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Political Dimension of Famine in Northeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency has led to severe malnutrition, starvation, epidemics, and high mortality in Northeast Nigeria. Over 4.5 million people are starving and one in ten children dies daily. Despite significant attention from the national government, international community, and donor agencies, the political factors contributing to the famine are often overlooked. This study, based on in-depth interviews, reveals that the politicization of the insurgency has exacerbated the famine, offering insights into its root causes and the broader impact on the region.

Keywords: *Boko Haram, Famine, Insurgency, Malnutrition, Northeast, Political Dimension.*

Introduction and Problem

Famine has been a recurrent challenge in human history, affecting various regions across the globe at different times (Farris, 2009; Trigger, 2003). For instance, Europe faced several famines, such as the English famine of 1235 and the Italian famine between 1628 and 1632. Other regions were also afflicted—India in 1630 to 1632 (Roy, 2006) and China in 1936, where over 5,000 people died of starvation (Farris, 2009; Ó Gráda & Chevet, 2002; Penuel & Statler, 2011; Trigger, 2003). Between 1913 and 1918, Germany experienced a famine that claimed over 300,000 lives, while Indonesia suffered from rice trade restrictions between 1966 and 1987, leading to the starvation of 50,000 people (Ó Gráda & Chevet, 2002; Trigger, 2003). The 1994–1998 North Korean famine, which resulted in 600,000 deaths, and the Iraq famine caused by sanctions from 1990 to 2002, which took 500,000 lives (Roy, 2006; Searing, 2003; Seyf, 2010), demonstrate how political factors exacerbate such crises. In Africa, the 1998 Sudanese famine, fueled by war and drought, resulted in over 70,000 deaths (Alfani et al., 2016; Dyson, 1991; Ó Gráda, 2009).

Africa's history of famine includes other significant episodes. In Ethiopia, from 1998 to 2000, famine was intensified by the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. Similarly, between 2005 and 2006, about three million people starved in Niger, and 10 million across West Africa were affected (Charles & Randall, 2022; Fayad, 2023; Human Rights & Development, 2022). More recently, the Sahel drought of 2012 led to severe famine in Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Madagascar has also been grappling with famine since 2021 (Charles & Randall, 2022; Fayad, 2023; Human Rights & Development, 2022).

Natural disasters such as extreme weather conditions have been the primary triggers of famine in Africa. However, colonialism introduced new dimensions to famine by disrupting existing ethnic groups and their peaceful coexistence. Colonial powers enforced artificial borders that forced diverse ethnic groups into acrimonious relationships, resulting in mutual distrust, armed conflicts, and wars (Ake, 1991; Arowolo & Aluko, 2010; Momoh & Hundeyin, 2008). This disruption not only exacerbated famine through the breakdown of agricultural systems but also left deep scars on the social fabric of the continent (Momoh & Hundeyin, 2008).

The legacy of these crises, precipitated by colonialism, persists today, especially in regions like Northeastern Nigeria. This area, inhabited by a mosaic of ethnic groups, has become a flashpoint for conflict due to the tensions created by colonial-era boundaries and post-colonial political mismanagement (Ayu, 2014). These tensions have been exploited by conflict entrepreneurs, leading to recurrent ethno-religious strife (Ayu, 2014).

In the recent history of Nigeria, ethnic and religious divisions have severely affected the Northeastern region, particularly in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states (Ayu, 2014). The ethno-religious composition of these states has played a significant role in the rise and spread of Boko Haram insurgency. Since 2009, the politicization and mishandling of the insurgency have deepened the crisis, contributing to widespread famine. As insurgents occupy farmlands and use them as hideouts, agricultural activities, which can be regarded as the lifeline of the local economy, have been paralyzed, leaving inhabitants jobless and impoverished (Action Against Hunger, 2017; Harrison, 2017; Reliefweb, 2018).

The Boko Haram insurgency has had a cascading effect on the region's public infrastructure. Schools, in particular, have been abandoned or destroyed due to fear of attacks, further weakening the region's capacity for recovery (Arowolo & Akinola, 2017). The destruction of infrastructure, combined with insufficient governance, has resulted in the displacement of millions of people (Olaniyan, 2015). This has not only exacerbated famine but also contributed to a humanitarian disaster of staggering proportions.

While famine has long been associated with natural disasters, political factors - especially conflict - play a critical role in its occurrence. In the case of Northeastern Nigeria, famine has become inextricably linked to the insurgency and the political mismanagement of the region's complex ethnic and religious dynamics. Although there is extensive literature on the causes and effects of Boko Haram insurgency, less attention has been given to how politics drives famine. To fully understand the current famine in Northeastern Nigeria, it is essential to explore the political dimensions that have shaped this crisis. This article aims to address this gap by examining the connection between politics and famine in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states. By shedding light on this linkage, the study contributes to a broader understanding of the factors underpinning the persistent famine in the region.

The context and concepts of politics, famine and insurgency in Nigeria

This section conceptualizes and contextualizes famine, politics and insurgency and explores the role of politics in exacerbating famine in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States. It examines the interplay between famine, insurgency, and politics. Lasswell's and Easton's definitions of politics are particularly relevant for understanding the role of politics in insurgency and famine. David Easton (1981) defines politics as the authoritative allocation of scarce values. Arowolo (2016) operationalizes this by arguing that politics involves the process of allocating resources, selecting those who allocate them, and determining the expiration of their mandate. Harold Lasswell (1936) aptly defines politics as who gets what, when, and how.

The process of determining the allocation of resources involves cooperation and conflict, as Heywood (2007) notes. Politics involves conflict and cooperation and the processes of conflict resolution and cooperation maintenance. If society comprises diverse tendencies, conflict will continue to shape socio-economic and power relations. Diversity and conflict are permanent features of society (Heywood, 2007). Human diversity raises questions of interest incompatibility in satisfying individual needs, leading to struggles over scarce resources, which often result in conflict (Heywood, 2007).

Understanding how politics influences famine requires understanding insurgency. Politics as a tool for handling insurgency has led to food crises, and mismanagement by the ruling elite has escalated these crises into famine. Insurgency is often politically charged and sometimes cloaked in religion to garner sympathy from religious fanatics (Arowolo & Akinola, 2017; Lawal, 2016). The Indian military describes insurgency as "an organized armed struggle by a selection of the local population against the State, usually with foreign support" (Indian Army, 2006, p. 16). This aligns with Arowolo and Akinola's view that local populations wage war against the state with external sympathy and support. Luttwak (2007), Peters (2006), Scheuer (2008), and van Creveld (2006) describe insurgency as a war aimed at overthrowing existing structures through force and popular appeal. Insurgency challenges the government's legitimacy and, in extreme cases, aims to overthrow it.

Insurgency's effects include large-scale destruction, economic stagnation, infrastructural collapse, disruption of livelihoods, displacement, social alterations, investment retardation, and food crises (Nkwede et al., 2015). These interconnected effects ultimately impact the food supply, leading to famine. Sen (1981) describes famine as widespread acute food shortages, with severity measured by starvation-induced mortality. Famine results from the denying of individuals' rights and entitlements to access food and water. Dreze & Sen (1989) affirm that famine occurs when a group's entitlements are undermined, preventing adequate food access. Rangasami (1985) identifies the systemic failure of socio-economic and political processes as a precipitating factor of famine.

This study views famine as stemming from three pathologies: bad leadership, bad governance, and socio-economic deprivation. Famine in the Northeast arises from governmental actions and inactions. De Waal (2008) argues that famine results from political malfeasance, including government errors, exclusion, and inaction. It is a cumulative effect of economic mismanagement and bad governance, manifesting in acute shortfalls in productive capacity. This is evident in the political negligence and politicization of government responses to Boko Haram insurgency, which created a new form of famine in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. Political factors include the lack of political will to tackle insurgency head-on, the role of politics in aggravating insurgency to the point of food crisis, and political corruption in food distribution in IDP camps.

The general conclusion is that Boko Haram insurgency and famine in the northeast are interconnected, with factors such as religion, poverty, heterogeneity, and weakened armed forces contributing to insurgency and famine (De Waal, 2008; Dreze & Sen, 1989; Nkwede et al., 2015; Rangasami, 1985). The political dimension of famine has been overlooked. The delay between large-scale civilian killings, public utility destruction, strategic asset bombings, and government response highlights the politicization of the conflict, aggravating the situation. Government and opposition parties play blame games while lives and properties are lost (Arowolo & Akinola, 2017). Famine, characterized by acute food and water shortages, falls under government responsibility. Defeating insurgency largely depends on the political class' capacity, sincerity, and readiness. Therefore, this study emphasizes the political

aspect of famine and interrogates the relationship between politics and famine in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states.

Theoretical analysis of the political dimension of famine in Northeast Nigeria

Analyzing the political dimension of famine in northeast Nigeria requires the application of a theoretical construct. The neo-patrimonial theory, a key tool in understanding the political dimension of famine in Northeastern Nigeria, finds its roots in the work of Max Weber (1968). Weber's concept of patrimonialism, which was coined to evaluate legal patrimonial-traditional and charismatic authority, has been further developed by scholars such as Eisenstadt (1973) and Bratton and van de Walle (1999). They have explored the dichotomy of patrimonial practices within formal and informal societal structures. O'Neil (2007) describes the fundamental characteristics essential to understanding the behaviours and dynamics inherent in patrimonial states. Weber's ideas have been pivotal in explaining the development of postcolonial Africa, providing a compass for understanding the sources of patrimonialism on the continent.

Anders (2005) views neopatrimonialism as a phenomenon that encourages the diffusion and suffusion of public and private spheres. According to him, it involves the private appropriation of public resources for political relevance and legitimation. Olaniyan et al. (2015) argue that neopatrimonialism breeds clientelism, nepotism, and corruption, ultimately promoting mediocrity and sycophancy. This viewpoint is supported by Nkwede et al. (2015), who state that Nigeria and other African neo-patrimonial states operate weak, agrarian economies driven by weak class formation with horizontally patterned relationships tied to primordial social structures. These diffused and suffused social structures, devoid of functional differentiation, promote the misappropriation of resources for personal and familial gain.

In Nigeria, this phenomenon clearly explains the escalation of Boko Haram insurgency, leading to dislocations, disruptions of livelihoods, and economic collapse, which facilitated acute food shortages in the northeastern region. Ekanem et al. (2012) argues that the military, as a public service, is designed to implement government policies on security, including counterinsurgency and de-radicalization. However, Adeoye (2015) contends that despite the crucial role of the military in

national security, it faced significant technical and financial constraints, particularly between 2009 and 2015. This debilitation of the military capacity allowed the sporadic eruption of the Boko Haram insurgency.

The core characteristic of neo-patrimonialism - private appropriation of the public sphere - has a devastating effect on the military's capacity to effectively combat Boko Haram insurgency. Lawal (2016) identifies corruption, promoted by neo-patrimonial tendencies, as a factor that undermines the government's capacity to provide security and protect its territorial integrity. Resources meant for arms procurement and other security measures were diverted to private use and political patronage. Corruption among the ruling elite explains the acute shortage of food amid insurgent onslaughts in the northeast (Lawal, 2016; Nkwede et al., 2015; Olaniyan, 2015).

The evidence suggests that state resources were misappropriated, and there was a trend towards the personalization of state structures and resources. Neo-patrimonialism vividly explains the primitive accumulative tendencies of the Nigerian ruling elite and their inability to effectively tackle Boko Haram insurgency, which later gave rise to famine in the area. The insurgents occupied territories and disrupted governance and economic activities, rendering people homeless and jobless (Anderele, 2012; Adeoye, 2015; Anyadike, 2013; Aro, 2013; Arowolo, 2013; Awojobi, 2014; Ekanem et al., 2012; Shuaibu et al., 2015). This dislodgement in all areas of community life brought an acute shortage of food and water, as the Boko Haram insurgents occasionally poisoned water sources (Adeoye, 2015; Awojobi, 2014; Ayu, 2014).

The unchecked spread of Boko Haram insurgency by the ruling elite for years symbolized a gross deficit in political will. The politicization of approaches to tackle Boko Haram allowed the insurgency to thrive, dislocating social structures and facilitating famine in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states (Adeoye, 2015; Olaniyan, 2015).

Neo-patrimonialism is flawed by focusing heavily on the relationship between elites and the appropriation of public resources for private gain. While this is a critical factor, it may overlook other structural and systemic factors contributing to famine, such as environmental degradation and economic policies, which also play key roles in creating food insecurity. Despite this limitation, the theory effectively captures the core issue of the study: the diversion of public resources for private interests, which plays a central role in the famine in the study areas.

Study areas and methods

Research for this study was conducted between September 2016 and December 2022 in three Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps located in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States in Northeast Nigeria. Adamawa State, known for having the largest number of ethnic groups in Nigeria, comprises over eighty groups including Animists, Christians, and Muslims, with a population of approximately 4,248,436 people spread over 36,917 square kilometers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). It is bordered by Borno State to the northwest, Gombe State to the west, Taraba State to the southwest, and Cameroon to the east. Borno State, created in 1976, is home to twenty-eight ethnic nationalities such as Kanuri, Shuwa-Arab, Hausa, Fulani, Babur, Bura, Chibok, Ngoshe, Guduf, Mandara, Garwegu, and Tera, with both Muslims and Christians. Its population was estimated at 5,860,183 as of 2016, covering 69,435 square kilometers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). It is bordered by Yobe State, which was carved out of it in 1991. Yobe State, as pluralistic and diverse as Borno, has a population of 3,294,137 people consisting of five major ethnic groups: Kanuri, Fulani, KareKare, Bade, and Hausa, covering about 47,153 square kilometers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

The study used survey research method. The primary method of data collection was In-depth Interviews (IDIs), conducted in one camp per state. The study involved interviews with twenty-four (24) respondents, including members of the Camp Management Committees (CMC); officials from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA); and, humanitarian partners, with six members from each organization. In addition, unstructured interviews were conducted with six IDPs, with two respondents selected randomly from each of the three camps with assistance from civil society organizations involved in humanitarian services. This brought the total number of respondents to thirty (30). Additional information was gathered from key informants and stakeholders, including local government officials, journalists, traditional chiefs, and opinion leaders in the three areas.

The participants were purposively selected. Purposive sampling was used. The purposive selection is appropriate because it ensures precision. The main goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which best enables the researcher to answer his/her research questions (Small, 2009).

There are different types of purposive sampling, which include: criterion sampling (this involves searching for individuals who meet certain criterion); theory-guided sampling (this is a situation where the researcher looks for certain individuals who fit into certain theoretical constructs); negative case sampling (it is also called disconfirming sampling and it entails a situation where researcher looks for cases that disconfirms or contradicts his/her findings); maximum variation sampling (it involves searching for the individuals or cases who cover the spectrum of positions and perspectives in relation to the phenomenon one is studying); homogeneous sampling (units are selected because of their similar characteristics which are of particular interest to the researcher), critical case sampling (this is frequently used in explorative, qualitative research in order to assess whether the phenomenon of interest even exists) (Steinke, 2004; Lucas, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Out of all the types of purposive sampling briefly discussed, this study adopted stakeholder sampling to select members of the Camp Management Committees (CMC); officials from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA); and, humanitarian partners and IDPs, who constitute the major stakeholders in the subject under investigation. Stakeholder sampling is particularly useful in the context of survey research; this strategy involves identifying who the major stakeholders are and who are involved in designing, giving, receiving, or administering the programme or service being evaluated, and who might otherwise be affected by it.

The interviews focused on the nature and depth of the food crisis and causes of famine in the IDPs, the factors contributing to famine, the role of the ruling elite in the situation, and the impact of government measures. Discussions also explored potential solutions to mitigate famine in the affected areas.

Nature, depth and causes of famine in the Northeast, Nigeria

In Northeastern Nigeria, the nature, depth, and causes of famine are deeply tied to political factors, particularly the insurgency and the response (or lack thereof) from political elites. The spread of Boko Haram since 2009 has devastated local economies, disrupted food supply chains, and driven millions from their farmlands, with profound impacts on food security. The insurgency's political mismanagement has played a key role in exacerbating the famine.

The famine in this region is not simply a product of natural causes but stems primarily from a failure of governance and a slow, inadequate response to the insurgency. The ruling elite failed to take decisive actions against Boko Haram, allowing the insurgents to control vast swaths of territory and prevent farming activities. The inability of the government to secure these areas led to the displacement of millions, creating a humanitarian crisis. This situation was worsened by the politicization of the insurgency, where political actors focused more on electoral gains than on addressing the root causes of the conflict and its humanitarian consequences (Fieldwork, 2022).

Excruciating poverty, fueled by decades of neglect by the political class, created fertile ground for Boko Haram to recruit unemployed youths, further destabilizing the region. The political class' slow and often ineffectual response allowed the insurgency to deepen its hold, prolonging the conflict and intensifying food shortages. For example, even when the government declared a state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states in 2011, political calculations undermined its effectiveness. The government allowed political authorities in these states to remain intact, prioritizing electoral concerns over the pressing need for decisive action to combat the insurgents (Fieldwork, 2022).

The political dimension of the famine also extends to the mismanagement of resources meant for IDPs and the failure of government programs intended to combat the insurgency (Fieldwork, 2022). Corruption and the diversion of food supplies meant for IDP camps have severely undermined relief efforts, with food often being allegedly sold on the open market by officials (Fieldwork, 2022). This has created a situation where famine is not only a consequence of insurgency but also a product of systemic governance failures.

In essence, the famine in Northeastern Nigeria is politically induced. While natural factors like drought and desertification have historically contributed to food shortages in the region, the current crisis is rooted in the failure of political actors to address the insurgency, provide

adequate security, and ensure the fair distribution of food aid. The politicization of Boko Haram's insurgency, coupled with corruption and inefficiency in resource management, has transformed a manageable conflict into a full-blown famine affecting millions across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states. The government's slow and ineffective response, driven by political self-interest, has not only prolonged the insurgency but has also worsened the food crisis in the region.

The study delved into the profound political dimensions of famine in Northeastern Nigeria, highlighting how a lackadaisical approach by government officials exacerbated the impact of Boko Haram insurgency, which has ravaged Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states since 2009. The escalation of Boko Haram activities, characterized by relentless attacks and bombings, posed severe threats to the lives and livelihoods of residents, resulting in widespread famine marked by malnutrition, starvation, epidemics, and heightened mortality rates. The crisis forced over three million people into Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) camps across the region, with Borno state bearing the brunt with the largest number of IDPs.

The study underscored that effective containment of Boko Haram could have been achieved if not for the politicization of the insurgency and the lack of decisive political will on the part of the Nigerian government. This politicization not only delayed crucial responses but also diverted attention and resources from critical humanitarian interventions. Moreover, pervasive political corruption further exacerbated the crisis, evidenced by the embezzlement of funds earmarked for military operations against terrorism, as uncovered in the arms deal probe. This corruption severely undermined the operational capacity of the Nigerian military, impeding their ability to effectively counter Boko Haram's insurgency, and inadvertently bolstered the insurgents' capacity to wreak havoc.

Furthermore, the study revealed alarming instances of compromised military integrity, where some military personnel allegedly collaborated with Boko Haram group, compromising intelligence and operational effectiveness. The arrest of a Nigerian military unit commander implicated in espionage for the insurgents underscored the depth of this infiltration, highlighting systemic weaknesses within the military command structure.

The political dimensions of the famine crisis in Northeastern Nigeria are deeply rooted in the failure of political leadership to adopt a

proactive and unified approach against Boko Haram insurgency. The study's findings emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive reforms in governance, security, and anti-corruption measures to mitigate humanitarian crises and restore stability in the region. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for the immediate relief of affected populations but also for fostering sustainable peace and development in Northeastern Nigeria.

Furthermore, corruption within the ranks of the Camp Management Committee (CMC) exacerbated the famine in the IDP camps. The study also revealed inadequate humanitarian intervention relative to the urgent needs of the IDPs. Specifically, the level of hunger and starvation in the Maiduguri camp was particularly severe, with one out of every ten children succumbing daily to malnutrition and emaciation. Mismanagement of the IDP camps, coupled with widespread corruption among government officials, prolonged the famine across the studied areas.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the famine in Northeastern Nigeria is not solely a consequence of natural disasters or food scarcity but is profoundly shaped by political failures. The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, has ravaged Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, disrupting agricultural production, destroying food storage facilities, and displacing millions. The insurgency's violent campaigns - including bombings, village raids and widespread destruction - have crippled local economies and dismantled critical food systems. Borno, in particular, has borne the brunt of this devastation, with more than three million people forced into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, where famine and malnutrition have become endemic.

A central finding is the Nigerian government's inability to effectively counter Boko Haram. The response was marred by delays and a lack of coordinated action, often influenced by political considerations rather than humanitarian needs. The politicization of the insurgency, with government actors focused on electoral gains and power dynamics, diverted critical resources away from counterinsurgency operations and humanitarian relief. This weakened military effort, as funds intended for combating Boko Haram were embezzled, undermining the military's capacity to mount an effective defence or offence against the insurgents.

Corruption within the military compounded the problem, with reports of some personnel allegedly collaborating with Boko Haram group. This not only weakened operational effectiveness but also compromised the flow of intelligence, enabling Boko Haram members to continue their attacks with limited resistance. Such internal failures created a breeding ground for further insecurity, intensifying the famine.

The study also identified significant mismanagement within the IDP camps. Corruption within the Camp Management Committees (CMC) worsened conditions for displaced populations. Funds and supplies intended for humanitarian aid were often siphoned off or poorly distributed, leaving many IDPs, especially children, exposed to severe malnutrition and starvation. The misallocation of resources, coupled with inadequate international and national humanitarian support, contributed to the deepening of the famine crisis.

In sum, the famine in Northeastern Nigeria is deeply entrenched in the political landscape, where corruption, mismanagement, and the lack of political will to prioritize human lives have amplified the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency. The failure of government leadership to provide timely and effective responses to the insurgency and the humanitarian crisis it has caused have exacerbated food insecurity, leading to a preventable famine that continues to worsen people's economic conditions.

Given that the IDPs' needs exceeded the Nigerian government's capacity, urgent humanitarian intervention by the international community and donor agencies is imperative. Transparent partnerships between the Nigerian government and international agencies will foster accountability in the utilization of donor funds. In addition, the mandate of anti-corruption agencies, such as Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) need to be further broadened to monitor and investigate the CMC's activities in the IDP camps. This is to prevent the diversion of resources.

Furthermore, the government should adopt comprehensive reforms, particularly in governance and security sectors. This should be done by the Ministry of Defence in collaboration with the Office of National Security Adviser. The move is to restructure military leadership to address weaknesses in command and ensure transparency in military spending. Political will is crucial to depoliticize the insurgency and prioritize national security over electoral gains. The government should

prioritize the empowerment of IDPs and their reintegration into society.. The launch empowerment and skills acquisition programmes targeting youths and women in IDP camps to facilitate their reintegration into society would help improve IDPs' living conditions. Educational initiatives, especially for girls, should be prioritized as part of long-term rehabilitation efforts.

As part of a permanent solution, agricultural investment should be considered. To restore food security, significant investment in agriculture is necessary to support displaced farmers and rebuild local economies. This will reduce dependence on aid and create sustainable livelihoods.

On intelligence and community trust, including preventing the recruitment of youth into extremist groups, there is the need to foster collaboration between the military and local communities. This is vital for effective intelligence gathering and counter-extremism efforts. By implementing these recommendations, the Nigerian government and international stakeholders can address the immediate humanitarian needs while laying the groundwork for long-term peace and development in the region.

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