of rural Malay society, as argued here, it is important to be aware that non-Malays have been subject to and involved in many of the same forces and changes (see De Koninck *et al.* 2011; Ishikawa 2010; Lunkapis 2013; Zawawi 2001, 2008; Zawawi and NoorShah 2012).

Economics: agrarian transition

Into the mid-twentieth century, analysis of rural economics tended to focus on village-level subsistence agriculture and smallholder cash-cropping. Anthropologists and sociologists produced numerous monographs on kinship-oriented agrarian production (e.g. Bailey 1983; Banks 1983; Carsten 1997; Firth 1946; Firth 1966; Kuchiba *et al.* 1979; Peletz 1988; Scott 1985; Tsubouchi 2001), small-scale rural industries (Maznah 1996), rural development (Wilder 1982; Wilson 1967) and agrarian transitions to capitalism (De Koninck 1992; Guinness 1992; Halim 1992; Jomo 1986; Rutten 2003; Wan 1988; Wong 1987; Zawawi 1998). Scholarly interest in detailed attention to local, rural economic relations of production and consumption seems to have greatly declined if not altogether disappeared, accompanying a general decline of the peasantry in Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Elson 1997).

Up to the mid-twentieth century, rural Malaysia was predominantly marked by peasant economies of agricultural smallholders, most of whom were Malay. The high-colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw the rise of large-scale plantation or 'estate' agriculture (Overton 1994). Such estate agriculture, cultivating cash crops, especially palm oil and rubber, remains a significant part of the rural landscape. Palm oil in particular is cultivated on a vast scale. These estates were successfully nationalised in the process of decolonisation. Rather than nationalising these ventures through force or political seizure, in the late 1970s and 1980s Malaysian government-backed concerns bought out the British companies. In at least one case, this was done through a hostile, though market-authorised take-over. By the early 2000s, the major British concerns of Guthrie, Sime Darby and Golden Hope had been consolidated under a single, Malaysian-owned conglomerate.

Peasant agriculture, oriented toward subsistence and based primarily on rice cultivation, dramatically declined if not altogether disappeared over the course of the late twentieth century. From the early 1970s onward, under the New Economic Policy (NEP), sustained efforts were made to reduce poverty, which has been seen as mainly a rural phenomenon in Malaysia (Ragayah 2013: 35). Across Malaysia, absolute poverty has fallen dramatically, from 52.4 percent in 1970 to 3.8 percent in 2009 (*ibid.*: 33–35). In a recent review, Ragayah (2013) argues that while the focus of government efforts was on *in situ* rural development, urban employment was more effective in reducing rural poverty than were government rural development programmes. While the latter did have a positive impact in reducing absolute poverty in rural areas, they frequently if inadvertently exacerbated relative poverty and income inequality (*ibid.*: 56).

Government-led rural development programmes, nevertheless, have had a sustained and transformative effect on rural modes of production. Major agrarian land development took place under the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) and significant land consolidation under the Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (FELCRA) (*ibid.*: 40–42). FELDA, in particular, was responsible for opening up land and resettling landless Malay villagers. At the beginning of NEP, large estates were turning to more lucrative palm oil and rubber was increasingly the domain of smallholders. Yet another government initiative, the Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority (RISDA), established in 1972, was initiated to sustain and protect the interests of smallholders through consolidation and regulation of rubber production and markets (Ragayah 2013: 43). A resettlement scheme, RPS (Rancangan Pengumpulan Semula), somewhat parallel to FELDA, has targeted Orang Asli groups. But in contrast to FELDA, it has led largely to dispossession and displacement rather than expansion of Orang Asli landholdings (Zawawi 1996). Overall, under the NEP, government programmes saw a relative neglect of rural 'estate' Indians and Orang Asli as well as rural Malays in areas that did not support the central Barisan Nasional government (Ragayah 2013: 56–57).

The government has also intervened extensively in the rice sector, with a substantial paddy support policy (Ragayah 2013: 47–51). The policy led to a skewed distribution, such that farmers sold rice at a subsidised price and bought it back from the market for their own consumption, a situation that indicated the thorough commodification of peasant-farmers' most basic staple. In Ragayah's assessment (*ibid.*: 49–51), rice policy led to an economic subsidy trap, benefited wealthy farmers more than poor farmers, and while reducing absolute poverty, at the same time increased income inequality. Overall the rice policy was less effective in redistribution favouring the poor than was FELDA, which fostered greater land ownership among landless Malay farmers. But by the 1990s, FELDA had ceased opening new smallholder settlements and evolved into a diversified business conglomerate (*ibid.*: 46).

Although rural development programmes increased income inequality, this was at least partially mitigated by remittances from urban employed migrants. Importantly, as Ragayah (2013: 54) points out, incomes among the urban working poor and lowest-level civil servants grew more rapidly than did incomes of the urban upper middle class; and many of those in the lower socio-economic strata of the urban economy were rural-to-urban migrants who at the same time were supporting rural kin with remittances. Ragayah and others (e.g. Ariffin 1994; De Koninck and Ahmat 2012; Thompson 2004, 2007) point to the significance of near-universal primary and secondary education and the absorption of educated rural poor, especially women, into urban, industrial employment.

De Koninck and Ahmat's 2009 restudy of villages originally surveyed in 1972 in the Kedah rice belt is particularly instructive in demonstrating the more general agrarian transformations taking place in Malaysia through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (De Koninck and Ahmat 2012). From the 1970s to the 1980s, rice farming became increasingly mechanised, and labour-intensive farming methods largely disappeared in the Kedah rice belt (*ibid.*: 57–58). The same period saw nearly universal improvement in access to education by poor and rich rural families alike, coupled with a decline in household size and in the frequency of extended families living under one roof from 1986 to 2009 (*ibid.*: 58–60). These trends mirror the 'urbanisation' of *kampung* society observed by Thompson in a mixed rubber-tapping and paddy-planting village away from the Kedah Plain (Thompson 2004, 2007).

In the 1970s and 1980s, land consolidation in the Kedah Plain took place operationally but not in terms of land ownership. In other words, smallholders maintained ownership of small

parcels of land, but increasingly leased these to larger operators rather than farming the land themselves (De Koninck and Ahmar 2012: 60). Some moderate consolidation of ownership appeared in evidence in the 1990s and 2000s (*ibid.*). It remains an open question whether this trend will accelerate as younger generations with weaker agrarian roots take possession from older generations.

Rice agriculture has expanded – in the sense that yields and the total amount of rice produced have increased substantially since the Green Revolution of the 1970s – but farming as an economic activity has been dramatically marginalised, particularly for smallholders and labourers. By the 2000s, De Koninck and Ahmar (2012: 62) observe that rice cultivation has become thoroughly industrialised and highly mechanised and agricultural labour has declined sharply. Furthermore, the involvement of women in agriculture has become insignificant and exchange of labour between farming households has disappeared altogether. The agricultural labour that remains is done almost entirely by men who operate the farming machinery.

Among villagers, agricultural labour has been overwhelmingly displaced by non-agricultural labour (*ibid.*: 62–65; Zahid 2003). Moreover, in the villages these authors studied, there is extensive use of foreign labour (Thai, Burmese and Indonesian) in the agricultural sector and local owners do little manual labour (De Koninck and Ahmar 2012: 65–66). The rural poor, especially the poorest of the poor, are for the most part no longer rural Malays, but rather, immigrant and often undocumented foreign workers from Southern Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines, in the case of Sabah. An important and still under-examined issue is how well these immigrants will be integrated into Malaysian and Malay society, particularly those from Indonesia, in comparison to the long history of such migrations (see Tugby 1977).

Recent research has given some attention to rural economic diversification, especially into non-agricultural industries. With the possible or partial exception of some remote areas, particularly in East Malaysia, subsistence economies have largely disappeared in Malaysia. In their place, agricultural cash cropping and non-agricultural economic pursuits have led to a diversified economy in rural areas, which, like other aspects of rural life, has only been studied in a piecemeal fashion in recent scholarship. One area of the diversified economy that has received some attention in research has been the growth of a rural tourist economy, and in particular, the rapid proliferation of ‘homestays’ in rural areas (Liu 2006; Lo *et al.* n.d.; Pusiran and Xiao 2013). The impact of these activities in terms of rural economies and rural society remains to be seen.

Society: rural urbanisation

Along with economic transformation and diversification, rural Malaysia has seen dramatic social change over the past fifty years or more. Earlier research on rural society in Malaysia focused largely on *kampung* society (Firth 1946; Firth 1966; Kuchiba *et al.* 1979; Swift 1965; Wilson 1967) and on kinship in particular (e.g. Banks 1983; Carsten 1997; Peletz 1988). In the 1960s, Provencher (1971) drew sharp distinctions between Malay styles of social interaction in rural and urban settings. The major trend of the past fifty years has been the overwhelming influences of rural to urban migration, both in Peninsular and East Malaysia (Cramb 2012; Dalhan 1989; Gomes 2004; Thompson 2003, 2007; Wilder 1989).

With few exceptions (more so in Sarawak and Sabah than in Peninsular Malaysia), once ‘remote’ villages and city centres are in close, regular and frequent contact, through

telecommunications and mobility of people and commodities. On the Peninsula, it would be difficult to find any place of human habitation that is not within a day’s travel or less from Kuala Lumpur and other major urban centres. The upshot is that as much as any other country in Asia (excepting small city-states such as Singapore), Malaysia has been subject to what Gavin Jones describes as ‘thoroughgoing urbanization’ (Jones 1997).

Not only has this shifted the orientation of Malay society from rural *kampung* to urban society for the migrants, rural *kampung* have transformed in the process. Urban transformation within and on the periphery of cities, or peri-urban outskirts, has been widely noted (e.g. Brookfield *et al.* 1991; Ghazali 2013; Lockard 1987; McTaggart and McEachern 1972). Social relations within rural *kampung* have been extensively reorganised and reoriented as well, such that the substantive urban–rural distinction observed by Provencher (1971) no longer typifies the urban–rural divide (Thompson 2004, 2007).

One of the most noted changes has to do with gender relations and the status and role of women in Malay society (e.g. Karim 1992; Rudie 1994; Stivens 1996, 2013; Stivens *et al.* 1994; Strange 1981; cf. Thambiah 1999). From the late 1970s into the early 1990s, particular attention was given to the transition from farming to factory work and other urban-oriented occupations among women (Ackerman 1991; Ariffin 1994; Fatimah 1985; Hing 1984; Lie and Lund 1994; Maimunah 2001; Ong 1987, 1990; Stivens 2013). This attention largely displaced earlier ethnographic research on women’s roles in rural village society (e.g. Firth 1966; Laderman 1983). By the 1990s, much of the moral panic around the subject had dissipated and factory work among rural women had become normalised (Thompson 2004, 2007). Although research in the 1970s and 1980s argued that substantial changes were taking place in terms of power and economic relationships within families, between women and men and across generations, little if any substantial rural-based research since the 1990s has followed up on or traced these issues into the present (cf. Peletz 1996; Stivens 2013).

In keeping with a broader interest in information and communications technology (ICT) that has been fostered through prominent attention to projects such as Cyberjaya and discourse surrounding the intended transition to a ‘knowledge economy’ since the 1990s, a number of studies have been done on rural ICT development. Most of these have focused on various sorts of Internet use (e.g. Alias 2013; Rohaya *et al.* 2013; Suhaida *et al.* 2013). Internet use has certainly penetrated into rural areas, particularly through the establishment of government sponsored Rural Internet Centres (Alias 2013). However, the much more extensive and rapid proliferation of mobile phones has almost certainly had a more profound effect on social relations and economic activity in rural Malaysia than has Internet use. While the appearance of mobile phones in rural Malaysia has been noted by some scholars (e.g. Preston and Ngah 2012: 355–56), an extensive and theoretically informed analysis of how this ICT has influenced rural sociality remains to be done (see Qui and Thompson 2007; Thompson 2009). New, proliferating ICTs such as the Internet and mobile phones are just one part of an extensive expansion of infrastructure that have brought cities and countryside closer together throughout much of Malaysia.

The idea of rural *kampung*, marked by close social relations and mutual self-help (*gotong-royong*) remains a powerful one in everyday discourse (Thompson 2002, 2007, 2013a). Scholars have also noted the significance of an often commodified nostalgia for rural *kampung* among the urbanised Malay middle class (Kahn 1992; Kessler 1992). Such nostalgia notwithstanding, researchers working in rural *kampung* have observed that rural sociality has changed significantly, reflecting forms of sociality typically thought of as urban rather than rural (Thompson 2004, 2007). Significant disagreements remain over whether or not rural Malay social life is best seen as undergoing dissolution (Maznah 2013) or regrounding (Preston and

Ngah 2012). A problem with the general lack of attention to rural-based research at present as compared with fifty years ago is that our basis for making empirically grounded arguments and for analysis of these changing social relations and processes is relatively thin. This weakness is even more the case when it comes to rural politics.

Politics: from local to national

Singularly lacking in social science research of the past two decades is analysis of local, rural politics. Prior to the 1980s or 1990s, scholars of Malaysia produced numerous important monographs and reports on rural, village-level politics. Among these were Syed Husin Ali's classic study of village leadership (Husin Ali 1975), Shamsul A.B.'s analysis of the transition from colonial to local rule (Shamsul 1986), James Scott's political-economic analysis of village-level class relations (Scott 1985) and numerous other monographs (e.g. Kessler 1978; Nash 1974; Ness 1967; Rogers 1993; Shamsul 1982–83, 1991). Historical studies of rural and village-level politics also reached an apex in the mid-twentieth century (e.g. Kratoska 1984; Lim 1977; Nonini 1992). This tradition of scholarship has largely vanished, and to a greater degree than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In neighbouring Thailand, for example, works such as Andrew Walker's (2012) *Political Peasants* or Yoshinori Nishizaki's (2011) *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand* count among the most important recent works in scholarship on Thailand.

In part, the decline in the study of local, rural politics can be attributed to the general shift in focus from rural- to urban-based research. The lack of detailed, local-level analysis of rural politics may also in part be attributed to the chilling effect of government attitudes toward social science research. Foreign researchers are formally and informally warned to avoid 'sensitive issues' and 'political elements'. Local researchers are likewise subject to similar implicit and explicit restrictions. Whereas insightful analysis of on-the-ground rural politics has flourished in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and elsewhere over past decades, the tradition of empirically grounded, careful studies of rural politics pioneered by Malaysian and foreign academics of the mid-twentieth century mentioned above has dwindled, if not entirely died off, since the 1970s or 1980s.

Insofar as political analysis has had much to say about rural politics over the past couple of decades, it has been with respect to the role of rural voters and constituencies in terms of national, electoral politics. While the rural-biased gerrymandering of parliamentary constituencies has long been pointed out, the issue has become more prominent in the wake of the hotly contested twelfth and thirteenth general elections, held in 2008 and 2013, respectively. In 2008, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition unexpectedly lost its long-held two-thirds majority in the federal parliament as well as losing outright in five state-level assemblies (Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak and Selangor). This result raised opposition expectations in the lead-up to the thirteenth general election. Despite losing the popular vote in 2013, the BN was able to maintain a solid majority of seats in the federal parliament and form a new government.

In the wake of these results and the bitter disappointment of many opposition supporters (including many academics), renewed attention was given to the rural-biased skewing of constituencies and the rural-urban divide in voting patterns. Numerous academic and other commentators laid blame for the opposition's loss and BN's win at the feet of rural voters, and attributed support for the BN to those voters' lack of education, backwardness and responsiveness to vote-buying (Chin 2013; *Malaysiakini* 2013; Mohamed Nawab 2013). Problematically, however, in the absence of sophisticated or in-depth on-the-ground research

into the motivations or dynamics of rural voting patterns, such analysis remains largely speculative and laced with no small amount of urbanite contempt for rural citizens (Thompson 2013a, 2013b).

Conclusion

In a recent review, Preston and Ngah (2012) argue for a view of rural society in Malaysia that focuses on processes of broadening, deepening and regrounding. In contrast to dystopic perceptions of rural social dissolution (e.g. Maznah 2013), Preston and Ngah see strength rather than weakness in the reconstitution of contemporary rurality in Malaysia. Their intervention usefully outlines a positive prescription for understanding contemporary rural change as well as pointing to areas for further and ongoing research.

While rural villages cannot be usefully studied in isolation from wider, and largely urban-oriented Malaysian society, neither should they be ignored economically, socially or politically. With regard to economics, both agricultural and non-agricultural activities need to be studied from an on-the-ground perspective rather than only through macro-economic data. Open questions remain as to whether such activities as rural tourism, rural industrialisation or various forms of cash crops are sustainable and whether or not the benefits of such activities will be widespread.

With regard to social issues, the trend in scholarship has been away from holistic ethnography and toward issue-oriented analysis, of concerns such as divorce, substance abuse, unemployment, health, nutrition, and the like (e.g. Cooper 2013; Rohaya *et al.* 2013). While such issue-oriented research is useful, it would be at least as, if not more, valuable if more studies could address the issue of rural social change at a more holistic level. Among other benefits, it would be valuable to return attention to issues of kinship, drawing on the past, rich ethnographic record to study how family and kinship are transforming in the present. Cramb (2012), for example, provides an intriguing view of the urban and transnational extensions of Iban longhouse-oriented society in rural Sarawak.

In the political arena, insofar as restrictions on research within Malaysia allow, a keen attention to the on-the-ground dynamics of local, rural politics could go a long way to moving scholarship and broader public discourse beyond stereotypes of incompetent rural voters and toward a better understanding of the ideas and interests of rural constituencies that have fed into the apparent urban-rural divide in the Malaysian electorate. Earlier work, such as Shamsul A.B.'s (1986) study of the transition from colonial to national rule, have shown that for many decades, local politics in rural Malaysia has been tied into broader national trends and interests. But that does not lessen the significance of local, rural political dynamics. Moreover, those dynamics have surely changed since studies such as Syed Husin Ali's (1975) examination of peasant leadership. Among other issues worth exploring is the role of return rural-to-urban migrants and of rural residents' attitudes toward Malaysia's changing political landscape.

Finally, studies of rural change in Malaysia have moved, and should continue to move, away from imagining the rural as typified by Malay *kampung* society. While Malay *kampung*, albeit transformed, continue to be a vital part of Malaysia's rural landscape, a broader view of rural transformation is called for, including studies that take more serious account of urban and national engagement with 'nature' (e.g. Kathirithamby-Wells 2005), environmental concerns and the range of non-Malay rural inhabitants. There is little to suggest that the demographic and scholarly trends in Malaysia toward urbanisation and urban issues are likely to abate any time soon. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of Malaysia's population continue

to make their home outside of cities, and as Preston and Ngah (2012) argue, city-dwellers themselves appear increasingly inclined to desire a return to, or at least a reconnection with, the countryside.

Note

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