

LANGUAGE, FAITH, AND IDENTITY IN ENGLISH LEARNING AT DARUSSALAM BUNTET PESANTREN

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Abstract

This study explores the interaction between language, faith, and identity in English learning at Darussalam Buntet Pesantren. Situated within an ethnographic framework, the research examines how English is ideologically positioned, how Islamic values shape learning practices, and how santri construct their identities in a religious educational setting. Data were collected through prolonged engagement, participant observation, in-depth interviews with santri and teachers, and document analysis of curriculum and institutional policies. The findings reveal that English occupies a peripheral yet symbolically important role, recognized as a global resource while remaining secondary to Arabic as the language of religious authority. Its use is largely limited to formal contexts and is shaped by institutional norms. Islamic values play a central role in mediating English learning, influencing teaching materials, classroom practices, and moral boundaries. English is selectively adapted through a process of cultural and religious filtering and is sometimes associated with purposes such as dakwah. Furthermore, the study shows that santri construct hybrid identities by negotiating their roles as devout Muslims and emerging English users. This negotiation is reflected in practices such as code-switching and the integration of religious expressions into English use. This study contributes to ELT by highlighting the importance of sociocultural and religious contexts in shaping language learning. It suggests that English in pesantren is not a neutral skill but a localized practice, requiring more context-sensitive approaches in non-secular educational settings.

Keywords – ELT in Pesantren, language ideology, Islamic education, identity construction, ethnography

Introduction

English has become a dominant global language, functioning as a key medium for international communication, education, and access to knowledge (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). In the contemporary era, its role continues to expand alongside globalization, digital transformation, and international mobility, reinforcing its status as a crucial linguistic resource in education systems worldwide. In Indonesia, English is increasingly associated with academic advancement, global participation, and socio-economic mobility (Taufik, 2024). However, recent studies emphasize that the adoption of English is not merely technical but deeply ideological, as it interacts with local cultural and institutional values (Ningsih et al., 2023;

Putri et al., 2025; Umar, 2021, 2022). Consequently, the presence of English in diverse educational settings invites critical inquiry into how it is interpreted, negotiated, and localized.

One such context is the pesantren, an Islamic boarding school that serves as a central institution for religious education, moral formation, and identity development among santri. Pesantren have historically functioned as guardians of Islamic knowledge and tradition, emphasizing Arabic as the primary language of religious authority (Rois et al., 2023). At the same time, contemporary pesantren are increasingly engaging with modern educational demands, including the integration of English into their curricula (Mustofa &

Salahuddin, 2020). This integration reflects an ongoing transformation in pesantren education, where global competencies are introduced without abandoning religious foundations. However, such efforts often produce tensions between maintaining Islamic values and responding to global linguistic demands.

Recent studies highlight that the implementation of English in pesantren remains complex and sometimes fragmented (Rahman et al., 2023). For instance, shows that English is often positioned as peripheral within pesantren curricula, influenced by leadership policies, institutional culture, and limited immersion practices. Similarly, research by Putri et al. (Putri et al., 2025) and Umar et al. (Umar et al., 2025) indicates that English teaching in *pesantren* must navigate structural constraints, including strict regulations and limited access to digital resources. Other studies also reveal multilingual dynamics in pesantren classrooms, where English coexists with Arabic and local languages, often resulting in code-switching practices that reflect both pedagogical and cultural negotiations (Fitriyah et al., 2025). These findings suggest that English learning in pesantren cannot be understood solely as language acquisition but must be viewed within broader sociocultural and religious frameworks.

Despite these emerging insights, much of the existing literature in English Language Teaching (ELT) still focuses predominantly on secular educational contexts, where English is treated as a neutral and functional skill (Holliday, 2013a; Kubota, 1998a). Such perspectives tend to overlook the role of religion in shaping language ideologies, learning practices, and identity formation. In contrast, studies on pesantren remain limited, particularly those that examine the intersection of language, faith, and

identity in a holistic manner. As highlighted by, there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding of how institutional structure, cultural values, and religious authority influence English language learning in pesantren settings.

Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on the interplay between language, faith, and identity in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren. Specifically, it examines how English is ideologically positioned within the institution, how Islamic values shape English learning practices, and how santri construct and negotiate their identities as both English learners and devout Muslims. Furthermore, the study explores the tensions and possible harmonizations between global English and local Islamic epistemology, particularly in relation to the coexistence of English and Arabic within the pesantren environment.

The purpose of this study is to explore the interaction between language, faith, and identity in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren through an ethnographic perspective. By situating English learning within its religious and cultural context, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on ELT in non-secular settings and to offer a more nuanced understanding of how global and local forces intersect in language education.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using an ethnographic approach to investigate the interaction between language, faith, and identity in English learning at Darussalam Buntet Pesantren. Ethnography was selected as it enables the researcher to explore cultural practices, institutional discourses, and participants' lived experiences within their natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the context of pesantren, where religious values, language practices, and

identity formation are deeply intertwined, this approach allows for a holistic understanding of how English is ideologically positioned and socially negotiated.

Research Design

This study adopted a critical ethnographic orientation, focusing not only on describing practices but also on examining language ideology, power relations, and cultural tensions within the pesantren environment. Specifically, the study investigates: the ideological positioning of English (e.g., as a tool for dakwah, global capital, or cultural challenge), the role of Islamic values in shaping language practices, and the construction of santri identities as both devout Muslims and English users.

Additionally, the study pays attention to power relations between languages, particularly the positioning of English in relation to Arabic as the traditional language of Islamic scholarship, as well as broader discourses of globalization and modernity in a religious educational setting.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at *Darussalam Buntet Pesantren*, an Islamic boarding school that integrates religious education with formal schooling. This site was selected due to its active engagement with English learning alongside strong Islamic traditions.

Participants were selected purposively to ensure relevance to the research focus. They included: *10–15 santri (students)* from different levels of study, *2–3 English teachers*, and where relevant, *pesantren authorities or curriculum coordinators* involved in language policy.

These participants provided diverse perspectives on language use, institutional practices, and identity negotiation.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected over a period of approximately 3–6 months through multiple ethnographic techniques:

Participant Observation

The researcher engaged in prolonged observation of English classes, dormitory life, language programs, and informal interactions. Observations focused on how English, Arabic, and local languages were used, as well as how Islamic values were embedded in learning practices. Field notes were systematically recorded.

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with santri, teachers, and selected institutional stakeholders. The interviews explored participants' perceptions of English, its functions (e.g., dakwah, global communication), and their experiences in negotiating religious and linguistic identities.

Document Analysis

Relevant institutional documents were analyzed, including: curriculum materials textbooks, language policies and regulations, visual texts such as slogans and banners.

These documents were used to examine how English is formally represented and positioned within the pesantren.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study included: Observation protocols focusing on language practices and classroom interaction, Interview guides covering themes of language ideology, Islamic values, and identity, Document analysis framework to identify institutional discourse and policy

These instruments were designed based on the study's conceptual focus on language, faith, and identity.

**Table Observation Framework
 Language, Faith, and Identity**

Dimension	Observation Focus	Field Indicators (What is Observed)	Example of Data
Language	Positioning of English in pesantren	- Statements from teachers/santri about the function of English (e.g., “important”, “supplementary”) - Situations where English is used or avoided - Terms reflecting attitudes toward English	Teacher refers to English as useful for “future” or “global dakwah”
	Language use practices	- When English is used (classroom vs informal context) - Who uses English (teachers or certain students) - Dominance of other languages (Arabic/Indonesian)	Santri use English only when instructed by teacher
	Integration of Islamic values	- Use of Qur’anic verses or hadith in English class - Islamic-themed teaching materials - Religious expressions in explanations	Teacher links lesson content to dakwah values
Faith	Religious boundaries in language	- Attitudes toward Western content - Restrictions on English usage - Moral judgments about language	English is seen as neutral but needs filtering
Identity	Identity as English	- Confidence in speaking English -	Santri feel shy or joke

learners	Speaking style (hesitation, code-switching) - Peer reactions	when speaking English
Religious identity	- Balancing Islamic identity and English use - Self-narratives (e.g., “modern santri”) - Use of Arabic terms during English learning	Santri maintain Arabic expressions while speaking English
Identity negotiation	- Situations of tension or conflict - Adaptation strategies (code-switching, humor)	Mixing English and Arabic to remain “Islamic”

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed several stages:

1. Data familiarization through repeated reading of field notes, transcripts, and documents
2. Initial coding of data related to language positioning, religious values, and identity
3. Development of thematic categories, including: English as ideological construct, Islamic values in language learning, identity construction and negotiation, tensions and harmonization between English and Arabic
4. Interpretation of findings in relation to theories of language ideology, sociocultural learning, and identity

This analytic process allowed the researcher to uncover patterns of meaning and sociocultural dynamics within the pesantren context.

Finding and Discussion

Findings of Language

The Ideological Positioning and Practice of English in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren

The findings reveal that English in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren occupies a complex and peripheral position, shaped by institutional culture, religious priorities, and sociocultural dynamics. This section presents the findings based on both observation and in-depth interviews.

English as a Peripheral yet Symbolically Important Language

The data indicate that English is recognized as important; however, its role remains secondary within the pesantren system. This dual positioning is evident in participants' narratives.

One teacher explained:

"English itu penting untuk masa depan santri, apalagi untuk dakwah global. Tapi di sini tetap yang utama adalah ilmu agama." (Teacher 1)

Similarly, a santri stated:

"Kami belajar English, tapi tidak seperti pelajaran utama. Lebih ke tambahan saja." (Santri 3)

These statements show that English is ideologically framed as a useful global resource, particularly for dakwah and future opportunities, but not as a core component of pesantren education. This reflects what Umar et al. (2025) describe as the peripheral institutional status of English, where it is acknowledged but not strongly enforced within the system.

Culturally, this positioning is closely tied to the pesantren's emphasis on kitab kuning and Arabic as the primary sources

of religious authority, reinforcing the secondary role of English.

Limited Use of English in Daily Practices

Observation findings show that English is rarely used in daily communication and is mostly confined to formal or semi-formal settings. This pattern was also confirmed through interviews.

A santri commented:

"Kalau di kelas disuruh pakai English, tapi di luar kelas jarang. Lebih sering pakai Indonesia atau Arab." (Santri 7)

Another student added:

"Kadang kalau pakai English sama teman malah jadi bercanda, tidak serius." (Santri 5)

These responses indicate that English has not yet become part of the santri's everyday linguistic repertoire. Instead, it is treated as a task-based classroom language, rather than a medium of natural communication.

This finding is consistent with previous research showing that English use in pesantren tends to be limited and program-dependent, lacking immersion in daily interaction (Umar et al., 2025).

From a cultural perspective, this reflects the linguistic hierarchy within the pesantren, where:

Arabic	= religious authority
Indonesian	= daily communication
English	= academic/foreign addition

English within the Cultural Logic of Pesantren

The positioning of English is deeply embedded in the cultural and institutional logic of the pesantren. The role of the kiai and institutional values significantly

influences how English is perceived and practiced.

One teacher noted:

“English boleh dipelajari, tapi harus tetap sesuai dengan nilai-nilai pesantren. Tidak semua budaya luar bisa langsung diterima.” (Teacher 2)

This statement highlights that English is not adopted uncritically but is filtered through Islamic values. It is accepted as long as it supports, rather than contradicts, the moral and religious framework of the pesantren.

Additionally, a curriculum coordinator mentioned:

“Kami mendukung English, tapi belum ada kebijakan khusus yang mewajibkan penggunaan sehari-hari.” (Coordinator)

This reflects a broader pattern identified in earlier studies, where institutional support exists at the ideological level but lacks systematic implementation.

Tension Between Global Language and Religious Tradition

The findings also reveal a subtle tension between English as a global language and Arabic as the traditional language of Islam.

A santri expressed:

“Kalau untuk agama, pasti pakai Arab. English lebih untuk umum saja.” (Santri 9)

Another added:

“Kadang merasa aneh kalau membahas hal agama pakai English.” (Santri 2)

These responses indicate that English is perceived as less appropriate for religious discourse, reinforcing the privileged status of Arabic. This creates a boundary where English is accepted in certain domains but

restricted in others. Such dynamics illustrate a negotiated coexistence, where English is incorporated without displacing established linguistic and religious hierarchies.

Findings of Faith

Islamic Values in Shaping English Learning Practices

The findings demonstrate that Islamic values play a central role in shaping how English is taught, perceived, and practiced in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren. Rather than being a neutral subject, English learning is deeply embedded within a religious and moral framework, influencing both pedagogical practices and students' attitudes. Two major themes emerged: (1) the integration of Islamic values in English learning and (2) the establishment of moral boundaries in language use.

Integration of Islamic Values in English Learning

The data show that English teaching is frequently integrated with Islamic values, reflecting the pesantren's commitment to aligning all forms of knowledge with religious principles. Teachers often incorporate religious references, such as Qur'anic verses, hadith, or moral messages, into English lessons.

One teacher explained:

“Kalau mengajar English, saya biasanya kaitkan dengan dakwah atau nilai Islam, supaya santri tidak hanya belajar bahasa tapi juga tetap ingat tujuan utamanya.” (Teacher 1)

This approach was also observed in classroom practices, where lesson topics were linked to Islamic themes such as akhlaq (moral conduct), dakwah, and daily religious practices.

A santri confirmed this experience:

“Kadang materinya tentang kehidupan sehari-hari, tapi dijelaskan juga dari sisi Islam. Jadi tidak lepas dari agama.” (Santri 4)

These findings indicate that English is not treated as a culturally neutral language but is recontextualized within an Islamic worldview. This aligns with the broader educational philosophy of pesantren, where all knowledge is expected to support religious understanding and moral development. In this sense, English functions not only as a communication tool but also as a medium for reinforcing Islamic identity and values.

Moral Filtering and Religious Boundaries in Language Use

Despite the acceptance of English, the findings reveal that its use is subject to moral evaluation and religious filtering. Both teachers and santri expressed awareness that English is associated with Western culture, which must be approached selectively.

One teacher stated:

“Tidak semua konten dalam bahasa Inggris cocok dengan nilai pesantren. Jadi harus disaring, mana yang sesuai dan mana yang tidak.” (Teacher 2)

Similarly, a santri commented:

“Belajar English boleh, tapi tetap harus hati-hati. Takutnya ada budaya yang tidak sesuai dengan Islam.” (Santri 6)

These responses highlight that English is not fully embraced as a neutral global language but is viewed through a moral lens, where its content and usage are evaluated based on Islamic principles.

Observation data also show that: certain topics are avoided or modified, teaching materials are adjusted to fit Islamic values,

and language use is monitored to maintain religious appropriateness.

This reflects what can be described as a process of cultural and religious filtering, where English is adapted rather than adopted.

English as a Tool for Dakwah and Religious Purpose

Interestingly, the findings also reveal that English is often legitimized through its potential role in dakwah (Islamic propagation). This framing helps reconcile the presence of a global language within a religious institution.

A teacher noted:

“Kalau English digunakan untuk dakwah, itu justru sangat bagus. Kita bisa menyampaikan Islam ke dunia internasional.” (Teacher 1)

A santri similarly expressed:

“Saya ingin bisa English supaya bisa berdakwah ke orang luar negeri.” (Santri 8)

The data show that some participants associate English with dakwah, suggesting that English may be perceived as having relevance beyond its role as a global language. This reflects a localized interpretation in which global communication practices are related to Islamic values.

Negotiating Faith and Global Influence

The findings suggest that the integration of English in pesantren is not free from tension. While English is accepted, its association with globalization and Western culture creates an ongoing need for negotiation.

One santri reflected:

“Kadang bingung juga, karena English itu identik dengan budaya luar. Tapi di pesantren kita diajarkan tetap menjaga nilai Islam.” (Santri 10)

This statement illustrates the internal negotiation experienced by students as they navigate between global linguistic exposure, and local religious commitments.

Rather than rejecting English, santri develop adaptive strategies, such as interpreting English through Islamic perspectives, selectively engaging with content, and maintaining religious expressions within English learning contexts.

Findings of Identity

Identity Construction and Negotiation among Santri

The findings reveal that English learning in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren plays a significant role in shaping santri's identities. Rather than forming a single fixed identity, santri construct dynamic and hybrid identities, negotiating between their roles as devout Muslims and emerging English users. Three major themes emerged: (1) identity as English learners, (2) maintenance of religious identity, and (3) identity negotiation through linguistic practices.

Becoming English Learners: Confidence and Ambivalence

The data show that santri develop an identity as English learners; however, this identity is often marked by uncertainty and ambivalence. While some students express motivation to learn English, many still lack confidence in using it.

One santri explained:

“Kalau disuruh ngomong pakai English, kadang masih malu dan takut salah.” (Santri 3)

Another added:

“Saya ingin bisa English, tapi belum terbiasa. Jadi masih ragu-ragu kalau bicara.” (Santri 6)

These responses indicate that the identity of being an English user is still in the process of formation, rather than fully internalized. English is perceived as a valuable skill, yet it remains socially and linguistically distant from students' everyday practices.

Observation data further show that when using English, santri often hesitate, laugh or joke, rely on peers for support. This suggests that English is not yet a naturalized identity marker, but rather a performative and situational role.

Maintaining Religious Identity in English Learning

Despite engaging with English, santri consistently maintain their identity as religious individuals. This identity remains dominant and shapes how they approach language learning.

A santri stated:

“Walaupun belajar English, kita tetap santri. Jadi harus tetap menjaga sikap dan nilai Islam.” (Santri 8)

Another student noted:

“Kalau belajar English, saya tetap pakai istilah Arab untuk hal-hal agama.” (Santri 2)

These findings indicate that religious identity is not replaced by English, but rather preserved and embedded within the learning process. Even when using English, santri continue to use Arabic expressions (e.g., *insyaAllah*, *alhamdulillah*), refer to Islamic concepts, and align their behavior with pesantren norms.

This reflects the strong influence of pesantren culture, where identity is closely tied to religious commitment, discipline, and moral conduct.

Hybrid Identity: Being “Santri” and Global English Users

The findings further reveal that santri develop what can be described as a hybrid identity, combining elements of local religious identity and global linguistic competence.

One participant expressed:

“Saya ingin jadi santri yang bisa English, supaya bisa mengikuti perkembangan zaman.” (Santri 5)

Another stated:

“Sekarang kan penting juga bisa bahasa asing, tapi tetap harus punya dasar agama yang kuat.” (Santri 9)

These statements reflect an emerging identity of “modern santri”, where English proficiency is seen as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, religious knowledge. This hybrid identity allows santri to participate in global communication, access broader knowledge, and maintain their religious and cultural roots.

Identity Negotiation through Code-Switching and Interaction

One of the most visible forms of identity negotiation is found in language practices, particularly code-switching between English, Arabic, and Indonesian. Observation data show that santri frequently mix languages as a strategy to balance different identity demands. This was also reflected in interviews.

A santri explained:

“Kadang ngomong English dicampur Arab, supaya tetap terasa islami.” (Santri 7)

Another noted:

“Kalau full English kadang terasa asing, jadi dicampur biar lebih nyaman.” (Santri 4)

This practice indicates that code-switching is not merely a linguistic habit, but a symbolic strategy to maintain religious identity, reduce social distance, and adapt to the pesantren environment.

It also reflects the multilingual ecology of the pesantren, where different languages carry different meanings:

Arabic → religious authority

Indonesian → social interaction

English → global communication

Through this negotiation, santri actively construct identities that are context-sensitive and culturally grounded.

Negotiating Tension: Between Authenticity and Modernity

Finally, the findings show that santri experience moments of tension when navigating between global and religious identities.

One participant reflected:

“Kadang merasa aneh juga, karena English itu identik dengan budaya luar, sedangkan kita di pesantren harus menjaga nilai Islam.” (Santri 10)

This illustrates an internal struggle between authentic religious identity, and aspiration toward global participation.

However, rather than leading to conflict, this tension often results in adaptive negotiation, where santri reinterpret English within Islamic perspectives,

selectively adopt global elements, and maintain core religious values.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that English learning in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren is not merely a pedagogical process but a sociocultural and ideological practice shaped by the interaction of global, religious, and local forces. The interplay between language positioning, Islamic values, and identity construction reflects broader discussions in English Language Teaching (ELT) regarding the non-neutrality of English and its embeddedness in specific cultural contexts (Holliday, 2013b; Kubota, 1998b; Umar et al., 2025).

From the perspective of language ideology, the study confirms that English is not perceived as a value-free global language, but rather as a socially situated resource whose meaning is shaped by institutional beliefs and cultural priorities (Kubota, 1998b). The peripheral positioning of English, as found in this study, resonates with arguments that the spread of English is always negotiated within local contexts rather than uniformly adopted (Kubota, 1998b). In pesantren, English is reinterpreted as both a global communicative tool and a potential cultural influence, resulting in its selective and controlled integration (Umar et al., 2025).

The findings also align with sociocultural perspectives in ELT, which emphasize that learning is mediated by cultural values and social practices (Tzuriel, 2021). In this study, Islamic values function as a central mediating force, shaping not only what is taught but also how English is understood and used. The integration of religious content and the moral filtering of English materials demonstrate that language learning is deeply embedded in value systems, rather than being purely cognitive or technical (Tzuriel, 2021). This supports

the view that education in religious contexts cannot be separated from broader moral and ideological frameworks (Marginson & Dang, 2017).

Furthermore, the study contributes to discussions on identity in language learning, particularly the notion of identity as dynamic and negotiated (Norton, 2013). The findings show that santri construct hybrid identities, combining their roles as devout Muslims with their aspirations as English users. This reflects global theories of identity in second language acquisition, which argue that learners actively negotiate their identities across different contexts (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2013). In the pesantren setting, this negotiation is especially visible through practices such as code-switching and the continued use of Arabic expressions, indicating that new linguistic identities do not replace existing ones but are layered upon them.

Importantly, the interaction between language, faith, and identity in this study illustrates a process of localization or “glocalization” of English, where global language practices are adapted to fit local religious and cultural norms. Rather than resisting English entirely or adopting it uncritically, the pesantren community engages in a process of selective appropriation, ensuring that English remains aligned with Islamic values and institutional identity.

Overall, this study suggests that ELT in pesantren contexts challenges dominant secular assumptions in language education by demonstrating that language learning is inseparable from religion, culture, and identity. It calls for a more contextualized understanding of English, particularly in non-secular settings, where global languages are continuously reshaped through local meanings and practices.

Conclusions

This study has shown that English learning in Darussalam Buntet Pesantren is not a neutral or purely technical activity, but a socially and culturally embedded practice shaped by the interaction of language, faith, and identity. English is positioned as a global resource, yet its use is mediated by Islamic values and pesantren norms. Within this context, santri do not simply adopt English; rather, they interpret, adapt, and negotiate it in ways that remain consistent with their religious commitments. As a result, English learning contributes to the emergence of hybrid identities, where being a santri and an English user coexist in a dynamic and context-dependent manner.

Academically, this study contributes to the development of English Language Teaching (ELT) by extending sociocultural and identity-based perspectives into religious educational settings, which have often been underrepresented in the literature. It highlights how language ideology, faith-based values, and local institutional cultures interact in shaping language learning practices. In doing so, the study offers an alternative lens to dominant secular-oriented ELT frameworks and enriches ongoing discussions on the localization of English and identity negotiation in non-secular contexts.

However, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single pesantren, which may not fully represent the diversity of English learning practices across different Islamic boarding schools. Second, the data are primarily based on observations and interviews within a limited timeframe, which may not capture longer-term changes in language practices and identity development. Third, the study emphasizes students' and teachers' perspectives, while broader institutional and policy-level influences are not extensively explored.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to involve multiple pesantren settings in order to provide more comparative insights. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how language, faith, and identity evolve over time. In addition, further research could explore the role of curriculum design and institutional policy in shaping English learning in religious contexts. Practically, this study suggests that English Language Teaching in pesantren should adopt more context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge the importance of religious values, while still supporting students' engagement with global communication.

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