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### **Adresse**

Laboratoire de Sociolinguistique, Dynamique des Langues et Recherche en Yoruba (LASODYLA-REYO)

Université d'Abomey-Calavi.

**laboratoiresociolinguistique@yahoo.fr**

**Site : <https://lasodyla.uac.bj>**

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## Présentation

ReSciLaC (Revue des Sciences du Langage et de la Communication) est une revue du Laboratoire de Sociolinguistique, Dynamique des Langues et Recherche en Yoruba (LASODYLA-REYO) de l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi (UAC). ReSciLaC est une revue pluridisciplinaire qui accueille des contributions abordant un grand nombre de champs d'études des sciences humaines et sociales.

ReSciLaC permet de faire la diffusion de travaux de jeunes chercheurs ou de chercheurs confirmés *en sociolinguistique, en linguistique, en didactique des langues, en communication, en littérature, en philosophie du langage, en sciences de l'éducation, en sociologie, en histoire, en histoire de l'art*, etc.

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# WIDOWHOOD AND LEVIRATE AS A GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AGAINST AFRICAN WOMEN: AN APPROACH TO BAYO ADEBOWALE'S *LONELY DAYS*

Célestin GBAGUIDI, Théophile HOUNDJO et Rodrigue AKLAKPA

Université d'Abomey-Calavi (Bénin)

ggbaguidicelestin@yahoo.fr

## **Abstract**

*This paper analyses widowhood and levirate in traditional African societies as a real hindrance to the social blossoming of the African woman in a male-dominated society. After the decease of the husband in some traditional African societies, the widow suffers a lot from her in-laws. The torment inflicted upon the widow by phallogocentric systems is visible in Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days* through episodes of widows' mental and physical sufferings. The study points out how male chauvinism and the practice of bride-price nurture the phenomena of widowhood and levirate in traditional Africa and suggests measures to lessen the bereaved women's lots such as the banishment of such negative cultural practices and the recognition of the equal rights for both men and women in society. In this framework, the paper sides with the feminist vision of human societies to advocate for justice-based communities where both genders swear to each other mutual respect of their common and unique dignity. Socio-criticism and postcolonial criticism are used to achieve this goal.*

**Keywords:** widowhood; levirate; patriarchy; bride-price; justice

## **Résumé**

*Cet article présente le veuvage et le lévirat dans la société traditionnelle africaine comme de véritables obstacles à l'épanouissement social de la femme africaine dans une société dominée par l'homme. Après le décès du mari dans certaines sociétés traditionnelles africaines, la veuve souffre beaucoup de la part de la belle famille. Le supplice que le système phallogocentrique inflige à la veuve se révèle dans *Lonely Days* de Bayo Adebowale à travers des épisodes de souffrances mentales et physiques infligées à la femme. L'étude fait ressortir comment la phallogocratie et la pratique de la dot entretiennent le veuvage et le lévirat dans la société traditionnelle africaine et propose des mesures pour amoindrir le sort des femmes endeuillées comme le bannissement des pratiques culturelles négatives et la reconnaissance des droits équitables pour l'homme et la femme dans la société. Dans ce cadre, cet article partage la vision des féministes d'une société humaine qui préconise une justice plus équitable où les deux sexes se vouent un respect mutuel dans une dignité commune et unique. La sociocritique et la critique postcoloniale sont utilisées pour atteindre cet objectif.*

**Mots-clés :** veuvage ; lévirat ; patriarcat ; dot ; justice

## **Introduction**

The binary character of the term gender has always been depreciative to women in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this wake, Simon and Obeten (2012) postulate that:

Peace presupposes harmonious existence between the sexes. This is negated in the experiences of women especially widows in the African milieu due to the over-bearing influence of patriarchy, jealousy, greed, hatred and other forms of marginalization meted out on widows. Widowhood has thus generated conflicts in most African families and societies (p. 260).

In fact, similarly to colonialism, which imposes the supremacy of settlers on indigenous people, this exclusive interpretation of the human body dimorphism is very prejudicial to African women. In fact, it has favoured a patriarchal stratification of black African societies and thereby maintained women in a lower position than men as stipulated thus in the following lines: “For as long as this binary structure for assigning social meaning to biologically dimorphic bodies has existed, there have been people who questioned and criticized how their culture constructed gender roles, particularly in cultures where what is gendered female or feminine is valued less or subordinate to what is male or masculine” (Mary Klages, 2012, p. 29). In this bipolar relationship, the man or the phallus is seen as “self” that is, a strong, intelligent and lordly being whereas the woman is viewed as the “other” with diminutive qualifications like weak, incapable and therefore inferior to the man. On this score, Millet (1970) puts this claim in proper perspective when she contends that “patriarchal culture is resolute as a system of power relationship, whereby men as a group control women as a group and possess more social wealth, power, esteem as well as control over these resources than women” (p. 22). But the most alarming thing is the treatment some women are submitted to following the decease of their husbands. As should be the case, anyone hits with such a doleful situation should find comfort and compassion in their surroundings. Unfortunately, widows in some traditional African societies are rather “subjected to a whole gamut of obnoxious widowhood rites aimed at making [them] die within the mourning period of about one year. Most brothers-in-law are ever ready to disinherit [her] and in many cases, may drive her out of her marital home” (Acholonu, 1999, p. 97). On this score, Orabueze (2004) condemns the practice of widowhood as follows:

widowhood is a word that every woman dreads to mention. In Africa, it usually brings to a peak all the humiliation, subordination, degradation and oppression which an African woman goes through in her lifetime. From the time of her husband’s death to the time of her own death, his family and the society blame her for the passing away of the much-needed male. She is indirectly asked why she should survive the man (p. 115).

As it should be expected, this situation has aroused the indignation of many committed scholars who have been campaigning for a social system to guarantee equal opportunities and fair treatments for both men and women in African communities. The novelist Bayo Adebawale has this through his novel entitled *Lonely Days* on which this article is anchored. The paper mainly zeroes in on demonstrating that the heading motivation behind these extremely dehumanizing inflictions is nothing but the male sex’s imperialism towards the fair sex. In this wake, the work is organised around two major pillars. The first deals with the means via which the rites are implemented and the second is the paradoxical aspect they have. However, prior to the announced focus, it is necessary to give a succinct account of what those who champion the widowhood practices take as advantages for widows in order to measure their degree of partiality. The post-colonialism theory is the bedrock on which the analysis is based.

## **I. Bride-price relation and widowhood practices**

One of the means which seal the underrating of the female sex can be noticeable in the cultural practice of dowry payment to the bride's people. In fact, this practice makes some men consider women as their property which is at the disposal of the husband and his relatives as they please even after the passing away of the husband. The weight of the foregoing assertion is underscored through the condescendence bordering on the contempt of the husband for the woman he has 'purchased'. As a result of this commodification of the African woman, the latter is commonly treated as if she were a doormat which can be trampled underfoot or scoffed at. This master-subject relationship between the two sexes reaches its peak in widowhood. Indeed, the loss of a woman's legal spouse, in traditional Africa, leads to many long and difficult rites. According to Pazzack and Imam, "In most African societies, the death of a spouse is seen as a serious matter which involves the observance of a series of rituals and ceremonies all meant to signify the separation of the deceased spouse spiritually from the surviving spouse" (p. 220). Instead of showing affection towards the bereaved woman "[...] emphasis is shifted to bizarre and expensive rituals and practices conceived to be customary and necessary for the deceased and his widow. Against this background, the death of a man becomes a mess for his widow, especially if she is young and, or childless. This brings the widow to a state of despair in life which brings about the death of many (Iheanacho, 2005). In other words, at the demise of a man, his living wives fall in a state of "[...] silent victims who suffer cruel and dehumanizing cultural and ritual practices as a mourning process for their dead spouses" (Akujobi, 2006, p. 3). Though each ethnic group has its own set of practices, they generally boil down to strenuous mourning, accusation of their husbands' death, alienation, levirate, dispossession and excommunication. In fact, as the woman has been commodified through the payment of the bride price, the deceased husband's brothers or male cousins claim ownership over the widow and can inherit her as their wife.

## **2. The so-called advantages of widowhood and levirate**

Widows are believed to profit from levirate and widowhood. Indeed, for the upholders of the widowhood practices, death brings impurities and that the dead still have contact with the living, especially their closest partners in life. This accounts for the fact that widows are subjected to inhuman and humiliating customary practices. In this framework, Sossou (2002) contends that "The satisfactory completion of these ceremonies, rituals and practices is therefore believed to help restore the balance and security, which the dead had sought to overthrow. People, due to superstitious beliefs, rationalize these practices with the argument that they perform important functions, such as giving the widows protection from their powerful deceased husbands." In the same vein, one can put forward that widowhood rites should not be meant to belittle African women rather, "the main essence of the rites is to, as it were, break the spiritual attachments between the deceased husband and the surviving spouse (or spouses)." (Pazzack and Imam, 2015, p. 221). Furthermore, the upholders of widowhood practices claim that the treatment of the widows ushered in by their spouses' death is to purify

them. On this score, Ngozi (2015) asserts that “the Etche and some other cultures of Nigeria regard the widow as unclean and defiled. Except female attendants, the widow is distanced from people and she remains so until the rituals of cleansing and purification are completed by the concerned female ritual activists”. But even if we assume that these two arguments are relevant, they still present some lacunas which will always justify the dubiety of any Cartesian spirit. Those weak points can be summarized in the following query. In fact, if the practices are genuinely as profitable as advanced, why should they be applied to women only? In other words, how does one account for the fact that bereaved men are not also submitted to the same treatments? Moreover, one should seek to know the reasons why it is only other women who are permitted to approach the widows in their isolation. Is it because women cannot be defiled, or out of sheer contempt for them? As one must have already noticed, the partial characteristic underscored in the preceding questions has led this article to its stand which for a recall is that the practices are merely gender discriminative. This claim is argued in the points here-after with the focus novel.

### 3. The channels through which widowhood practices are implemented

As just stated above, this sub-section highlights the gender discrimination, the subject of the phenomenon under study. On this score, it focuses on the analysis of the means by which the practices are carried out. To begin with, it has been noticed that there is a similarity between widowhood practices and colonialism in that as with widowhood (practised in a patriarchal system) men dominate women, with colonialism colonisers dominated the colonized. On this score, Ashcroft *et al* (2007) contend that: “both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate” (p. 93). To grab this parallel, we can compare the plight of the widows in the novel under study to that of the black people during the colonial era. As far as the indigenous people in *Weep Not Child* are concerned, Mr. Howlands, one of the settlers takes them as “mere savages” [...] or “donkeys and horses” (Ngugi, 1964, p. 77). So as it should be expected, he does not mind involving in every form of brutality against the blacks to the extent that Boro, a rebel, is reminding him of in the lines hereafter “. . .you killed many sons of the land. You raped our women. And finally you killed my father. . .” (Ngugi, 1964, p. 128). The point here is that if the violence in the preceding citation is based on racism, it also unfortunately characterizes the way widowhood practices are meted out to widows. The following extract from the novel under study typifies the ordeal undergone by widows:

‘The barber propped Fayoyin’s head between his thighs, clenched his teeth, and began scraping away with a sharp ‘crocodile nacet’ blade.

‘Cut the hair down to the roots,’ they had told the barber. ‘Even if the skin on the head has to be bruised in the process!’

‘Bruise it, for goodness sake!’

‘We hope your razor is sharp enough to do the job the way we want it done?’

‘Cut this woman’s hair totally down to her scalp!’

‘Sprinkle her head with wood ash and oil it with paraffin ointment.’ (Adebowale, 2006, p. 27)

It comes out that the head scraping of widows is merely designed to humiliate them and make them suffer. That's why the relatives of Fayoyin's late husband insist that her head be bruised and oiled with paraffin ointment. We should also observe that the attitude of the barber himself reveals a kind of hatred, otherwise he could avoid clenching his teeth before going about his work. Furthermore, since no widower passes through this brutal and degrading treatment in his community, it can be retrieved as the manifestation of sheer contempt for women. Afolayan (2011) discussing the issue of widowhood practices in Nigeria posits that "many women are exposed to dangers that can easily claim their lives in the course of the death of their husbands because of the socio-economic and spiritual elements of Yoruba widowhood rituals" (p. 39). Of course, it might be objected that among those who enforce the practices, there are also fellow women. However, their attitude is prompted by other factors which will be demonstrated later. But in the meantime, another vehicle of the practices needs to be stripped bare.

The next channel that helps execute the ignominies under concern is intimidation or threat. This starts as soon as a husband passes away. As a matter of fact, the following dramatization which takes place at the death of Dedewe's husband is a pertinent one. It runs as follows:

'Confess Dedewe, to avoid the punishment of heaven!'

'The punishment of heaven comes down furiously and mercilessly like burning inferno!'

'The guilty one cannot escape it!'

'Confess Dedewe.' (Adebowale, 2006, p. 26).

Widowhood usually causes conflicts in African societies. In this wake, Simon and Obeten (2012) claim "This is largely due to the erroneous traditional African belief that no one dies a natural death. If a man pre-deceases his spouse, it is the woman that is held responsible ...". Consequently, Dedewe is accused of being responsible for her husband's demise. It should be noticed here that coercion is used to influence Dedewe into admitting the crimes she is suspected to have perpetrated although the bereaved woman is sure she "was innocent." (Adebowale, 2006, p. 26). We can therefore assert from people's attitude here that Dedewe is deliberately humiliated by power maniacs determined to crush down the fair sex. In fact, every widow who tries to challenge the practices is forced to obey by means of threats of dispossession and social ejection as corroborated by the following extract where the sword of Damocles hangs on Yaremi's head as a result of her refusal to yield to a new marriage: "The village elders compounded her problem the following day when they announced a number of punitive measures on the issues at stake: Yaremi had contravened traditional widowhood injunctions and was to be punished accordingly. The villagers had been instructed to ostracise her and avoid her as a leper" (Adebowale, 2006, p. 140). The point in citing that passage is that, if levirate were profitable for widows, there would be no reluctance from their side. Even more, if there were no personal interest in it for men, it should not be a dictation and there would be no need for punishment. But as said earlier, women should not have their say in anything, even in matters regarding them. Women are to obey, no matter the price. Hence, intimidations and any other oppressive means are welcomed to oblige them and keep them under bridge.

Reporting another example of hostility to any woman challenging this man's almightiness, the narrator in *Lonely Days* stresses that the men of Kufi exclaim "what impudence!" as "to the men, this [Yaremi] was a woman who should be kept at arm's length and be dealt with decisively" (Adebowale, 2006, p. 90); This passage is a reaction to the following boldness from Yaremi towards the wooers who offer to marry her at the end of her widowhood: "Times without number, Yaremi had told the men what they hated to hear – the plain truth – that she was neither a napkin nor a rag to clean up mess with. She was not a music calabash for the clumsy fingers of drummers. The strands of her hair were not for the grubby claws of ruffians" (Adebowale, 2006, p. 90). By refusing to be assimilated to a napkin or a calabash, and by likening the wooers to ruffians with clumsy hands, Yaremi hints that women are not fairly treated by men and that she will no more accept to be used as a mere object. But for the men of Kufi, no woman should challenge them that way. They are the lords and their women are their subjects. So to maintain the womankind under their grip, they resort not only to the methods which have been already uncovered so far but also to this last instrument.

One more instrument via which men manifest their male chauvinism is division. In fact, in order to weaken women and have them their way, their husbands set them against one another, especially in polygamous families. The following quotation should do away with any doubt on this statement. It claims that "Women in polygamy, it seemed, must first be divided, in order for them to be ultimately united in the homes of their husbands" (Adebowale, 2006, pp. 86-87). What is still important to consider from the foregoing quotation is the antinomy between the words "*divided and united.*" In fact, two people cannot be divided and united at the same time. This is therefore used to highlight how resourceful men are in achieving their hegemony over women. This point can furthermore be read in the following lines which describe a husbands' reaction to two rivalling wives:

The tug-of-love would rage on and husband, waiting in the wings, would adjust his voluminous loincloth, ready to intervene and ready to deliver judgment, usually in favour of Junior Wife, using his great wisdom! And Senior Wife, dejected and defeated, would fill the rest of the day with silent recrimination, her wrinkled face permanently cast in an expression of despair. (Adebowale, 2006, p. 88)

As it can be understood here, the unity in question means simply that by fighting each other this way, women fail in pulling themselves together to overthrow man's injustice against them. They, on the contrary, unite unwittingly with their tormentors and allow them to reinforce their grip. Here too, African men's behaviour towards their women is similar to the way European colonisers behaved towards the colonized people of Africa. The author of *Lonely Days* shows that African men have also used the same domineering policy to keep their women under control.

All in all, we can assert from all that has been discussed so far that the main reason behind widowhood practices against women is male chauvinism. Of course, we are aware of the counter-argument that if the practices were geared against women, they would not be supported and encouraged by women themselves. On the strength of this, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2007) opine that: "... hegemony is the power of the

ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. Domination is thus exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a more subtle and inclusive power” (106). The insinuation here is that the fair sex has been brainwashed into accepting that the torture they suffer from an overbearing phallogocentric system is for their own good. But in addition to all that has been said so far, we have found out that the practices themselves speak against their defenders as demonstrated in the up-coming lines.

#### 4. Superstitious beliefs behind the phenomena

One such belief is the superstitious claim that women detain some spiritual power which lifts them over men; a power they can even wield against their spouses' life. In *Lonely Days* for instance, Yaremi, the protagonist, is said to have always been “linked with the subject of the human beings transforming into feathered creatures.”(Adebowale, 2006, p. 43) Consequently,

When the people saw the hawk which perched on the roof of Ajumobi's house on the day Ajumobi died, their suspicion was confirmed:

'This woman has killed her husband!'

'She turned into a hawk and killed her man!'

'That's not an ordinary bird, for sure, on the roof of the house.'

'Ever seen a hawk perch so adamantly, so confidently on a human house before? Refusing to move, even when shouts come out this loud?' (Adebowale, 2006, p.43)

Still, one can rightly wonder how people come to the conclusion that a person is a witch. To this interrogation, there is no accredited response. However, there is a lack of relevance in the attachment of women to these devilish powers they are said to be endowed with. For example, to console herself of her husband's beatings, Yaremi, the main character in the novel, expresses her faith in these beliefs by thinking “vengeance could be hers, in the spiritual world where, as they said, women could give back onto men what they received from them on earth” (Adebowale, 2006, p. 63). But let's notice here that the use of the conditional tense and the clause “as they said”, shows that Yaremi doubts that women really have such powers, which reinforces the view that women are merely victims of man's diktat.

The other weakness which can be pointed out as for the belief that women are witches is that there is a contradiction between accusing a wife of being a witch and the fact of imposing on her to remarry with one of her deceased husband's brothers or relatives. In fact, if it is true that a woman is so endowed with some malevolent spiritual powers that she can end her husband's life, it is therefore illogical that she should be forced into levirate, for she is likely to repeat her homicide against the new spouse, especially as it is a union she might not accept. Another argument which emphasizes this contradiction and thereby stresses the gender-based approach of widowhood practices is that unlike women, men can openly boast their spiritual might without any social stigmatization. In *Lonely Days*, for instance, the character Ajumobi whose wife is charged with his murder, is a fine example of this. Interestingly, he boasts he “can swallow the sap of jokoje and chew the bitter leaf of iparada, to make himself invisible

before his opponents, [...] transform into invisibility, in one minute, and remain undetectable, like a chameleon, in the canopy of green leaves” (Adebowale, 2006, p. 51). From this extract, it is self-evident that the aforementioned accusations against women are purely discriminative.

Furthermore, the quality of love the bereaved women habitually show for their husbands even after their death, often makes it difficult for every decent person to easily embrace these murder accusations. Yaremi for example, loves her late husband so deeply that the story-teller seeks to know the man “who would take” his “place in her heart.” And he goes on with the answer “no one.” Because for Yaremi, “there was nobody like Ajumobi.” And “on him alone” she “placed her hope and love, her devotion and her affection” (Adebowale, 2006, p. 72). By what irony can one therefore explain the fact that someone like Yaremi can turn on her husband she loves so much and kill him? This work is unable to find any answer.

## 5. Perspectives for African women’s liberation in relation with widowhood

The female character Yaremi has gone through the different steps of widowhood except the very last one. This very last step consists in choosing a new man to replace her dead husband. This rite, according to their tradition, is compulsory. She refuses to perform the rites which lead to it. Yaremi shows disgust for this unfair practice undergone by women in this male-controlled setting. No evidence is given for its validity or reasonableness. Anyway, the mainstays of this practice will say that there is no scientific explanation for traditional regulations and observances. About the defiant refusal of Yaremi to choose a new man to replace her dead one, the narrator reports:

Yaremi turned round and bowed to the elders who sat speechless and overwhelmed. She grimaced at three widows with a hesitating countenance and began picking her way back to the house, leaving everybody under the odan tree gazing in petrified stupidity ... The angry murmur of the crowd followed her, vibrating like the discordant note of a distant music. (Adebowale, 2006, p. 116)

It is clear that the woman protests against the directive of choosing a new man to replace her dead husband. In fact, Yaremi’s rejection of her community’s dictates can be likened to a feminist’s attitude. Cakpo-Chichi, Gbaguidi and Djossou (2017) corroborate Yaremi’s stance to call into question the dictates imposed on her by patriarchy when they point out that feminists fight for “the woman’s freedom to decide her own destiny, [...] freedom from society’s oppression and restriction, freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action” (p. 113). Yaremi’s rebellious attitude is something to be encouraged insofar as it occurs while many people including the elders and the guardians of tradition are present. This must bring people to reflect on the lot reserved for African widows.

The female character Yaremi has shown the way the oppressed African women must take to free themselves from men’s brutality and oppression almost like the colonial oppressor used to behave towards the black colonised. Hence, women must become aware that men’s supremacy and supposed invincibility can be turned up and vanquished. In this context some legal instruments are also set to protect women against the practices

of levirate in Africa. Self-help and mutual aid will free them from men's bondage. It can be put forth that African women's empowerment begins with their individual and collective capacities to overcome hardships from their crushing male counterparts. In the same vein, Acholonu (1999) suggests purging African cultures and traditions of practices hampering women's social blossoming when she posits:

African culture cannot be allowed to remain static, unprogressive and repressive to womenfolk. Any culture that ceases to grow and change for good, loses its relevance and usefulness to the people and is as good as dead. Ours is a culture in transition and must be purged of all inhuman practices that deny women their rights to full citizens. Therefore, all harmful traditional beliefs, practices and taboos that militate against women's full enjoyment of their human rights, cannot but be regarded as pollutants that must be flushed out of our cultural system now (p. 98).

Acholonu clearly condemns the wicked and unproductive custom of widowhood. In addition to Bayo Adebawale, there are other female writers who have explored widows' lot in Africa. In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* for instance, the female character Ramatoulaye objects to marrying her brother-in-law, Tamsir, to replace her dead husband Madou. She expresses her refusal in the following terms. "I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand ... I shall never be one to complete your collection ..." (Ba, 1980, p. 58). Of course according to the Article 20 (c) of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, "a widow shall have the right to remarry, and in that event, to marry the person of her choice". Therefore forcing her to marry a brother or relative of her deceased husband is a violation of her right.

## Conclusion

From our analysis, we have found out that the widowhood and levirate practices are characterized by violence, intimidation, division of the womankind and some partial ironies. Hence it is a must to recognize that the widowhood torture tradition meted out to the already-afflicted women is nothing but the coronation of the subordination imposed onto them by their communities and that the only non-dubious argument propping this exponentially excruciating treatment is the misogynistic attitude of men. An attitude nurtured by a patriarchal social pyramid that abusively confines the fair sex to the position of a sitting-duck. However, the situation should not be pronounced hopeless for daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in that some committed African creative writers, like Bayo Adebawale, castigate the injustice done to female characters like the imposed practice of widowhood and levirate prevalent in male-controlled societies. Both sexes should rise up as one people and rid our social fabric of not only the abuses under concern here but also of any other ones which hinder social blossoming. Society in Africa South of the Sahara, should encourage widows to be physically and emotionally firm so that they can look after themselves and orphans.

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