

# Post-100 Years of Nigeria: Finding the “Genius” of the Nigerian culture as a necessary starting point for true (liturgical) Inculturation

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## **Abstract**

There is no doubt about it, that the only Christianity that would be accepted and acceptable by and to the people of Nigeria in particular and Africa at large in the twenty-first century, is the Christianity that takes into cognizance what the cultural sensibilities of the people are. In fact, if we forget the cultural sensibilities of the people, the tendency is that we lose the people, either to the whims and caprices of materialism or to the verbosity of Pentecostalism. After hundred years of living together as Nigeria and as Nigerians, however, we soon discover that it is not so easy where we have to define what constitutes our cultural sensibilities, or to decide which cultural sensibilities to engage in the process of inculturation that makes meaning to our collective identity. This paper seeks to propose that finding the genius of the Nigerian culture is a necessary starting point for inculturation in Nigeria today. It proceeds, by demonstrating the complexity of the process of inculturation, especially in Nigeria, showing why the search for this genius is necessary and ends by proposing some elements of the Nigerian genius which are suitable for inculturation.

## **1. Introduction**

Determining what parameters to use for the process of inculturation, especially in the case of the liturgy, has always been at the heart of the problem of inculturation in the country. In a Pastoral Letter, “The Nigerian Church: Evangelization through Inculturation” issued by the Nigerian Bishop's Conference in 1991, this problem was raised when the bishops stated, “The absence of cultural homogeneity in Nigeria raises the question, 'Nigerian Culture or Nigerian Cultures?’” (Evangelization through

Inculturation, 1991:19). The question then arises: Could one really talk of a Nigerian culture? What would be the standard then, where every culture, especially the three major ones: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, would be jostling for prominence? How do we meet the challenge of inculturation today in the face of the pluralistic nature of our society after 100 years of our existence as a nation? This is the focus of this article. Although there might be specific reference to the liturgy here, the article is intended as a reflection on the process of inculturation in general.

## **2. The problem**

The "lack of cultural homogeneity" in Nigeria is even more problematic today than it ever was considering the fact of urbanisation which is draining the rural areas of its inhabitants. It might be easy to say that one is closer to this "homogeneity" in the rural areas, but experience has shown that even here, this is not always the case, especially in northern Nigeria which is the richest when it comes to the endowment with minority ethnic groups. I know of a small village in North-Central Nigeria belonging to Adunu parish in Minna Diocese called Abolo with a population of less than a thousand, where the Koros co-habit with the Gbagyis, the Kadara, and naturally, the Igbo who are there to ply their trade. This is not to talk of other tribes from the southern Kaduna area which make up this mix. In the urban areas the situation is more complicated so that parishioners in general and the liturgical assemblies in particular are anything but homogenous – at least from the point of view of ethnicity.

It is interesting to note how the Pastoral Letter mentioned above sought to answer the question of cultural homogeneity in Nigeria. According to the letter, "'Nigerian culture' refers to a typology, meaning that certain structural and elemental constants exist in all the cultures of the nation" (Evangelization through Inculturation, 20). This does not mean that the over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria do not possess significant specific cultural differences; on the contrary, and, according to the document, "since inculturation refers to an intimate relationship, polycentric inculturation is logical in Nigeria" (Evangelization through Inculturation, 20). The questions, however, still remain: if polycentric inculturation is logical in Nigeria when and where one has to inculturate, what constituents or elements would form the objects for inculturation? Where would these constituents come from? What are these "structural and elemental constants"?

### **3. The complexity in the process of Inculturation**

The issues raised in the forgone paragraph point to an obvious truth which is often neglected in the discourse on inculturation, namely, that the inculturation process or process of inculturation is rather complex. What happens most times is that inculturation is simply reduced, either to the singular tenet of creativity, or to the linear process of adoption. Here I am referring to a situation where certain practices present in a culture are simply adopted without the attendant question as to its relevance in the here and now for demonstrating a religious truth which should be apparent to the people. This neglects the consideration of the fact that inculturation, when it is truly inculturation, is dynamic and as such, is something which should be received rather than taken; generated organically over time, rather than constructed. The following constitute the elements of complexity in the process of inculturation which should not be taken for granted.

#### ***3.1 The Complex nature of Faith and Culture as loci (places) of Inculturation***

Generally, inculturation has to do with the interaction of faith and culture on the level of dialogue as distinct from a monologue (Shorter, 2006:4). This is essentially what has given this term precedence over others in the discourse on the relationship between faith and culture. The terms are: adaptation, contextualisation, indigenisation, revision, incarnation, imposition, translation, acculturation and interculturalisation (Schineller 1990:14-24). Added to this is the fact that it combines the theological significance of incarnation with the anthropological concepts of enculturation and acculturation (Schineller, 22), and that it seeks its object in the internal and not the external. But all this would not be understandable without the proper grasp of the complex elements which constitute the object of inculturation. In fact, the complexity of the inculturation process results from the complexity of these tenets themselves. We are talking here of what constitutes faith and what constitutes culture. One could easily define faith here in the biblical sense of faith being the realization of what is hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Heb 11:1), but this is not always so simplistic, since we are talking here, not only of faith as a theological virtue, but of faith as a sense of a religious tradition or affiliation. When we come to culture, the scenario is even more complex. Gone are the days when culture was defined simply as a single universal and normative concept where some people were regarded as “cultured” and others “uncultured” (Shorter, 17-30); today, culture is rightly seen as something pluralistic: there

is not just one culture; there are cultures which co-exist with one another so that the only way to arrive at the true tenets of a culture is through empirical studies; in other words, the tenets of culture are received through observation and not necessarily taught to someone; it is something which is given; something which generates itself. Added to this pluralistic concept of culture is the reality of cross-cultural fertilization where the interaction among cultures causes change to the extent that new cultures emerge; in other words, culture as a phenomenon itself, at least at some certain levels, has been found to be in a state of flux.

### **3.2 *Understanding acculturation as the first step to inculturation***

The agent of this change in culture has been designated as acculturation. By acculturation is meant the encounter between one culture and another or the encounter between cultures to the extent that this encounter leads to cultural change. Acculturation demonstrates to us the truth, that it is impossible for two cultures to exist side-by-side without the one influencing the other. How all this happens is worthy of note here: it is a historical process which takes place over time, not at once; it is not something which is directly willed, in other words, it is beyond the scope of human choice (Shorter, 7); it is a dynamic and diachronic process and not a static one, and it is a necessary aspect of culture which can hardly be prevented to the extent that every culture has a vocation to cross its own border and to transcend its own limits. By its nature, the consequences of acculturation could only be discerned *post factum* at the conscious level, for example, through research. The change through cross-cultural fertilization is often not apparent to the senses. Many of its workings are, therefore, at the subconscious level of human existence and this is why it is hard to control. The problem arises therefore, when one has to do true inculturation, of determining how much of a culture has been affected and effaced by acculturation and what the real tenets of a culture is remaining, in order that inculturation takes place.

Discerning this interplay between cultures is very important in this process of inculturation because essentially, inculturation – true inculturation – is the result of true acculturation. It is interesting to note that the first magisterial document, in which the issue of inculturation is raised, makes this suggestion. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, John Paul II, not only uses the terms acculturation and inculturation together, he makes allusions to the fact that inculturation proceeds from acculturation such that there is just a thin line between what constitutes acculturation and what constitutes inculturation. How he does this is to be considered as

axiomatic in any discourse on inculturation. Rather than relate the nature of inculturation in a vacuum, he places it within the tangents of evangelization—a procedure which I consider as the most plausible. Although he calls inculturation a neologism, he nonetheless describes it as suitable for expressing the one factor of the incarnation, that is, faith taking flesh in culture. What happens in the process of inculturation is that evangelization and catechesis bring the power of the Gospel to the very heart of culture and cultures. To do this Christianity engages in a dialogue of values with the receptor culture, so that the dialogue taking place is that between Christianity in a cultural form and the receptor culture. Although it is a duty of Christianity to challenge these cultural values and call them to conversion when necessary, evangelization or catechesis never seeks to impose itself; rather, it seeks to know the receptor cultures and their essential components; it seeks to learn their most significant expressions and to respect their particular values and riches. In this manner it will be able to offer these cultures the knowledge of the hidden mystery and help them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought.

Not only is it so, that the Gospel message cannot be purely and simply isolated from the culture in which it was first inserted; by its nature, the Gospel has always been transmitted by means of an apostolic dialogue which inevitably becomes part of a certain dialogue of cultures (Catechesi Tradendae, 53). If the Christian faith or the Gospel were not to be transmitted in a cultural form—in other words, the Gospel Message as a system of values—then *acculturation* would not even take place, not to talk of *inculturation*. In this case, there would be no catechesis since it would be the Gospel message which would have to change when it came in contact with the cultures. This would result in what John Paul II calls, “emptying the cross of Christ of its power” (Catechesi Tradendae 53). The point here is this: inculturation which is the dialogue between faith and culture occurs only through the process of acculturation which is the dialogue between two cultures. This is all because the Christian faith itself, as we have it today, is transmitted in a cultural form and must be seen as such. Faith or the Gospel is 'caught', rather than 'taught', through the witness of human beings who live out its cultural values; the values of Love, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, abnegation and spiritual poverty. Although these values must occur in a cultural context, they are, nonetheless, tenets of the Christian culture.

### 3.3 *The different levels of culture*

Having said all these, one must also take into cognisance the fact that there are levels of culture and this has a lot to play in determining which elements, especially in the face of cross cultural fertilization, which constitute the object of inculturation. In fact, it would seem that even faith could be encountered at different levels, so that the protestant missionary G. L. Barney, who is said to be one of those to have used the word inculturation for the first time in 1973, uses it in such a way that suggests that the interaction between faith and culture occurs at different levels. The context here could be of a very great help to understanding what inculturation should be. Barney is said to have used this while addressing his conferees (probably in the missions) in a way that reminds them of the need to keep the core of the Christian message (supracultural components) intact throughout the course of cultural exchange wherever they find themselves as missionaries thereby suggesting that there are some accidental components. The full statement reads: "The essential nature of these supracultural components should neither be lost nor distorted but rather secured and interpreted clearly through the guidance of the Holy Spirit in 'Inculturating' them into this new culture" (Chupungco, 1992: 25). John Paul II also alludes to this when he talks of inculturation bringing "... the power of the Gospel into the *intimate* ordering of human culture..." (Catechesi Tradendae, 53) and "...of the work of evangelization which is at the same time an example of that which today bears the name of the bringing in of the *soul* of a culture, namely the insertion of the Gospel into autochthonous human culture..." (Slavorum Apostoli, 21), all in ways which suggest that there is something which constitutes the material aspect of human culture differently from those aspects of human culture that are fundamental.

It is Aylward Shorter who eventually makes this distinction explicit. Not only does he subscribe to the point that there are levels of culture, he goes on to demonstrate how, within a single culture, there could be cultural levels to the extent that some of these levels may enjoy sufficient autonomy to justify being called 'sub-cultures'. An example could be seen from the situation in the third world where an ethnic group often represents a subtle variant of a shared national or regional culture. Furthermore, he differentiates between culture at the phenomenological level having two strata: the practical and the symbolical, and culture at the deeper cognitive level, what he calls the level of meanings and values. While the practical or material level of culture includes all that has to do with material life, behaviour and technology, the

symbolical is related to the realm of ideas, a realm which governs the practical order and orients human behaviour. At the deeper cognitive level, however, meaning and value is given to what happens at the practical and symbolic level so that Shorter does not place the object of inculturation on the phenomenological level but states emphatically that “in dealing with religion and the theological concept of inculturation we have to do with this inner level” (Shorter, 17). In every culture, there is a way of understanding and acting towards the world, what has been called the worldview, such that there is an extent to which a religious understanding of reality is at the heart of culture. This is why one often encounters the resistance to change in a cultural personality as one descends deeper and deeper to the realm of values. This is so because, while the outer, practical levels in a culture are reasonably susceptible to change, it is much harder to change people's values and harder still to change their worldview.

Now, we have said that acculturation is a reality. What comes to the fore, having known that there are levels of culture, is the fact that even acculturation could take place at different levels; as we have said, either at the phenomenological level or at the level of values and worldview. The likelihood is that this process occurs easier at the phenomenological level because this is the most accessible: the clothes one wears, the car one drives, even learning a new language table etiquette etc. This is probably what people mean when they say, “when in Rome, behave like the Romans”. I doubt, however, if one becomes roman just by “behaving” like the Romans. One essentially becomes a roman by adopting the roman system of thought and values; this takes a longer time and probably occurs more in the subconscious.

It is probably for this reason that Shorter talks of an acculturation that may lead merely to a juxtaposition of unassimilated cultural expressions leading further on to a form of syncretism in which an illegitimate symbiosis occurs that is harmful to authentic Christian meaning. He does not only stop at this but goes on to impute the process of inculturation in many particular churches which make up the Church Universal by stating that evangelisation has only reached the level of acculturation, and has not succeeded, or perhaps even sought, to attain the deeper level of inculturation in these churches (Shorter, 13). One gets the plausible impression here, that there is an acculturation which leads to authentic inculturation and one which leads to an illegitimate symbiosis. My take

here is that illegitimate symbiosis in acculturation would lead to illegitimate symbiosis in inculturation and that this illegitimate symbiosis occurs, when the dialogue between the cultures takes place at the phenomenological level without moving to the deeper level of values and worldview.

Having known all these, several questions arise if one must set out to attain real inculturation: how much has acculturation affected culture? If it has affected it, what elements of culture are left to be engaged in dialogue? In fact, one could ask, in the layman's words, what "culture" is to be engaged in the process of inculturation? Is it the normative culture or the emerging culture?

#### **4. Understanding the object of Inculturation**

It is probably such distinctions that the Nigerian bishops refer to when they talk of a polycentric culture for Nigeria which deals with "certain cultural and elemental constants" derived from the commonality of experience. From the elements which supply this 'commonality of experience' as suggested by the bishops, one gets the impression that they are aware that the cultures in Nigeria could not have remained as the same as they were 100 years ago. These elements are:

- a. The culture's relationship of dominated acculturation with western culture through colonialism
- b. The hundred years of Roman Christianity and the difficulty this church may have of letting go of some presuppositions on which it has delicately hung her prestige and hope of survival
- c. The contemporary situation of modernisation (Evangelization through inculturation, 20).

Incidentally, it would seem that a concerted effort at coming up with what constitutes this 'commonality of experience' or 'polycentric culture' has not been much of something to concentrate on in the whole discourse on inculturation in Nigeria. When we look at the situation in other Black-African countries, we observe that the consciousness of this 'polycentric culture' is there, but the effort to arrive at it is not taken. In their initial effort to develop the Zairian rite, the bishops of Zaire gathered in assembly in 1961 are said to have declared that "the liturgy introduced to Africa is not yet adapted to the proper character of the populations and therefore remained foreign to them" (Egbulem, 1996:33). Again, they would talk of, "the

admission of modifications in the forms and expressions of the liturgy in a way that reflects the genius and character of the life of the Zairean people" (Egbulem, 2012, 230). This use of the term *character* and *genius* here is of particular interest because it bears a semblance to what the Nigerian bishops have referred to as 'commonality of experience' or 'polycentric culture'. Although the commission tasked with the responsibility of working out this liturgy would also express the knowledge of this fact, it seemed to have reacted to it negatively.

There is another and more difficult problem related to the great number of different tribes which make up the population of Kinshasa. And it's not the language that creates the problem. Tribes differ in ways of expressing their feelings and emotions ... To find common elements which will be accepted by all Congolese will be either impossible or very impractical because by doing so we may again take all life out of a Congolese liturgy (Egbulem, 1996:36-37).

This supplies us with the reason why, rather than use elements which demonstrate the genius or character of the people, the commission goes ahead to use the role of the village chief in the Beti assembly as a starting point for their project; an assembly, which, apart from being only common to one ethnicity in the area, has the character of a community meeting rather than a gathering for worship. The result of this is that many foreign elements are introduced into the approved rite by individuals in an effort to arrive at elements which portend the 'commonality of experience' and genius that we are talking about. (Egbulem, 1996: 134-135).

##### **5. What then is *genius*?**

According to Edmund Bishop, *genius* refers to "something intangible and indefinable... but a permanent reality that we can quite well apprehend; a characteristic and distinguishing spirit that manifests itself in all that a people says and does, in its history and its literature; determining character of both, and affecting the general character of every thought" (Bishop, 1918, 2). Although the context of this definition is his reflection on the genius of the Roman rite, this definition nonetheless tells us something tangible about the genius of a people: intangible and indefinable as it may be, it could also be apprehended since it is a permanent reality such that its tenets bear semblance to the level of values and *worldview* which we have seen in Shorter above. Anscar J Chupungco has used another terminology, what he calls cultural pattern, for the same reality. He defines cultural pattern as an innate quality of every sociocultural group and the group's prescribed

system of reflecting on, verbalizing, and ritualizing the values, traditions, and experiences of life (Chupungco, 1992:36). Interestingly, this cultural pattern seems not to be anything which is limited to one ethnicity or cultural group *per se*; on the contrary, it functions within the reality of the pluralistic nature of culture to highlight elements within this pluralism which constitute elements of unity because, in the final analysis, given this pluralism, it is now easier to define cultural patterns than to define culture itself. What matters therefore, is not whether we can define the nature and components of a particular culture but whether we are able to identify the principal elements that make up the cultural pattern (Chupungco, 36).

The plausibility of this position lies in the fact that a society could be multicultural within a very small perimeter of existence, such that defining the culture of a people as such may not only prove futile but might also constitute a hindrance to inculturation since one might be dealing with a hand-full of different cultural expressions within a very small perimeter of existence. In the words of Chupungco, again, what seems to serve inculturation in this case is a study that will determine the typical way a particular group of people, in concrete circumstances of life collectively thinks, speaks, and expresses itself through rites, symbols, and art forms such that an inculturated liturgy is one whose shape, language, rites, symbols, and artistic expressions reflect the cultural pattern of the local Church (Chupungco, 77). The expression, "the typical way in which a people collectively think, speaks and expresses itself..." is to be considered as axiomatic. Here, the rites, symbols and art forms might be different, but the thinking, speaking and expression of self are only slightly different. According to Arinze, for example, the reason why the Igbo offer sacrifice is that the Igbo never crown himself head of the universe so that sacrifice emanates from the fact that the Igbo know that they have superiors. Sacrifices are offered, then, because of the insufficiency of man and his consequent inability to live uprightly. Since they believe that their lives are being directed from above, there is simply no question of celebrating their independence from the invisible spirits and ancestors (Arinze, 1970:45). This same sentiment is found among the Kadara of Niger State who believe that Life and Life-force is governed by the *Ohwu* (spirits). In order to live and live well, the living have to maintain their connection to the *Ohwu* or demonstrate their dependence on it (Usman, 2013: 296-298); in other words, a pertinent similarity with what we have seen with the Igbo. Earlier, Tempels had significantly reported how the people looked to their ancestors

to help them in this life and to intercede for them in the next to the extent that food and drinks are offered at the graves of the dead (Tempels, 1965:180). What this means is that when these people are faced with real life situations the impulse would be to recourse to offering sacrifices, perhaps in different ways, but for the same purposes. When the Kadara as well as the Igbo renounce their native sacrificial forms, it is highly unlikely that they jettison the idea of sacrifice entirely. This purpose behind the sacrifice, this idea, is the foundational element of the Nigerian *genius*. There could be others: love of dialogue, spontaneity, verbosity, song, gesticulation and dance, all these are elements which cut-across ethnicities and have hardly been effaced by cross-cultural encounter. While most people in Nigeria have lost touch with the way sacrifices—ie the forms—are performed in their various cultures and traditions because of the attrition of cross-cultural fertilization, Christianity and Islam, the matter, which is the desire to commit and submit to something higher than oneself, remains. There is an extent, therefore, to which one could associate the genius in this case with the sense of the divine to which one must always be in touch. This is the level of value and worldview and this is the 'stuff' that should be given a proper form in the liturgy and in the process of inculturation in general.

### ***5.1 Elements of genius or cultural pattern***

There is no doubt that giant strides have been made in the actualization of the adaptation called for by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 37-40, (Hereafter SC). Although this subsection simply reads in English 'Norms for adapting the Liturgy to the Culture and Traditions of Peoples', it suffices to note that the original Latin text does not use the word *cultura* but *ingenium* (*Normae ad aptationem ingenio et traditionibus populorum perficiendam*) where *ingenium* translates as *genius* and means 'natural character' or 'nature' and *cultura* means 'care' or 'culture'. It is not the *cultura* that should be the focus of the *aptatio* but the *ingenio* so that a better wording of this section in English would have been 'Norms for adapting the liturgy to the native character and traditions of peoples'. A most typical adaptation of this sort in history is demonstrated by Edmund Bishop in his book *Liturgia Historica* where a roman collect is amplified in its Gallican reception. The Roman Collect reads:

O God, the creator and Redeemer of all the faithful, grant to the souls of thy servants departed the remission of all their sins, that through pious supplications they may obtain the pardon which they have always reward (Bishop,3).

While the Gallican reads:

O Almighty and eternal God who hast dominion over the living and the dead, and art merciful to all whom Thou foreknowest shall be Thine by faith and good works; we humbly beseech Thee that they for whom we have determined to offer up our prayers, whether the present world still detains them in the flesh, or the future hath already received them out of the body, may by the intercession of all Thy saints and the clemency of thy pity, obtain the pardon of all their sins (Bishop, 3).

Just looking at the two prayers shows that, although the content is essentially the same, the prayers are different in the cases of mood, sense, style and feeling and these are the elements of *genius* of *cultural pattern*, of 'polycentric culture'. It would seem, however, that most of the adaptations done so far, or the proposed ones, are largely based on the quest to adopt forms from certain African Ethnic groups which are made to conform to what the liturgy is deemed to be. There is nothing so much wrong with this except that such an approach runs the danger of having inculturation done on the phenomenological level that we have been talking about so that one runs the risk of providing for inculturation or acculturation on the level of "form" to "form" rather than from "matter" to "matter" or from "matter" to "form", even when the African forms to be used appear to have become obsolete. Sometimes elements are even used which do not evoke the sentiments of the search for a connection with the divine like we noted with the case of the commission for the Zairian liturgy beginning with the Beti assembly which is a community gathering rather than a worshipping one. When it is done at this level, inculturation runs the risk of becoming some kind of concordism, something like an arbitrary effort to find correspondences between African religiosity and Christian religiosity. However, inculturation, as we have seen, is more than this. Not even acculturation from the Christian perspective should be done on this level. In inculturation, there is no question of transcending African religiosity towards another kind of religiosity, even if that religiosity is Christianity; rather inculturation implies a dynamic of confluence, growth, and mutual fulfilment – not necessarily agreement, because the former is deeper than the latter. Christianity then becomes fulfilled in African religiosity, just like the African religiosity becomes *fulfilled* in Christianity. This is so because it is possible to have mere agreements without the necessary and desired fulfilment which would all be a pity. The encounter is meant to enable the

gospel to *claim* what belongs to God in a culture, and to enable the culture in its turn to see itself in its true light as God's word, when indeed it is; or as an aberration from God's word when it is that where, in the second case, the Gospel then becomes a challenge to culture, calling it to conversion (Magessa, 2007:160). This is actually where the *genius* of the people comes in – which is constant – because it is more concerned with the “spirit” behind the “form” or that generates the form, than the form itself; something which remains even when the form changes or is effaced, something which does not belong to the axis which is in constant flux.

## 6. Conclusion

Inculturation in Nigeria has made good progress since Vatican II. As much as this is true, so must one also give credence to the fact that acculturation has also eaten deep into the fabric of most ethnic cultures in Nigeria. Apart from the fact of colonialism, there is also the loss of cultural values through globalisation and materialism. Added to this is the truth that the various local churches in Nigeria (Dioceses) could hardly be termed homogenous – at least in terms of ethnicity – not to talk of the various liturgical assemblies being homogeneous: east, west, south and north, the situation seems to be the same. There is, therefore, an extent to which the most tangible aspect of culture left to us now is the Nigerian genius of religiosity, of association with the sacred, of feeling and of spontaneity. Taking into consideration all I have said about acculturation and inculturation as dialogue at the level of value and of worldview, therefore, we can say that the survival of Christianity in the 21st century Nigeria does not *necessarily* lie in how much of the *potoshi dance* or *Ohywo* of the Kadara or the *Iruma Chukwu* and the *Aja Eze Enu* of the Igbo is incorporated into the liturgy or church life but how much sense of connection with the sacred and the religiosity of the people is given form and expression!

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