

## **A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AGRICULTURISTS AND THEIR PERCEIVED FUTURE IN AMERICA**

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### *Abstract*

*The objective of this study was to gain a more complete understanding of the historic processes and unique challenges that have faced African American farmers as they have tried to gain operating independence and viability through the use of cooperative tools. Some of the challenges in providing support for the progression of Black farmers include building new organizational strategies to develop and maintain independent farming, and adopting practices, such as value-added activities and market development.*

*Results indicate that African American agriculturists may have feelings of distrust and fear toward the USDA as programs and structures that have been put in place have proven to be historically hostile to African American farmers. Such discrimination is thought to be the major reason that the nation's already dying corps of black farmers is dwindling at three times the rate of farmers nationwide.*

*Small farmers, the group of farmers to which most African American farmers belong, are the backbone of the sustainable agricultural future. Government subsidized loans and grants are designed to support the small farmer, and provide vital resources to this important segment of the farming industry. In order for this system to operate effectively, it must operate equitably. To discriminate against small farmers, and to further marginalize particular small farmers with racially discriminatory practices in the administration of financial assistance, contradicts the spirit and purpose of these USDA programs.*

## Introduction

From the newly freed slaves of 1863 to today's black farmers, African Americans have fought to acquire and maintain land and have encountered crippling obstacles along the way. In 1910, nearly one million black farmers in the U.S. owned 15 million acres; by 1969, they held only 6 million acres. In 1920, blacks owned 14% of the nation's farms; today, there are only 18,000 black farmers, representing less than 1% of all farms (Public Broadcast Service, 2004).

The federal government provided a limited number of opportunities for blacks to acquire land. In 1865, General William T. Sherman's Field Order #15 deeded "40 acres and a mule" to black families on the South Carolina and Florida coasts (Public Broadcast Service, 2004). According to the United States Census of Agriculture, in 1910 Black farmers owned approximately 15.6 million acres of farmland nationally. By 1982, this figure had declined to only 3.2 million acres. Currently Black owners are losing land at a rate as high as 9000 acres per week (USDA, 2000).

The independence of Black America has always been based on three primary factors; the right to vote as symbolized by participation in the governmental authority; the right to an equal opportunity to pursue educational aspirations to the highest as symbolized by America historically Black institutions; and, finally, the right to own land as symbolized by Black family farms (US Civil Rights Office, 1982). Even though Civil Rights and voting rights have made strides in helping farmers maintain land, it still has not been enough. Black farmers obtaining the right to own land is essential in establishing a sound base of political and economic power, which can guarantee Black independence now and in future generations.

Governmental studies continue to reveal a network of corrupt governmental officials at the local and national levels systematically appropriating Black land while displaying racist attitudes (US Civil Rights Office, 1982). Records show that in 1984 and 1985, according to the United States Census of Agriculture, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) lent \$1.3 billion to farmers nationwide to buy land, and that almost 16,000 farmers received funds, 209 of which were Black. In 1993, an Associated Press analysis found Black farmers on average received \$21,000 less than white borrowers from a Farmers Home Administration loan program. More recently, in a class action lawsuit, Pigford versus USDA, it was alleged that in many cases Black farmers were turned away from obtaining loans needed to maintain ownership of land. In many instances, these lands had belonged for many decades to Black family farmers. Some individuals also experienced delays when trying to borrow funds to purchase lands from other Black farmers, while credit for making such purchases were made available sooner to white farmers. These instances not only frustrated the opportunity of some Black farmers to expand their scale of operation but also increased concern for the loss to Black farming in general (US Civil Rights Office, 1982).

The situation is urgent and emergency measures are needed to help keep the remaining Black owned land, an asset of \$250 million, in Black hands. African Americans who are heirs to property should be aware of who is being impacted as they decide to sell the land of their ancestors that their grandparents and great-grandparents struggled hard to obtain. The urban African Americans need to understand that the only real power in the United States is land. However, the "aging" of agriculture is also having an impact; the average age of American

farmers reached 54.3 years in the last census (Zippert, 2001). This creates great concern in retaining Black farming land, as young farmers are attracted to life in the big cities.

The history of Black farmers has demonstrated many barriers and triumphant moments. However, it is important to unveil the negative occurrences in the past and to acknowledge current trends among Black farmers. This will enable research conducted to provide an analysis of the perceived future of the profession seen through the eyes of Black farmers themselves.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to gain a more complete understanding of the historic processes and unique challenges that have faced African American farmers as they have tried to gain operating independence and viability through the use of cooperative tools. In order to accomplish the aforementioned purpose the following objectives were developed:

1. To identify past trends impacting African American agriculture.
2. To determine current trends impacting the future of African American agriculture
3. To determine the future of African American agriculture
4. To identify strategies to improve the state of African American Agriculture.

### **Methodology**

A population of 16 farmers was selected for this descriptive census survey study. The agriculturists attended a regional Black Land Loss Summit in Whitakers, North Carolina. The rationale for utilizing all elements of the population concerns the convenience of having such an assessable population of black farmers located in one location (N=16).

At the time of this study, a survey suitable to meet the research objectives was not found. A survey instrument was developed by the researchers based on research questions of this study with the aid of an extensive literature review. The validity of the instrument was established by means of content validity. Brown (1983) defined content validity as “the degree to which items on a test representatively sample the underlying content domain” (p. 487). Brown recommended using expert judges as one means of establishing content validity. A panel of experts at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, consisting of the researcher’s graduate committee, reviewed the instrument for content validity.

The survey instrument for this study consisted of five sections: Section I - Demographics and Program Characteristics, Section II - Perceptions of past trends which have impacted African American Agriculturists, Section III- Perceptions of current trends that may impact the future of African American Agriculture, Section IV- Perceptions of the perceived future of African American Farming, and Section V- Perceptions of strategies that will help improve the state of African American Farming. Section one utilized a combination of closed and open-ended responses concerning various demographics and farm variables. Sections two through five utilized a five-point Likert-type scale with the following responses: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Uncertain, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree.

In order to test reliability, a post hoc reliability test was taken at the conclusion of data collection on each section of the survey instrument. Cronbach's alpha was used as the reliability measure for this study. Nunnally (1967) suggested that 0.5 to 0.6 would be high enough in the early stages of research. The 0.8 measure is commonly used. Measurements of 0.9 might not be high enough where precision is needed. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the survey were as follows: Section Two = 0.51, Section Three = 0.48, Section Four = 0.282, and Section Five = 0.763.

## Findings

Overall the respondents in this study were male, possessed at least a high school education, were on average sixty-three years of age (Table 1.).

Table 1. Personal Demographics

Demographics	Subcategories	N	Mean or Percent
1. Age		16	63.88
2. Gender	Female	0	0%
	Male	16	100%
3. Race/Ethnicity	American	0	0%
	Asian American	0	0%
	Black/African American	16	100%
	Caucasian	0	0%
	Hispanic/Latino	0	0%
4. Highest Degree:	Less than high school	2	12.5%
	High school	9	56.3%
	Associate degree	0	0%
	Bachelor degree	1	6.3%
	Masters	3	18.3%
	Doctorate	0	0%
	Some college	1	6.3%

In relation to the farm operation demographics of respondents, the majority resided in Virginia, produced a variety of commodities such as tobacco, corn, vegetables/fruit, timber (Table 2). Others commodities included livestock, wheat, soybeans, and cotton. Respondents had farmed for at least thirty-seven years, owned the majority of land farmed, and had both been denied and received loans from the USDA. A great majority had received USDA disaster resistance and participated in conservation programs, while a slight percentage had participated in other programs.

Table 2. Farm Operation Demographics

Demographics	Subcategories	N	Mean or Percent
1. Residence	North Carolina	5	31.3%
	Virginia	10	62.5%
	Arkansas	1	6.3%
2. Products Produced	Tobacco	14	
	Corn	14	
	Wheat	9	
	Soybean	9	
	Cotton	2	
	Vegetables/Fruit	12	
	Timber for harvest	11	
	Cattle	7	
	Hogs	9	
	Poultry	6	
	Other	5	
3. Hold a job off the farm.			43.8%
4. Length of time farming (Years).			37.12
5. Number of generations farming.			3
6. Number of acres owned.			125.56
7. Number of acres rented.			70.81
8. Own a computer.			62.5%
9. Received loans from USDA.		10	62.5%
10. Denied a loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).		9	56.3%
11. Participate in any of annual commodity programs.		11	68.8%
12. Participate in any conservation programs.		10	62.5%
13. Received USDA disaster assistance.		12	75.0%
14. Participate in any other federal programs:	Export	1	6.3%
	Research	3	18.8%
	Minority Farm Outreach (2501)	2	12.5%
	Marketing	1	6.3%
	No Response	9	56.3%

With regard to past trends that have impacted African American Agriculture, respondents agreed upon factors such as discrimination, lack of government support, networking through cooperatives, and procedures in place concerning socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and gender (Table 3). In contrast respondents disagreed that governmental programs were successful in addressing the needs of African American Agriculturalists.

Table 3. Past trends impacting African American Agriculture

Past Trends	Mean	SD	Rank
1. African American agriculturist have been denied the assistance qualified for as a result of discrimination.	4.37	1.63	1
2. Radical changes in agriculture have severely limited farmers' power in decision-making and their ability to survive on the land.	4.07	1.61	2
3. A lack of support by the government has hindered the progress of all farmers in America.	4.00	1.59	3
4. Black cooperatives encourage African American agriculturists to be more assertive of their rights to organize.	3.56	1.55	4
5. Procedures were in place that acknowledged variations in socioeconomic, racial/ethnic and gender lines.	3.50	1.34	5
6. Organizations independent of the government were more supportive.	3.19	1.20	6
7. A lack of support by the government has hindered the progress of African American agriculturists.	3.19	1.64	6
8. Assistance was provided to assist you in overcoming financial barriers.	2.94	1.15	7
9. There were substantial government efforts to help African American agriculturists to maintain independence and to utilize cooperatives.	2.50	1.09	8
10. Programs implemented by the government were successful in addressing the needs and interests of African American agriculturists.	1.94	.96	9

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Uncertain, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree.

For objective three respondents were asked to give their perception regarding current trends impacting the future of African American agriculture (Table 4). Respondents agreed that prejudicial issues, work time spent on farm, and lack of family support were trends impacting African American Agriculture. On the contrary they disagreed that governmental agencies such as FSA and cooperative extension give equal attention to their needs.

Table 4. Current trends impacting the future of African American agriculture

Impact on Future	Mean	SD	Rank
1. Prejudicial issues are still a major concern for African American agriculturists.	4.44	.89	1
2. The majority of work time is spent on the farm.	4.31	.70	2
3. Lack of family support has encouraged the decrease in the number of African American agriculturists.	3.81	1.56	3
4. Experiencing racial discrimination is just as prominent as it was before the Pigford v. Veneman case (Black farmers vs. USDA).	3.81	1.22	3
5. Black farmers are not treated as well as white farmers by the Fair Housing Administration.	3.75	1.39	4
6. You can identify something else other than farming as an occupation.	3.19	1.80	5
7. Local administrations (FSA, NRCS) are providing assistance in a timely manner.	3.00	1.51	6
8. Current programs are readily available to assist your agricultural needs.	2.94	1.39	7
9. For the most part, white farmers and Black farmers are treated alike by FSA.	2.44	1.63	8
10. In general, Extension workers give more attention to Black farmers than to white farmers.	2.19	1.33	9

Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Uncertain, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

With regards to the future of African American Agriculture, respondents strongly agreed that the return of foreclosed lands would strengthen the future of African American agriculture. It was also strongly agreed upon that a new farm bill, more outreach, and more technical assistance were needed in order to impact African American agriculture (Table 5). Additionally it was strongly agreed upon that more networking and monitoring of USDA agencies would be needed. Respondents also agreed that black owned farms would continue to decline, and that access to attainment of legal and financial expertise was difficult.

Table 5. Perceptions of the future of African American agriculture

Perceptions of the Future	Mean	SD	Ranking
1. Return of foreclosed lands to the Black farmer will strengthen the future of African American family farming.	4.50	1.10	1
2. A farm bill to strengthen American family farms is needed.	4.88	.50	2
3. Future efforts need to include more outreach, technical assistance and funding to educate farmers.	4.69	.60	3
4. USDA/Farm Services Agency should be monitored more strictly.	4.56	1.09	4
5. Can forming strategic partnerships make a profound difference for the future of African American farmers?	4.50	.73	5
6. In the future, Black owned farms will continue to go out of business.	4.38	.89	6
7. There should be implementation of the Civil Rights Action team (CRAT) and National Small Farm Commission recommendations.	4.38	.81	6
8. Access to credit without discrimination in the future for all family farmers will strengthen ownership.	4.00	1.26	7
9. It is hard to find attorneys and economists to assist in the battle to overcome the racism and illegal actions of the USDA.	4.00	.73	8
10. Is there a future in farming?	3.44	1.59	9

1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Uncertain, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

Respondents strongly agreed that strategies to improve the state of African American agriculture include networking, becoming politically active, encouraging future generations to enter the profession through agriculturally based youth organizations, and establishing educational programming through local school boards (Table 6). It was also found that 1890 Land-Grant institutions and the black church must become more involved in the future of the industry.



Table 6. Perceptions of strategies to improve the state of African American Agriculture.

Strategies to Help	Mean	SD	Rank
1. African American family farmers must network to establish better connections to community resources.	4.88	.34	1
2. Totally different political and economic structures must be examined to maintain survival and maximize forthcoming opportunities.	4.81	.40	2
3. To maintain the survival of Black agriculture, younger generations must be influenced to follow the trade.	4.75	.58	3
4. Other agricultural associations must take steps to encourage Black youth to participate (FFA, 4-H).	4.69	.48	4
5. School Boards (K-12) must also establish programs that educate students on the plight of Black agriculturists and the significance of agriculture.	4.50	.73	5
6. In the final agreement in the Pigford verses Venemen (Black farmers verses USDA), there must be a statement of action to ensure Black Youth a future in agriculture.	4.37	.96	6
7. 1890 Land Grant colleges (historically Black universities must design programs targeting the plight and relevance of Black agriculture.	4.19	.98	7
8. The Black church and Black agriculturist must establish a working relationship in order for the larger Black community to grow respectfully.	3.94	1.06	8

1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Uncertain, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

### Conclusions

Based upon the findings of this study, the following conclusions are presented:

1. The average age of the African American agriculturists in this study was 64. This indicates that younger generations are choosing not to continue the operation of the family farming business. This supports findings that do not expect the growth of small family farms to last, as longtime farmers die and their children sell the properties (Peralte, 2004).
2. African American agriculturists were in agreement concerning past trends that have impacted farming. The trends involved decades of discriminatory actions by USDA officers. Loan officers discouraged, delayed or rejected loan applications because of race. This indicates that African American agriculturists may have feelings of distrust and fear toward the USDA as programs and structures that have been put in place have proven to be historically hostile to African American farmers. Such discrimination is a major reason that the nation's already dying corps of Black farmers is dwindling at three times the rate of farmers nationwide (Ates, 2002).

3. African American agriculturists were uncertain as to whether infrastructures established by the government (Farm Service Agency (FSA), USDA: Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Forest Service) enabled them to overcome financial barriers and assisted them in maintaining independence and utilizing cooperatives. Therefore, if African American agriculturists are uncertain, maybe this is an indication that they were not properly educated or informed by government agencies on the programs and services provided, or perhaps, those participating in the study are not familiar with the financial institutions afforded Black farmers in the past. If prior generations were not aware of the services being provided, lack of knowledge may have directly resulted in failure of their farming operations. However, there is documentation that indicates the government implemented various programs targeting the needs of Black farmers, but sustainability was short-lived (Public Broadcast Service, 2004).
4. African American agriculturists disagreed that the government was successful in addressing their concerns, needs and interests in the past. This finding indicates that regardless of the government's pursuit to implement programs tailored to their interests, African American agriculturists were not satisfied with the effort. Maybe this is a result of the many unfulfilled promises by the government, such as the promised "40 acres and a mule", and the attempt to promote land tenure/income stability for rural America (Hortan & Horton, 2001). Both were administered in a discriminatory manner, or geared toward the more solvent and educated upper tiers of those in need.
5. African American agriculturists strongly agreed that efforts by minority organizations and class action lawsuit, have not lessened their concern on prejudicial issues. This indicates that the lawsuit *Pigford v. Veneman* (a.k.a. *Pigford v. Glickman*) brought by African American farmers who alleged that USDA discriminated against them on the basis of their race in its farm credit and non-credit benefit programs has not enabled them to forgive and forget. On April 14, 1999, the court approved a consent decree resolving the case (Cowen and Feder, 2008). In many cases, farmers are still waiting for the government to fulfill their promises in the Consent Decree. Perhaps farmers are not happy with the way the settlement concluded since it did not solve their problems. They also may find fault with the agreement because it does not force the USDA to change its policies to permanently stop discrimination in the loan and assistance process.
6. African American agriculturists disagreed that programs and services implemented by the government provide equal opportunities to black and white agriculturists. A survey conducted by Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) showed that cooperative grants and loans were implemented by the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to low-income farmers. Also, financial assistance was available to farmers seeking to lease land, acquire land, acquire farm equipment, livestock insurance and other resources (Mittal & Powell, 2000). Given this finding, it is evident to researchers that the Black agriculturists still felt discriminated against
7. African American agriculturists agree that implementation of the Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) and National Small Farm Commission will enable family farmers to gain

better access to credit and encourage land ownership. This finding indicates that farmers do not believe they can achieve financial stability nor gain access to lost land as long as discriminatory actions by the government still exist. As a result, agriculturists feel that in the future Black owned farms will continue to go out of business. This may be as a result of the continual decline in the number of Black owned farms and the constant struggle to obtain financial support from the government and the lack of admission by the USDA to permanently stop discrimination and follow through with promises to Black farmers (Ates, 2002).

8. African American agriculturists strongly agreed that in order to successfully regain economic viability many strategic methods and steps must be taken, such as providing more outreach; improving technical assistance; providing more funding to educate farmers; returning foreclosed land to Black farmers; restructuring the Farm Bill; strict monitoring of the USDA and FSA, and building strategic partnerships in the community. These findings indicate that African American agriculturists are aware of the importance and need of precise measures to be taken in order for their respective operations to survive. Without coordination with other producers to adopt effective strategies for competing in their local markets and entering new, more lucrative markets, opportunities for these farmers will shrink (Holmes, Richardson & Schofer, 2002).
9. African American agriculturists strongly agreed that in order for Black agriculturists to survive, the following strategies must be established: 1) Programs in K-12 to educate students on the history of Black agriculturists and the importance of agriculture; 2) Agricultural associations must be more active in encouraging Black youth to participate in FFA and 4-H; and 3) Different political and economic structures should be implemented to maximize access to future opportunities. These strategies and proposals indicate that African American agriculturists firmly believe that developing infrastructures targeting the needs of African American agriculturists will secure the future for the next generation (Civil Rights Action Team, 2004).
11. African American agriculturists agreed that improving their state of existence will depend on establishing networking relationships among the community, such as the Black church and 1890 Land Grant colleges and universities. Also, African American agriculturists believe that the implementation of programs targeting black youth in the final agreement (consent decree) of the Pigford v. Venemen will secure the future of Black farmers (Civil Rights Action Team, 2004). This finding indicates that agriculturists are willing to work cooperatively with organizations and institutions in order to rebuild Black agriculture for future generations.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the aforementioned conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

1. *Return of Land*: Return foreclosed lands to the Black farmers and pay adequate compensation for the abuse of their human rights over the decades.

2. *Registry of Black Farmers and Landowners: Implement Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) recommendation requiring the USDA to create a voluntary registry of Black and other nonwhite farmers and landowners.* This registry will serve as a baseline measuring tool to determine the number of Blacks and other minority farmers and the extent of their landholdings. The registry will assist the USDA in planning outreach, education, and technical assistance programs. The registry will also assist the USDA and farmer organizations in evaluating the effectiveness of USDA services and programs in maintaining diversity and plurality in the ownership of farmland in the nation.
3. *Support for Outreach, Technical Assistance, and Education Funding:* For the implementation of the settlement to be effective and supportive of Black farmers, there is a need for a program of concentrated outreach, education, and technical assistance for Black and other disadvantaged farmers. In 1990, Congress authorized \$10 million to be allocated every year (Section 2501 of the Minority Farmers Rights Act) for this purpose. This was the first time the Federal government targeted funding for technical assistance and outreach for minority farmers. The Act was a response to the 1982 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report stating that the primary reason Black farmers have lost land is because of the USDA itself. However, at no time since 1990 has the full \$10 million been awarded; in fact, Black farmers have been shortchanged by over \$50 million in the past nine fiscal years.
4. *Better USDA Research and Education Funding and Activities:* More support and funding is needed from the USDA for research, education, and extension activities geared to the needs of Black family-sized farmers, instead of all its activities catering to the needs of the large-scale farmers.
5. *Democratization of the USDA/Farm Services Agency (FSA) County Committee System:* The FSA County Committee election system must be reformed and made more democratic and representative. There are only a handful of African American committee members elected across the South. As a result, the system has failed to provide fair representation of Black and other minority farmers on these critical local decision-making committees.
6. *Full Implementation of the CRAT and National Small Farm Commission Recommendations:* In 1997, the USDA published the Civil Rights Action Team report and in 1998 the National Commission on Small Farms published "A Time To Act," which contained recommendations for improving the USDA's services to its Black farmer and all family farmer customers. The implementation of the legal settlement should include full implementation of the recommendations in these reports.
7. *Tax Considerations:* Enhanced tax considerations and exemptions should be considered for farmers and landowners and experiencing discrimination, to retain their landholdings in agriculture, forestry, and wetlands.
8. *Farm Bill for the Farmers:* Serious alterations and/or complete revision of the next Farm Bill is necessary to strengthen America's family farmers by providing a minimum price safety net and programs to end the discrimination against small family farmers. Several

of the CRAT recommendations are currently being addressed by draft legislative amendments or new legislative proposals.

### **Implications**

The goal of the research was to gain a more complete understanding of the historic processes and unique challenges that have faced Black farmers as they have tried to gain operating independence and viability through the use of cooperative tools.

The history of discrimination that led to the Pigford suit tells the tale of deeply entrenched institutionalized racism. The discrimination that led to the suit still persists in many forms, including even the administration of a civil rights settlement. Instead of a fair facilitation of the settlement, the victimization continues with delay tactics and aggressive litigation strategies. According to the Civil Rights Action Team, several of the aforementioned recommendations are being addressed by draft legislative amendments or new legislative proposals (Pigford Arbitrator, 2004).

A settlement is a cooperative process, not a small-scale litigation battle. Ultimately, the farmers have not fared substantially better than they predicted. Thus far, research shows a startling 86% of the farmers with discrimination complaints have been unsuccessful and have walked away from the settlement with no money and no ability to redress their grievances in a court of law. Other claimants have had lengthy litigation and uncertain results as the reality of the outcome of the settlement. Only 18 claimants of nearly 200 have been successful before the arbitrator and 20 still await the initial hearing over five years after the settlement was reached (Pigford Arbitrator, 2004). This is not a favorable outcome; however, it is a continuation of the disenfranchisement of the African American farmer at the hands of the USDA.

Small farmers, the group of farmers to which most African American farmers belong, are the backbone of the sustainable agricultural future. By contributing a heightened awareness of the needs of the land, utilizing sustainable practices such as multi-cropping, and by supporting the growth and wealth of their local communities, small farmers provide an invaluable resource to the agricultural system. Government subsidized loans and grants are designed to support the small farmer, and provide vital resources to this important segment of the farming industry. In order for this system to operate effectively, it must operate equitably. To discriminate against small farmers, and to further marginalize particular small farmers with racially discriminatory practices in the administration of financial assistance, contradicts the spirit and purpose of these USDA programs.

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