Ogoni Puppetry Tradition: A Study of the Theatrical Elements in Naabiradee (Amanikpo) Play

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ABSTRACT
The Naabiradee Puppetry Theatre is a traditional play of the Ogoni people. There are obviously certain theatrical elements that are inherent in the performance process. In this paper, attempt is made to delineate these elements and discuss them in the light of traditional theatre expectations. The paper, thus identifies mime, setting/stage, dialogue, scenes, costumes, dance/music, movement/action, characters, rituals, theme and spectacle as theatrical features in Naabiradee puppet play performance. The paper, in an attempt to elicit information, uses the field work approach as well as Performance Theory by Richard Schechner for a theoretical framework. The paper, having examined these elements, concludes that the performance of Naabiradee puppetry theatre is dramatic and represents truly, a functional traditional play in the corpus of African oral literature.

Keywords: Naabiradee, Performance, process, traditional theatre, theoretical framework, African oral literature field work

1.0 INTRODUCTION
Puppetry theatre is an art form where a number of puppets are suspended on a built tent or strings and are manipulated by puppeteers from within the tent in performance. There are the marionette puppets, hand puppets, rod puppets and shadow puppets as known to various cultures of the world.

In Ogoniland, puppetry theatre belongs to the Naabiradee (Amanikpo) Cult Play Group. The play is ancient and is sustained on the myth of secrecy and Zimadee (blindness). It is a unique play in which acting is done by representational objects known as puppets which are manipulated by humans as puppeteers.

Today, puppetry theatre in Ogoni has developed to a large extent such that its functionality has become an issue of research interest to scholars of oral literature especially. The relevance of Ogoni puppetry theatre to tradition lies in the fact that as a theatre, it exhibits Ogoni traditional beliefs and showcases its crafts in songs, dance, drumming and other artistic cultural innovations. Besides, it relevance to tradition is also seen from the perspective that it is a generational experience where the act of puppetry, with all its cultural traits are passed down from generation to generation.

1.1 Who are the Ogoni?
The Ogoni are one of the ethnic minorities within the Federal Republic of Nigeria. They are found in the six kingdoms of Babbe, Ken-Khana, Nyo-Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme.
The Territory in which they live forms the easternmost extension of the mainland fringe bordering the eastern Niger Delta, lying in an area between approximately latitude 4.05’ and 4.20’ north and longitudes 7.10’ and 7.30’ east. They have an estimated population of 500,000 persons (http://www.ratica.org/corporations/ogonifacts.html).

1.2 Their Origin/Worldview

The origin of the Ogoni has been an issue over time for Ogoni historians and scholars of other related disciplines. Although there are now researched works done in this area, records available still point to the fact that more spirited efforts need to be put in by perhaps a technical research team that would be able to use the multi-disciplinary approach of the fields of Archaeology, Ethnography, Linguistics, Sociology and Anthropology for a sustained, reliable and dependable account of the origins of the people. Nevertheless, one popular account on the origins of the Ogoni is that which links them to the ancient Ghana Empire. Exponents of this account opine that the Ogoni were said to have left their place in ancient Ghana due to wars and made their way along the Atlantic coast. By means of large canoes, they finally arrived at Ibani (Bonny Island). It is reasoned that the name Ogoni must have derived from the Ibani word Igoni which simply means Strangers (Ighara & Keenam 14).

A second account on the origins of the Ogoni is that which suggests an east-west movement. Exponents of this theory believe that the Ogoni people may have migrated from the Nigeria/ Cameroon border into the Oban forest because of the abundance of food crops, fruits and other necessities of life and later moved into the Cross River Basin (Afigbo 18). Ken Saro-Wiwa, in Ogoni Nation, Today and Tomorrow also gave support to this theory (7). Another strong view in this direction is that of Ben Naanen who cited the Ododop, the Yakurr and the Bahum, including the Andoni, Abua, Efik, Ibibio, Annang and the nationalities within the Ogoja region of the Cross River State of Nigeria, who like the Ogoni, also claim the Oban forest in the Cameroon highlands as their cradle land (21).

In the aspect of worldview, the Ogoni believe in the trinity of life—the world of the living, the departed (spirit world of the ancestors) and the unborn. Spiritually, the Ogoni tradition holds that there is another world after this. They also believe that whatever a person does in this world trails behind him or her when he or she comes back (re-incarnation). It is the traditional belief of the Ogoni that human beings have the ability to leave their human form and enter into that of an animal, taking on the shape of that animal. This is to say that the human spirit or soul can manifest itself in an animal.

The death of somebody, in Ogoni world view, is usually attributed to another person. More often than not, such an accused person is brutally killed in cold blood by the people through mob action. In the text, A Forest of Flowers, Ken Saro-Wiwa identifies this aspect of Ogoni world view and blames it on their psyche and lack of proper education:
Why were so many people dying? No one bothered to find out how each person died. Heart attacks, ruptured kidneys and livers, pneumonia, senility, these noted killers of man are happily unknown in Dukana. All the deaths within a short period of time were attributable to a culprit who had to be identified (34).

Another area of Ogoni world view worth noting is the issue of the supreme creator. The Ogoni believe that although the world of nature was created, man was not created but born out of God’s womb. God is therefore seen as the great mother (Kawabari) of mankind from whom all authority and governance emanated (Kpone-Tonwe 17). To reach out to God therefore, the Ogoni believe that other smaller gods must be approached as intermediaries. This is the origin of their beliefs in lesser gods such as: the land deity (Yor Asaan), water deity (Yor Maa), market deity (Yor du) and farm deity (Yor wii) to mention, a few.

1.3 Theoretical Framework
In a research paper such as this, a theoretical framework is desirable in so far as it holds together the theory which the researcher intends to use. In the case of this paper, Richard Schechner’s performance theory is considered relevant.

1.3.1 Performance Theory
The choice of performance theory in this paper is informed by the very fact that analysis of Ogoni traditional theatre is culturally situated. Ogoni traditional theatre performances, apart from being ethnic, intercultural, historical and ritualistic, it has also aesthetic qualities.

This paper seeks to establish the fact that the theatrical elements of Ogoni Naabiradee puppetry, finds expression in Richard Schechner’s Performance Theory especially, from Schechner’s perspective on artistic and cultural performances which encompasses art, solo-performance, theatrical storytelling, plays, parades, religious ceremonies, community festivals and performances of social and professional roles.

The reason for the predilection of Schechner’s performance theory is predicated on the premise that it is eclectic in nature and therefore amenable to studies in the oral stream of African literature which the Naabiradee puppetry theatre tradition of the Ogoni people represents.

Schechner’s concept of performance asserts the importance of different systems of transformations which vary significantly from culture to culture. Indeed, Schechner opines that performing on stage, performing in special social situations (public ceremonies) and performing in everyday life are a continuum (143).

Every traditional performance is considered total in content because performance is an inclusive term, with reference to the activities of actors, dancers, musicians and their spectators and audiences. It is important to note that theatre, dance and music are elements that are central in the Naabiradee puppetry tradition of the Ogoni people. These elements are also cardinal in Schechner’s performance theory. Theatre emphasizes narrative, dance emphasizes movement and music emphasizes sound. These, are well replicated in the performance of Naabiradee puppetry festival of the Ogoni people.

Another strand of performance theory that defines the Naabiradee puppetry tradition of the Ogoni is the issue of the ingredient of ‘restored behaviour.’ By this, we mean the organized re-enactment of mythic or actual events as well as the role playing of religious, political, professional, and social life. The roles which the different puppet masks play during performance of the Naabiradee theatre revolve around the above.

Schechner’s performance theory also emphasizes the place of rituals. As a traditional play, Naabiradee festival is replete with incidences of rituals. Indeed, there is no performance of the Naabiradee festival that will be organized without episodes of goat decapitation and fowl killing. These ritual performances are not only efficacious, they are also often beautiful and pleasure-giving because of the aesthetics that are tied to them. In the view of Victor Turner, another critical voice on performance theory, ‘ritual is a motor for profound individual and community change’ (125).

These entailments in Schechner’s performance theory provide the basis for the analysis of Naabiradee puppetry theatre, especially, the aspect of theatrical elements.

1.4 Naabiradee Festival Theatre
Naabiradee festival theatre is an Ogoni puppetry ritual drama. Like the Greek theatre that was dedicated to the god Dionysus, Naabiradee, as a festival theatre is enacted yearly in the month of April to commemorate the passing on of Naabiradee who according to oral history, died on April 5th, 1920 (interview with Chief Kordaa Kpakor). Thus, the festival, when celebrated, is said to be dedicated to the Zim of Ogoni (the collective spirit of the ancestors amongst whom is Naabiradee).
1.4.1 Historical Account of Naabiradee Festival Theatre

Before the seventeenth century, puppetry theatre was not known anywhere in Ogoniland. The history of its origin has it that the play came through a woman from Nyowii Báan in Nyokhana District of Khana Local Government Area of Rivers State. According to oral tradition, the woman had travelled to Ekparakwa in Ibibioland to sell clay pots, the only dignified trade at that time. While there in Ekparakwa, she inadvertently walked into a group of women who were performers of Akparikpo, a name which perhaps gave birth to Amanikpo, as the play was later known in Ogoniland. It is important to note that Naabiradee and Amanikpo are two names that denote the same thing – Ogoni puppetry theatre.

The account went on to state that the woman was consequently arrested for having violated the secrecy of the play. She was then fined one fowl and other necessary traditional items as specified. Having paid the fine, the woman was declared a member. As she was to return home, the women performers from Ibibioland followed and established the play at Nyowii Báan. The chief of Nyowii was invited and told that a new play has been brought home.

Historically, Nyowii Báan became the first town in Ogoniland where the play was established. With the passage of time, the play came into Gbam where it was formally called Anmanikpo, a coinage that is derived from Akparikpo as it is called in Ibibioland. From Gbam, the play came into Gio and Kpite town where it was established at Elder Nkerelo’s compound.

The account of the oral source further stated that it was at Kpite town that the daughter of BariGokana, with the name Naabiradee was arrested to have violated the secrecy of the play. Because Naabiradee was unable to pay the fine levied on her, she had to send for her father who on getting the information, came prepared with money with which all the stipulated items were bought and presented. Thereafter, Naabiradee became a member.

The significance of Naabiradee in the development of the play in Ogoniland centres around the fact that through her, men became members of the play and that at her death, the play became a festival that was celebrated annually in the month of April till date. The father of Naabiradee, Chief BariGokana became the first man to be initiated as a member, having paid one cow as demanded by the women members from Gbam, Gio and Kpite communities who all converged at Ko, a village near Bera in Mogho Gokana.

Until today, the shrine and forest of Naabiradee are still there in that village at the compound of BariGokana, serving as tourist sites for researchers and historians of indigenous culture.

1.4.2 Theatrical Features in Naabiradee Festival

As said earlier, Naabiradee festival theatre is an Ogoni puppetry drama. It is dramatic in performance and also exhibits a number of theatrical features in the process of its performance. Amongst these features are:

- **Miming**

There are scenes in the performance of Naabiradee puppetry theatre where the audience only can guess the meaning behind certain actions by some of the puppet masks. We thus, see in such scenes, the act of miming which simply means ‘to act without words.’ For instance, the Saalili mask, would for the most part of the performance, mime the need for a castrated goat to be slaughtered. The audience gets to know this through the use of the traditional sword in the right hand of the Saalili mask which is used in the demonstration of the act of decapitation. Another character that does the miming act is the Yiangeré mask. This mask poses as a police constable and thus mime that fierce look which the police represents especially,
when out for the arrest of a suspect. The audience again is able to know this through the use of the police staff and uniform, peculiar to this puppet mask alone.

Other instances of miming include the act of nodding by the entire puppets to indicate tacit agreement with the submissions made by the Awoolo mask in the various scenes. As a traditional play, we find this element a regular feature especially when viewed against the definition of traditional theatre by Ola Rotimi in the following words:

Theatre within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies an imitation of action or a person or persons in action, the ultimate objective of which is to edify or to entertain, sometimes, to do both (77).

Setting/Stage
In any outing of an Ogoni puppetry theatre, the incidence of stage is very prominent. Naabiradee puppetry theatre uses a constructed tent as stage with adjoining free space of a stretched out land, to be encircled by spectators during performance. Usually, the tent is kept directly in front of the Amanikpo house, covering the front view of the structure from left to right. It is a kind of proscenium stage just like in ancient Greece, and this finds expression in Richard Schechner’s theory of performance which states that, “performing on stage, performing in special social situations (public ceremonies) and performing in everyday life are a continuum (143).

Dialogue
Dialogue is a prominent feature in the performance of Naabiradee puppetry drama. There are two levels of dialogue that any keen spectator can notice. The first is the one that unfolds amongst the puppet masks, positioned one after the other with an interval space of one foot in between. As it is with this ancient play, the Awoolo mask (Chief vocalist) is the coordinator of the dialogue. The Agbarator mask (choir master) takes it over and the dialogue flows through with the other masks – Baagéré, Saalili, Taagéré, Yiangéré, Oogéré, Mmáakaé and Kadume mask, taking their turns. The realization of dialogue amongst the puppets is observed in the chronological sequence of ideas from one puppet to the other.

The second level of dialogue is that which is between the puppet masks and the custodians of the ancient play. The custodians are normally seated outside and directly in front of the tent stage on which the masks are stationed to be watched by the audience. From time to time, they (the custodians) engage in dialogue with the puppet masks. Usually, the dialogue at this level is woven around the deeds of past heroes of the ancient play, exploits of top personalities of the celebrating community, what it takes to be a titled person and the benefits to be gained from being an initiate of the ancient play.

Plate 1.3: The Tent and Custodians
Scenes
There are several scenes in the performance of Naabiradee puppetry theatre. As typical with traditional displays, all the scenes are unique and invigorating. We have the scene of monologue performance. In this scene, the Saalili and Yiangéré masks are the performers. In the case of the Saalili mask, there is an uninterrupted chanting of the phrase: Koko pee oh, koko pee oh (meaning, castrated goat, castrated goat). As the chant goes on, the mask, in this monologue form, demonstrates bodily movement left and right. Similarly, Yiangéré puppet mask poses as a police officer and asks intelligence questions much of which are rhetorical in nature. This scene is more or less, comic and the audience, are entertained by it.
After this scene, comes several other scenes of intense singing of sweet melodies. With the combination of the Awoolo mask (chief vocalist) and Agbarator (the choir master), the music rendition is carried to a crescendo. The songs come alive to the audience through the whistling voices of the puppeteers. The puppeteers, as performers, must learn to use the Ostrich egg shell in order to have the kind of unique, shrill voice peculiar to puppets placed on the tent. In the words of R.T.E Ellison:

The whistle in this case consists of two pieces of Ostrich egg shell about three-quarters of an inch square, bound together with thread. This is half swallowed …and he declares that to perfect this whistling voice is by far the most difficult part of the craft and requires years of practice (252).

Costumes
The use of costumes is evident in the performance of Naabiradee puppetry theatre. The puppet tent is the first area of attention. It is beautifully adorned with assorted wrappers ranging from George wrappers, Hollandaise, English Wax to Hitegard. With their different colours, they are arranged to bring out artistic aesthetics in their draping pattern. The custodians of the ancient play are by tradition, to be uniformed while on outing. They put on a red traditional cap (tún) and tie around their waists, George wrappers. Their torsos are usually bare except that they hang goat skin bags on their backs. They walk bare-footed and hold in their right hands, different colours of cow tails, known in the traditional setting as Zága which they brandish as they walk or sit in front of the puppet tent.
The puppet masks too offers a good example of the use of costumes. In a formal outing, such as that of the festival, the masks are twelve in number. Each mask is given its peculiar decoration in terms of the positioning of the feathers. While some have the feathers sparingly fixed by the sides of the mask head, others have the feathers fixed in a weedy form. The Awoolo mask holds a small cow tails in the right hand as a mark of distinction. The Saalili mask also holds a carved machete in the right hand and wears the traditional cap (tún) on the head, by the side of which a small proportion of the feathers are arranged.
• **Dance/Music**
  Of all the traditional festivals in Ogoniland, Naabiradee is the most peculiar in terms of audience participation. Rather than having a participatory audience, we have a watching type of audience. Those that do the dancing are initiates of the play. They dance within the space in the front of the tent while the audience watches on. The puppet masks also combine singing with dancing. The rhythmic beats from the gongs are usually the propelling force for the puppets and the initiates to perform.

In the production of the music, there are no drums, rattles, resonators (clay pot) as known in other traditional displays. Basically, it is the gong (Gira) that produces the music and they are five in number. Assessing the role of instruments such as the gongs to the delivery of dramatic performances, an expert in the field of Orchestration, recommends the gong for dramatic purposes (Macdonald 286).

• **Movement/Action**
  Movement and action are aspects and parcel of Naabiradee puppetry theatre. In an organized outing of the Naabiradee festival, the tent would have been prepared there in the Naabiradee forest. Thus, on the outing date, the tent is carried snake-like by the able bodied men who themselves, are initiates to the performing arena. The custodians, dressed in their usual traditional outing, would move along, flanking the able bodied men who are carrying the tent. As they move, they utter words and expressions, all of which must depict the uniqueness and awesomeness of Naabiradee. As part of the action, a signal of three gunshots, known in the traditional setting as (tantigiri) must be fired to herald the arrival of the tent and also to disperse momentarily, non-initiates from viewing the tent as it is to be positioned. This situation, adds credence to the fact that secrecy is one of the pillars of the ancient play.

• **Characters**
  In an organized outing of Naabiradee puppetry theatre, the number of the puppet masks to be displayed on the tent must be twelve. Each mask is controlled from within the tent by a puppeteer. In the Ogoni situation, the marionette type of puppets are used. Therefore, it is convenient to say that there are twelve characters in the performance of Naabiradee festival theatre. Each is given a symbolic name that defines the role they play during performance. On tent, they are arranged from left to right beginning with *Saro Gbara* (Kasi Zim), *Niwaka* (Kerebium), *Awoolo* (Chief vocalist), *Agbarator* (choir master), *Tuagéré, Baagéré, Saalili, Taagéré, Yiangéré, Oogéré, Mmáekae* (last born) and *Kadumé* (back bencher).

While some of the characters could be said to be round, others are completely flat. For instance, it is possible to predict the line of performance of the *Saalili* mask because the puppeteer would always chant koo koo pee oh, koo koo pee oh. This role of the *Saalili* mask makes it a flat character. Another flat character to watch is the *Yiangéré* mask. This is because the puppeteer acts the police role always, emphasizing the arrest of somebody. Nothing new is learnt from these flat characters. Outside them, the other characters are round and they are capable from time to time to spring surprises in their performance act.

• **Rituals**
  The performance of Naabiradee puppetry theatre is in part, ritualistic. The reason for this is to justify the fact that the enactment of the ancient play is usually dedicated to Ogoni *Zim* (collective spirit of the ancestor amongst whom is Naabiradee). In the Ogoni situation, as it affects the outing of Naabiradee puppetry drama, performance of ritual is a theatrical experience. This is in tandem with the views of Catherine Bell who once wrote that:

> The performance of ritual creates a theatrical-like frame around the activities, symbols and events that shape participant’s experience and cognitive ordering of the world, simplifying the chaos of life and imposing a more or less coherent system of categories of meaning onto it (156).

As said earlier in this discussion, ritual performances in Naabiradee puppetry theatre are not only efficacious, they are also often seen to be beautiful and pleasure giving. It must be stated clearly that a number of dramatic performances in traditional societies are ritualistic in content. The Naabiradee puppetry theatre of the Ogoni people is one. In it, we have episodes of goat decapitation, fowl killing and other forms of sacrifices in which the mullet/shark fish are used to propitiate the gods of the land to be at peace with the performance/enactment.

What is most appealing with the ritual content of Naabiradee however, is the aesthetics that accompanied the ritual performances. This quality makes it dramatic and entertaining and that is why ritual is classified in this seminar paper as an element of Naabiradee theatre.
Theme
Every work of literature, be it written or oral must have its theme. For instance, the theme of a piece of fiction could be its view about life and how people behave. A fable may be said to have a moral theme and the theme of a parable could be its teachings. Theme, in literature, is not presented directly. It is the business of the individual to extract it from the story through the characters, action and indeed, the setting that make up the story.

In the case of Naabiradee puppetry theatre, its enactment as a play is usually anchored on certain communal aspects of living. We normally have the theme of: the deeds of the ancestors, communal wars fought and won, exploits of epic heroes, remarkable patriarchal and matriarchal lineages, great deities of the land, to mention a few. According to an oral source, these themes are normally exposed in the speeches of Awoolo, the chief vocalist in what is termed, solo performance period. Usually, such speeches are laced up in proverbs and in community maxims. Thus, it is the elders and the titled men that are privileged to decipher the messages. The very young are often being carried away by the rhythm of the drum beat and the dance movement of the puppet masks on the tent.

Spectacle
Spectacle is yet another very exciting element of the Naabiradee theatre. As a theatre element, spectacle refers to the things that are spectacular. In the case of Naabiradee theatre, we have first and foremost, the tent on whose top the marionette puppets perform. The design, which is mostly the combination of wrapper colours, draping from top to the ground level makes for a spectacle. Another spectacular aspect is the puppet masks. Each has its peculiar appearance and the combination of these appearances, no doubt, make for a worthy spectacle. We also have the spectacle of the props, the areas reserved for titled men and the special costumes for the custodians of the ancient play. All these, form the aesthetics with which the Naabiradee puppetry play is watched by spectators.

1.4.3 Performance Aesthetics
Performance aesthetics, in the context of this paper, means the creation of beauty out of the various segments that define the staging of the Naabiradee puppetry theatre in a year’s festival. African traditional theatre is artistic in appeal. In using the Naabiradee puppetry theatre of the Ogoni as a study example, we see performance aesthetics in the following areas:

1.4.3.1 Ritual Aesthetics
At different stages in the festival performance of Naabiradee puppetry theatre, we have incidences of ritual enactments. Some are done behind the tent while others are performed before the surging spectators wanting to have a full grasp of the performing puppets on tent. The manner in which the ritual is performed and the performer’s special pattern of dress-code, add to the aesthetics of ritual enactment. It is a religious ritual and thus sustains the traditional belief that man craves to relate with his ancestors, deities and ultimately, the supernatural beings. This desire of the African man is predicated on the ground that man is helpless, thus, he relies on supernatural help for most of what he does and needs. This explains why the literary artist says that we can see the aesthetics of the traditional theatre through the stylized ritual of sacrifice and favour (Duruaku 16-17).

1.4.3.2 Songs/Dance Aesthetics
The performance of Naabiradee puppetry theatre is incomplete without the incidence of songs and dance. The uses of songs bring about a relationship between the living and the dead. In some, the deaths of loved ones are expressed. Others are used to praise the ancestors for their heroic deeds. Taiwo Oladele expresses his views on this aspect of performance aesthetics by saying that:

The people’s beliefs and attitude to life are embedded in their songs and so they have appropriate songs for any situation. These songs are regarded as a major activity during which people show their joy or sorrow or in the case of religious festivals, their reverence and devotion (39).

On the other hand, dance can be described as a human movement created and expressed for an aesthetic purpose. (Sondra 49). In Africa, dance is closely related to music, mime, storytelling, costume and ritual. In the Naabiradee puppetry theatre, dance expresses emotions of joy, peace, love and commemoration. It serves purposes of entertainment and communication. The dance steps in Naabiradee festival is ritualistic. It is the business of the initiates. Thus, when they dance, they chant the deeds of great deities of the land and in most cases, imitate in miming, the dance steps of some notable priests of various deities when possessed.
On the whole, performance aesthetics in the Naabiradee puppetry theatre is a product of myriad of elements ranging from the puppet masks, costumes, dance dexterity of initiates, songs, drum beats to spatial organization. All of these help to create the beauty appeal that is associated with the performance of this ancient play.

CONCLUSION
The attempt so far made in this paper has been to acquaint readers of the place of Naabiradee as a traditional play in Ogoniland. In doing so, a brief account on the origins of the Ogoni is examined. Also examined is the historical origin of Naabiradee, the ancient play which is traced to have come into Ogoniland from their Ibibio neighbours. The paper uses Richard Schechner’s Performance theory to explicate the traditional performance of Naabiradee with particular interest in the theatrical elements of the play. By the analysis, Naabiradee puppetry theatre performance is found to have salient theatrical elements such as: miming, setting/stage, dialogue, scenes, costumes, dance/music, movement/action, characters, rituals, theme and spectacle, as well as performance aesthetics, all of which truly situate the ancient play as an example of a traditional theatre in the African context.

No doubt, Naabiradee puppetry theatre has a lot of tourist potentials and it is expected that the play be reinvigorated in Ogoniland so as to attract tourist interest in this aspect of the Ogoni culture.

WORKS CITED

APPENDIX

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