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DEMOCRATIZING DOCUMENTARY AND INTERACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES

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Sant Yàlla is a theater troupe from Yeumbeul, a neighborhood in Dakar's outer-city region. The troupe – whose name translates to "thanks to God" – is currently touring Senegal and thrilling local audiences with *Jaar Jaari Mame Cheikh Ibrahima Fall* (*The Life and Work of Mame Shaykh Ibra Fall*). The play recounts the life of Mame Shaykh Ibrahima Fall, the chief disciple of the Muridiyya, Senegal's homegrown Sufi order. Brian Valente-Quinn and I joined Sant Yàlla for 3 weeks in December 2016 to document the troupe's tour and explore how these artists navigate the tensions between representing and embodying religion on stage. This chapter focuses on the documentary practices we used in collaboration with Sant Yàlla to produce and distribute *Bamba, The Taste of Knowledge* (2018), a 22-minute documentary film.[1] Examining our filmmaking as co-creative research rooted in democratic participation, I discuss the ethical implications of using media to document, preserve, and disseminate local cultures.

Sant Yàlla's performance was inspired by Senegal's urban popular theater movement, where traditional performances mix with contemporary approaches to dance and music.[2] One characteristic of the urban popular theater movement is that performers do not train in programs run by conservatory-style schools; rather, they practice theater at intermittent workshops or on stages in cultural centers throughout Senegal's urban areas. Another characteristic of this movement is that community theater troupes typically apply a local focus to their material.

Jaar Jaari Mame Cheikh Ibrahima Fall exhibits a particular style within urban popular theater called *théâtre total*, or total theater.[3] Total theater blends drama, music, and dance, and it emphasizes participation and spontaneity. Thus, Sant Yàlla works in concert with audience members to showcase Senegal's religious traditions, particularly those of the Murid Sufi order. The performers encourage participation during the show by walking through the crowd and speaking

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directly to the audience. Some audience members respond to these invitations with religious "fervor" – upon witnessing the show and hearing the songs of Murid folklore, they fly into a spiritual trance that includes yelling and uncontrolled movements. Audience members might also join the show and express their approval of the artists' performances by bringing fistfuls of bills to the stage. Although these interjections interrupt the show, they are part of the play's overall spectacle, and they augment the immersive nature of total theater.

Despite Sant Yàlla's considerable local success, its use of the stage to recount religious themes and re-create religious figures has been met with resistance from key figures within the Murid order who decry the mixing of theater and religion. In fact, Santa Yàlla was warned before launching this production that, without permission from Murid leadership, Murid devotees could show up at performances and prevent the show's opening. Although this has not happened so far, such a practice has been implemented before to censor Senegalese artists who were seen as taking liberties with Murid culture. In the 1980s, for instance, the stage production *Bamba Mos Xam* toured Senegal for years with great success but closed under mysterious circumstances (some believe under pressure from Murid leadership). Little evidence remains of *Bamba Mos Xam* – a few aged photographs and the stories of those who performed in the show or who witnessed it. Sant Yàlla seeks to build on the rich legacy of *Bamba Mos Xam* and bring Bamba's story to new audiences. Fearing that this history could soon be lost to future generations, Brian and I partnered with Sant Yàlla to preserve their stories in a documentary film. We hoped that the film could inform younger Senegalese audiences about Bamba and create spaces for people to debate and discuss performance, art, and religious expression.

Given the sensitivities with representing Bamba on stage, the stakes for Sant Yàlla and for Brian and me as researchers/filmmakers were considerably high. A rebuke from the Murid leadership could mar the young performers' careers and even put their physical safety at risk. Despite these risks, the young artists persist in defending the show and insist that it aims to spread awareness about the Murid order's culture, which they argue provides a moral compass for young people and serves as a national treasure to be celebrated by all. Most of the performers are not Murid devotees; instead, they view their role as artists who step in and out of character without betraying their religious identities. Some artists in the troupe use a "method" approach by immersing themselves in Murid culture and belief to the point of blurring the line between their stage role and their faith. This background informed how Brian and I navigated the ethics of collaborative cross-cultural research and developed our partnership with Sant Yàlla.

Democratizing Documentary and the Making of *Bamba*

I entered this project as a relative outsider. In early 2016, I had a conversation with Brian about producing a documentary about Sant Yàlla, which is the focus

of his research on West African performance culture. Prior to our meeting, Brian had traveled to Senegal numerous times and had several conversations with Sant Yàlla's performers and with community artists and Murid devotees who remembered *Bamba Mos Xam*. Brian and Mouhamadou Diol, the artistic director for theater company Kàddu Yaraax and a consultant for Sant Yàlla, discussed the possibility of making a documentary about Bamba, but neither had the technical experience needed to make a film. Sant Yàlla's stage production includes lively music, dancing, and vibrant colorful costumes, and Brian explained in our initial meeting that this spectacle lends itself perfectly to the visual medium. Sant Yàlla's story, he said, cannot be expressed fully through words.

Partnering with Brian to produce a documentary about Sant Yàlla was appealing to me for several reasons: the project challenged us to think through the limitations and creative potential that different mediums provide (e.g., text, audiovisual, social media); it offered opportunities to communicate with diverse audiences in various formats; and it created spaces in which to examine how documentary has the potential to promote interdisciplinary collaborations and democratize cross-cultural research.

Despite these possibilities and my initial excitement, I also had a few reservations. I do not speak French or Wolof, the primary languages spoken in Senegal, and I was unsure how I would incorporate my filmmaking into Brian's already-established partnership with Diol and Sant Yàlla. These concerns were eased, however, when I learned more about Brian's research. In his book *Senegalese Stagecraft*, he argues that a "sustained focus on theater as a sited expressive practice will underscore the political, social, and economic stakes involved in any form of innovative stagecraft."[4] This framework is helpful for examining the *sites* in which co-creative research occurs, and for investigating the social relationships embedded in documentary. By reviewing how we made *Bamba, The Taste of Knowledge* in collaboration with Sant Yàlla, I demonstrate the ways in which co-creative research expands the *sites* where cultures and knowledge are produced, contested, and disseminated.

Analyzing documentary as a series of social relationships that have the potential to democratize research requires defining a few key concepts. The first is *participation*. Media studies scholars have suggested that participatory video and community art projects have the potential to foster civic participation and promote social change.[5] I avoid media-centric analyses of participation by examining participation through democratic theory. Christian Fuchs defined participatory democracy as a "society in which all decisions are made by those who are concerned by them and all organizations (workplaces, schools, cities, politics, etc.) are controlled by those who are affected by them." [6] To apply these principles to our filmmaking with Sant Yàlla, Brian and I used co-creative Do-it-With-Others (DiWO) methods. In contrast to documentaries in which filmmakers remain detached neutral observers and view interviewees as "subjects," DiWO operates on a continuum of collaboration that demands additional ethical considerations

from all participants. These considerations (for example, sharing editorial control and rethinking authorship) have the potential to level the filmmaking hierarchy and recognize participants as peers in the research process and as allies in civic life – as opposed to individual artists, directors, or performers. Thus, DiWO "provides a progressive re-working of documentary's historic role in the public sphere, as an open space for dialogue and a stage for the performance of citizenship."[7]

Similar to participation, *citizenship* is a somewhat ambiguous concept. Graham Murdock's definition brings clarity, though. He defined citizenship as "the right to participate fully in social life with dignity and without fear, and to help formulate the forms it might take in the future."[8] Regular and thoughtful attention to our roles as researchers/filmmakers – and to the power dynamics among all participants – encouraged Brian and me to co-produce media that visualized and exhibited powerful representations of Senegalese art and religion.

Our filmmaking and research recognized various approaches to video ethnography, and I aimed for what Luke E. Lassiter called "collaborative ethnography" – a method that encourages the organizations or groups being filmed and studied to be involved in the research through consultation and critique.[9] The interactive social media practices that Brian and I used throughout this project provided Sant Yàlla with numerous opportunities to consult with us and critique our practices and products. One instance is notable for revealing how interactive social media practices helped us democratize documentary. Following the filming of a rehearsal, I edited and uploaded a 50-second highlight video to Facebook. I tagged Brian and Diol, and the video spread quickly throughout Sant Yàlla's social networks, reaching more than one thousand views in the first 24 hours. This is not to suggest that participation can be quantified by social media metrics but rather how social media provides researchers with opportunities to invite participants into the research process. The following day, the artists excitedly asked me what they could do to facilitate the production. They joked that my edits to the beat of a drum had nice rhythm "for a *toubab*" (a somewhat derogatory term for a "white person," but it can also be used affectionately). Despite my inability to communicate verbally with Sant Yàlla, I discovered that video and social media helped me speak with our partners. Through video, I communicated my professionalism as a filmmaker and the care with which I was handling Sant Yàlla's story. Further, I created an opportunity for Sant Yàlla to consult with me and critique my filmmaking.

This experience helped to establish trust between Sant Yàlla and me. After seeing the short highlight video, the artists subsequently felt comfortable offering feedback about my aesthetic choices, and they made suggestions for angles and shots during rehearsals and performances. The artists assumed the role of co-directors in these instances by adjusting their movements and ensuring that I was in position to document important moments. These interactions fostered a mutually beneficial project – I was able to produce compelling visuals for the film, and Sant Yàlla was able to promote its performance through video shared on

social media. Publishing my research notes in real time via social media and taking direction from my partners about where to focus my literal or metaphorical lens may reduce, according to some scholars, the "ethnographicness" of this project.[10] Applying the principles of democracy, however, enhanced the collaborative nature of the project and allowed me to address important ethical questions: Who is the director of this project? How much editorial and creative control should I have? How should we distribute this film? Truly democratizing documentary required engaging our partners throughout all stages of the project, giving them a stake in the design decisions and outcomes of the research, and viewing Sant Yàlla's artists as colleagues.

Collaborative filmmaking also requires that filmmakers and researchers develop close and intimate relationships with their partners. Brian met Diol in 2013 and made multiple trips to Senegal over the next 4 years conducting research about Diol's theatrical work with Kàddu Yaraax. Prior to rolling our cameras, Brian spent considerable time meeting with Diol and community artists across Senegal. In 2015, Diol pitched the idea of producing a documentary film about *Bamba Mos Xam* to Brian, and they began considering the logistics and scope of the film. Although introducing cameras into a research project may change the relational dynamics among the participants and make it difficult to document candid moments, Diol and Sant Yàlla's artists welcomed me as a newcomer to the project. As performers, these artists were adept at switching into performance mode for the camera. While this provided us with dramatic footage for the documentary, it was also important to occasionally set the camera aside – or even leave our equipment at home – during conversations and planning meetings with Diol and Sant Yàlla. We wanted to move the production beyond superficial details or staged events and engage with the artists on a deeper human level.

Senegalese customs often required this deeper level of connection. Before filming most interviews, for example, Brian and I sat for hours with interviewees, enjoying lunch, discussing the documentary's focus, and learning about the sensitivities required to communicate Bamba's story through theater and film. These conversations required a lot of patience and forced us to slow down the filmmaking and research processes. We benefited greatly in these instances from the assistance of Ousmane Guèye of Touba, who provided us with his local expertise, made important introductions with key figures, and helped us navigate Senegal.

Interactive Social Media Practices as Cross-Cultural Research

Technology and digital media are raising provocative questions for researchers about the ethics of participation, but these questions reflect an old divide within the field of video ethnography. The classical Chicago School model of the early twentieth century promoted a positivist approach to video ethnography that included recording public behaviors and rating or coding the footage.[11] In

contrast, new ethnography encouraged researchers to be much more involved with their research subjects and to "possess an extensive knowledge and expertise of the culture."[12] These approaches are often called "presentation" (objective social science) and "research practice" (subjective interpretation). *Presentation* typically uses a *cinema-vérité* style that favors wide and medium shots, minimal editing, and ambient sound as opposed to music (notably Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, 1922). This gives viewers the impression that events are depicted "as they happened," without any outside interference from the filmmakers. *Research practice*, on the other hand, views the camera not as a "fourth wall" that divides filmmakers from participants, but rather as a "fluid wall . . . [that] recognizes the mutual benefits of open communication and adaptable interactions."[13]

Our filmmaking with Sant Yàlla reveals how the distinctions between old and new ethnography are becoming more pronounced with digital media. Sharing video in real time on social media changes who has access to the data, how analysis and interpretation occur, and what forms research takes. Inexpensive video cameras and free editing software have made media production more accessible for hobbyists and researchers, which has increased the demand for creative research within the academy. Video ethnographers and anthropological filmmakers have previously discussed returning to research sites to "give back" to the communities with which they worked. These trips might include offering art and photo books to their collaborators as gifts or hosting a film screening in the community where the research was conducted. Today, communities do not need to wait months or years to view, edit, and co-create media with researchers.

Interactive social media practices alter the speed of data collection and analysis, create new spaces for collaboration, and challenge researchers to reconsider the ethics of subjective interpretation. Anthropologist and filmmaker Paul Henley argued that "active engagement on the part of the filmmaker . . . is bound to involve some measure of subjectivity."[14] He also believed the camera provides researchers with opportunities to become intimately engaged in people's lives and achieve a level of understanding that is inaccessible to filmmakers/researchers who insist on remaining neutral or distant. "The implicit theory of knowledge underlying this approach," Henley wrote, "is that true social reality is not to be found in the superficial observable details of everyday life but rather in the underlying relationships, sentiments, and attitudes which sustain them."[15] The relationships and sentiments that Brian and I developed with Sant Yàlla and other community artists in Senegal are not explicit in the film's images. They did, however, motivate how the images were produced, what questions were asked, and whose expertise was relied upon in the film. Our relationships with Ousmane and Diol, for example, influenced who we interviewed and how these interviews were conducted. During interviews, Ousmane and Diol would sometimes interject with clarifications or suggest follow-up questions. Democratizing documentary, therefore, asks filmmakers and researchers to reconceive participants' roles and rethink what it means to observe.

In addition to using my personal Facebook page to share the 50-second highlight video with Sant Yàlla, we also created a dedicated Facebook page for the film.[16] We learned during our time in Senegal that Facebook is the dominant social media platform there, so we decided it was the best venue on which to promote the film and engage with local audiences. Brian and I provided Diol with administrative access to the page, and we spent about $30 on targeted ads to promote the page. One of the first posts we shared after creating the page included the highlight video discussed earlier. Diol and the troupe continue to upload videos and photos of performances to this page to promote upcoming shows and grow Sant Yàlla's audience. The page, which has about 700 followers, increased the troupe's visibility and provided Senegalese audiences opportunities to critique Sant Yàlla's performance and the documentary.

Despite the myriad concerns that scholars and activists have rightly expressed about Facebook regarding surveillance, personal privacy, and the spread of misinformation, the site offered us a venue in which to identify audiences for the project and collaborate across geographic distances with our community partners. Because so much scholarship is behind paywalls and written in English (with dense academic jargon), sharing excerpts of the documentary on Facebook helped us engage with audiences who otherwise would not be able to access this story and our research. When I shared an image of my edit suite months after I left Senegal, for example, I let our collaborators know that we were making progress and moving into post-production, which generated excitement about the film's release.

Reading and responding to comments on our posts as we moved into script writing and editing also provided us with instant feedback about how the project was being received by local audiences. Because most of these comments were written in Wolof, Brian regularly consulted with Diol and Wolof experts to ensure that we were understanding all of the nuances. In a notable example, several comments about the highlight video disparaged Sant Yàlla's women artists, arguing that their clothing is inappropriate and that women should not speak publicly about religion. Brian discussed these comments with Diol as we considered how to portray gender in the documentary, remaining mindful of how the documentary could affect Sant Yàlla. Although we did not directly address this controversy in the film because we felt it was outside the scope of the story, we did include interviews in the film with several female artists who shared their views on performing religious themes as non-Murids.

Prior to sharing the documentary publicly, we uploaded a first draft of the film to a password-protected Vimeo page and invited Diol to provide feedback. After a few minor revisions, we shared the finished documentary to the film's Facebook page. Brian and I discussed some reservations he had about posting the documentary online. He was concerned that the film would be downloaded and shared without our or Sant Yàlla's permission. We ultimately agreed that if we wanted to truly apply the principles of democracy, we cannot simply espouse

those principles – they must guide our work. The documentary has indeed been downloaded and republished on YouTube, partly because YouTube is more accessible in Senegal than Vimeo. These experiences forced us to think critically about audience, authorship, and peer-review. Democratizing documentary through interactive social media practices meant encouraging Diol and Senegalese artists and audiences to participate in the writing, editing, and distribution of Bamba. Social media allowed us to give those most affected by our research a stake in shaping it.

Visualizing Bamba and Religious Imagery

Throughout urban and rural Senegal, one finds reproductions of the only known image of Amadu Bamba – a 1913 colonial photograph that has become the centerpiece of a rich and interactive culture of religious iconography among Murid devotees. Bamba's image performs a crucial spiritual function through its multiple reproductions on the cityscape (see Figure 5.1). The visual manifestation of Bamba transmits the saint's *baraka*, often translated as "charisma" but what others have translated as "aura" to those who see it.[17] This passes on spiritual blessings to onlookers and to those who facilitate the image's circulation, specifically artists or devotees who place it in open view. The image functions beyond the realm of metaphor. It does not "stand in" for another implied meaning, but rather it facilitates an engaged relationship that brings the viewer into contact with Bamba's spiritual essence. Within the framework of these representational practices, any theater troupe or filmmaker eager to present an adaptation of Bamba's life must

FIGURE 5.1 Bamba's image (right) is painted on walls throughout Senegal.

Source: Photograph by the author

carefully consider how stagecraft and visual media give voice and movement to the saint's sacred image.

As white, Western researchers and filmmakers, Brian and I had to remain attuned to these nuances and recognize that some religious authorities believe theater and other visual representations of Bamba go too far. When a theater troupe takes the stage to tell Mame Shaykh Ibrahima Fall's story, this typically involves an actor embodying a religious figure and speaking as if from the voice of him. This differs greatly from visual reproductions of the saint or references to him through music where the religious figure retains his otherworldliness or his relation to the unseen world, so closely examined in the Sufi tradition.

Instead of speaking *as* Mame Shaykh Ibra, Sant Yàlla used a creative stage narrative technique in which the lead actor speaks as an unnamed narrator and recounts the biography of the religious figure. He occasionally introduces a scene by declaring "Mame Shaykh Ibra once said . . ." and then performs an episode of the disciple's life as an intermediary recounting the tale for the supporting actors, rather than as the embodiment of the disciple himself (see Figure 5.2). Through roleplay, Sant Yàlla makes its play acceptable to audience members who would have otherwise opposed actors speaking as Mame Shaykh Ibra or as his master Shaykh Amadu Bamba. We also utilized this technique in our film by avoiding voice-over narration and letting the community artists and local experts we interviewed tell Bamba's story.

These editorial decisions were informed by a series of meetings between Sant Yàlla and Cheikh Fall, the director of *Bamba Mos Xam* (see Figure 5.3). We organized these meetings for the documentary and filmed them to document how art

FIGURE 5.2 Film still of Xadim Beye, lead performer of Sant Yàlla, discussing Bamba's story during a show in Yeumbeul.

Source: Photograph by the author

FIGURE 5.3 Cheikh Fall discusses Bamba Mos Xam with Sant Yàlla.

Source: Photograph by the author

and theater have the potential to bridge generational understandings of Bamba. These meetings represent what Faye Ginsburg called "ethnographic media," which are video and film that mediate social relations. Indigenous media, she wrote, "communicate something about that social or collective identity we call 'culture,' in order to mediate (one hopes) across gaps of space, time, knowledge, and prejudice."[18] Sant Yàlla's members were eager to consult with Fall on their pressing concerns regarding the hidden social and religious taboos associated with representing holy figures on stage. Fall understood their concerns and, in fact, had experienced some harrowing encounters in the course of *Bamba Mos Xam*'s 15-year run. By organizing these meetings between Sant Yàlla and Fall, the documentary intervened in Bamba's cultural and religious heritage by documenting Fall's experiences as an actor and director – which provided context, background, and visuals for the film – and created space for Sant Yàlla to discuss their art and spiritual leanings. Fall encouraged the young artists to continue their work but asked them to rely upon the authorization of prominent Murid leaders.

Filming Sant Yàlla's stage production and these encounters with Fall produced layers of media and visual storytelling that required considerable care from us as filmmakers/researchers. Collaborative documentary, as opposed to extractive storytelling or investigative journalism, demanded that we slow down, earn the trust of our community partners, and share producing and directing responsibilities with them. Although Brian and I earned a significant amount of trust throughout our time in Senegal, we needed to rely often on Diol to facilitate our work. In addition to distributing our documentary online, Brian has returned to Dakar several times to organize screenings of the film with Diol. Much like Sant Yàlla's

"total theater" method – where the artists march into a public square, begin performing, and attract an audience of curious onlookers – these screenings have been pop-up showings in busy public spaces. The sounds and images of the film draw passersby to the screen and encourage dialogue among community members who often recount their personal experiences with Bamba, Muridism, and the saint's visual image.

Indeed, a key strength of the documentary has been its ability to spur conversations about the religious themes depicted in the film. Following a screening at the West African Research Center in Senegal, for example, attendees had a spirited debate about whether Sant Yàlla's performance was an appropriate act of religious devotion. Conservative Muslims argued that the young artists were being disrespectful with iconic religious imagery and making a mockery of Muridism. Others argued that religious expression should not be dictated by a select few, and that Sant Yàlla's performances spread Bamba's message to new and diverse audiences. The documentary has also screened at several U.S. research centers focused on media, religion, and African studies; at international film festivals, including the African World Documentary Film Festival and the Ethnografilm Festival in Paris, France; and it has been reviewed by academic journals. Using a multifaceted distribution strategy was one way we attempted to reach academic and non-academic audiences, revealing how co-creative research creates additional sites for culture and knowledge to be produced and shared.

Conclusion

Nicholas Mirzoeff and Jack Halberstam challenged media studies researchers to re-examine their research practices in a *Cinema Journal* dossier titled "Decolonize Media: Tactics, Manifestos, Histories."[19] The authors engaged critically with race, gender, class, and power, and they offered seven suggestions for decolonizing media studies, all of which relate to the collaborative documentary practices discussed in this chapter:

> (1) Listen. To the colonized, to the historically underrepresented, to your own body; (2) Use and create open-source materials; (3) Study or learn in languages beyond English (and other colonial languages); (4) "Text is not enough." Produce in many forms; (5) Collaborate in your research: faculty with students, academics with the communities they serve; (6) Be "producers not only consumers" from the outset of learning; (7) And try to live up to the injunction "ethics above all."[20]

We created open-source scholarship in multiple forms by producing films and distributing them online. We studied and learned in languages beyond English when we worked with Wolof translators to produce a bilingual documentary. We collaborated with our community partners by involving them in our

editorial decisions and by soliciting and responding to their real-time feedback on social media. As the boundaries between academic disciplines continue to blur, researchers are inventing new ways of studying media, religion, and art. Centering the social within documentary decolonizes media studies by forcing scholars to re-evaluate, revise, and update dominant theoretical frameworks and accepted methodologies. Co-creative research compels scholars to consider who research is for.

The *form* of scholarship also helps us realize how co-creation upends notions of participation and citizenship, and it provides communities with opportunities to curate alternative archives. Jacques Rancière wrote that the *form* of politics represents the "distribution of the sensible."[21] Documentary, as a visual medium, asks viewers to witness and make sense of the world. Documenting social life and distributing it to publics, Rancière argued, encourages viewers to reimagine the terrain of politics. "The politics of works of art . . . plays itself out in the way in which modes of narration or new forms of visibility established by artistic practices enter into politics' own field of aesthetic possibilities."[22]

Co-producing *Bamba, The Taste of Knowledge* with Senegalese artists challenged us to formulate our research questions in partnership with the community. Artists and activists who wish to produce multimedia with community groups should recognize the power dynamics between themselves and the participants, rely on local expertise to guide the direction of their projects, and enter communities with humble curiosity.

This documentary gave Brian and I opportunities to share Bamba's story, consider the tensions between religious expression and art, and understand how creative research practices affect culture. Sant Yàlla's practices (e.g., music, theater, and dance) and the practices Brian and I used to share Bamba's story (e.g., film, public screenings, social media, and research articles), expand our ideas about religion, art, and culture. Through co-creative research that embraced tension and visualized alternative modes of expression, we centered grassroots perspectives and situated Bamba's story in broader sociopolitical and historical contexts. Co-creation democratizes filmmaking and fieldwork, and challenges researchers and audiences alike to reconsider the taken-for-granted and rethink what we know.

Notes

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