

PIONEER MIGRANTS IN THE LAND OF PROMISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how migrants came to Davao in the first half of the last century. Of the major cities in the Philippines today, Davao has a unique history of having been settled by a relatively large number of foreigners, particularly Americans and Japanese, hand-in-hand with Filipino settlers. This paper aims to answer the question why these diverse peoples went to a politically and geographically peripheral place, and what travails they encountered in that frontier situation. For the Filipino settlers, the push and pull factors of migration will be explored. This paper traces their particular places of origin using the Philippine Census and the San Pedro Parish Records, and finds answers to the question why such large numbers left their hometowns to go to Davao (the push factor). For the pull factor, worker benefits and the burgeoning plantation economy will be studied as to its influence in enticing thousands of Filipinos from the Visayas to migrate to the Davao frontier.

KEY WORDS: *Davao, frontier migration, American era*

From a small sparsely populated string of villages along the Davao Gulf Coast at the turn of the century, Davao grew, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, into a bustling town accommodating a large influx of migrants. The agricultural plantations on the frontier gave opportunities for a variety of migrants of different nationalities to settle there. A cosmopolitan town on the frontier, Davao took in streams of migrants on the initiative of the mostly Americans, Japanese and Filipino planters who provided good wages and incentives to attract laborers. Using the Philippine Census and the San Pedro parish baptismal Records as sources, one can look further into the origins of many of the migrants to Davao and deduce the demographic make-up of this frontier boomtown before the Second World War. The knowledge of the migrants' places of origin then helps in venturing answers as to why these peoples went to a geographically and politically far-off place.

AMERICANS, JAPANESE AND OTHER FOREIGNERS ON THE DAVAO FRONTIER

The Americans first reached Davao in 1899 through a military contingent led by General J. C. Bates (Corcino, 1998). The place they came to was a small village located along Davao Gulf, surrounded by smaller villages that similarly strung themselves around the coast. The coastal villages were surrounded by primary growth forests that grew unhampered into the interior. These villages around the gulf and their vast forested lands became the District of Davao when the U.S. Army established the Moro Province in 1903 (Gowing, 1979).

The Americans who administered the Moro Province were supporters of the Republican policy of retaining the Philippine Islands as a colony and encouraged the migration of American businesses and capital to Mindanao. They encouraged fellow Americans to settle in the vast unpopulated lands of Mindanao. In Davao, discharged American soldiers, under the encouragement of Moro Province colonial administrators, established hemp and coconut plantations along the gulf coast during the first decade of the twentieth century. Because Muslim communities in Davao were smaller and considerably less warlike than those in Jolo, Cotabato and Lanao, Davao was perceived as a "safe" destination for American settlers (Abinales, 2000). And because of Davao's relatively safe conditions, the Moro Province concentrated its human and

financial resources on the other parts of Mindanao, leaving the Davao settlers largely alone to develop the frontier.

The American pioneers in Davao ventured with plantations of more than a hundred, some reaching a thousand, hectares of land planted to abaca and coconuts. In 1907, there were 27 American-owned plantations scattered around the coast (Glecek, 1992). By 1909, there were already 40 plantations with sizes of 100 hectares and more planted to 2.7 million hills of abaca and 122 thousand coconut trees (Corcino, 1997). Census records (Table 1) however show that the Americans, although they were the colonial administrators and were among the first to establish large scale plantations, were often outnumbered by Filipinos, the Japanese and the Chinese as inhabitants of Davao.

Table 1. Population of Davao Province by nationality, 1903, 1918, 1939

Nationality	1903		1918		1939	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Total	65,496	100.00%	108,222	100.00%	292,600	100.00%
Filipinos*	65,423	99.89%	102,221	94.45%	270,823	92.56%
Japanese	0	0.00%	4,920	4.55%	17,888	6.11%
Chinese	19	0.03%	874	0.81%	3,595	1.23%
U.S. citizens	16	0.02%	96	0.09%	112	0.04%
Spaniards	31	0.05%	51	0.05%	52	0.02%
British	1	0.00%	49	0.05%	21	0.01%
Others	6	0.01%	11	0.01%	109	0.04%

* Indigenous and non-indigenous populations were added up for 1903.

Sources: United States Bureau of the Census, 1905

Census of the Philippine Islands, 1921

Commission of the Census, 1940

Next to the Filipinos, the Japanese were the most numerous among Davao inhabitants, starting from the 1918 and up through the 1939 Census. The first group of Japanese to reach Davao in 1903 was chiefly laborers from the completed Benguet road project contracted to work in the abaca plantations of

Davao (Cody, 1958). Upon the request of Davao planters, other groups of laborers soon went to Davao direct from Japan (Hayase, 1984). The need for laborers in Davao, Japan's rising population pressure, and the *Nanyo* (South Seas) movement in Japan boosted Japanese immigration to Davao's frontier plantations for the next several decades (Hayase, 1984). While most of the Japanese were farmer-laborers, some entrepreneurs, most notably Kyosaburo Ohta, established corporations that engaged in large-scale abaca production starting in 1905 (Hayase, 1984). By 1911, there were four Japanese plantations thriving there, and around seventy by 1918 (Hayase, 1984). With the Japanese corporations gaining a foothold in Davao, and an organized information campaign on the *Nanyo* in Japan, more Japanese immigrants went to Davao in the 1920s and 1930s (Yu-Jose, 1992). These Japanese immigrants were greatly assisted in Davao by the Japanese consulate and the Davao Japanese association through subsidized transportation, processing of immigration papers, and granting of start-up interest-free farm loans (Kamohara, 1938; Quiason, 1958; Sanie, 1966).

The Chinese, who were the third largest group in all three census years, steadily increased their numbers throughout. The only foreign-born settlers to be included in the top ten places of provenance of fathers in the San Pedro baptismal records, the Chinese were mostly listed as born in Amoy, China. This is notable considering that the Chinese population in the Census are not as numerous as the Japanese, but the Chinese outnumber the Japanese in the San Pedro records. Two things may be inferred: first, that there were more Chinese who inter-married Catholic women; and second, that there were more Chinese who were Catholics and would thus have their children baptized, compared to the mostly non-Catholic Japanese.

Other foreigners in Davao included nationals of the former colonial power Spain, who were the second largest group, at 33 in the 1903 census, and although this increased to 51 and 52 in the next two censuses taken in 1918 and 1939 respectively, their increases were not as great as for the Japanese, the Chinese or the Americans in Davao. Also noted in the census, though not numerous, were British nationals, who peaked at 49 in the 1918 census. They were possibly Davao-based agents of the British merchant houses and their families, Britain being the third largest trading partner of the Philippines next to the United States and Japan (Powell, 1983). Other foreigners in Davao listed in the San Pedro baptismal records (Table 2) are those from India, Syria, the U.S. territory of Hawaii, France, Germany, Russia, and Singapore.

FILIPINO LABORERS TO THE FRONTIER PLANTATIONS

The establishment of plantations in a frontier with very few skilled workers among the indigenous inhabitants created a need for imported labor. Labor scarcity in the plantations forced plantation owners to import workers like those from Japan and but most often, from other parts of the Philippines, and this prompted the migration of thousands of Filipinos to Davao.

The 1903 census records the population of Davao at 65,463, which had a majority of indigenous peoples (labeled in the census as "Wild Tribes"), among which were the Bagobo, Manobo, Mandaya, Tagacaolo, and B'laan, numbering 45,272 (US Bureau of the Census, 1905). However, the indigenous peoples were not used to sedentary labor, being hunters and gatherers themselves. The planters then had to recruit laborers from the Visayas and Luzon with recruitment drives focusing on specific towns. Planters used local recruiters as their point persons who in turn used personal connections to entice the residents of their town and its nearby areas to work as contract laborers. Often, the local recruiter would tap relatives and town mates, and spread the news of job opportunities through word-of-mouth (Garcia, 2005). In some instances, planters themselves went to the locality to personally seek out laborers (Corcino, 1997). For many early migrant workers, this method of mass recruitment prevented them from being separated from their family and neighbors. The fear of living alone on the frontier was assuaged by the presence of people with whom the migrant was familiar. Thus, it is not strange to see almost entire towns transplanted to the Davao frontier.

The San Pedro baptismal records is a rich source of information on where many of the pioneer migrants to Davao came from, San Pedro being the only parish in Davao before the Second World War. This paper focuses on the information gleaned from the birthplace of the father of the baptized, and the records show that many were from the Visayan islands of Cebu, Bohol, Leyte and Panay (Table 2). Cebu-born men were more than twice the number of Davao-born fathers, supporting Doeppers' study of the ethnicity of Davao's population, that there was a preponderance of Cebuano migrants to Davao, with the records affirming that this has been the case since the first half of the twentieth century (Doeppers, 1972).

Table 2. San Pedro Parish Baptismal Records, Father's Place of Birth

Birthplace of Father	Date 1898-1930	Date 1931-1934	Date 1935-1941	Total from 1898-1941	%
	Entries	Entries	Entries	Total	% Total
Cebu	5,311	5,912	14,605	25,828	36.4%
Davao	3,635	3,039	5,747	12,379	17.5%
Bohol	344	739	5,362	6,445	9.1%
Leyte	370	935	3,825	5,130	7.2%
Panay	787	726	1,290	2,803	4.0%
Negros Oriental	637	654	1,193	2,484	3.5%
Ilocos	314	363	635	1,312	1.9%
Zamboanga	368	277	535	1,180	1.7%
China	299	302	576	1,177	1.7%
Pangasinan	218	300	462	980	1.4%
Japan	237	206	363	806	1.1%
Negros Occidental	197	202	354	753	1.1%
Manila	196	156	237	589	0.8%
Misamis	110	100	333	543	0.8%
Bicol	130	104	173	407	0.6%
Batangas	104	99	196	399	0.6%
Zambales	58	108	181	347	0.5%
La Union	89	101	139	329	0.5%
Samar	43	70	195	308	0.4%
Pampanga	87	81	114	282	0.4%
Abra	31	72	164	267	0.4%
Rizal	37	75	134	246	0.3%
Cavite	58	64	102	224	0.3%
Cotabato	70	47	103	220	0.3%
Romblon	36	48	128	212	0.3%
Bulacan	60	51	92	203	0.3%
Surigao	31	51	112	194	0.3%
Tarlac	36	47	72	155	0.2%
Nueva Ecija	39	37	77	153	0.2%
Sulu	20	19	71	110	0.2%

Table 2. San Pedro Parish Baptismal Records, Father's Place of Birth (continued)

Birthplace of Father	Date 1898-1930	Date 1931-1934	Date 1935-1941	Total from 1898-1941	%
	Entries	Entries	Entries	Total	% Total
Laguna	25	31	48	104	0.1%
Spain	41	17	22	80	0.1%
U.S.	6	17	15	78	0.1%
Tayabas	19	11	47	77	0.1%
Agusan	10	18	39	67	0.1%
Isabela	10	10	33	53	0.1%
Cagayan	16	10	23	49	0.1%
Masbate	10	12	25	47	0.1%
Lanao	12	4	23	39	0.1%
Marinduque	12	3	15	30	0.0%
Mountain Province	1	2	20	23	0.0%
Mindoro	2	2	12	16	0.0%
India	4	6	2	12	0.0%
Formosa		4	7	11	0.0%
Bataan	2	2	5	9	0.0%
Hawaii			8	8	0.0%
Palawan	1	2	3	6	0.0%
Syria	2	1	3	6	0.0%
Batanes	4	1		5	0.0%
Benguet	3			3	0.0%
U.K.	1	1	1	3	0.0%
Nueva Vizcaya	1	1		2	0.0%
Russia		1	1	2	0.0%
Bukidnon		1		1	0.0%
France			1	1	0.0%
Germany	1			1	0.0%
Singapore	1			1	0.0%
Unknown Provenance	2,562	420	686	3,668	5.2%
Total	16,738	15,562	38,609	70,909	100.0%

A possible migration push factor would be the gradual economic decline experienced by southern Cebu that provided a steady source of laborers bound for the Davao plantations. The deterioration of Cebu agriculture due to the increasing unproductiveness of the soil, and the lack of alternative opportunities in trade and industry, hastened the movement of Cebuano peoples to an area of greater economic opportunity which Davao certainly was (Echevarria, 1974). The trend was most obvious in the 1920s and 1930s when the southern Cebu municipalities of Argao, Sibonga, and Carcar posted negative population growth rates, while Davao was enjoying a 172 percent increase (Echevarria, 1974). These towns, including Cebu City and Talisay, were the hometowns of most men listed in the baptismal records of their children born before World War II in Davao (Table 3).

Table 3. San Pedro Baptismal Records, Father's Birthplace of Cebu Municipalities

	1898-1941	%
Argao	5,410	21%
Sibonga	2,427	9%
Talisay	1,840	7%
Carcar	1,337	5%
Others	14,814	57%
Total Cebu	25,828	100%

The availability of sea transport, partly explains why three out of the top five areas of provenance came from Eastern Visayas (Simkins and Wernstedt, 1971). Although the shipping firm Fernandez Hermanos' Davao-Manila route, established as early as 1905, had a stop-over at Iloilo in the Western Visayas, the Cebuano-speaking ports of Eastern Visayas were more numerous with Cebu and Dumaguete. The route, which took fifteen days, sailed to the following ports of call: Davao-Cotabato-Zamboanga-Cagayan de Misamis-Iloilo-Dumaguete-Cebu-Manila, and vice-versa (Lizada, 2002).

Its inclusion on the shipping route may explain why Western Visayas' Panay was the other region in the top five hometowns of Davao fathers in the San

Pedro Records. Panay migrants who came to Davao must have been affected with Iloilo's labor problems and heightened economic competition from Negros (McCoy, 1982). The threat of reduced job prospects among its workers must have prompted migration to Davao during the first half of the twentieth century (Locsin-Nava, 2001).

Included in the top ten places of provenance in the San Pedro records were the Ilocano-speaking regions of Ilocos and Pangasinan whose migrants were noted by plantation owners for their hardworking attitude (ACCJ, 1931). Zamboanga-born migrants were also among the most numerous Filipinos in Davao, an occurrence indicating that Mindanao-born peoples were also participants in the population boom of Davao, and whose migration was again facilitated by the Davao-bound shipping route that included Zamboanga as a port of call.

INDUCEMENTS FOR MIGRATION

To entice laborers to work on the frontier, there were many perks put in to sweeten the deal. The planters often advanced the money for transportation and personal effects (Corcino, 1997). Before 1915, the Davao plantations were no match for the more attractive terms of the Hawaiian plantations, which offered P36.00 a month for men and P24.00 for women (Hayase, 1984).¹ Until the late 1920s, Filipino laborers came and went back to their home provinces on the basis of the prevailing conditions of the abaca industry in Davao (Hayase, 1984). However, after 1915, as the price of abaca rose threefold, Davao laborers were getting competitive rates. Depending on their skill, laborers were paid from as low as P0.50 per day to as high as P1.00 per day for clearing land, and some on a 50-50 share basis from the proceeds for stripping abaca (JPL Papers, Hijo Plantation Co., 1934). Plantation owners even offered the option for the laborers to acquire land, as was the case of Montano Vargas, a self-made Filipino plantation owner whose offer was cited by Gleeck (1992, 91) from a 24 November 1919 *Manila Times* article:

To attract laborers, he hired ten of them in Iloilo on one-year contracts providing free transportation to and from Davao, an advance for food, and at the end of the year, an equal division with them of the income for services they shall have rendered aside from an option to acquire their own farm.

Laborers for public work projects were prone to abandon their government employment and instead work for the plantations, which paid P60 to P70 per month, compared with the government's P0.60 (with food) to P0.80 (without food) per day (Annual Report of the Governor General, 1917; Garcia, 2005). The government realized it had to match the private sector rates if it hoped to attract enough workers for public works. In 1932, Davao's rate for public works projects stood at P1.20 per day, which was among the highest rates in the Philippines, higher than Zamboanga (P1.13), Cavite (P1.10) and Cotabato (P0.75) (Statistical Handbook, 1932). The aforementioned P1.20 rate was applied to unskilled labor in Davao (Statistical Handbook 1932). Skilled plantation workers in Davao were relatively overpaid, with a daily rate of P2.50 against P1.20 in Manila (Quiason 1958). In 1939, while the national average monthly salary was P14 for agriculture, the majority of persons involved in the agricultural sector of Davao reported salaries within the P10 to P29 range (Commonwealth of the Philippines, 1940).

To keep their workforce, the plantations in Davao provided a lot of benefits for the laborers (compared with most landlord-tenant arrangements in other Philippine provinces), gave them free medical care, hospitalization services, Christmas gifts, bonuses, and sick leaves with pay (Quiason, 1958). The Japanese plantation companies were renowned for providing free living quarters which were "models of cleanliness" for their mostly Filipino workforce (Porter, 1940). Aside from living space, the Japanese corporations provided for free amenities that one can find in older Philippine towns like cockpits, dance halls, billiard and pool parlours, and other recreational facilities (Quiason, 1958). The Odell Plantation of the American International Harvester Company, established in the late 1920s, provided employee benefits along similar lines, with housing, public school, post office, hospital care, and recreation facilities within its 2,300-hectare plantation. Odell employees were also allowed to grow fruit trees and vegetables in their garden plots, while their wives were given assistance in growing poultry (ACCJ, 1931).

Despite the predominance of laborers in Davao, there was an absence of labor unrest. While Iloilo was in the midst of striking dock workers in the 1920s and 1930s, and Central Luzon saw its peasants starting to organize protest movements against the government and their landlords (McCoy, 1982; Kerkvliet, 1977), Davao did not have such a restive workforce despite the presence of union organizations in the area. Labor problems were hardly

mentioned or reported in the newspapers. Most of the crimes reported were cases of Bagobo murdering Japanese settlers intruding onto tribal lands (Hayase, 1984). But as the abaca industry developed and the tribal datu adapted to the new political and economic realities, resistance by indigenous groups diminished. By the 1930s, the so-called "non-Christian tribes" were already a minority in Davao province, outnumbered by the influx of migrant Christian Filipinos (Hayase, 1984). In 1933, the peaceful situation prompted the government to contemplate a withdrawal of three constabulary detachments from the province (*PPF*, 1933).

Old-time residents recalled that Davao was a peaceful town, where one could "sleep soundly at night" (Dabbay, 1995). Visiting writers in the 1930s noted that "police are less in evidence" since Davao had fewer robberies or *colorums*² than any town they had been to (*ACCJ*, 1936; *PPF*, 1932). Even prostitution was reportedly on the wane. In 1936, prostitutes on the outskirts of the poblacion were reduced to half their number compared to the previous year, citing lack of patrons (*PPF*, 1936). This incident parallels an earlier one in 1918 when 178 prostitutes from Calle Gardenia, Manila, were sent to Davao, but went back to the "bright lights" of Manila after a few months since they did not have enough work (Hayase, 1984). Gambling cases were common, although the police appeared to have had these under control (*PPF*, 1932). In 1938, the mayor was quoted as saying "the crime situation was no worry at all" (*The Commonwealth Advocate*, 1938).

Generally, the absence of labor problems was due to good worker benefits and a relatively low level of coercion by the government or plantation owners. Private plantations did not have a close or strong relation with the state to create conditions for coercing labor on the plantations of Davao at the level of the Sumatran estates that existed at about the same period (Stoler, 1998). Moreover, the government itself did not have an active labor policy in Davao, choosing to focus on public land distribution through homesteading instead of indentured labor policies. The government could bark, but there was no bite, as the case of the Gardenia Girls revealed. The Bureau of Labor did threaten to banish the girls to Borneo unless they signed contracts to go to work as laborers in the plantations, but in the end the women were sent back to Manila while a few *decided* to stay after establishing laundries or finding husbands in Davao (Hayase, 1984).

A VARIETY OF FILIPINO MIGRANTS AND GOVERNMENT'S LIMITED ROLE

The influx of Filipinos to Davao developed alongside the insular government's shifting policy of frontier migration starting in 1913, under the leadership of Governor Harrison, a Democrat. Harrison's Rapid Filipinization movement included the Filipinization of migration to the Mindanao frontiers. By this time, the other areas of Mindanao were already pacified to some degree, and the government ventured to create a critical mass of Christian Filipino settlers to amalgamate Mindanao into the national polity (Gowing, 1979). To bring the Christian settlers to the frontier, the government established agricultural colonies in Cotabato and Lanao (Gowing, 1979). However, Davao was not chosen as a colony site since it did not have a large Muslim population to neutralize. There were no government-sponsored settler colonies created in Davao until 1932 when the Davao Penal Colony was established (Annual Report of the Director of Lands, 1932). Despite lack of government support, laborers continued to arrive in Davao largely upon the initiative of the plantation owners. Eventually, due to lack of funds and bureaucratic neglect, the agricultural colonies in Cotabato and Lanao failed to grow (Pelzer, 1945). But Davao, riding on the back of an abaca boom, saw its population rise by 64 percent from 65,496 in 1903 to 108,222 in 1918, and by 346 percent numbering 292,600 people in 1939 with Filipinos in the majority (Table 1).

While it was mostly Visayan laborers who migrated in the first decade of the twentieth century, the same decade also saw Filipino professionals such as school teachers and members of the Philippine Constabulary relocating to Davao (Simkins and Wernstedt, 1971). Many more professionals started going to Davao when the province's fortunes began to take off after 1915, with the establishment of a viable agricultural economy. With Davao becoming a bustling frontier town as the second decade arrived, a number of doctors, surveyors, health officers, and police officers from Luzon and the Visayas soon migrated to Davao, lured by job prospects and high salaries. Some went to Davao as agents and employees of agricultural and trading companies and settled there with their families (JPL Papers).

Many others were self-employed professionals such as lawyers, pharmacists, and merchants who went to Davao at their own expense (Garcia 2005; personal communication, Magallanes, 2004). Among them was the

forementioned Montano Vargas who moved to Davao in 1916, and whose success was featured in the 24 November 1919 issue of the *Manila Times*:

[He worked] as municipal secretary-treasurer and later on was asked to serve concurrently as postmaster. Out of his savings he was able to buy 150 hectares of land. He cultivated the coconuts already growing in his property aside from planting hemp. Today, his earnings averages P150 a month from the hemp and P50 from the coconuts while he receives a regular salary of P85 a month from his job (Gleeck, 1992, 91).

Filipinos continued to migrate to Davao fueled by the stories of plantation wealth. The bulk of settler migration was not facilitated by the government. From 1916 to 1919, the Bureau of Labor subsidized transportation and subsistence costs during the initial period of contract of some 9,191 Davao-bound public works and plantation laborers only (Hayase, 1984). From 1918 to 1939, the government, through the Bureau of Labor's Inter-Island Migration Division, selected prospective settlers and advised them of settlement possibilities, but due to high costs the Bureau only gave transportation assistance and no financial support to the settlers (Wernstedt and Simkins, 1965). Filipinos who settled in Davao mostly bypassed the government, and came using personal funds and other resources to facilitate their move.

CONCLUSION

From the census and San Pedro Parish baptismal records, Davao's population may be analyzed in a more detailed manner. These demographic records show that Davao had a rapid population growth rate, and that this reflected the growth rates of peoples of various nationalities, with Filipinos comprising the majority but also having a cosmopolitan blend of Asians, Americans and Europeans taking part in the population boom as well. The composition of these migrants can be further gleaned by using the San Pedro records as a sample indicating that most migrants were born in the Visayan islands of Cebu, Bohol, Leyte and Panay, but that there were also a significant number coming from China and Japan, making Davao a melting pot of Filipinos as well as of different races and nationalities.

This population boom cannot be separated from the economic growth that made settlement of the frontier possible in the context of minimal government support. Davao's plantation economy enabled the high wages and attractive worker benefits that induced large-scale migration to the frontier, with laborers taking up the bulk of the migrants, while the hometowns of origin were experiencing economic difficulties. Population and economy thus created a virtuous cycle in Davao wherein the increasing population stimulated the economic opportunities of the town, which soon drew professionals and entrepreneurs as well, contributing to economic growth. Thus, within a matter of decades, Davao grew to become one of the prime cities of the Philippines.

NOTES

¹ In 1912, the price of a cavan of rice hovered from P2.00 to P6.00 (RGGPI 1912). In 1925, the average price of a cavan was P9.40, this went down to P8.90 in 1929 (Statistical Bulletin 1929). Circa 1929, *Rosita* cigarettes cost P0.08 for 20 pieces, while 30 pieces cost P0.10 (*Excelsoir*, 1928).

² Colorums were an "ascetic, egalitarian and nationalistic religious sect" found mostly in Luzon and northeastern Mindanao frontier provinces where migrant communities were often victimized by land-grabbers, moneylenders and landlords, and excluded from effective participation in the political process (Golay, 1997).

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