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About Bianca Marais

From biancamarais.com



Bianca Marais is the author of the beloved *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* and *If You Want to Make God Laugh*.

She holds a certificate in creative writing from the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies, where she now teaches creative writing.

Before turning to writing, she started a corporate training company and volunteered with Cotlands, where she assisted care workers in Soweto with providing aid for HIV/AIDS orphans. She runs the Eunice Ngogodo Own Voices Initiative to empower young black women in Africa to write and publish their own stories.

Originally from South Africa, she now resides in Toronto with her husband.

About the book

From penguinrandomhouse.com

Life under Apartheid has created a secure future for Robin Conrad, a nine-year-old white girl living with her parents in 1970s Johannesburg. In the same nation, but worlds apart, Beauty Mbali, a Xhosa woman in a rural village in the Bantu homeland of the Transkei, struggles to raise her children alone after her husband's death. Their meeting should never have occurred...until The Soweto Uprising, in which a protest by black students ignites racial conflict, alters the fault lines on which their society is built, leaving Robin's parents dead and Beauty's daughter missing.

In the aftermath, Beauty is hired to care for Robin, and the two forge an inextricable bond through their deep personal losses. But Robin knows that if Beauty reunites with her daughter, Robin could lose her new caretaker forever, so she makes a desperate decision with devastating consequences.

Told through Beauty and Robin's alternating perspectives, the two narratives interweave to create a rich and complex tapestry of the emotions and tensions at the heart of Apartheid South Africa. *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* is a beautifully rendered look at loss, racism, and the creation of family.

Rousing quest for redemption in apartheid South Africa

By Rayyan Al-Shawaf | July 21, 2017 | thestar.com

Hum If You Don't Know the Words, the title of a delightful yet deadly serious novel by Bianca Marais, is also a metaphor for how Robin, a white girl in apartheid South Africa who co-narrates with an educated black maid named Beauty, muddles through a fraught childhood. In 1976, when Robin is nine years old and oblivious to life outside her Johannesburg suburb, her parents are murdered for the colour of their skin. The perpetrators are black men enraged by the police's gunning down of at least 176 protesting black schoolchildren in the now-famous Soweto uprising.

Marais, who is white, lives in Toronto, but was born and raised in South Africa. She manages to capture, sometimes simultaneously, the abominable nature of apartheid and the racial/cultural complexity of her homeland, as when Robin discovers that some people are neither white nor black. "If people didn't come in the right colors, how would we know who to be scared of?" she asks.

Of course, Marais isn't the first white South African writer to do this. And highlighting the absurdity of what purportedly sophisticated grown-ups have wrought by presenting it through the eyes of a mystified child is hardly original. Robin initially seems like the heroine of a young adult novel. Marais even has her grapple with forms of bias other than anti-black racism, such as homophobia and anti-Semitism, in a heavy-handed attempt to illustrate their commonalities.

Yet two story elements steer *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* away from the predictable and the pedagogic. The first assumes the form of Beauty, a black character who — in contrast to Robin — narrates her chapters in the present tense, imbuing them with immediacy. In Johannesburg, Beauty becomes nanny and surrogate mother to Robin, whose maternal aunt/nominal guardian is often abroad for work. However, Beauty's main concern is finding her 19-year-old daughter Nomsa, who was living with her uncle in nearby Soweto but has gone missing since the uprising began. Has the fiery Nomsa joined the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC) resistance organization?

"I allowed her to come to this city to study so long as she promised she would not get involved in anything dangerous," recounts a desperate Beauty, who was at the time living in the far-off Transkei region, "but I should have known she was lying. The only thing a warrior cannot fight is her own fierce nature."

Meanwhile, Robin cannot bear to be separated from Beauty, even for the sake of Nomsa. So she makes a selfish, shocking, and fateful decision. A sure-footed Marais then tracks Robin's attempts to rectify the mess she's made. And in the process, the author turns *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* into a brave girl's rousing quest for redemption.

Review: *Hum If You Don't Know the Words*

By Jen Forbus | June 8, 2017 | shelf-awareness.com

In her breathtaking debut, Bianca Marais explores humanity's potential for compassion and understanding in a world consumed by hate and injustice. Robin Conrad is Marais's white, nine-year-old, female narrator living in 1970s South Africa. Her story alternates with that of Beauty Mbali, an educated, black Xhosa mother.

Robin lives a comfortable life with her parents in Johannesburg, observing the apartheid laws that force her black maid to use separate bathroom facilities, eat from different dishes and carry a passbook to verify her work status. Meanwhile, Beauty, a widowed schoolteacher living in a small, rural village of the Transkei, struggles to raise her three children, the oldest of whom is living with her brother, Andile, and attending school in the suburb of Soweto. The two exist in their disconnected worlds until a tragedy strikes, forcing their spheres to collide.

Andile summons Beauty to Soweto when he writes that her daughter Nomsa is in danger. After two days of travel, Beauty arrives as the Soweto uprising of black students erupts in the streets. She searches desperately among the children but does not find her daughter.

In the middle of the night following the uprising, Robin and the family's maid wake to the pounding of the police on their door. A confused and terrified Robin learns her parents—who had gone out for the night—were murdered.

Robin's only remaining relative is her mother's sister, Edith, an airline hostess who spends more time traveling than home. Beauty needs documented work to stay in the city and search for her daughter. So when a mutual acquaintance covertly brings Edith and Beauty together, their work dilemmas are solved, even if not quite legally.

As Robin and Beauty's relationship grows, the young girl starts to question the belief system that has shaped her first decade of life. And Beauty opens her heart to love the damaged child who's experienced so much loss in such a short time. With humor, warmth and tenderness, Marais pulls her audience into this unlikely but heartwarming bond. The exquisiteness of Robin and Beauty's connection is enhanced by the contrast of apartheid's repulsiveness, both of which are forcefully illustrated by Marais. She details the horrific results of the uprising with vivid descriptions like "a river of blood in the streets and the children are floating in it... they are human debris swept along in a flood of destruction." Furthermore, her depictions of the disdain of whites toward blacks are emotionally painful. But while such portrayals are agonizing, Marais injects hope and light into the darkness of hate with scenes such as Robin's realization that "Almost everyone who mattered most to me was in the same room.... Black, white, homosexual, heterosexual, Christian, Jew, Englishman, Afrikaner, adult, child, man, woman: we were all there together, but somehow that eclectic jumble of labels was overwritten by the one classification that applied to every person there: 'friend.' "

Intense, powerful and moving, *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* is an exalting anthem of love, family and humanity.

Author Interview: Bianca Marais

The author of Hum If You Don't Know The Words on crafting authentic characters, accepting grief, and writing about what one knows

Bennet S. Johnson | Jul 12, 2017 | medium.com

Bianca Marais' *Hum If You Don't Know The Words* is an emotionally charged brick of dynamite. From its intertwining of two — what one might easily call, opposing — narratives, to its adaptation of vivid motifs — the kind which only a novel set in late 1970s South Africa can appropriately utilize — this debut will take you into unfamiliar territory and won't let you go until it's finished with you.

At the center of the book is the story of Robin and Beauty. Though Robin is a white child attempting to grieve the loss of her recently murdered parents and Beauty is a black woman from rural lands searching for her lost daughter in a big city, what begins as two separate stories inevitably morphs into one. By merging their stories together, Marais explores the difficulties of race, grief, family-making, and musicality with a near perfect balance struck between that of presence and potency. The harmony of subjects and voices sing out from the page — it's quite hard not to finish this book within a single day.

Bianca will be reading at Literati Bookstore on July 7th at 7 PM. In the week leading up to her reading, I was fortunate enough to send her a few questions.

The relationship shared between Cat and Robin was one of my favorite threads to follow throughout the entirety of the novel. As one might easily guess, chapter thirty-three — the chapter in which Cat evaporates from the remainder of the narrative — was a difficult, yet somehow still beautiful chapter to read. How did you come to the decision to remove this imaginary character from the novel?

That was an incredibly difficult scene to write and I recall crying as I was writing it because Cat is just an extension of Robin. In the beginning of the book, before Robin's parents are murdered, Cat is in Robin's life as a coping mechanism. Robin projects onto Cat the feelings, insecurities and fears that she knows aren't acceptable to her parents, and that's how she learns to exist in a world in which she wants very much to be herself but also to be liked and loved.

After Robin's parents die, Robin uses her sister even more as an emotional crutch to avoid dealing with her grief. As long as she can keep Cat happy and stop her from being sad, she's able to cope with her loss. However, once Robin starts to care for Beauty and once she knows that Beauty loves her — all of her, even the parts that weren't acceptable to her parents — she feels she's able to navigate a world in which Cat doesn't exist. That scene is very much Robin's coming of age and it shows her resilience and vulnerability.

The title of the novel appears for us about a quarter of a way through the book. Robin is attending her parent's funeral and at the start of the procession an unfamiliar song begins to play. Fearing possible embarrassment, Robin informs her aunt Edith of her ignorance, at which point, Edith responds: "When in doubt, just do what I do, Robs. Hum if you don't know the words." I should also note that this isn't the only instance in the book where the motif of music and sound shows up. We hear numerous records, a singing / repetitious African Grey, and there always seems to be some rhythmic noise hovering beyond the periphery. What is it about the motif of musicality that you find so useful when writing a novel like *Hum If You Don't Know the Words*?

When you write a story that takes place in a very particular moment in history, you need to anchor the story very firmly in that time so that the reader feels immersed in it. Music is a wonderful way of doing that. Also, music is so culturally important. The music that Beauty listens to and the songs she sings is very different to the music Robin and her aunt, Edith, listen to. I wanted to show how far apart their worlds are even though they end up living in the same home.

When I write a scene, I picture it in my mind from the point of view of the character, looking out of their eyes. And so I feel, see and hear everything they do which is why I focus on smells, sounds, tastes and textures; they make a story come alive in a way that it wouldn't if you left out sensory descriptions.

Though this book has a great deal of sadness in it, there are many, many moments in which the audience will find themselves laughing out loud. I'm thinking of Morrie and King George when I mention this. Where did these two characters come from and were they always as funny as they are in the final version of the novel?

I'm so glad you enjoyed Morrie and King George because they are two of my favorites. I honestly can't tell you where they come from; both of them just popped into my head fully formed as I was writing. As you say, the book deals with heavy themes, but South Africans are also people who love laughing and who can see the humor in any situation no matter how dire and these characters helped me convey that.

I didn't know much about Judaism when Morrie announced himself, and so I had to do quite a bit of research to get him right. King George made me laugh out loud as I was writing him and I'm grateful to him for the comic relief even as he remained a very scarred and damaged character.

I struggled to fully accept the decisions Robin makes in pursuit of attempting to gain some semblance of a normal childhood. Yet whenever I found myself struggling to acknowledge what she was doing, I reminded myself of all that she had been through: two dead parents, a maid who left her, an aunt who may or may not want her, and one friend who wishes to be more than just a friend. This seemed to make her actions comprehensible — if only until something more life derailing occurred. How do you empathize with Robin?

I must be honest, I battled to like Robin at many moments throughout the story. She can be such a brat and is so oblivious to her privilege, but she's also very much a product of her environment. I had to keep reminding myself of that in order to empathize with her. It's not that she has a bad nature or is a horrible person — she just doesn't know any better most of the time.

When I meet people in real life who are bigoted or prejudiced, or just oblivious to other people's feelings or suffering, it always makes me wonder about their upbringing and how much of who they are is shaped by where they grew up and the people who raised them. It's the whole nature versus nurture argument and I find it fascinating.

Sometimes good people make bad choices and that's very much what happens with Robin, but she does eventually redeem herself which makes her much more sympathetic.

Grief and the process of grieving is essential to almost all of the different characters we meet through the book. Everyone, in some manner, is attempting to overcome some sort of strife, or pain, or unmentionable memory. By the end of the book, grief has yet to be conquered, but is instead managed via the familial ties which are constructed between those likeminded characters which care for one another. This begs the questions: can grief ever fully be escaped?

My experience of grief is that isn't something you get over. It isn't a process you go through to come out healed on the other side. It's something that stays with you and transforms you, and the best you can hope for is to learn how to live with it so that the burden of it gets easier to carry with time.

Beauty says this of grief in the book and it sums up how I feel about it.

Grief is a city all of its own, built high on a hill and surrounded by stone walls. It is a fortress that you will inhabit for the rest of your life as you walk its dead-end roads forever. The trick is to stop trying to escape and, instead, make yourself at home.

Beauty Mbali is an exceptionally strong character. Her resilience and capacity for hope amazed me time and time again. I understand that some of her qualities are based off of a black woman who cared for you when you were a child. Eunice, who watched you as a child, is still a dear friend of yours and someone you are in contact with regularly. Though Eunice will turn ninety-four this year and her hearing is somewhat problematic, have you spoken at all with her about the book and the character of Beauty Mbali?

I have tried throughout my adult life to speak to Eunice about her experience of apartheid and how it affected her, but it's something she's never wanted to discuss and I've had to respect that. Eunice is as resilient and full of grace as Beauty is and those are the qualities of hers that I wanted to capture. Eunice is my absolute hero. I can't imagine having lived the life she has and not being bitter about it. She is a bigger and better person than I will ever be.

Eunice knows about the book and I have asked her permission to speak about her and to post photographs of her on social media which she has very kindly granted. She says she's very proud of me and is looking forward to becoming famous. She has a brilliant sense of humor.

I was lucky enough to volunteer in Soweto for almost ten years working with the caregivers of HIV positive children and have them share their experiences of apartheid with me. It was their willingness to talk about it and their generosity of spirit that allowed me to be able to understand some of what Beauty may have experienced during that time.

Additional Interviews:

[Author Bianca Marais on Apartheid, Growing Up, and How they Shape Her Novel | July 21, 2017 | wuwm.com/podcast](http://www.wuwm.com/podcast)

[Stereo Embers The Podcast: Author Bianca Marais \(Hum If You Don't Know The Words\) | soundcloud.com/alexgreenonline](https://soundcloud.com/alexgreenonline)

[The Short Stacks 18: Bianca Marais//If You Want to Make God Laugh | July 18, 2019 | https://thestackspodcast.com/tag/bianca-marais/](https://thestackspodcast.com/tag/bianca-marais/)

Discussion Questions

From *biancamarais.com*

1. Robin is a product of her environment and adopts the racist ideology of those around her. How do these prejudices and preconceived notions about black people inform the way she acts? How do her behavior and thinking change throughout the book, particularly toward Beauty?
2. Compare 1970s South Africa to today's world. How have matters surrounding racism and homophobia changed since then? In what ways have they remained the same? What can we do individually and in our communities to facilitate forward thinking and change?
3. Robin and Beauty come together, against all odds, to create a family of their own. How does this book challenge norms of the conventional nuclear family? How does Beauty's role as the mother of Nomsa differ from her role as Robin's caretaker? What does *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* tell us about human connection in the face of adversity?
4. The pass laws and the Group Areas Act meant that Beauty and her children had to live in the Bantu homeland of the Transkei, approximately 600 miles from where her husband worked in the gold mines. How much of Beauty's family life is affected by the laws of apartheid? Did this have an impact on Nomsa's decision to become a freedom fighter? Once apartheid ended in 1994, how much do you think the state-legislated disintegration of families continued to affect South African society and black cultures?
5. What purpose does Cat serve in Robin's life, and what necessitated her appearance? How does Robin use Cat to navigate her home life with her parents, and then her life with Edith? Is Cat an effective coping mechanism? Are there any downsides to her presence?
6. Compare Beauty and her daughter, Nomsa. As the plot unfolds and more of Nomsa's character is illuminated, what similarities between the two come to light? How does your perception of Nomsa change throughout the book, and why?
7. What is the significance of the book's title, and why do you think it was chosen? How does it relate to the book's central themes?
8. How does the narrative change between Robin's and Beauty's alternating perspectives? What stylistic choices does the author employ to differentiate each voice from the other? Who is a more reliable narrator?
9. How does the White Angel help Beauty in her search for Nomsa, and how much does she hinder it? Does her need to control the situation say anything about Maggie and her

subconscious attitude toward black people? Does Robin really save the day at the end of the story? Do her actions make everything right, or are they more a child's way of trying to fix what cannot be mended?

10. What do you make of the ending, and why do you think the author chose to conclude the novel at this moment? If there were an epilogue, where do you think we'd find the characters?

Why are South African cities still so segregated 25 years after apartheid?

Justice Malala in Johannesburg | October 21, 2019 | theguardian.com

After 1994, the architecture of apartheid – the separation of rich and poor, black and white – was to be eradicated with creative and determined urban planning. It has not quite happened



A waste-picker sorts through a bag of rubbish from bins outside a gated residence in a wealthy suburb of Johannesburg. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

It doesn't take long after I drive out of the sleek OR Tambo international airport for the penny to drop. Again. Johannesburg is the bastard child of the worst aspects of capitalist greed and 20th-century racism. Nearly 150 years after its formation, this sprawling metropolis is still scarred by the sins of its genesis.

Even with the explosive rise of the black middle class, the presence of blacks in formerly white suburbs remains low

Johannesburg – like Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and other cities in South Africa – is visibly and traumatically segregated. These remain cities divided.

The rich of Johannesburg still live in the sumptuous northern suburbs, where the food at some restaurants is Michelin-star quality and house prices are eye-watering. These areas remain largely white, although that is changing at a glacial pace. The workers are in Soweto and Alexandra and other poor, crime-plagued black enclaves. It has always been this way with Johannesburg, and it remains pretty much as divided 25 years after apartheid collapsed and 29 years after Nelson Mandela walked out of prison.

This economic powerhouse is Africa's city of dreams – and nightmares. Its population of nearly 10 million are drawn from all corners of South Africa and increasingly from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Malawi and Bangladesh. The city remains a magnet for those hoping for a better life.

It is unique as the only major city in the world not built by the seaside or on the banks of a major river. This is because it is the child of gold, not trade. Just a patchwork of farms when gold was discovered in 1884, it swiftly transformed into a chaotic, violent concatenation of settlements that attracted white adventurers, gold diggers (literal and figurative), sex workers, settlers, criminals, shysters, black labourers and elites from around the globe – all looking to make a fortune.



People queue to cast their votes at a polling station in Soweto in April 1994, in South Africa's first all-race elections. Photograph: Denis Farrell/AP

It mutated into a frontier town and grew in a colonial fashion – blacks and whites remained largely separate, with the white mine-owners building mansions that sprawled into rich northern suburbs while black people were pushed to the south into townships.

Apartheid formalised the loose colonial arrangement in the 1940s, creating a black labour reserve named Soweto (from South Western Townships) and banishing black people from the city while forcing them to carry a *dompas* (permit) at all times to show cause to be there. For 46 years from the formal introduction of apartheid in 1948 until its demise in 1994, this was the architecture of apartheid Johannesburg. Separate and unequal; black and white; rich and poor.

Then 1994 happened. Mandela and his party, the ANC, were installed in office. Hopes for a new South Africa and a new Johannesburg – integrated, non-racial and free of the divisions of the past – were high. Spatial apartheid would be done away with thanks to creative and determined urban planning.



The Maboneng development zone in Johannesburg in 2013.
Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

It has not quite happened. In my neighbourhood of Parkview, a tree-lined middle-class suburb in the jacaranda tree shadow of the “Randlords’” mansions in Westcliff, mine remains one of woefully few black families. Even with the explosive rise of the black middle class in the mid-2000s, the presence of black people in formerly white suburbs across Johannesburg remains low.

There is a reason for this glacial pace of change. Johannesburg is a microcosm of South Africa. The World Bank said in May 2018 that South Africa remains the most economically unequal country in the world. Poverty levels are highest among black people. Whites make up the majority of the elite or top 5% of the population. Hence the stubbornness of spatial segregation.

After the collapse of apartheid, Mandela and his new team vowed to provide housing, water, electricity and other amenities to the previously disadvantaged. They didn’t expect to get such a huge influx of new residents into the cities. Since 1994, millions of people have set up shacks on the peripheries of townships and cities across the country.

The response has been to rush to these unplanned new peripheral areas – some built on dangerous river banks – and build formal, though tiny, houses. The result is massive new low-cost housing units on the peripheries of cities and very little or no deliberate urban planning that leads to integrated housing solutions. The rich stay in the rich suburbs while the poor join other poor people on the periphery.



A pedestrian passes by a residential construction project in Maboneng.
Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

Hopes for the future

It doesn't mean that there is no change. In 2016 the government statistician published a series of maps that illustrate Johannesburg is the most integrated city out of its six major metros. Encouraging as that picture is, it is also problematic. The Johannesburg central business district has a high percentage of black African residents – but the past 20 years have been characterised by “white flight” into the northern suburbs. Johannesburg's townships, like Soweto, remain largely disconnected from business districts and formerly white suburbs, despite initiatives such as bus rapid transit to make it easier for Soweto residents to get to work in formerly white areas.

Even more hopeful is the decision this February by the city of Johannesburg to adopt a first-of-its-kind inclusionary housing policy that compels private developers to make 30% of the homes in all future residential developments affordable, regardless of where they are built. Implemented properly, it could be a game-changer for the city.

Many of my favourite parts of Johannesburg have been facilitated by the Johannesburg Development Agency, together with a handful of savvy and brave private developers. The Newtown Cultural Precinct in the CBD is a fine example, incorporating commercial developments and sleek affordable housing.

Johannesburg's new policy to make 30% of homes in future developments affordable could be a game-changer for the city

Possibly the trendiest part of the old Joburg CBD is Maboneng, a collection of 55 buildings bought and restored by the JDA in partnership with entrepreneur Jonathan Liebmann. The company Liebmann founded collapsed earlier this year, with units being auctioned off at way

below estimated market value to bargain-hunters. But it is still a hive of restaurants, hotels, residential flats and a major artistic hub, with international artist William Kentridge as a tenant. However there are others springing up all over town.

Yet Johannesburg's fortunes are intricately intertwined with South Africa's – and the country has gone through a turbulent 10 years under the leadership of ousted former president Jacob Zuma. Now led by former trade unionist and businessman Cyril Ramaphosa, the country is battling to deal with the corruption that thrived under Zuma. Ramaphosa says all the right things, as he did in London this week, but internal ANC politics stop him from introducing vigorous economic reforms to kickstart the economy in a country where unemployment is now just under 30% and government finances are deteriorating rapidly.

Young people are restless and are becoming increasingly disillusioned with politics. The number of South Africans under 20 who registered to participate in May's general election was the lowest since at least 1999, data from the Independent Electoral Commission showed. Among citizens aged 18 to 29 – the biggest segment of the voting population – registrations are at their lowest in at least a decade.

The frustration of youth is palpable. Every morning traffic reports warn of protests by young people blocking major roads with burning tyres and rocks to demand services and jobs. It is a ticking timebomb.

Yet there is a sense in South Africa that things can be turned around. That would give our cities a shot at becoming more inclusive, more liveable and more human.

Justice Malala is an award-winning journalist, television host, political commentator and newspaper columnist. His book on South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy will be published in the US next year.

RECIPE FOR SOUTH AFRICAN MALVA PUDDING

INGREDIENTS

For the pudding

2 tablespoons butter

1 teaspoon white vinegar

½ cup of milk

1 ½ cups cake flour

1 teaspoon baking soda

1 pinch salt

1 cup superfine sugar

2 eggs

1 tablespoon apricot jam

For the sauce

1 ½ cups cream

½ cup butter

½ cup white sugar

½ cup water, orange juice, or sherry

PREPARATION

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees F (175 degrees C). In a small saucepan over low heat, melt 2 tablespoons butter together with vinegar and milk. Remove from heat, and set aside. Meanwhile, sift flour, baking soda, and salt together into a separate bowl.
- Beat superfine sugar and eggs with an electric mixer on high speed until fluffy and light-colored, about 5 minutes. Gradually mix in the apricot jam. Fold the dry ingredients into the egg mixture alternately with the warmed milk mixture using a spatula. Pour batter into a greased 1 quart ovenproof baking dish.
- Bake approximately 45 minutes, or until a knife inserted into the center comes out clean.
- Prepare the sauce: place cream, butter, ½ cup sugar, and water (or juice or sherry) in a saucepan and stir over moderate heat until the butter has melted and the sugar is dissolved. Do not allow the mixture to boil.
- Remove pudding from the oven, pierce several times with a skewer or fork, and pour the hot cream mixture immediately over the pudding. Serve hot or cold.



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AFRICA**