EXPLORING HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF PEACE AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN PRECOLONIAL YORUBA SOCIETY, 1388-1864

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Abstract

Traditional Yoruba society in West Africa has a rich cultural heritage that has been passed down through generations. The Yoruba people are known for their unique customs, beliefs, and practices that emphasize the value of peaceful coexistence and the resolution of conflicts through various means. Over the years, Yoruba society has faced several challenges, including wars, colonization and modernization, that have threatened the preservation of their traditional practices. However, despite these challenges, Yoruba people have managed to maintain their cultural heritage and have continued to practice their traditional methods of conflict resolution and peacekeeping. This paper explores the ways in which Yoruba society has managed to preserve peace and harmony since time immemorial. The paper aims to analyse the peace and conflict management methods employed in the Yoruba pre-colonial era and culture and their effectiveness in maintaining social harmony. The paper will also explore the role of traditional institutions, such as the Obas (kings) and Ifa priests, in resolving disputes and maintaining peace in Yoruba communities. The paper also sheds light on the relevance of these traditional methods of peace and conflict management in contemporary times. The study of traditional conflict resolution

methods is particularly relevant in today's world, where there is a growing need for peaceful solutions to conflicts. The Yoruba culture offers a unique perspective on conflict resolution, which can be applied in modern societies to promote peaceful coexistence and social harmony.

Key words: Yoruba culture, Conflict Resolution, and Traditional Institutions.

Introduction

In traditional African societies, conflict was a common occurrence and could be attributed to various aspects of cultural life, which influenced people's behavior.[1] In every conflict, there is usually a beneficiary seeking to gain control over power. The Yoruba people, like many other African ethnic groups, experienced social upheavals, wars, conquests and betrayals, which underlay conflict in their society. One significant example of this was the Agbekoya uprising in 1968, which was triggered by the grievances of rural peasants, who were faced with harsh government policies and widening economic inequality.

The Yoruba people are found in south western Nigeria, as well as parts of Benin and Togo.[2] The Yoruba civilization dates back to the 12th century, and the Yoruba have a rich cultural heritage that spans various aspects of life, including religion, music, art and governance.[3] Yoruba society is known for its complex social structure, which is based on a system of kingship, family, and community relationships.[4] Traditional Yoruba society was organized into kingdoms, each ruled by an Oba, who was considered the divine representative of the people and who ensured the protection and welfare of his subjects.

Conflict management in Yoruba society occurs at various levels, and involves the family, religion, and monarchy.[5] Yoruba society is patriarchal in nature, and kinship is an essential aspect of their social structure.[6] For instance, the extended family system

provides a platform for conflict management, with family members playing critical roles in resolving conflicts within the family. The traditional monarchy system also plays a significant role in conflict resolution, with the Oba serving as a divine representative of the people and responsible for ensuring their protection and welfare.

Essentially, peace and conflict management have always been integral parts of Yoruba society. The Yoruba people believe that peace is the foundation of prosperity and that conflict, if not managed properly, can have disastrous consequences.[7] Conflict in Yoruba society can arise from various sources, including disputes over land, inheritance, marriage, and social status.[8] Traditional Yoruba society had well-defined mechanisms for managing conflict, which were based on a combination of legal, social, and cultural practices. These mechanisms included the involvement of designated judicial authorities, such as the Oba (king) or Olori-Ebi (family head), who acted as mediators and arbitrators, applying customary laws and principles to guide their decisions.

Traditional African societies have a rich history of effective conflict management and resolution mechanisms.[9] The approach to peace and conflict management in traditional African societies is rooted in the culture, values, and beliefs of the people.[10] The primary focus of traditional African approaches to conflict management is on restoring harmony and maintaining relationships among the parties involved in the conflict.[11]

One of the most prominent traditional African approaches to peace and conflict management is mediation.[12] Mediation involves the use of a neutral third party to help the conflicting parties find a solution to their dispute. In many traditional African societies, elders or respected members of the community serve as mediators. These mediators bring the parties together

and facilitate discussions aimed at finding a mutually acceptable solution.

Another traditional African approach to conflict management is arbitration. Arbitration involves the use of a neutral third party to make a binding decision on the conflict.[13] The arbitrator is usually someone who is respected in the community and has the authority to make a decision that is acceptable to both parties. In many African societies, chiefs or kings serve as arbitrators.

In addition to mediation and arbitration, traditional African societies use various other approaches to conflict management.[14] These include negotiation, restorative justice, and traditional rituals and ceremonies. Negotiation involves the parties involved in the conflict coming together to discuss their issues and work towards finding a solution that is mutually acceptable.[15] In traditional African societies, negotiation is often facilitated by respected members of the community, such as elders or chiefs.[16] Restorative justice is another traditional African approach to conflict management. This approach focuses on restoring relationships between the parties involved in the conflict rather than punishing the offender.[17] The focus is on repairing the harm caused by the conflict and bringing the parties together to work towards a common goal. Traditional rituals and ceremonies are also used in many African societies as a way of resolving conflicts. These rituals and ceremonies are often designed to bring the conflicting parties together and facilitate a process of reconciliation and forgiveness.[18] For example, in some African societies, the parties involved in a conflict may be required to perform a traditional dance or participate in a communal meal as a way of restoring harmony and relationships.[19]

Conceptual Clarification

Peace and conflict management are critical components of any society, as they promote social harmony, stability, and economic growth.[20] Conflict arises when individuals, groups, or states have

competing interests or goals, and it can result in violence or the breakdown of social order. Conflict management, therefore, refers to the process of preventing conflicts from worsening and/or reducing their severity.[21]

Peace, on the other hand, is a state of calmness, serenity, and tranquillity that is free from violence, conflict, or disturbance. Achieving peace requires the use of various approaches that promote understanding, cooperation, and reconciliation between conflicting parties. Peaceful societies are more likely to experience economic growth, social stability, and the overall well-being of its citizens.

The Yoruba concept of peace and conflict management

The Yoruba people have a rich cultural heritage that emphasizes community, harmony, and respect for elders.[22] The concept of peace and conflict management in Yoruba society is deeply rooted in their traditions, customs, and beliefs. According to Yoruba philosophy, peace is seen as the ultimate goal of human existence, and it is achieved through a harmonious relationship with the environment, other humans, and the supernatural.[23] The Yoruba also believe that conflicts are a natural part of human interaction, and they must be managed effectively to prevent violence and promote peaceful coexistence[24]

The Yoruba concept of peace and conflict management is guided by the principle of "Omoluabi" which means a person of good character.[25] An Omoluabi is someone who possesses virtues such as honesty, integrity, humility, respect for others, and a sense of responsibility. The Yoruba believe that an Omoluabi has the capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully and maintain social order in the community.

In Yoruba society, peace and conflict management are achieved through a combination of traditional institutions, customs, and practices. The role of the Oba (King) in conflict management is crucial as they are regarded as the custodian of peace in the

community. The Oba serves as a mediator between conflicting parties, and his decisions are final and binding. In addition to the Oba, the Yoruba also use mediation and arbitration to resolve conflicts.[26] Mediation involves the use of a neutral third party to help conflicting parties reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Arbitration involves the appointment of a neutral third party to make a binding decision on the conflict.

The Yoruba also rely on the family and community as an integral part of conflict management.[27] Family members and community elders are often called upon to mediate in disputes and provide guidance to conflicting parties.[28] Traditional rituals and ceremonies such as the "Eyo" festival are also used to promote peace and unity in the community.[29] The Yoruba concept of peace and conflict management emphasizes the importance of respect, dialogue, and reconciliation in managing conflicts. It recognizes that conflicts are inevitable in human interaction and that peaceful resolution is essential for maintaining social order and harmony in the community.

Traditional Yoruba Approaches to Peace and Conflict Management

The Yoruba society has a long history of using various approaches to manage and resolve conflicts. These approaches are deeply rooted in Yoruba culture and are often passed down from generation to generation.

The role of the Oba (King) in conflict management

Historically, the Oba's role in conflict management has been evident in ancient Yoruba towns like Ile-Ife and Oyo.[30] In Ile-Ife, the Oba was known as the "Oonirisa," which means "the owner of the palace of the Supreme Being."[31] The Oonirisa was regarded as the highest spiritual leader in the kingdom and was responsible for maintaining peace and order in the community. In the event of a dispute, the Oonirisa would summon the parties involved to his palace and pass judgment that both parties would

abide by.[32] The Oonirisa's decision was usually accepted without question, as he was believed to have been chosen by the gods to rule.

Similarly, in Oyo, the Oba was regarded as the custodian of peace and order.[33] The Oba's court was called the "Oja-Oba," which means "the market of the king." The Oja-Oba was where disputes were settled, and the Oba's word was final.[34] The Oba's power to enforce his decisions was evident in the case of the Egungun festival. The festival, which involved the wearing of masks and other cultural performances, was sometimes a source of conflict between different communities.[35] The Oba would use his power to prevent conflicts and maintain peace during the festival.

The role of the Oba in conflict management continues to be important in modern-day Yoruba society. For instance, in the town of Iwo, the Oluwo of Iwo is regarded as the traditional leader of the community.[36] The Oluwo serves as the custodian of the town's customs and traditions and is also responsible for maintaining peace and order. The Oluwo's court is still a place where disputes are settled, and his decisions are still respected by the people.

The use of mediation and arbitration

Yoruba society also relied heavily on mediation and arbitration to resolve conflicts. Mediation involves a neutral third-party facilitating communication between disputants to help them reach a mutually acceptable solution.[37] Arbitration, on the other hand, involves a third party making a binding decision in a dispute.[38] In Yoruba society, mediation and arbitration were often conducted by elders or respected members of the community. These individuals were seen as wise and knowledgeable and were trusted to offer fair and just solutions to conflicts.[39] The use of mediation and arbitration helped to prevent conflicts from escalating into violence and was an essential tool in maintaining peace within the community.[40] An

example is the use of arbitration in the town of Oyo, which was one of the most powerful Yoruba kingdoms in the 16th century. The Oyo Empire had a sophisticated legal system that relied on arbitration to settle disputes between subjects and ensure justice was served.[41] The Oyo legal system was administered by the Alaafin, who was the king and the highest authority in the kingdom. In Oyo, disputes were heard by a panel of judges called the "Oyomesi," who were appointed by the king.[42] The Oyomesi were respected elders and chiefs who were known for their wisdom and integrity. They would hear both sides of the dispute and make a binding decision. The decision reached by the Oyomesi was final, and parties were expected to comply with it.[43] To maintain order and deter non-compliance, severe consequences were imposed for failing to adhere to the decision of the Oyomesi.[44] Offenders could face punishment ranging from exile to the most extreme penalty of death.[45] This strict enforcement underscored the empire's commitment to maintaining social cohesion and upholding the integrity of the legal system.[46] The legal system of the Oyo Empire played a vital role in settling disputes, promoting fairness, and demonstrated the empire's commitment to a structured and orderly society where the rule of law was upheld and respected.[47]

The role of family and community
Yoruba society also placed a significant emphasis on the role of family and community in peacebuilding. Family and community members were expected to intervene in disputes and work towards finding a resolution. This approach was based on the belief that conflicts were not just between individuals but also between families and communities.[48] Family and community members would often come together to discuss a conflict and find a solution that was acceptable to everyone involved. The use of family and community members in conflict resolution helped to promote reconciliation and prevent conflicts from escalating. Historical examples from ancient Yoruba towns illustrate the critical role of family and community in peacebuilding. One such

example is the town of Ile-Ife, known as the cradle of Yoruba civilization. In Ile-Ife, the Ife dynasty ruled the town for centuries, and the Obas played a vital role in conflict management.[49] However, family and community members also played an important role in maintaining peace in the town. In Ile-Ife, disputes between families or individuals were often resolved through family meetings. During these meetings, family members would come together to discuss the conflict and find a resolution that was acceptable to all parties involved. If the conflict could not be resolved at the family level, it would be brought to the attention of the Oba, who would use his authority to enforce a decision.[50]

Traditional rituals, religion and ceremonies for conflict resolution

Religion is an essential institution in Yoruba culture and has played a crucial role in conflict resolution within the society.[51] There were various religious sects in the past, and many of them still exist today, such as Sango worship, Obatala, Oya, and Osun. Family heritage and community play a significant role in the choice of one's religion. Each sect has a different color of clothes which distinguish them distinct from each other. The religious institution has contributed to managing conflicts that could have led to chaos.[52] Before a king is enthroned, the religious institution consults the gods on the choice of the family to be enthroned, promoting peace and unity within the society. When there is conflict between towns or villages, the religious institution helps in conflict resolution by seeking the direction of the gods. Their impact on the Yoruba society cannot be underestimated.

Yoruba traditions have a set of religious beliefs regarding deities, sanctity, profanity, taboos, and sacrilege that are so strong that individual life, fortune or misfortune, choice of leaders, calamity, or general peace and prosperity are believed to have their source from the gods.[53] Ogun, the god of iron, was well referred and worshipped because of the belief that this god had the ability to

preserve the life of faithful ones and mete judgment against defaulters through thunder strike. Any offender or miscreant who failed to come back to the path of rectitude was taken to Ogun shrine, and some abracadabra would be performed. If the accused person was found guilty by Ogun, such a person was liable to be struck dead within three to seven days; if not, the person would be seen as innocent. The role of ancestors was also seen as essential in maintaining social order and pre-empting conflict situations in Yoruba traditions. Some occurrences were regarded as posthumous and traceable to the working power of past Yoruba ancestors who were believed to be in the unseen world and controlling the affairs of their posterity. There are many rituals and traditional ways by which tranquility and harmonious living were attained by the Yorubas of the past, and some of these practices are still being upheld by a small fragment of the Yoruba race. Modernity, Christianity and Islam have supplanted most of these traditional practices.

Traditional rituals and ceremonies were also an important part of conflict resolution in the Yoruba society. These rituals and ceremonies were often used to bring disputants together and create a sense of unity and reconciliation. Traditional rituals knowns as "etutu" and *Ifa* divination system are two prominent examples of traditional rituals and ceremonies used in conflict resolution in Yoruba society. The "etutu" is a complex and highly symbolic ritual that involves making offerings to the gods to seek their intervention in resolving a conflict.[54] The offerings may include food, drinks, and other items that are believed to be pleasing to the gods.[55] During the ceremony, the priest or diviner may consult with the gods through divination to determine the cause of the conflict and find a solution. The "etutu" ceremony is often used in cases where disputes involve issues such as land, inheritance, or other matters that are considered important to the community.

The *Ifa* divination system is another important tool used in conflict resolution in Yoruba society. *Ifa* divination involves the use of sacred texts and symbols to determine the cause of a conflict and find a solution.[56] The *Ifa* divination system is based on the belief that the gods communicate with humans through divination, and that the symbols and texts used in the divination process hold hidden meanings and messages.[57] The *Ifa* divination system is often used in disputes involving witchcraft or other spiritual matters. During the divination process, the diviner may consult with the gods to determine the cause of the conflict and find a solution. The diviner may also offer guidance and advice to the disputants to help them resolve their differences.

Traditional religion, rituals and ceremonies were an important part of conflict resolution in Yoruba society. The *etutu* ceremony and *Ifa* divination system were two prominent examples of traditional approaches to conflict resolution that were deeply rooted in Yoruba culture and beliefs. These approaches helped to prevent conflicts from escalating into violence and promoted reconciliation and harmony within the community.

Contemporary challenges to peace and conflict management in Yoruba Society
Contemporary challenges to peace and conflict management in Yoruba society arise from the influence of globalization and Westernization, the emergence of modern governance systems, the role of religion in peacebuilding, and the role of education in promoting peace. Each of these challenges has significant impacts on the traditional approaches to peace and conflict management in Yoruba society.

The emergence of modern governance systems has significantly impacted the role of traditional rulers in conflict management within Yoruba society. Historically, traditional rulers held a crucial position in maintaining peace and resolving conflicts,

drawing upon their deep knowledge of local customs, traditions, and cultural intricacies.[58] They possessed the authority, respect, and understanding necessary to navigate complex interpersonal and communal disputes. However, with the advent of modern governance systems, the roles of traditional rulers have undergone a transformation, often resulting in their diminished influence and relegation to mere figureheads.[59] The hierarchical power structures and centralized decision-making processes of modern governance tend to prioritize formal legal frameworks and bureaucratic procedures over the cultural nuances and traditional wisdom of traditional rulers.

As a consequence, the reduced involvement of traditional rulers in conflict management has had negative implications for Yoruba society. Modern governance systems, driven by standardized approaches and legalistic frameworks, often lack the deep cultural understanding and sensitivity required for effective conflict resolution in a diverse and culturally rich context such as Yoruba society. The intricate web of relationships, historical contexts, and communal dynamics that shape conflicts may be overlooked or inadequately addressed by these systems, leading to suboptimal outcomes and unresolved tensions.

Globalization and Westernization have also impacted traditional approaches to peace and conflict management in Yoruba society. The spread of Western values and norms has led to a decline in the importance of traditional practices, including traditional conflict resolution methods.[60] This has resulted in a loss of cultural identity and a reduction in the effectiveness of traditional conflict resolution methods.

Religion plays a significant role in Yoruba society, and religious differences have been a source of conflict. On the positive side, religion has been utilized as a powerful force to promote peace and harmony within Yoruba society. Religious teachings and practices often emphasize values such as love, compassion,

forgiveness, and reconciliation, providing a moral framework for conflict resolution. Religious leaders and institutions have played a vital role in fostering peace by promoting dialogue, mediation, and peaceful coexistence among individuals and communities. They have used their influence to encourage understanding, bridge divides, and advocate for peaceful resolutions to conflicts. However, religion has also been misused and exploited as a tool to fuel conflicts and exacerbate divisions. In some instances, religious leaders have been involved in inciting violence, propagating extremist ideologies, or manipulating religious differences for personal or political gains. Religious differences have been exploited as a justification for conflicts, leading to tensions, discrimination, and even acts of violence between different religious groups within Yoruba society.

Successes of traditional approaches to peace and conflict management in the Yoruba community

One example of the success of traditional approaches to peace and conflict management in Yoruba society is the Egungun festival, a cultural event that dates back centuries. During the festival, participants wear elaborate costumes and masks to represent the spirits of their ancestors. The Egungun festival serves as a platform for resolving disputes, as aggrieved parties may use the opportunity to air their grievances and seek resolution.[61] The festival's spiritual significance and cultural importance create an atmosphere of respect and mutual understanding, making it easier for parties to reach a peaceful resolution.

Another example is the use of the Odu *Ifa* corpus in dispute resolution. Odu *Ifa* is a collection of sacred texts that contain the wisdom and teachings of the Yoruba people. It is considered the foundation of the *Ifa* divination system, which has been used by the Yoruba people for centuries to provide guidance on a range of issues, including conflict resolution.[62] The Odu *Ifa* corpus contains stories and parables that illustrate the consequences of

certain actions and the benefits of peaceful resolution. It is still widely used in Yoruba communities today, with many people seeking its guidance in disputes involving family, land, and inheritance.

These traditional approaches to conflict resolution have been successful in maintaining peace and harmony in Yoruba society for centuries. They have been passed down from generation to generation and continue to be an important part of Yoruba culture and identity.

Innovations in peace and conflict management in the Yoruba community

One innovation in peace and conflict management in Yoruba society is the adoption of community-based organizations (CBOs) as grassroots initiatives.[63] These organizations aim to address the underlying causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. CBOs help build trust, strengthen social cohesion, and promote understanding among community members by providing platforms for dialogue and cooperation. They actively involve the community in decision-making processes, creating a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. CBOs play a significant role in fostering sustainable peace by tailoring interventions to the specific needs of the community. They empower community members, equipping them with the skills, resources, and opportunities needed for active participation in peacebuilding efforts.

Another innovation is the integration of traditional and modern approaches to conflict resolution. For example, some Yoruba communities have developed hybrid systems that combine traditional methods, such as the *Ifa* oracle, with modern legal systems.[64] The Ifa oracle holds immense significance in Yoruba tradition and serves as a source of guidance and wisdom. This approach seeks to preserve cultural heritage while also ensuring that disputes are resolved in a fair and just manner. The

integration of modern legal systems alongside traditional practices helps to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary understandings of justice. By incorporating these elements, Yoruba communities strive to enhance the objectivity and transparency of conflict resolution processes, ensuring that decisions are made based on both cultural values and legal principles.

Another innovation in peace and conflict management in Yoruba society is the use of education and training programs to promote conflict resolution skills. These programs are designed to teach individuals and communities how to effectively communicate, negotiate and mediate conflicts. By providing people with the necessary skills and knowledge to resolve conflicts peacefully, these programs can help to prevent conflicts from escalating and promote peaceful resolution.

One example of an education and training program is the "Train the Trainer" program, which was developed by the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP).[65] The program trains community members to become peacebuilding trainers who can then teach conflict resolution skills to others in their community. The program follows a cascading model, where a select group of community members undergoes intensive training in conflict resolution methodologies, negotiation techniques, and effective communication skills. These trained individuals, known as peacebuilding trainers, then become agents of change within their communities. They utilize their newfound expertise to conduct workshops, training sessions, and awareness campaigns, sharing their knowledge and skills with a wider audience. Through this program, WANEP has been able to reach thousands of people across West Africa, promoting a culture of peace and non-violence. Moreover, the "Train the Trainer" program helps to address the scarcity of skilled professionals in conflict resolution. By tapping into the existing knowledge and resources within communities, WANEP maximizes the impact of

its efforts and promotes self-sufficiency in peacebuilding endeavors.

Another innovation in peace and conflict management in Yoruba society is the use of technology to facilitate peacebuilding. For example, the PeaceTech Lab, in partnership with the Nigerian-based organization, Tech4Dev, developed the PeaceTech Exchange program.[66] The program uses technology to connect peacebuilders in Yoruba communities with international experts, allowing for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and best practices in conflict resolution. This approach has helped to bridge the gap between traditional approaches to conflict resolution and modern, technology-based solutions.

Finally, Yoruba communities have also developed innovative approaches to peacebuilding that address specific challenges in their context. For example, the "Women's Peace Hut" initiative was developed in Liberia, a country with a large Yoruba population.[67] The initiative involves the establishment of physical spaces where women can come together to discuss issues related to peace and conflict, share experiences, and develop solutions. By creating a safe space for women to engage in peacebuilding activities, the Women's Peace Hut initiative has helped to empower women and promote gender equality in conflict resolution.

Conclusion

Yoruba society's traditional approaches to peace and conflict management have played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability. The use of dialogue, mediation, and community involvement in dispute resolution, along with traditional rituals and ceremonies, has helped to prevent conflicts from escalating into violence and promoted reconciliation. However, as Yoruba society continues to evolve and modernize, there is a need for innovative approaches to peace and conflict management that reflect the changing social, economic, and political realities of the

community. The use of community-based organizations and hybrid systems that combine traditional and modern approaches to conflict resolution are examples of such innovations.

Based on the foregoing analysis, several recommendations can be made to enhance peacebuilding and conflict resolution within Yoruba society. Firstly, it is important to preserve the Yoruba cultural heritage and promote its values, norms and traditions to the younger generation. This can be achieved through education, cultural festivals, and other cultural events. Secondly, traditional institutions such as the monarchy and religious leaders have played a significant role in peace and conflict management in Yoruba society. Therefore, efforts should be made to strengthen these institutions and empower them to resolve conflicts at the local level. Thirdly, the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms should be promoted and integrated into the formal justice system to enhance access to justice for all. The Yoruba society has a long history of using ADR mechanisms to resolve disputes. Fourthly, there is a need to sensitize and create awareness among the general public on the importance of peace and conflict management in the society. This can be achieved through community-based education programs, media campaigns, and other public awareness initiatives. Fifthly, efforts should be made to empower women and youth who play a critical role in peace and conflict management. This can be done by providing them with education, skills training, and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes at all levels. Finally, the government should play a more active role in peace and conflict management by creating an enabling environment for peacebuilding initiatives, providing resources for conflict resolution, and supporting local peacebuilding initiatives.

To further enhance peace and conflict management in the Yoruba community, there is a need for more research that explores the effectiveness of these traditional and innovative approaches. Research should focus on identifying the root causes

of conflicts in the community and developing tailored solutions that take into account the unique cultural context of the Yoruba society. In addition, efforts should be made to promote peace education and conflict resolution training in the community, particularly among young people. This will help to foster a culture of peace and nonviolence and equip the next generation with the skills and knowledge needed to address conflicts effectively.

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