



# “Sunsum” and “Honhom” in African Socioreligioculture and Spirituality

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## ABSTRACT

*Sunsum* and *Honhom* in the African socioreligioculture and spirituality present a complexity of functionality and purpose that provides distinctive context to the interplay of dimensions that define existence (*being*). In any case, ‘existence’ or ‘being’ must possess distinctive functionality and a purpose that defines the specificity of their spiritual or physical purposes. The study which examines the meaning, significance and relevance of *Sunsum* and *Honhom* within the African socioreligioculture and spirituality attempts to decipher their implications for Christianity, Theology and Biblical scholarship especially in Africa and beyond. It used ethno-anthropology and socio-phenomenology which examined the meaning, significance and relevance of *sunsum* and *honhom* not just as a linguistic preference or juxtaposition but as a dimension, or functionality that establishes both an epistemology and a nomenclature that provide the right approach and methods for nurturing or relating with people or elements within the physical and spiritual cosmology. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the functionality of *Sunsum* and *Honhom* within African socioreligioculture and spirituality and how they affect how human beings or elements within the African Socioreligioculture and Spirituality are perceived or related to/with.

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## INTRODUCTION

The cosmology of African socioreligiocultural and spirituality are defined by complex epistemology and a nomenclature that create not just a context but a framework that forms the foundation for belief, and practice. These epistemologies and nomenclatures which are nonetheless distinctive to the Africa’s indigenous socioculture and spirituality are developed out of careful reflections, encounters and experiences with the supernatural and how it is reflected in social structures and systems. A concept that has presented so much debate within the African socioreligioculture and spirituality is the interplay, dichotomy and functionality of *sunsum* and *honhom*. *Sunsum* or *honhom* not only play a significant role in the quasi-physical or quasi-spiritual components of created elements but also it forms one of two important components in addition to *ɔkra* (Soul), and *honam* (body) in *Onipa* (human).

Together, *sunsum* or *honhom* form the *tripartite* or *pentachotomistic* conception of ‘*Onipa*.’ While *sunsum* is defined as a ‘life force’, *honhom* is defined as a ‘spiritual essence’. The interplay of *sunsum* and *honhom* therefore defines the functionality of every element in creation and the nature of their relationship with *Onyankopɔn* (the Supreme-Being). Significantly, *sunsum* and *honhom* are not just linguistic preferences for spirit in specific cultures as translated into English and different from *ɔkra* (soul)

but an emphasis on distinction or a dichotomy that exists within the concept which are often overlooked. *Sunsum* and *honhom* therefore provide important trajectories within the conception of *Nkwa* (life) in the African socioreligioculture and spirituality which are presented as a life-force (*sunsum*) and a spiritual essence (*honhom*) without which *nkwa* (life) is only a abstraction.

### Concept of an African Cosmology

Viriri and Mungwini define Africa as a place of complex spiritualities.<sup>1</sup> It has a sophisticated but distinctive worldview informed by careful observation, fascination and experience of the natural and supernatural realms of existence or functionality. For Petrus and Bogopa, the interaction that exists between the natural and supernatural is a reality that is lived daily, manifested by active engagement between the physical and spiritual realms. The idea of an African cosmology therefore suggests the availability of alternative frameworks other than Western/European, Asian etc.<sup>2</sup> For Udefi, this however does not indicate parallelism of cosmologies since each possesses very distinct and unique elements.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it indicates a plurality of cosmologies defined by distinctive experiences, epistemologies and nomenclatures that provide the context within which each perceives the world or forms a general conception of things.

However, African cosmology possesses structures that provide specificity to the facets of dimensions conceived within its various realms. For Kanu, there are two dimensions; physical (natural) and spiritual (supernatural).<sup>4</sup> The physical (natural) encompasses the mundane through the senses including the ecological system categorized into biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) such as plants, humans, animals, the sky and the sea. The physical is where humans engage in daily life and interact with one another and the environment. According to Asamoah-Gyadu, the spiritual (supernatural) also includes beliefs, practices, and experiences that connect individuals or communities with the sacred such as the supreme being, ancestors or spirits, and other non-physical entities.<sup>5</sup> This perception of cosmology informed a socioculture and spirituality that shaped Africa's epistemology and nomenclature.

The epistemological nomenclatures provide a socioreligiocultural and traditional framework within which Africa contextualises and expresses its worldviews i.e. the way it sees and conceives the world and everything in it. Such a worldview is indigenous and distinctively African. It develops out of generations of practices, engagement and experience of her ancestors (patriarchs and matriarchs) who proved their veracity. They lived with it; they lived by it and they lived through it. They saw their rationality reasonableness and therefore found the need to preserve them through orality, folklore and myths and legends. To a very large extent, these epistemological nomenclatures not only provide the context or framework through which Africa contextualised or expressed its worldviews but they also added to the richness and meaningfulness of the African Indigenous life and living by providing the moral and ethical frameworks that ensured that there was peace, unity and love for one another in the family, clan and community.

### African Socioculture and Spirituality

According to Kanu Africa is engulfed with a plurality of traditions and cultures.<sup>6</sup> The multiplicity of which provides a complex socioreligioculture defined by an inimitable collection of social structures and cultural practices such as family and kinship, lineage and descent, and tribal and ethnic identities. Others include gender roles and relations, community cohesion and solidarity. The cultural practices also include rites of passage, beliefs, marriage, burial and funeral rites which are intricately interwoven. The social structure

<sup>1</sup> Advice Viriri and Pascah Mungwini, "African Cosmology and the Duality of Western Hegemony: The Search for an African Identity," *The Journal of Pan-African Studies* 3 (2010): 27.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore S Petrus and David L Bogopa, "Natural and Supernatural: Intersections between the Spiritual and Natural Worlds in African Witchcraft and Healing with Reference to Southern Africa," *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 7, no. 1 (2007): 1–10.

<sup>3</sup> Amaechi Udefi, "Philosophy, Mythology and an African Cosmological System," *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* 22, no. 1 (2012): 114–26.

<sup>4</sup> Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "The Dimensions of African Cosmology," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 2, no. 2 (2013): 533–55.

<sup>5</sup> Kwabena, J. Asamoah-Gyadu, "*Spirit and Spirits in African Religious Traditions.*" *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World: Loosing the Spirits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "Towards an African Cultural Renaissance," *Professor Bassey Andah Journal of Cultural Studies. Volume 3* (2010): 146–55.

and cultural practices provide a sense of order and stability, harmony and continuity and play a key role in transmitting indigenous knowledge from one generation to the other or one person to the other. Social structures and cultural practices provide a context or criteria that organise the entire life of the society or community by defining the extent or limit of what is permitted and prohibited.

Marumo and Chakale noted a spirituality that provided a unique dimension to the social structures and cultural practices that formed its extent and shaped a cosmology ingeniously pervaded by a cosmology or hierarchy of transcendent entities that exist in various forms and types.<sup>7</sup> Their involvement in the everyday life and activities of society is as absolute and clear as their roles. Chiorazzi argued that African cosmology is simply spiritual, the reason why the entire ecology is approached with respect and veneration.<sup>8</sup> For Ephirim-Donkor, these transcendent entities acted as intermediaries and custodians of the heritage of societies.<sup>9</sup> They not only protected but penalised any fallout from family or community laws. They existed and manifested themselves in various forms and through various elements of natural ecology. This perception creates a spirituality that defines the indigenous socioreligiocultures of Africa.

The African believes that there is a life in everything. All though all lives may not be the same. Every element in creation animate or inanimate is believed to possess a type of 'life-form' or 'form-of-life'. For instance, there is a 'form-of-life' in lakes, plants, mountains, rocks, and humans, etc however these "life-form" differ from each other. This is what gives elements of the cosmology a "purpose" or "function". While human life-form is considered the highest, plant life-form is considered the lowest. The concept of change from one life form to another, in this case, a lower form to a higher form or a higher form to a lower form is considered a reward or punishment for attaining a satisfactory standard of function or purpose at a particular dimension (higher or lower) until a life-form reaches the highest which is the ancestor life-form and becomes admitted into their sacred world. This dovetails into the concept of *nipa*.

### **African Philosophy or Epistemology**

Bodunrin has argued that the cosmology and spirituality of Africa provide a basis for a sagacious philosophy developed from everyday living, fascination with the supernatural and reflection on the complexities within the natural and supernatural ecology.<sup>10</sup> It is this philosophy that defines the context, and nature of every acuity, or activity of society. African philosophy, therefore, is an epistemology that systematises the pervading worldviews and nomenclatures that contextualise its views on life, living and existence. Although its primary basis is African, it provides a competitive framework for philosophising in other cosmologies. However, according to Wiredu, there is a distinctiveness that outlines the parameters of its approach although, it continues to evolve based on traditional and contemporary issues.<sup>11</sup> It explores how values such as respect, hospitality, and community well-being shape individual and collective conduct.

According to Lutz, *Ubuntu* is an Nguni (isiZulu) aphorism: *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, which means "a person is a person because of or through others" is also a philosophical epistemology that contextualises the totality of African philosophies.<sup>12</sup> There is a connectivity that exists between all parts or forms of life and living. The individual is rugged, but living within a community. Mabovula observed that in a hostile environment, it is only through solidarity that hunger, isolation, deprivation, poverty and other challenges can be survived.<sup>13</sup> Ubuntu unlocks the capacity of African culture to express compassion, common humanity, dignity and the responsibility of individuals to each other. Africans are social beings that are in constant interaction with one another in an environment where a person is regarded as a human being only through his or her relationships with others. Therefore, the survival of one is dependent on all.

<sup>7</sup> Phemelo Olifile Marumo and Mompoti Vincent Chakale, "Understanding African Philosophy and African Spirituality: Challenges and Prospects," *Gender and Behaviour* 16, no. 2 (2018): 11695–704.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Chiorazzi, "The Spirituality of Africa," *The Harvard Gazette* 6 (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Peter O Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy," *Philosophy* 56, no. 216 (1981): 161–79.

<sup>11</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion," *African Studies Quarterly* 1, no.4 (1998): 17–46.

<sup>12</sup> David W Lutz, "African Ubuntu Philosophy and Global Management," *Journal of Business Ethics* 84, no. Suppl 3 (2009): 313–28.

<sup>13</sup> Nonceba Nolundi Mabovula, "The Erosion of African Communal Values: A Reappraisal of the African Ubuntu Philosophy," *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2011): 38–47.

### “Nkwa” and “Onipa” in African Socioreligioculture

*Nkwa* (life) and *Onipa* (human) are concepts within the African thought system that present many complexities. Ntiamoah and Agboada argued that if there was something within the African cosmology conceived with an aura of sacredness, it was *nkwa* (life) and *onipa* (human).<sup>14</sup> ‘*Nkwa*’ (life) is more than subjective experiences such as thought, feeling, perception, and awareness of one's existence or biological characteristics such as growth, reproduction, response to stimuli, and metabolism. Agada argues that *nkwa* is an energy or activating principle that causes elements in creation to exist or function or gives them their nature or characteristics.<sup>15</sup> However, there are ‘forms’ or ‘levels’ within the kinds of *nkwa*. This provides the conception of life as a ‘form’ with human life considered the highest form and crown of all life forms.

A ‘life-form’ is also a ‘state’; however, it is not static. Therefore, a life-form can change from one dimension or state to another through what is described as a cycle (rebirth or reincarnation) which is critical to the philosophy of life in Africa. Oyeshile postulates two ontologies of *Onipa*; the “*tripartite*” and “*pentachotomistic*.”<sup>16</sup> According to Gyekye, ‘*onipa*’ is a tripartite made up of *ɔkra* (soul) *sunsum/honhom* (spirit) and *honam* (body).<sup>17</sup> For Wiredu ‘*Onipa*’ is *pentachotomistic*. In addition to ‘*ɔkra*’ (soul), *sunsum/honhom* (spirit) and *honam* (body) there is *mogya* (blood) and *ntoro* (a spiritual-genetic aspect of the father).<sup>18</sup> While the *ɔkra* (soul) is given by *Onyankopɔn* (the supreme being), the *sunsum/honhom* (spirit) forms the individual spirit of a person. It is the basis for one’s personality or characteristics. However, the *Honam* (body) is the material component of the person, perishable after the *ɔkra* (soul) has left.

The *honam* (body) is formed by the fusion of the *mogya* (semen) of the father and the *nksoa* (egg) of the mother. Even though the *honam* (body) is the only part of *Onipa* that provides a physical component, it forms but a minute part of the whole human person. The majority of the human person that constitutes the unique characteristics and behaviour of the individual is formed and shaped by spiritual components, that is, *ɔkra*, *sunsum/honhom* and *mogya* (blood). Therefore, the physical body is the result of something metaphysical.

### “Sunsum” and “Honhom” in African Socioreligioculture

In the African socioreligioculture and spirituality, *sunsum* and *honhom* provide distinctive nuances that are different from soul and spirit. Spirit provides two different complexities ‘*honhom*’ and ‘*sunsum*’ thus a life-force (*honhom*) or spiritual-essence (*sunsum*). In Greek, the two words *pneuma* (spirit) and *psyche* (soul) carry a near meaning like *nefesh* and *ruach* in Hebrew. However, there is a limitation to their nuance. While *pneuma* (*spirit*) provides a nuance closer to the ‘spirit’ (*sunsum*) ‘*psyche*’ (soul) provides the idea of ‘*ɔkra*’. *Sunsum* and *Honhom* therefore provide a unique emphasis on pneumatic functionality. While *honhom* is conceived as a life force providing context and functionality, *sunsum* is conceived as a spiritual essence providing meaning to that functionality and purpose.

Because of this, it is believed that not every element possesses a life force (*honhom*) and a spiritual essence (*sunsum*) except human beings (the only creature described as possessing the image and likeness of *Onyankopɔn*). The quality of a particular element possessing a life force (*honhom*) and a spiritual essence (*sunsum*) is determined by the presence of ‘*ɔkra*’ which is an aspect of *Onyankopɔn* given only to *Onipa*. Because of this, *Onipa* is conceived above every element in creation. He is the centre and crown of creation. He possesses an aspect of the creator *Onyankopɔn* that sets him above all other elements in creation. In *Onipa* *sunsum* and *honhom* combine to form a system of balance or judgment (conscience) between the physical and spiritual (in humans it is the *ɔkra* and *honam*). It is underscored that the proclivity of one aspect, dominating the other is very high. However, with the balancing functions of the *sunsum* and *honhom*, the functions of each element are kept in a middle path.

The upper limit of the function is defined by the *ɔkra* (soul) which is given by *Onyankopɔn* (the supreme being/God) and is all good and pure. In contrast, the lower limit of the balance is defined by

<sup>14</sup> Edward Agboada and Michael Kwadwo Ntiamoah, “Nkrabea and Hyebrɛ in African Philosophy of Life,” *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 5, no. 3 (March 1, 2024): 175–82, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ejass.2024531>.

<sup>15</sup> Ada, Agada. "The African vital force theory of meaning in life." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2020): 100-112.

<sup>16</sup> Olatunji A Oyeshile, “Towards an African Concept of a Person: Person in Yoruba, Akan and Igbo Thoughts,” *Fiorita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 34 (2002): 1–2.

<sup>17</sup> Kwame Gyekye, “The Akan Concept of a Person,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1978): 277–87.

<sup>18</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, “The Akan Concept of Man,” *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* 3, no. 15 (1983): 7.

*honam* (body) which is the fusion of *mogya* and *ntoro* and is depraved and earthly. Because it functions as a life force, spiritual essence and system of balance or judgment, the sensitivity of the *honhom* especially can be nurtured through social processes. This is why social structures are organised with intentionality and purposefulness. In Africa, social structures and life are designed such that knowledge and wisdom are particularly transmitted from elders to children through indigenous knowledge systems.

### ‘Sunsum’ and ‘Honhom’ in the functionality of Onipa

*Sunsum* and *honhom* provide complexity in the functionality of *onipa* in Africa’s socioreligioculture. They represent the tangible and intangible, quasi-physical, quasi-material aspects of the unseen force that animates *onipa* (human) and is responsible for their consciousness, and spiritual essence. According to Gyekye *sunsum* is a spiritual essence, and *honhom* is a life force.<sup>19</sup> *Sunsum* represent the non-material aspect of ‘onipa’ and is related to the spirituality. It contains a core nature that gives *onipa* identity in the broader non-physical aspects of existence. According to Wiredupentachotomistic, ‘sunsum’ and *honhom* join into one component in addition to *okra*, *honam*, *mogya* and *ntoro*.<sup>20</sup> For Gyekye the *honam*, *mogya* and *ntoro* join with *okra* (soul), and sunsum/honhom (spirit) to form a tripartite (soul, spirit, and body).<sup>21</sup>

The *sunsum* and *honhom* provide a balance between the *okra*, (soul) *mogya* and *ntoro* which forms the *honam* (body). Without the function of the *sunsum/honhom*, Onipa may be unable to keep a balance between his spiritual and physical essence. Akesson argues that *okra* (soul) is given by *Onyankopɔn* (the supreme being/God) and is the eternal aspect of Onipa and the carrier of *nkrabea* (destiny).<sup>22</sup> But the sunsum/honhom is formed by the fusion of the spiritual and corporeal essence of Onipa. According to Owusu-Gyamfi the *honhom*, is formed through biological processes but the sunsum is a divine essence or vital force given by *Onyankopɔn*.<sup>23</sup> Together, the *sunsum* and *honam* form the individual spirit of a person. Its sensitivity to *okra* or *honam* is what is described as *adwenboa* (conscience) which can be nurtured through a social process.

### ‘Sunsum’, ‘Honhom’, and ‘Okra’ in ‘Death’

Death, in African socioculture or traditions, presents a unique trajectory predicated on the concept of life as a cycle. Death is not the cessation or end of life but a transition from one state into another until a person attains a perfect state (character) where they can be admitted into the world of sacred ancestors. At death, one is not completely separated from family or clan. In the world of sacred members (ancestors), they maintain contact with them, protect them and ensure that there is peace among the living and also between the living and the gods. A transitioned soul can always come back for a purpose To complete an assignment, avenge killers, or provide direction or a needed service to family, clan, or community. Wiredu posits that *pentachotomistic* where Onipa is made up of *Okra* (soul), *sunsum/honhom* (spirit), *honam* (body), *mogya* (blood) and *ntoro*.<sup>24</sup>

There is an interplay that ensures the separation of *okra*, Sunsum/Honhom and Honam after death. Because the *okra*, Sunsum and Honhom possess a pneumatological property they go through a stage-by-stage process of separation at death. At death, the *okra* (soul) because it is given by God and is considered eternal, intrinsically pure, and all good returns immediately to *Onyankopɔn* and is reunited with him. The sunsum and honhom however go through a process of transmogrification. Within the period although not in the physical body (*honam*) will remain in the physical home (in the family or on earth) for forty days. This is considered the period of waiting for the opening of the ancestral door. During this period, it will try to settle disputes or bid goodbye to loved ones. All kinds of rites and rituals are also performed to separate loved ones and the spirit of the dead. After this, the Sunsum or Honhom is brought before the sacred ancestor. Here, it will be determined whether it will be allowed to enter the ancestral world or otherwise.

<sup>19</sup> Kwame Gyekye, “The Relation of Okra (Soul) and Honam (Body): An Akan Conception,” Eze, Emanuel Chukwudi (Hg.): *African Philosophie. An Anthology*, Malden, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, 59–66.

<sup>20</sup> Wiredu, “The Akan Concept of Man.”

<sup>21</sup> Gyekye, “The Akan Concept of a Person.”

<sup>22</sup> Sam K. Akesson, “The Akan Concept of the Soul,” *African Affairs* 64, no. 257 (1965): 280–91.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi, “Sunsum (the Spirit of Life): Reflecting on Robert Owusu Agyarko’s Contextual Pneumatology,” *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry (AAMM)* 25 (2022): 41–58.

<sup>24</sup> Wiredu, “The Akan Concept of Man.”

Meanwhile, honam which is a fusion of the mogya (blood) and Ntoro is perishable after the *ɔkra* (soul) sunsum and honhom have been separated from it. It is kept at a place where the mortal remains of members of the family, clan, or community have been kept. It is believed that they form a legacy or point of contact with the ancestral world. During festivals or special occasions, these places are visited and prayers are offered to the memory of all family, clan, or community members whose remains have been kept there. This is one of many reasons why in African socioculture and traditions, many families, clans, or communities do not allow the remains of their members to be kept in foreign places or land. In the case where it is impossible to return the remains of the dead member, vital parts of the body such as hair, and nails are returned after libation and a special prayer is offered.

### **Osaman (Ghost) Spirit of the Dead**

In African socioreligioculture, *osaman* provides a belief in the continuous living of dead person without their physical bodies. The concept is derived from the words *sa* (spirit) and *ɔman* (nation/state/town) and provides the basic context for the belief in the continuous living of the spirit of the dead in the African socioreligioculture and traditions. *Sa* or *Ɔsa* which is translated as ‘spirit’ (ghost) and *man* or *ɔman* (state/town/nation) together form the concept of *Asaman* (plural) *osaman* (singular) and contain the idea of the continuous living of the spirit of the dead individuals in a certain form/state/town/nation (*asamando*). The idea is also conceived in the context of a life-form in this way, the *sa* (spirit or ghost) of individuals who have died continue to live without their physical bodies. When a person dies, their spirit becomes *osaman* (dead spirit/ghost)

What is unique about this state or form of living is that, the aspect of *ɔkra* (soul) that provides intrinsic goodness no longer exists because it has returned to Onyankopɔn who gave it while the honhom which provides the spiritual essence formed through the social process to give it a sensitivity to the *ɔkra* becomes sublime leaving the sunsum which provides social ties and affinity. As a result, the *osaman* (spirit/ghost) of the dead person, depending on many factors can be *osamanpa* (good spirit/ghost) or *osamanbɔne* (wicked spirit/ghost). It is believed that in the sacred world of ancestors (Nananom) there are clusters of abodes, thus a place for good dead spirits and a place for wicked dead spirits. During times of need i.e. war, or calamity either the entire *asamando* (world of the dead spirits) or particular *saman* is invoked for assistance.

There are, however, a plethora of rituals that are performed to seek or summon a particular Saman (dead spirit) or the entire *asamando* (the world of dead spirits), in other words, ancestors. For instance, in most traditions or cultures in Africa, when a person dies, they are not buried immediately. An oracle is approached to inquire of the cause of death, natural or unnatural. The spirit of the dead person is summoned to come and tell the family the cause of death if there are any further concerns and if the body of the deceased can be buried without any problems. Normally, Africans want to bury deceased people in the most respected and accepted way in order not to incur the anger of the ancestor world or any deity with which the deceased might have issues with.

### **CONCLUSION**

Without any doubt, the concepts of ‘sunsum’ and ‘honhom’ and their meanings within the African philosophy of life provide a complexity that establishes a unique and distinctive epistemology and nomenclature on the dynamics and interplay of honhom and sunsum in African socioreligioculture and spirituality. His constituent as tripartite or pentachotomistic provides a comprehensive framework for the examination of the dynamics and interplay of *ɔkra*, sunsum and honhom which determine their spiritual essence and functionality. As it was observed, the sunsum and honhom provide distinctive functionality which as either a life force or spiritual essence provides a context for certain unique and distinct functionalities within the individual. Of course, knowing these distinctive functionalities provides a great opportunity for the design and development of the right social and educational structures to nurture the human person.

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