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The Impact of Globalization on the African Culture in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

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Abstract

Globalization is a phenomenon of the postmodern era which accommodates the shrinking of the world into a small functional community. As a result of this, geographical distance and socio-cultural divergence are no longer constraints to aggregating the entire human race into one global family. The term is used to describe transnational relationships, engagements, cooperation and the sharing of human, material and ideological resources across regions. Discourse on the subject has become

so relevant across previously unrelated fields that their definitions have now converged on a consensus theoretical concept understood as “universal homogeneity.” The primary material, Helon Habila’s novel, *Measuring Time* is studied in the context of globalization and hybridity of cultures. The paper asserts that no human community should be isolated from the dynamic engagements of the wider society. This paper avers that globalization should not be advanced as an imposition of foreign cultural values; rather it should be seen as a practice that reflects mutually beneficial contact amongst people of divergent cultures. In the current dispensation, the cultural consumption and uncritical assimilation of Western values by African colonized people do not reflect the underlying objective of Globalization. This paper projected the need for a revision of the concept and to promote a symbiosis of unions where ideological, material and human capital flow across cultures in such a manner that all the actors in the ‘shrinking’ borderless world are mutual beneficiaries.

Key words: Globalisation, African, Culture, Hybridity, Post-Colonialism

Introduction

Globalization is used to describe the evolution in the modern era where the whole world is shrinking into a small community that promises to ensure a better and more convenient coordination of human activities. In the new world, geographical distance and socio-cultural divergence no longer constitute significant barriers to the melting of peoples and ideas from different climes. Across previously unrelated fields, there is a reasonable consensus about what globalization really represents. Waters (2012) citing Robertson viewed globalization as a concept that ‘refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.’ This covers both the concrete universal interdependence and consciousness of the global world. For Ibrahim (2013) globalization is the process of intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across international boundaries with the sole aim of homogenizing all practices and beliefs. By this, barriers of culture and geography are dismantled for the realization of the ideal global village.

All through Africa’s checkered engagement with the rest of the world, the continent has never enjoyed a rewarding deal for her people. Hence the understanding of the globalization phenomenon for the African may be expressively different from how it is viewed from a Western perspective. Olagunju (2013) argued that: “An individual’s political ideology, geographic location, social status, cultural background, and ethnic and religious affiliation provide the background that determines how globalization is interpreted.”

Whereas western nations are having a field day reaping tremendous gains in the current drive of pooling the divergent socio-cultural groups and political interests for the common good of humanity, African countries are perennially overwhelmed by the nagging crisis of poverty, diseases, squalor, growing slums, unemployment, socio-

political crises, escalating insecurity, and mindless ethnic violence that sometimes pitched to genocidal climaxes. Within this gloomy image of the African condition, there is no gainsaying the fact that African countries are wretchedly drowning in the midst of an unequal alliance with Western powers which are not in any least interested in lending a helping hand in assuaging the crisis bedevilling the continent. Where the quality of life, livelihoods and the social fabric of a segment of mankind is disturbed perennially, it then becomes difficult to impose on it the same moral code that prevails elsewhere. (Pieterse, 2010). This is so because such a community has a motivation that is different from that which motivates other human communities. In the words of Zwingel (2012) “universal principles, when applied to particular contexts, inevitably take on different forms.”

Africa may be a member of the large human family, but its role in the global affiliation is nothing short of that of an underdog. According to Frank (2012), whether “by connecting people with each other or rural areas to the world, by spreading knowledge, improving health care delivery or by providing a basis for small businesses, the new technologies have changed the way Africa’s people interact and its economies function.”

In this paper, Helon Habila’s novel, *Measuring Time* (2007) is used to view globalization in the light of the free flow of people, ideas, and beliefs across borders with emphasis on how it accommodates the socio-cultural peculiarities of Africa. We, therefore, interrogate the extent to which African people are willing to embrace foreign values and ideologies. We also probe what the mitigating factors for such engagement should be.

Contingency of Identity

Africans are rapidly losing their cultural identity, not only as individuals, but as an entire continent. We see a depressive condition of the continent which continues to slide in her attempt to negotiate a vantage place to project her numerous rich cultural legacies. Habila’s *Measuring Time* places unambiguous emphasis on the relationship between indigenous African culture and other cultures.

Determination of individual and cultural identity is a major preoccupation of the novel. It opens with the revelation of a strange animosity that the twins, Mamo and LaMamo hold against their philandering father, Musa Lamang. The twins believe that their father had broken their mother’s heart emotionally, an experience which had culminated into the events that led to her early death during child-birth.

The morbid circumstances surrounding the birth of the twin brothers resulted in the decision that Iliya their uncle had to take to cater for them as though they were his biological children. For the first three years of their lives, the boys enjoyed the tranquility of an uneventful life in Uncle Iliya’s house. But this was short-lived as

Lamang arrived too soon to shatter their peace. Even though there had not been any kind of previous relationship between Lamang and the boys, he took them away simply because he is their biological father (p. 16). Before now, the twins had lived in and enjoyed the utopia that Iliya was their father, his wife was their mother and Asabar was their brother.

The early years of Mamo and LaMamo had created an emotional bond between the boys and their uncle. It is for this reason that the sudden emergence of Lamang is viewed by the twins as an intrusion that confuses their sense of personal identity. To further compound the hatred that the boys have for their father, is the fact that he does not appear to have plans to give them any paternal affection. In their new accommodation at their father's house, they suffer a bizarre alienation owing to the fact that Lamang who snatched them from the conviviality they used to enjoy in their uncle's house is never present, neither does he extend any paternal emotion towards them.

The twins had enjoyed a greater filial tie with Uncle Iliya than they presently do with their biological father. While the gulf between them and their father continues to widen, the relationship between them and Uncle Iliya keeps blossoming, the geographical distance notwithstanding. For Mamo particularly, who is more cerebral and is always drawn to intellectual matters, Iliya provides the mentoring that his own father has failed to provide. It is evident that this close tie between uncle and nephew might actually be an extension of Mamo's early childhood attachment to Uncle Iliya. The former's sense of identity and self-worth is clearly redefined and fortified each time he is drawn into an intriguing conversation with his uncle.

On the part of the relationship between Uncle Iliya and his own son Asabar, it is ironic that, try as he may, he is unable to relate with him on a similar affectionate basis. Asabar does not have any regard for his father's philosophy in the same manner that Mamo does. When Uncle Iliya demands of Asabar to take responsibility to marry Jummai whom he had impregnated, Asabar declines. Instead he continues desperately in perpetrating every conceivable oddity that would further enrage his father. We see him step up his self-destructive habit by frequently ingesting toxic substances to grieve his father the more. Uncle Iliya's repeated cautions only fall on deaf ears:

I will tell you what to do as long as you live under my roof and I am feeding you. You do nothing from morning to night but sit with your drunken friends and smoke marijuana and drink and brawl in the village. I am getting tired of that (p. 154).

The only thing Asabar ends up doing in reaction to his father's open reprimand is to vacate the family house. With his newly found freedom, he continues his riotous lifestyle with the band of the never-do-wells of Keti which ensure his ultimate premature death.

Cultural Interaction and Hybridity

It is pertinent to ask the question: For whom does the African novelist write? If his target audience is predominantly populated by people of his homeland, then we are compelled to ask another question: how significant, in terms of population are members of this home audience? If his target is the world audience, then the language he chooses to convey his thought should be one that enjoys a wide international patronage. Unarguably, no other language is more suitable for this transaction than the English language. Fortunately, it is this very language of the colonial master that Habila has chosen to make his narrative of *Measuring Time*. This is quite strategic because it has enabled him to create a vantage space for himself on the global stage.

It may be argued further as an intrinsic concern of postcolonial discourse, that the English language is a tool for cultural imperialism. But Habila has demonstrated quite boldly that his work is a piercing voice in the choir of the empire writing back in a foreign language. By choosing to transmit his African perspective through the language of the erstwhile colonial master, he has made a success of his art as he draws the world's attention to the state of the former colony.

We may have commended Ngugi for deciding at a time in his writing career to jettison the English language and write in his native Kikuyu language. But to view it differently, as patriotic as Ngugi's crusade for decolonizing the mind (1986) might sound, we should be bold to admit that his earlier works which were composed in English would not have gone any distance to enjoy global acclaim, if they had not been written in English or translated into some European languages. Hence, we commend Habila for establishing an enviable presence on the global stage through a deliberate use of the English language as a medium for conveying his thought.

Hybridity of cultures is one of the seals of globalization. In order to achieve this process, attempts are often made by citizens of the interfacing cultural groups in *Measuring Time* to allow a free flow of ideas and practices that hold out incontrovertible virtues that might be lacking in other groups. In two separate encounters in the novel: one between Mamo and Uncle Iliya, and the other between the former and the Drinkwater sisters – Kai and Malai - Habila reveals the benefits that cultural groups stand to enjoy from each other if prejudices and parochial interests are dismantled, and if practices that would correct erroneous perceptions are embraced and adopted to enrich their respective cultures. One instance is when Uncle Iliya advises his young nephew, Mamo against accepting all cultural doctrines as sacrosanct. "The worst thing you can do," he tells him "is to ever accept anything on face value."

Don't agree with what a man says because he has lived longer than you or because he claims that is our way, using history as evidence to back his claim. Some have accused me of promoting western ways and making young people forget about their tradition and culture.

They point out to me the evils of modernity – as if tradition itself is devoid of evil. You will come across such people; my advice is, don't listen to them, get education. If you want to follow tradition, follow it because you understand it, not because some old man told you it is our way. The youth must be encouraged to ask, why is it our way? If the elders can't answer, forget it (p. 83).

Uncle Iliya believes that intercultural relations should be based on the ordinances of respecting and embracing values that will result in a more proficient one. As far as he is concerned, there is no culture that does not have something valuable to lend to the world. He is worried that while the rest of the world has science, technology and good promise of prosperity to offer as contribution to solving some contemporary challenges confronting humankind, African communities are fixated on promoting anachronistic practices. In his view, every society should be courageous to replace archaic traditions with the ones that promote the prosperity of the human race. Uncle Iliya believes this should be quite easy to accomplish: 'The difficulty lies not in new ideas,' says he, 'but in escaping from old ones' (p. 84)

Quite commendably, African people have dismissed certain ugly and destructive practices that used to be part of their tradition. Uncle Iliya believes that this is a pragmatic approach by which each cultural group can enrich and empower itself. He reasons for example that there used to be an era when inter-tribal wars were rampant. In those days, cultural practices like the engraving of tribal marks were necessary because they served as identification marks for tribesmen whenever they travelled, especially during wars, beyond their traditional borderlines. But in the modern age, such practices have lost their relevance since physical and direct combats are no longer in vogue. Through the use of more sophisticated weaponry, battles are fought across distances where identification through tribal marks has become outmoded. In a related vein, the abolition of the killing of twins is a welcome development that came with European influence. But for the enlightenment that came with Western civilization, according to Uncle Iliya, Mamo and LaMamo, who incidentally are twins, would have been killed at birth.

There is a consistent objectivity that Uncle Iliya displays even at the face of his own personal challenges. This encourages us to conclude that he is about the most broad-minded of Habila's characters that are of Keti extraction. He is a World War II veteran who ordinarily should have convincing reasons to be as distraught and as disillusioned as his brother Haruna who has just returned home from the Nigerian Civil War. But Uncle Iliya stands strong as steel to beat down all the odds that bedevil him.

Habila takes the reader back memory lane to disclose that Uncle Iliya was only fourteen years old when he fled home to join the West African Frontier Force. The war changed him. His determination to embrace formal education immediately after returning from

the war must have also helped to give him a broader perspective of life. Time was when he used to be naively religious and idealistic. But after the war, he became ‘a realist, a pragmatist’ (p. 112). During the war, he witnessed palpable racial discrimination against black soldiers, and this experience etched a deep wound on his emotion.

He saw that one could never depend on his fellow human being to protect him, or even to be just to him. One had to fight every inch of the way, and the best way to equip oneself for this lifelong fight was by getting an education (pp. 112 - 113).

The weapon he now uses to fight cultural imperialism is Western education. This is why he is so passionate on the community school project where he empowers young school dropouts by giving them a second chance to acquire a hybrid of Western education and vocational training. Unfortunately, insincerity and profiteering on the part of the ruling class keep disrupting the smooth-running of the school. With the likes of Musa Lamang and Alhaji Isa Danladi playing dirty politics, the oddity they portend leave little or nothing to be desired of a person aspiring for public office. The electoral process is marred with all manners of malpractices perpetrated by corrupt and desperate politicians with their acolytes. Drug-induced violence, ballot box stuffing and even the bribing of the police are rampant occurrences among them. More shocking is the fact that the traditional rulers who are supposed to be the custodians of the value system of the community are not to be viewed as models. Uncle Iliya cautions Mamo that “Our traditional rulers are politicians, you can’t depend on their word” (p.125).

Politicians who aspire for political office, for the mere fact that they want to wield influence, would stop at nothing to bulldoze their way into power. In their crudity, there is hardly any vice that they would not bring themselves to perpetrate.

One episode on the day of the local government elections is worth mentioning. Asabar who is Lamang’s recruited thug has just assembled his gang to thumb-print piles of ballot cards which they intend to stuff into the ballot boxes at the various polling centers. Asabar tells Mamo that through this, Lamang’s victory at the polls would be guaranteed:

We’ll take them to the polling stations and put them in the ballot boxes. That’s how you win elections. I am sure our opponents, the old Victory, ha ha, are right now somewhere doing the same thing.... We have over ten thousand cards here. If we can distribute them to the different polling stations on time, then the local government chairmanship is ours, after that the governorship” (p. 170)

Even though democracy as a system of government has already been entrenched, there is hardly anything democratic about how the state is run. The practice of democracy

itself which is another pie in the bag of Western civilization, is at its best practiced in Africa as a parody of what its original ideals represent.

Epistolary Form as a Bridge across Boundaries

The epistle is a veritable literary apparatus that Habila has deployed to bridge cultural, geographical and generational divides. For instance, with the encouragement that Mamo receives from Zara he succeeds in publishing his article in a Ugandan journal, *History Society Quarterly*. Mamo's article is a critique of late Reverend Drinkwater's anthropological book, *A Brief History of the Peoples of Keti*. Beyond his wildest dreams, the article receives an immediate acclaim that serves as an impetus for him to embark on a more arduous task of writing historical biographies of Keti people.

We also see the vital role that writing does in the works of late Reverend Drinkwater, an American missionary who pioneered Christian evangelism in Habila's Keti. It is through Mamo's critique of the late reverend's work, that he is systematically launched into limelight. It is significant that writing turns out to be an open channel of communing or corresponding with the world. Parallel to this benefit that writing has brought him is the fact that it brings him some fame in his immediate locality. It is the passion for this same fame – albeit with a different orientation – that motivates his brother, LaMamo to leave the village. The only time he intends to return would be at the end of his military expedition across the African continent. But Mamo discovers that through writing, he is also able to receive the kind of attention that he never realized was possible outside military adventures and escapades. It serves also as a form of intellectual activity for him and a kind of mental therapy from which he derives unquantifiable fulfilment and liberation from his depressing fragile health condition.

Even LaMamo who had left home in his quest for what lies beyond the horizon does not seem to be as satisfied as his brother who was forced to stay back in the village. LaMamo finds himself traversing the continent only to discover that there is actually nothing romantic about war. Writing from war-torn Liberia, LaMamo reports:

The whole country is dead, all the villages are on fire and there is no food and there are only dead bodies on the street. Only women and children can be seen, all the men are soldiers fighting for survival.... Now I am alone I have nowhere to go and really, I don't feel like fighting anymore. I am [sic] even began to plan how to return home. There are many sick people here, hundreds of them everyday, and mostly they are women and small children with cholera and infection and many of the kids die and are buried in the field (p. 131).

Having seen human misery in foreign lands, LaMamo is overwhelmed with the accompanying horror of blood-shed, physical displacement and solitude. We empathize with him in his nostalgia, longing for the day he would finally return to his

native land. As a result, the series of adventures that he experienced, LaMamo discovers that the misery and the alienation for which reason he had fled home are palpable everywhere. Human misery is just the same everywhere. Just as it is in his homeland Keti, so is it everywhere. As a pan-African fighter, LaMamo writes from time-to-time to intimate Mamo of the goings-on in other parts of the continent. His letters serve as a form of travelogue revealing that he is really living his dream of touching various parts of Africa. The epistles are effective at evoking sympathy not only for LaMamo who is on a wild quest for what lies beyond the horizon, but also for the other young people who have had to leave home, or are displaced by other extenuating circumstances prevalent in their indigenous communities.

It is possible for ideas to be transmitted across cultures. (Chakrabarty, 2012). It is through exposures such as LaMamo has had that he now acknowledges the commonality of all human experiences. We join him as he traverses the continent to make new acquaintances through which he comes to terms with the human condition which reveals a universal anatomy. He demonstrates African brotherhood everywhere he goes. 'I have a new friend now,' he writes his brother in his poor English:

... his name is Samuel Paul from Liberia. You will like him, he is quite, [sic] and he love [sic] reading all the time, like you do. His story is sad. He joins [sic] the army because of his family which were all killed in a church on his sisters [sic] wedding day. It is a sad story and he cries whenever he remembers [sic]... (pp. 90-92).

The war rages on with every violent incident opening fresh wounds for reprisal attacks. Samuel Paul, according to LaMamo is bent on exacting revenge on the tribes that are responsible for the death of his family members.

Zara, on her part, after she joins her old friend to relocate to South Africa uses the letter form to keep the relationship between her and Mamo alive. She reveals that the celebration of freedom in one part of the continent can indeed be the celebration of freedom for every African. Mamo "imagines her in a procession in Pretoria or Johannesburg...in a sea of a thousand other faces, black, white, coloured, bearing placards, singing songs in the street. Happy" (p. 219).

It is significant to see the role that Habila assigned Reverend Drinkwater and members of his family in his revelation of inter-racial and inter-cultural relations in the novel. For instance, Reverend Drinkwater is reported to have published a book, *A Brief History of the Peoples of Keti*. His effort is viewed as an endeavour that resonates the call for cultural and intellectual enrichment though the. Even though the work was authored by a foreigner, it was inspiring enough to motive Mamo to embark on a more informed research into his own culture. He is perturbed by the fact that very little or nothing about Keti people had really been known by the world. We see him determined to correct the wrong notions about his people that had been popularized through the

eye of a foreigner, Reverend Drinkwater. Mamo is however, inundated by several challenges that now exist as a result of previous contacts between the missionaries and colonial administrators on the one hand, and the people of Keti on the other.

The other members of Drinkwater's family are Kai, Malai and Michael. With the hope that the sisters, Kai and Malai, the already ageing daughters of late Reverend Drinkwater will volunteer some assistance, Mamo sets out to interview them on a number of issues pertaining to their late father's work on Keti people. They are a likeable duo who have really made their home in Keti which indeed is now the land of their nativity. They are comfortable wearing African fabrics and designs which smacks of their predisposition to cultural adaptation. They speak the Keti language. However, whether out of habit or as a result of their solitary life, the never-ending ritual of drinking tea even under a humid climacte does not seem odd to them.

Mamo is disappointed when he asks the sisters for some documents:

My uncle Iliya told me that your father, during catechism classes, used to teach his students stories of the lives of the saints, and that he'd also ask them to write their own biographies. There must be lots of such biographies somewhere. You wouldn't know where they are, would you?

They shook their heads. "Michael has them. If you want. We could ask him to send them over, to make copies for you" (p. 211).

Michael is an older brother to the Drinkwater sisters. He lives in America. It is worthy to note that about everything that would have been of value for Mamo's research on Keti people has been carted to the West by Michael. If he has to use them, then he is left with no other alternative than to wait for Michael to send them down from America. Mamo would not have access to the original documents, but photocopies. As a result of the phenomenon of globalization, documents and valuable artifacts that are indigenous to Africa have crossed the sea to the West. The best that can be garnered are copies of the original. This reality bespeaks one of the disadvantages of the borderless nations that globalization foregrounds. The only tangible object that Mamo would take home with him after interacting with the Drinkwater sisters is their late mother's fifty-page diary which mainly contains her grocery list. Even the sisters confess that Mamo would not find anything worthwhile in it. The valuable things are in America where Michael resides. But like a man drowning in deep waters, Mamo reaches out for the straws which Mrs. Drinkwater's diary typifies.

Migration to Discover New Horizons

In Habila's *Measuring Time*, migration is used as a dynamic process for cultural interface. A roll-call of the characters in the novel will reveal the impact that human contact outside a person's place of origin would have on him. Reverend Drinkwater

with his wife Hannah Drinkwater, Mr. Graves, Michael Drinkwater among several other foreigners have had a fair share of life's experiences drawn from their years of travelling from one place to another.

Late Mrs. Hannah Drinkwater was born in Bombay in India where her own father had worked as a Christian missionary. Afterwards she had travelled to America where she and Reverend Drinkwater got married. They immigrated as a missionary couple to Keti in Nigeria where they lived until their death.

For the Drinkwaters, migration is a way of life. They pick along with them customs and nuances of the various parts of the world that they have traversed. Till their last moments, Keti had become a real home for them. There their two daughters have resided onto old age. Now that it has become expedient for the sisters to reunite with their brother in America, they do not seem to look forward to it with excitement. Their emotion is unpretentious as the conversation between them and Mamo reveals:

Kai [one of the Drinkwater sisters] said "... We may not be in Keti for too long now."

"Are you thinking of moving elsewhere?"

"It's not our idea," she said with a sad sigh. "Michael thinks we need to return to Iowa soon for health reasons." She spoke softly, staring into the garden at the flowers. In the corner of his eye he saw her sister reach out to take her hand. "We are not young anymore."

"But this will always be our home."

"Our heart and soul will always be here, Malai [the other Drinkwater sister] said in English with a tremor to her voice (p. 211).

Keti has been the only place they have known as home. They are concerned about the history and relics they will have to part with when they leave for America. We see LaMamo betray a similar emotional dilemma in far-away lands. He is torn between nostalgia for his homeland Keti and remaining on his self-imposed exile in foreign lands where he is fighting to liberate people with whom he shares no filial ties. He introduces as the woman he intends to marry, a Liberian girl who he had rescued in the heat of battle.

At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, we may deduce that LaMamo, a young man on a military assignment is no different from a missionary like Reverend Drinkwater who left his native Iowa in America to live, work and die in Keti on active Christian service. Every immigrant is on a mission. They are all missionaries –Reverend Drinkwater, Mr. Graves, LaMamo and Zara. The only difference in their status as missionaries, perhaps is in their respective methodologies of pursuing their quests.

No community is an island to itself. All through human civilization, there is no other generation which fits the description of not being an island than the present age of globalization. In our homogenized world, there is a new sense of locale which Lundborg (2011) described as a progressive sense of place.

Conclusion

The paper has pointed out that the world is gravitating in a direction that people of diverse cultural groups and experiences can build functional symbiotic unions. In the new order, ideas and peoples that flow across regions manifest in such manner that all actors in the 'shrinking' borderless world are mutual beneficiaries. Habila's *Measuring Time* has revealed a world where transfer and fusion of ideas is promoted, where inter-racial marriages are tolerated, and where beliefs and ideas are shared across fast-disappearing borders. It has also revealed Africa as a chip of the human bloc that is no longer content with the state where the West would arrogantly flaunt some acts of virtuosity as though they were some benevolent act promoted by agents of a superior civilization. It is evident that between one African nation and another, and between Africa and other overseas nations, there is ample room for cross-fertilization of ideas.

It implies that African people should not be averse to adopting cultural practices from other climes, in the same way that they should not shy away from exporting their own, so long as such practices advance the cause of humankind. No culture is so rich and content to such degree that it would not borrow from other cultures that it comes in contact with. The West should therefore not relate with Africa in a condescending manner as though African cultural values are inferior.

We surmised that as noble and as rewarding as some flow of people from one place to another might be, some migrations are more of sojourning in circles which leave the immigrant in a state of alienation. Our study of *Measuring Time* reveals that the horizon for which the wanderlust adventurer often goes on a quest may not be as distant and farther off as he had imagined.

We therefore aver that globalization should not be advanced as an imposition of foreign cultural values; rather it should be seen as a practice that reflects mutually beneficial contact amongst people of divergent cultures. In the current dispensation, the cultural consumption and uncritical assimilation of Western values by African colonized people do not reflect the underlying objective of Globalization. We recommend a revision of the concept and to promote a symbiosis of unions where ideological, material and human capital flow across cultures in such a manner that all the actors in the 'shrinking' borderless world are mutual beneficiaries.

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