

COLONIZATION AND HISTORY: THROUGH THE EYES OF AFRICAN THINKERS

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ABSTRACT

The European Colonization of Africa had a devastating impact on Africa with regards to the brutal economic, political, and social oppression the continent experienced. Colonialism was a dark and tragic period in its history as many of the original customs, traditions, religions, tribes, and social orders would be severely torn from their space of existence. Most of the records of this period came exclusively from European sources, which had left the African voice missing from the conversation. Without giving agency to their voices and painful memories of colonization and slavery, you could-not get a complete understanding of what occurred in different spaces throughout Africa. We need to review what kind of impact this experience would have had on an African to truly understand this trauma. This article attempts to give voice to the African experience of colonization to create a fuller and more inclusive historical narrative.

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Introduction

The European Colonization of Africa had a devastating impact on Africa in terms of the brutal economic, political, and social oppression the continent experienced. Colonialism was a dark and tragic period in its history as many of the original customs, traditions, religions, tribes, and social orders would be severely torn from their space of existence. Arguably this trauma or shock in its history crippled our own understanding of Africa even today. Most of the records of this period came exclusively from European sources, which had left the African voice missing from the conversation.

There was an undeniable gap in what the Europeans perceived was going and what an African might have felt about colonization. Also, with the slavery experience the objectivity of a European writer becomes questionable because it left a cleavage in the narrative. This was because events occurred in a given space but, each group could have had very different takes on what had occurred. It would be difficult to look at a history of Africa that in this period that had an African voice included in the dialogue.

Furthermore, without having an African voice in the dialogue about colonialism we could not have a full narrative. This could not be done without giving agency to their plight. Without giving agency to their voices and painful memories of slavery you could-not get a complete understanding of what occurred in different spaces throughout Africa. We need to review what kind of impact this experience would have had on an African to truly understand this trauma. Unfortunately, many of the Europeans who recorded the events in Africa at this time did not know how to speak many of ethnic languages of the different tribes that had lived there for ages. Without any knowledge of the native's languages and customs we have identified a fatal flaw with these writers. The European writers had "Orientalized" Africans by lumping or combining together all Africans into a one size fits all labelling. This does not work because in any one village you can have multiple dialects, practices, religions, tribes, and traditions.

The majority of descriptions of African have been from a Western perspective which did not always take into consideration the different dynamic of African culture and society. Western thought can-not be applied to this society because Western theories will often misjudge certain aspects of these societies as being backwards or not developed. It led to a level of "Orientalism" that turned Africa into a social science project. For example, many of the Europeans writers took for granted the fact that these tribes that they often portrayed as having no monetary system might still use systems of barter and trade that did not show up in their observations.

Western theories had applied views that would work in Germany or England but, it would be foolish to think that societies in a completely different part of the world could just become uniformly like Europe. Once, again tragically we see the Africans “Orientalized” into a project or question that needed to be created and solved. This history in itself was a creation and even their identity was a commodity of Western knowledge.

Western progressive minded figures’ role in the appreciation of African culture

Moreover, values were not the same everywhere and to enforce your own values on others would not make for an easy transition. By western standards many of the description recorded of Africa would show a wild and backward society that was in dire need of civilization. That was a very troubling notion because when talking about civilization many of the western writers are speaking from a pro-European and Christian background. The people living in these foreign lands are seen as being savage and barbaric. The African people were labeled and judged by western standards and this was unfair. Societies have always had their interpretation of what values were important to them and what they believed it meant to be civilized. In this vein western writers have missed the ball failing to present what Africans have said in the fallout from the colonial period. It did-not give a complete picture to only include descriptions from one side, especially when that one side was subjugating the other and creating stories and descriptions of what Africa was. The tragedy with this one-sided description was that through-out the western world people began to accept strong stereo-types of a wild barbaric society.

Samuel Crowther

With this is mind it would be important to review what Africans have thought and felt about their interactions with Europeans and develop more of an African account of Africa’s history. For example, a person like Samuel Crowther would have had in depth knowledge of West African culture because he was strong willed and well educated African man. He came from an African village and spoke African languages and this was critical, it should-not simply off. There was a certain amount of cultural acumen that you would not see from a western writer. His cultural capital and experience gave agency to Africans in the colonial experience.

Crowther had a better understanding and appreciation of African culture because he was a man that came from that background. Crowther was unique because he had a grasp of western culture through his westernized education and

had a powerful understanding of life in Western Africa. This was because of some of the powerful events that occurred very early in his life. Slavery was a very violent part of African history and was responsible for the destruction of so many bonds that tore families apart and led to so many being displaced. The traumatic impacts included the social structure of the villages being ravaged. Crowther knew first-hand how painful slavery could be living in Western Africa when the slave trade was thriving and lucrative. One could imagine just how powerful a feeling it would have been for him to be watching people being sold into slavery.

Moreover, Samuel Crowther was one of the most popular and widely known African Christians of his time.¹ A famous missionary worker, he came from a small village in Nigeria. Now with Crowther working as a missionary, Christianity finally had a Black face that understood the nuances of African society better than most westerner missionaries would. He was really dynamic because there was simply not that many African men at his time that had the western style education he did. He was a truly remarkable African Christian leader that hailed from in Africa, and he was respectful to the cultural dynamics of African Society.

Crowther was born in a small town in the year 1807 in Western Nigeria in a place called Osogun in Yorubaland, his name as a child was Ajayi.² He grew up in an area that historically had some tension with their Islamic neighbors. There were serious Islamic movements there that were rallying under a jihadist sentiment. This would have a profound impact upon his childhood, growing up in a tenuous region so diverse, yet at the same time was like a tinder box. Also, with this war and violence that took place in front of him between the north and the south, there was something even more painful that occurred which would have a profound impact on him.

Although, slavery had been illegal it remained a very attractive and lucrative trade for the Europeans. Slavery was an incredibly traumatizing experience for the people who lived there. Families were fractured and destroyed. This would have been a death-blow to their identities. He could relate to the bonds that were broken in these societies because of slavery.

Crowther was violently snatched away from his home by this institution that tore away people's culture, traditions, and histories with their bodies to be sold into being the possessions of other people. Crowther grew up in a diverse but, also violent society with the combination of hostilities by the militant Islamic groups who

¹ Walls. 1992. "Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1892) Foremost African Christian of the Nineteenth Century." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* no. 16 (1),15-21

² *Ibid*, 15-21.

forcefully rejected Christianity and the Europeans who were engaging in the illegal activities of slave trading. It would be without a doubt that a man with his life experiences saw, and felt things that simply would not be possible for a western writer to have felt or understood. The intimate knowledge and powerful thoughts would only aid our knowledge.

According to Walls, "When Crowther was about thirteen, Osogun was raided, apparently by a combination of Fulani and Oyo Muslim, he recalled the devastation of burning houses, roping of the neck, slaughter for those who could not travel, and he changed hands six times before being sold to Portuguese traders."³ He would find himself helpless at the hands of different people however, his outcome was more fortunate than that of many others who would have either perished on their way across the Atlantic or become someone else's property once they landed.

Samuel Crowther as the African voice to the Christian Mission

Crowther was the African voice to the Christian Mission in Africa. His presence incorporated what had been missing for ages. Culturally he could go into communities and have some similarities and understand the native tongue of the locals and this would go a long way in developing an African approach to Christianity. He would engage in critical dialogues. His work in the region gained much notoriety as he was able to produce literature and materials that were targeted towards an African Christian community.

Crowther translated materials into local languages and created materials to give people advice on how to practice Christianity. Beyond just the physical translation which the missions would have benefitted from had they done it before he also added an African flavor to the mission. Now, you had a true African voice that was a leading figure in the Christian community. He was a star from a group of people who did not have many leaders who effectively communicated and understood things on his level. He was an example of an active African Christian voice opposed to a person who simply converted and was practicing what he was taught. Crowther was someone who had ownership of his thought and his destiny. This was unique for his time because he was a man that brought an African element into something that was mostly dictated from a western perspective.

³ Ibid,15-21.

Also, something of great importance about Crowther not only that he was able to speak native tongues making him more flexible than a European mission worker but, he was able to use his intimate knowledge of how societies function to his advantage especially when dealing with groups different than himself. His character really comes out in his dealings with people from other beliefs because one has to remember that different parts of Africa can very diverse and distinct ethnic groups and in the ethnic groups that practiced many different kinds of faiths even if they may not be recognized as a religion by western standards. He is insightful and understanding enough navigates very carefully and subtly in his encounters with other groups.

For example, the Western part of Africa had a sizable Muslims population so any successful mission worker at some point or another had to interact with Muslims at some in their careers. He was not a religious ideologue like some religious leaders tended to be rather, he was very open minded and flexible in his thinking. He was interested in hearing the story of the other side and this exemplified a very dynamic ability in him as a religious leader because as an African he understood that there were other views of Africans that unfortunately would not be respected or even be allowed into the discussion.

Crowther made it an emphasis of his to work with what the environment gave him. Many of these interactions challenged his own thinking and approaches as it made his thoughts more refined. He was different from a typical western missionary because he did not necessarily dictate towards other. He made a point through his career not only to work with Muslims and understand them better but, also to engage them in serious dialogue. This desire to engage other groups in dialogue was really fantastic because it allowed him to observe and learn about different groups in Africa and he did not approach the Muslims as being some kind of foreign group. He approached them rather as Africans, who happened to have a different view point of "God." Most importantly those view-points were uniquely African.

This approach was really important to understand because when missionaries would normally come into Africa they would find people who were Muslim or practiced other religions and condescendingly looked to convert them. Crowther represented a breath of fresh air because even if he did not convert people in his interactions, what he did was passed an olive branch, a seed for good will, and it opened up a space for dialogue in the future. This would be a trait Africa would benefit from even today.

This was important because cultures will act out there tradition and customs over a space and what converting people did was it took the essence of African customs and traditions that were in that space and transplanted them with something that had more

of a European flavor. Unfortunately, sometimes this was why the missions were met with violent resistance in the form of Islamic Jihad, or skepticism by others because they could not over-night become part of a system they don't recognize.

Crowther's utility was that he had cultural capital and social understanding as a Christian leader that allowed him to understand African culture while promoting Christian values. He was flexible and graceful enough to respect and understand the other views that were dynamically African as well. He was also very different for example from William Sheppard, who was an African American missionary because although he was Black, he was too westernized to appreciate the cultural dynamics of Africa.⁴

Crowther represented a man with a real African's experience with the abilities to think with and work under a western system. He symbolized a duality of man that brought out the best of both sides and added another dimension to the dialogue of an African experience.

Sierra Leone

What would have happened once he was taken would have had a profound impact on the rest of his life. The ship that had taken him away from his land had been intercepted by a British Naval squadron patrolling the waters to curb illegal slave trade activities. Sierra Leone was a very unique country. It brought together a lot of openly anti-slavery interests, very progressive minded people that came from mostly an Evangelical Christian Background.

Sierra Leone was something special in the fact that it captured. It possessed an independent African spirit that had picked up on modern technology and thought while maintaining their uniquely African customs and traditions.

Sierra Leone was a free Christian settlement in West Africa that was blessed to be reaping the benefits of the British abolition of slavery. It was in a way a safe haven that produced a community where Africans could live in peace without fear of attacks and oppression. They benefitted from the British also because of the naval activities helped police the activities in the water. Their presence in the seas became an obstacle to illegal slave trading. This would be an ideal place for the young Crowther to land because it would embrace both an African spirit and western thought, in a unique fusion of ideology and culture.

⁴ Hochschild, Adam. 1998. King Leopold's Ghost. New York: First Mariner Books. 1-5

The country had outlawed slavery, and began building an African Christian community. It represented a small oasis compared to other parts of Africa where there still was slavery. In this small oasis Crowther found himself in friendly confines. He really came into his own here being developed and nourished by a supportive African community that practiced Christianity. This was interesting because when Europeans initially came to convert people in places throughout African to Christianity, they gained something in the form of way to worship and find "God" but, also they also lost something as well in terms of culture and tradition. The people that were converted were often seen as being barbaric and needed to submit themselves before "God" in order to be civilized.

Sierra Leone was an interesting place to examine because of the fact that Africans were practicing and preaching Christianity. There was a uniquely African face and voice to Christianity rather than, an African being just a Christian. Sierra Leone was the perfect background for Crowther, who after being baptized took to embracing Christianity and would make a career out of the teaching of the gospel. He took on the initiative of learning and promoting the teachings of Christianity in his community. It did not take him very long to make a tremendous impact on his local community. The vibrant and energetic approach he took to his work made immensely popular.

Crowther, who was one day a slave was now emancipated and became educated. He naturally saw himself as a capable leader of the Christian community which would be a remarkable feat considering how few people in his time throughout Africa could even read or write western languages. Crowther did all this while maintaining his own culture and identity. In Sierra Leone there was a mixture of western values as well as African culture. This was where he became a very dynamic figure because of the fact that he was a person with an intimate knowledge of is Africa that negotiated and navigated both worlds. He was rapidly advancing with his education and became more and more competent commanding a lot of respect for his abilities as a Christian leader. This was very interesting considering that in many other parts of Africa people from Europe would come to preach and teach Christianity to the locals in an effort to understand "God" but, Crowther was actually a Black voice to the African Christian community. He was an example of an active participant who chose to preach from his own volition and not an example of docile figure succumbing to the will of other people who knew better.

Crowther was able to further his education by getting into college. Crowther gained admissions into Fourah Bay College which was one of the first Universities of education available. This was truly inspiring to see how far he was able to progress

from his humble begins in Nigeria. He was really up and coming with the work that he was doing in the church as he was becoming more and more popular every-day. His work as missionary leader set him apart from his European peers in Africa because of his dynamic ability as a native Nigeria to speak his tongue of Yoruba.

He could be flexible culturally and socially because of his intimate understanding of this region of Africa and his ability to speak a native tongue really separated him from the others. This was because he could actually understand and respect the communities that he would go into. He had a legitimate amount of cultural sensitivity where he could appreciate the intimate nuances of different tribes and groups. He really could speak, interact, think, and communicate in a way where locals would be more open and trusting of him as an African Christian. However, someone who may have been European could not think or behave in a way that a person like Crowther could and would not be able to command their attention and respect in the same way.

Jacob Gordon

Now, Jacob Gordon brought up some interesting ideas about a Pan-Africanist approach to eliminate most narratives left out a voice for an "African Diaspora."⁵ In the United States there had been a movement that included more of Africa in the study of history. For example, Gordon stated, "This apparent lack of a Pan-Africanist perspective in African studies programs that have created problems that have yet to be dealt with by American academia, this is compounded by the emergence of Afro-American studies in the late 1960s, believing these problems are deeply rooted in the historical development of African Studies in the US."⁶

The United States simply did not do much work or specialization on Africa prior to this. Africa was usually treated as part of development, international politics, or geography it was not seen as a stand-alone topic worth studying in the United States.

This began to change in the 1960s because around this time period, the United States had become a little more serious about Africa. According to Gordon, "Some of the elite universities in the US decided in the 1960s though federal funding to create an elite cadre of specialists in African Affairs that were developed in no time, at all and became overnight pundits to whom government and the business

⁵ Gordon, Jacob U. Year. (1976). Teaching the African Experience: A Pan-Africanist Approach." African Studies Review 19(3). 109

⁶ Ibid, 109.

community would turn to advice.”⁷ This was very troubling considering the fact that many of these so called pundits and experts would be creating knowledge on how governments in Africa should be run without having any real intimate knowledge of African society.

He offered a few criticisms for creating these types of elite groups that were so influential in academia on our understanding of Africa. Some of his criticisms included, first, creating elites that only shared knowledge with wealthy state departments and multi-nationals, secondly racism because there were very few black experts, also, there was little awareness of African problems to domestic issues, and finally African perspectives on Africa were left out.”⁸

Highlighting a cleavage in the American universities to include the African voice he brought up an excellent point here because if there were no African voices included in conversations about what was to happen in Africa then it continued the pattern of historically marginalizing the African voice.

Kwame Nantumbu

Moreover, Kwame Nantumbu picked up on the historical struggle of African people being seen from a western perspective. He stated, “African peoples have been analyzed within a Eurocentric, dysfunctional, historical, and divisive context, thus culminating in the use of the concept of Pan-Africanism will help to analyze the struggle of the African people from its proper historical perspective.”⁹ He was for an Afro-centric approach to understanding African history. He argued and pushed for an Africa that was for Africans that was run by Africans. Interestingly Gordon also believed that, “African studies should focus on all those ideas and processes which are related to the survival of African people because such an orientation will help define the range of intellectual and practical concerns of an adequate program of African studies.”¹⁰ Both were strongly for a more pro-African voice but, he was not as vehemently politically charged as Nantambu who embraced more of a nationalist sentiment.

⁷ Ibid,109.

⁸ Ibid,109.

⁹ Nantambu, Kwame, “Pan-Africanism Versus Pan-African Nationalism: An Afrocentric Analysis.” *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 5 (1998): 561.

¹⁰ Gordon, Jacob U. (1970). “Teaching the African Experience: A Pan-Africanist Approach.” *African Studies Review* 19 (3). 109

Nantambu used the inspiration of people such as W. E. B. Dubois and their views on the Pan-African movement to push further for more of a political and nationalist identity for Africans. For example, he brought up “the Pan-Africanism movement as an aid to the promotion of national self-determination among African under African leadership for the benefit of Africans themselves.”¹¹ Nantambu was very politically charged and brings up ideas of a nationalist movement that should benefit Africans while being led by an African. He was definitely very strong in his choice of words when he argued against Euro-centrism. However, a flaw he had was that he was incognizant of his own ethno-centrism.

Further, he believed that, “It seems that analysis of definition of Pan-Africanism or the Pan-African movement in terms of revolutionary, historical struggle; instead the movement is couched in emotional and politico-cultural platitudes.”¹² This was an interesting take from him because while it is totally understandable about some issues he had with what the Europeans did in terms of taking and deleting parts of African culture. The events of what the Europeans had done in Africa have haunted the continent historically by their actions in marginalizing Africans. Still he was to a certain level overly zealous in his critique of Europeans and was at times very ethno-centric. For example he stated, “The Pan-African struggle should not limit itself to any geographically disperse or dislocated African peoples or their descendants, to do so would be playing into the hands of the colonizer, thus enhancing the colonizer’s continued control and exploitation of us.”¹³ This was interesting because on one hand he was hammering away on a solid point that included as many people as possible in an “African diaspora” but, seemed really over the edge in his distrust of Europeans as all being exploiters. He suffered from undue paranoia of Europeans.

Syed Qutb

Some of the issues he elaborated upon about rang eerily similar to the famous Egyptian Syed Qutb who initially spoke out about exploitation and the evils of the western colonizers, however as history has shown he became the theorist that many of the modern terrorists considered as a must read. Ironically, when defining Pan-Africanism, Nantambu became very picky when he stated, “excluding the Arabs and North Africans” because once again definitions can be a sensitive issue.¹⁴ This highlighted some of his own ethno-centric perhaps even racist views because he was so deeply soaked in a certain political ideologies which only hurt his arguments. He was

¹¹ Nantambu, Kwame. (1998) "Pan-Africanism Versus Pan-African Nationalism: An Afrocentric Analysis." *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (5). 561

¹² Ibid, 561.

¹³ Ibid, 561.

¹⁴ Ibid, 561.

very concerned with a nationalist struggle and helped to create an identity of Africans while he claimed to be open to as many people as possible that have been exploited. He was very narrowly focused and this was fine because he had some legitimate arguments in terms of exploitation and the cultural problems created by slavery and the current economic malaise seen throughout Africa. He had a fatal flaw in his being a hardcore ideologue he could have been more successful if he didn't exclude the Arabs and North Africans because initially Qutb's gripe with the West was over issues of exploitation and abuses by the West. Unfortunately, Qutb's views gave life to terrorist sentiments in Egypt and throughout the Middle East, and Nantumbu's views could have given life to more hard core sentiments because struggle was akin to "Jihad."

Kobina Seyki

Also, in Pan-Africanism Osei-Nyame brought up Kobina Seyki as a leader from the Gold Coast in creating an understanding of the African culture of self-understanding through Pan-Africanism. Seyki was born in 1892 in Cape Coast which was described as the cradle of European culture and was superior to African.¹⁵ This was a sentiment seen throughout Africa at the time and one of the most powerful psychological tools used by colonial powers to keep Africans thinking that their culture and traditions were docile and archaic. Unfortunately, many Africans grew up believing in a prejudiced interpretation of history where western thought was king and anything remotely African was thought to be inferior.

This would have a domino effect throughout history further marginalizing the thoughts and the views of Africans. A narrow description of history would permeate throughout the world. It highlighted the importance of western values while, keeping the African voice out of history by showing it to be dated and irrelevant. Seyki's life took place in these conditions because he grew up in a time when he was taught that Westernization and Christianity led to civilization. This was interesting because he would go abroad to receive an excellent Westernized education at the University of London. Osei-Nyame stated, "Seyki studied at the University of London, but returned home thoroughly disillusioned with the British and their values, returning home he re-established his place in Akan-Fante Culture."¹⁶

His western education brought about a spiritual renaissance inside of him because instead of conforming to western thought he began to become a revolutionary thinker in the West African intelligence community. He became more resistant to western thought and desired a more African way of thinking and respected its culture even more deeply.

¹⁵ Osei-Nyame, Kwadwo. (1999). "Pan-Africanist ideology and the African historical novel of self-discovery: the example Kobina Seyki and J.E. Casely Hayford." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 12 (2).137-139

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 137-139.

His interactions from people in the west made him question the western hegemony in thought, and re-think Africa's place in history. He was searching for an African voice something that uniquely embraced African culture. He would lay the seeds of an African nationalist movement.

Osei-Nyame stated, "He was one of the most controversial members of the West African nationalist intelligencia between 1920 and 1952, recognized as reviving the national consciousness that people once believed was once dormant."¹⁷

Seyki wrote at length about issues that dealt with African culture promoting a nationalist view. Seyki was a man that could see and appreciate both an African approach and western thought because of his diverse background. He represented a sort of elite because on hand he was an African who wanted to call for nationalist movement but it can-not be denied that his desire to challenge ironically enough came, after he did receive a western education.

It was not common for the average African to have gone to the University of London for any education. There was an issue in the society that African's were comfortable with western culture and traditions, and how they were psychologically victimized by the colonial powers. Seyki addressed this in 'The Anglo-Fante dramatizing the cultural predicament examining prevalent modes of African and European culture, the western cultured Africans having a fidelity to their own culture and coming to terms with their own angst.¹⁸ This was his major utility as an African voice in history beyond just promoting an African nationalist sentiment. He really did an amazing job in having brought up points about how colonial practices systematically made everything African devalued and worthless. This would have had tremendous a psychological effect, historically marginalizing the African voice and made those traditions marginalized. The net effect was to create a history that would devalue African traditions and customs. He was a champion in bringing back a desire for a nationalist movement that made people become cognizant of the utility of African customs and traditions.

Marcus Garvey

Moreover, another popular pro African voice is Marcus Garvey who was a Jamaican born in 1887. He was an activist type who believed in promoting a strong African movement recognizing African culture. He was very provocative and a strong writer and thinker. Although Garvey never officially visited Africa, he was

¹⁷ Ibid, 140.

¹⁸ Ibid, 140.

very confident in his preaching of Africa for the African's and the expulsion of Europeans which would become an inspiration for many young educated African who were rising to prominence in the nationalist struggles in the 1940s/50s.¹⁹

Garvey with his flamboyant ways set the stage for revolutionary movements throughout Africa. His open declaration and call for an African identity found a home in the hearts of younger generations. His work as a journalist and writer further helped add legitimacy to this movement. For example, "Similar French speaking writers from the Caribbean and West Africa developed a sense of black self-respect through a movement known as negritude celebrating blackness and deep pride in African culture. He really got the ball rolling in creating a morale boost in changing the idea that European thought and culture was more dominant than African society. Now, people were feeling confident in their own abilities and trying revolutionary things in their own right with nationalist movements.

Conclusion

Finally, the Pan-African movement brought back to relevance an African identity and their voice. People like a Crowther and Seyki had a significant contribution to make when carrying on the dialogue about African Culture. They were unique individuals who came from a background that embraced both the western and African societies. Now, Garvey was a charismatic individual who gave inspiration to other nationalist thinkers. Nantambu represented a more militant perspective of African culture and ideology with the risk of being more on the extreme side. However, all of these people make different contributions which help fill a void that had been created by a western narrative of African history and these men have contributed heavily in helping us fill in the gaps to bring out an African voice in the history of Africa.

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