

Oligarchy and Orature in the Novels of Nuruddin Farah

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"You cannot divorce the oral and the literary from one another," the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah has said in a recent interview (Moss 1827), which suggests that the technical problem of transmuting or incorporating one mode into the other is not one that besets this particular author. The problem has been addressed in a number of ways, ranging from the reproduction, in Achebe's historical novels, of selected oral features such as proverbs and folklore in a traditional novelistic context, to Ouologuem's attempt, in *Bound to Violence*, merely to capture the spirit and energy of the griot, and to Armah's altogether more ambitious and adventurous experimentation with simulated orality in *Two Thousand Seasons*, seeking out precise written equivalents for oral stylistic devices. Farah, unlike these other African writers, grew up in a genuinely oral world which communicated in a virtually unwritten language, his imagination nourished by the legendary oral poets of the Ogaden (Somali acquired no orthographic script until 1972), and his novels, to use his recent description of a work-in-progress, chart the passage of a "society coming out of the oral tradition into a written form" (Langille 7). Farah's fiction has always behaved as if the oral and written modes existed not only simultaneously but interpenetratively, the one already there inside the other. Ebla, in his first novel (*From a Crooked Rib*, 1970), and Askar, in his most recent one (*Maps*, 1986), live, idiomatically and stylistically, as oral beings on the pages to which they are transcribed, their questing intelligences and intuitions fed by remembered anecdotes, parables and folk-wisdom imbibed with the oral cultures of their childhoods, and even the mercurial Koschin of *A Naked Needle* (1976), for all his literary allusiveness and his pride in the revolutionary government's scripting of the Somali language, is at heart a garrulously oral creature, given to torrents of talk and intoxicated (as is evidenced in his pun-power and

virtuoso alliteration) with the sheer sound of words. Though he has come a long way from it, Koschin comes originally from the same eloquent, bookless culture of Somali tradition.

Nevertheless, these continuities notwithstanding, Farah's fiction has been slower than that of some of his contemporaries—notably Ngũgĩ and Armah—to recognize the positive strengths and reconstructive potential of traditional cultural values and their oral modes of expression and, unlike the later novels of those two writers, has not conceived these values and forms in a polemical way: for example, as unsullied alternatives and likely modes of counter-discourse to the corruptions and tyrannies of post-colonial politics. In his trilogy of novels, *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* (1979–1983), Farah seeks neither to rehabilitate traditional forms, like the later Armah, nor to discredit and repudiate them, like Ouologuem, but rather to show how indigenous traditions, both oral and domestic, have themselves been implicated in the new political tribulations and terrors of the independent state. On the domestic front the totalitarian tribal oligarchy imposed on post-revolutionary Somalia by General Siyad Barre is revealed to be but the old patriarchal (and matriarchal) despotism writ large: accordingly, in *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), the police informer and “grand patriarch” Keynaan connives at the death and defamation of his dissident son, the government minister Soyaan, to stamp out subversion at both state and familial levels, and in *Sardines* (1981) the tyrannical Idil, when evicted by her son Samater (also a government minister), is able to invoke the wrath of the state to bring about his political degradation. As regards the oral tradition, Farah had of course already provided, through the medium of Ebla in *From A Crooked Rib*, a glimpse of an oral culture in something more akin to a pristine healthy state prior to its perversion by the General. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum he presents in the barely literate, vivid figure of Dulman in *Sardines* a revolutionary image of an ancient oral Somalia, a guest in a century of high-technology which it now turns to its own account by fighting despotism with its own weapons. “Our tradition is oral,” says Dulman. “One can communicate with the hearts of Somalis only through their hearing faculties” (170). Moreover, Deeriye, the hero of the third novel of the trilogy (*Close Sesame*, 1983), is a living reminder of a radical Somali oral tradition that fostered the talents of the warrior-poet, the Sayyid and the Sultan Wiil Waal, who fought colonial and clan enemies with the power of

the spoken word as well as with conventional weapons. The historical original of Deeriye's beloved legendary Sayyid inspired both devotion and terror in his people, however, and his revolution was nationalistic rather than social, whilst Wiil Waal was an absolute, albeit a benevolent, dictator (Sparrow 7,10); and Deeriye, who was given the works of Mussolini to read as a prisoner of Italian colonialism, is alert to the political uses and misuses of both the spoken and the written word. Farah has described the Somalis as a people "moving straight from the oral tradition in the African sense to the oral tradition in the technological sense (television and radio) without going through that middle stage of the written word" (Langille 7). This process acquires sinister implications, and the oral tradition darker dimensions, in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, where the oral culture is effectively allied with the reactionary forces of tribal authoritarianism and obscurantism, thus polarizing oral despotism and written revolution, unalphabetized tyranny and textual subversion. It is Koschin, in the earlier *A Naked Needle*, who sounds the first warning note about the dangers of excessive reliance on the oral code's modes of communication. "There is no government-fixed price, neither do you get a receipt," Koschin remarks ominously. "All is done orally, we are an oral society, and one has to trust" (111). In the sombre trilogy of novels that follows the Somali populace is short-changed by a military dictatorship that lives in terror of the written word and whose repressive surveillance techniques thrive on oral exchanges and are steeped in the existing oral traditions of a still largely illiterate society. The General knows as well as Dulman that Somali hearts are won through their ears, and the subversive cassettes that she smuggles abroad, recorded direct from the poet's mouth and worked into unscripted pieces for performance, are the oral tradition's answer to the debased oral techniques that help to keep him in power.

In the Somalia of *Sweet and Sour Milk* and *Sardines* power is still largely oral-based. According to the system of "Dionysius's Ear," the oral network uncovered in Soyaan's Memorandum, a barely literate General recruits his security corps of spies and informers from illiterates working entirely in the oral medium and reporting verbally everything they hear. Under the "ear-service" of tyranny, little or nothing is written down: there are no death-certificates or epitaphs on graves, no lists of detainees or arrest warrants (phoned instructions suffice), and no written reports and particulars. "No writing-pad, no pen," the protagonist of *Sweet and Sour Milk* notes of the heavy-

booted official who hauls him briefly into detention. "He had not come to take Loyaan's particulars. . . . No minutes would show how long he had been kept here . . . he might be here for six months, a name untraceable, a person unregistered, a man inexistent" (196). "In this country, rumour rules," Margaritta tells him, and it is rumour rather than information that is published: "The politics of mystification rendered rumours credible. Nothing was ever confirmed. . . . No information was released until a rumour had been published, and nothing was made official until the General's informants had reported back the mood, the feeling of the general public" (196). In *Sardines* Medina argues that gossip, libellous rumour and speculation are fostered to sustain the atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty, of being "kept guessing," required by the dictator (a Somali poet notes that the ear, the organ of both the oral culture and the General's police system, is shaped like a question mark), and she has scarcely made her decisive departure from home and husband when a generous supply of oral versions of the event is already in circulation and on its way back to her, presenting her with four possible reasons for her action: Idil's threat to have Ubax circumcised, the compromising of her anti-government position by Samater's ministerial appointment, Samater's rumoured infidelity with the maid, and the creation of a need for herself though absence. Neither Medina nor Farah ever confirm that any one of these alternatives is to be preferred above the others. Whatever private certainty exists is thus dissolved into public indeterminacy, purity of motive rumoured into plurality, and the oral convention poses not merely an invasion of privacy and a moral usurpation: insofar as its reconstruction of multiple possibilities acquaints people with their inner doubts about the nature and motives of their own acts, it undermines their sense of self and represents an existential threat to their very being.

I have touched elsewhere on Farah's tackling, in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, of deeper epistemological and ontological questions about the nature of perception and identity in a floating, indeterminate oral reality (Wright, 1989). My concern here is with the fate of the written text in a political system geared to oral discourse. The written sign and its objective notation of reality would appear, in theory, to pose to an oral-based power system the greatest challenge, for the sign certifies reality by keeping an evidential record of people and events which insists that things happened. In the oral malaise of Farah's Somalia the underground Group of Ten who challenge obscurantist power pin

their faith to the few signs that exist because there is nothing else with which to fix the flux, or even prove the existence, of human experience. Loyaan entertains the naive hope that a written public statement will refute the lies fabricated about his brother by his father; Ibrahim trusts optimistically that "the written word, more powerful than the gun, will frighten them"; Amina enthuses, in the next novel, that "the power of the written word is immense"; Soyaan, who kept his official memos short because of the semi-illiteracy of the ruling oligarchy, seems from the scraps of his writings that survive to have shared this perhaps deluded faith in the subversive potential of the written word, not realizing that the real sources of power lay elsewhere. The fate in store for literate protest against unalphabetized tyranny is, in fact, sounded proleptically during the retrospective beach scene between Soyaan and Margaritta at the beginning of the book: "The solidity of his body in the water's transparency flowed into ripples of fantasy. . . . She wrote his name on the sand. The sea washed away her writing. They silently watched the water recede. He wished he could read her message in the water receding" (12-13). Here, in the novel's Prologue—in the dissolving of solid, stable realities into fantasy, the washing away of words—the pattern for the book is set. What are the implications for written texts—for Farah's own text—in a mode of reality built on oral discourse? What happens to language when nothing is happening—in the sense of being written—in it?

One possible option is the phenomenon of the "disappearing text." The text retreats deeper into its "writtleness" and its peculiarly literary texture grows denser. Partly in imitation of, partly in resistance to the Somalian political reality under the dictator, it becomes a darkly hermetic, opaque hieroglyph layered with mysteries, its meanings driven underground into cryptic codes: the John Wain poem scribbled by Soyaan on the back of Marco's photograph; enigmatic signs scratched in the sand by his mistress; the mysterious monosyllables dropped down the telephone by Xassan, minimally echoic to thwart the General's Dionysian cave of listening devices; and Soyaan's secret "alphabet of mysteries" (and "mystery of alphabets")—"I/M" (Ibrahim/Medina/Mulki?) and "M to the power of 2" (Margaritta and Marco, Mogadiscio and Moscow?). Given the paranoid context of persecuted print where written texts are both threatening and threatened, Farah's own narrative develops into a correspondingly obscure and evasive text in the face of the reader's

interrogation of it for possible clues, so that the uncertainty of the questing protagonist becomes the reader's own. Much of the text is taken up by questions but they are, in Loya'an's phrase, "Whys and no wherefores . . . , endless questions, unprovidable answers." The book itself retreats into Soyaan's secret codes, recreating the atmosphere of confusion and mistrust spread by the General, and the awaited clarifying closure of the political thriller and detective novel encouraged by the book's form is finally dissolved in a polygraphy of possible meanings.

Alternatively, public oral conventions and codes begin to infiltrate the written text which, if only at a figurative level, begins to take on certain selected characteristics of an oral one: notably, its capacity not only for reconstruction but also for reinvention in the retelling of tales; its vagaries of characterisation; and the fluid indeterminacy of meaning and interpretative openness, so dangerous in the present political context, that follow inevitably from a form of discourse which is audience-oriented rather than performer-centred. The vaporous order of reality in *Sweet and Sour Milk* approximates the condition of the oral modes of discourse privileged by the General's regime and partakes of their unstable order of meaning and their susceptibility to variation, omission, changes of emphasis and shifts of shape. "He loathed to be interpreted badly and to be misunderstood," parrots Keynaan of his dead son as he, quite deliberately, does exactly that. Lives, like plots coming and going in an epic narrative, are re-imaginable and, in theory, infinitely interpretable: "Let everybody interpret things as they wished," laments Loya'an (138). A glance at patterns of oral performance and response might be instructive at this point. Jacqueline Bardolph, comparing the allusive epigraphic passages that open the chapters of *Sweet and Sour Milk* with the stage directions of Farah's play *Yussuf and his Brothers*, notes that the quite normal African mode of discourse employed by the author in both instances, though it relies on sign and code, "also demands active participation from the audience in the establishment of meaning" insofar as some significances "remain open or only come to life in the situation of communication" and that "some incidents are susceptible in their own terms of many layers of interpretation" (66). *Sweet and Sour Milk* is, in fact, full of miniature microcosmic oral "texts" of this kind. The symbolic vignettes of weather and skylscapes that follow the epigraphs and the riddling eloquence of the butcher's "text" of the tribal goat, tortured for its own enlightenment before

being ritually slaughtered, both fall into this pattern. Here is the butcher:

I am training her so that she can grasp the meaning of death before I slaughter it. Your father has, with the money he paid for her head, taught her what it means to be separated from where she was born and her tribal masters. She grasped that being dragged here. Now I've cut the tribal ear. A little later, I shall gladly administer death to her. (209)

Is the murdered Soyaan meant to be seen the goat in the fable, either as a sacrificial martyr to a spurious revolution or as a scapegoat, focusing the wrath of the regime on the rising tide of anti-Soviet activities and issuing a warning to the other members of the underground Group of Ten? Or does the butcher's text present a broader image of modern Somalia, decaying and moribund under a tribal dictator, and of all of its Westernized intellectuals, uprooted from their birthplaces but still psychologically scarred by their tribal heritage and facing a choice of exile or torture and execution? Perhaps the point is that the regime's political imbecility resists intelligibility in any terms other than those of personal sadistic power-mania, so that the parable of the goat stands reflexively as a sinister paradigm of Somali reality under an obscurantist dictator: a reality which is fundamentally uninterpretable—and therefore infinitely interpretable. In *Sardines* the oralist Idil, the matriarchal representative of the General on the domestic front, is fully at home in this many-versioned reality, which she can easily remould into the shape of her own obsessive vision:

Idil's ball of thread rolled away. . . . She began to thread-draw in her mind a past with patterns different from the one she had the intention of re-narrating. . . . Idil counted the number of holes she had to jump in order to form a pattern. (78)

In the tangled webs of both the General's and Idil's oral texts, the "holes" or lacunae, the interpretative spaces around the words, are as important as the words themselves in the forming of patterns. The oral mode is, in a very post-modernist way, an uncentred or off-centred form of discourse, and a prevailing motif of "uncentredness" ties together the novel's political themes, its protagonist's existential dilemmas, and its indexings to oral conventions.

In the polemical monologue of Margaritta and in Loyaana's reflections Somalia, serving as a microcosm of modern Africa, is itself envisaged as a centreless void, a kind of zero-zone into which anything can be put and of which anything can be made; a space inhabited by so many inauthentic foreign and native presences—"KGBs and CIA espionage networks" alongside "wizardry and witchcraft and hair-burning rites of sorcery" (148)—but without any inner core of reality. Its history is an endlessly reinvented, improvised narrative on which each successive regime plays its own variations before an obliging mass-audience, shifting its shape like the political map of the Horn of Africa in *Maps*, and reconstituted at the whim of dictators, frequently in terms of the flat, cartoon-like fictions that inform Keynaan's pre-heliocentric view of the universe—"the flat universe of Father's calculable dimensions" as against "the oval-shaped one of solar and lunar evolutions and revolutions" (106). Somalia's political "uncentredness" is matched by the decentred lives of its intellectuals. Margaritta, limiting the relevance of her past affair with the Minister in the matter of Soyaan's death, marginalizes both her sexuality and intellectual influence: "I am not central to all that taken place" (228). Beydan has a recurring dream in which she is not only not the centre-point but does not even exist, and the real Soyaan is, in every sense, absent from the funeral celebrations that remake him into a myth. Since there is no route by which his writings might pass into the oral discourse privileged by the regime, his own fate will be to be remembered not by their complex truths but by the oral slogans that refashion him into a revolutionary hero: "Soyaana [was] the centre of this festivity although, just like Beydan in her dream, he too wasn't there" (231). These lives are not centred upon themselves but are satellites of other forces, rotating in an interpretative void: their events are not traceable to any single source, their meanings not locatable in any single stable reality but in a multiplicity of versions. The manufacturer of this malaise, and the ringmaster of its peculiar epistemological circus, is of course the General. In theory, Somalia's Islamic militarism is centred on key signs in a written code: its politics on the Revolutionary Council's constitution and its religion on the Koran. In practice, however, the General has replaced the constitution by his own personality—"Have I ever introduced myself to you, young man? I *am* the constitution," he roars at Soyaan—and has bowdlerised the Koran into a collection of slogans and hackneyed paeans ("There is no General like our General") parroted by his

military stooges, a debasement that leaves the original text corrupted beyond restitution: for Loyaan at Soyaan's funeral, the Koran stands "open and unreadable." The effect, Soyaan notes, has been to decentre Somalia's political reality by placing phrases like 'radical governments' and 'revolutionary socialism' in the "punctuational accessories" of parentheses and inverted commas that hold them at several removes from the real thing. Under the stage-management of the General, "Mulki," the sister of Ibrahim who allegedly types Soyaan's secret memorandum, is also enclosed in inverted commas and is entirely "oral" in conception, a character for whom there is neither documentary evidence in photographic or written records within the contexts of realism nor separate narrative confirmation. We are given only others' representations and reported versions of Mulki's doings and never meet the woman herself. She suffers—indeed, she exists—on rumoured hearsay alone, and on mainly doubtful hearsay at that (of Keynaan, a police informer, and Ahmed-Wellie, a suspected government spy whose claim to know Mulki Loyaan disbelieves), and is hunted down by Loyaan in ministerial files that disclaim all knowledge of her existence. In the "badly written farce" staged for him by the Minister to the Presidency in the interrogation scene "Mulki" is represented by an incompetent actress, wheeled onto the set at ministerial cue to protest that she has been neither arrested nor maltreated and promising to be there at the airport to wave him off to the foreign diplomatic post which the embarrassed regime has hastily created for him: if there is such a person as Mulki, clearly this is not she. Moreover, Mulki's torture, like Soyaan's fatal injection by Russian doctors, is presented in the form of frenzied dream and delirium in the protagonal consciousness: unreality is conferred upon it, blurring the true and the imaginary, what does and does not exist, so that we can no more distinguish the "real" from the merely "represented" Mulki than we can the "real" Soyaan from the revolutionary artifact, the mythical property of the government, into which he is posthumously transformed. They are both "unwritten" entities, not so much figures in Farah's written text as figments of the General's oral scenario.

In *Sweet and Sour Milk* Farah appears to have conceived Somali political reality in terms of a grotesque parody of orature and, if orature is the given metaphor for the regime, then the analogy that suggests itself is of the General as a species of debased oral performer, ringing endless sinister surprises and variations on the themes

of torture, censorship and other ways of silencing dissidents (there are always "other methods at their disposal," the ex-policeman Keynaan warns his son Loyaan). Medina dismisses the General as the mere "Grandmaster of Irrelevancies," but the text repeatedly images him as a cunningly false artificer, the constructor of "showy pieces of tumorous architecture, . . . monuments of false hope." Most frequently, he is conceived as a malevolent, diabolically inventive kind of oral historian, fabricating imagined alternatives for the lives of his trampled victims and, with the willing help of men like Keynaan, breathing life into lies that travesty their real ones. An astute and wily performer, he serves up for his nation's oral epics, sung by his "griots in green," new "heroes and legendary figures about whom one tells stories to children and future generations" (183). In Farah's dark parody, however, there is none of the usual reciprocity between teller and listener. Instead of the griot's self-effacing assumption of a common identity with his audience and his instilling of a common sense of reality into it, the aim is, through sheer imposition of the dictatorial will, to render the audience's hold on these things unsure. The listener, Loyaan learns, must make himself alertly receptive to new variations and impervious to surprise—he must "plot, plan, wriggle and struggle the best he could, and let nothing surprise him"—but the General's ideal audience consists not of active, contributing participants but of passive assenters who can rearrange themselves into any shape required or, alternatively, have none to begin with. This audience comprises brainwashed buffoons mouthing official dogma ("Soyaan, the Hero of the Revolution"), political stooges like Keynaan who will stoop to any baseness to ingratiate themselves with power, and beggars, who are so compliantly impressionable and manipulatable that it is impossible to surprise them: "Here was an audience willing to hear anything," says Loyaan of the latter. Appropriately, those who are most attuned to the General's protean oral reality are themselves adept shape-changers who, in one symbolic scene, actually transform themselves before Loyaan's eyes in response to the visitations of power: "The beggars no longer resembled the remnants of a plane-crash. No, they were the passengers of a third-class train, stirring forward, jerking, shaking, speaking. . . . Power had chosen to visit them. The Minister to the Presidency and his entourage of cars and security men had arrived" (229). Loyaan notes that beggars, unlike Beydan, Soyaaan and Margaritta, "are the centre of their dreams," but it is a hollow centre, a

void where identity should be, a blank ready to be moulded into any form. In the centreless world of oral-based totalitarian power, the beggar becomes the image for the average citizen.

The novel's vaporous, polymorphous political reality is reflected in its meteorological matter. Cloud formations, the night sky and the sun which "poured its blazing vapouriness upon everything," constantly assume different shapes—camels, trees, garments, pillars, skulls—to the imagination playing its variations upon them. Like the regime's political enormities, they keep the beholder guessing, testing his mental alertness and capacity for surprise and challenging him to emulate their inventiveness. The phantasmagoric skylscapes, like a good griot, keep always one step ahead of Loyaan's imagination: "Loyaan's thoughts walked the untrod landscape of the unknowable . . . his unfrisked brain-pockets felt heavier with all these untested ideas" (59). But when night falls "in a veil of darkness," Loyaan discovers that the art-work is really shoddy, the scenery badly painted, and that, like the political order of which it is a metaphor, there is really nothing behind it: "Empty at my touch like a soap-bubble, everything reducible to nought, nothing. Inexistent at my remembering, like a dream" (143). "You always lose hold of your own reality," the dying Soyaan is informed by his mother, and those who try to track down the reality of the dead man's life—Loyaan, the reader—find their own hold upon the world weakened. The Somalian reality confronting Loyaan is not a slippery and confusing multiplicity, and duplicity, of signs but a signless void, providing no forms in which coherent meanings can be expressed:

The night unrolled like a cotton thread, unfolding inch by inch; the night wove words of thready thoughts; the night stitched for him a blanket of comfort and warmth. . . . Every movement he heard had a meaning, and if it didn't he gave it one. The security men were following him and making sure he stayed indoors, in one version. . . . Then, right before Loyaan's and the world's eyes, all suddenly began to disintegrate like a worn-out piece of cloth a thick set of fingers has pulled asunder. (205–06, 211–12)

The sun's sudden dismantling of the "fabric of schemata," the text written upon the night by Loyaan's imagination, is indirectly an image of Farah's own text unstitching itself. What looks like an unfolding of meaning turns out to be an unravelling of the entire fabric in which

meaning should reside. The proliferation of “versions” makes the imaginative picturing, verbalizing or other literary representation of reality a hazardous business and Loyaana, as a character within the narrative’s realistic frame, comes increasingly to rely upon instinct and touch for his sense of reality: the immediacies of Soyaana’s corpse, Margaritta’s erotic presence, his hatred of his father and his distrust of Ahmed-Wellie.

As Loyaana is unable to unravel the butcher’s tortuous text of the goat, so the novel’s narrative plot of his quest for the truth of his brother’s death is unable to unravel the details and motives of the political-criminal plot to murder and mythologize Soyaana. The latter never materializes, being, finally, unwritten and unwritable, and eventually runs out unresolvedly in a series of loose ends or dissolves in a welter of conflicting oral testimony. We are told in the final chapter that only Ladan, who has hidden Soyaana’s writings in a place known to herself alone, will be able to resume control of Loyaana’s narrative quest and restitch the true text of Soyaana’s life: “Ladan is that Solomonic thread which connects all, which stitches the holes its needle has made. Follow the hints of that thread, follow it with patience” (225). Yet Ladan is, puzzlingly, one of the few characters who fail to reappear or even get mentioned in the next two volumes of the trilogy. Significantly, the precise whereabouts of Soyaana’s scripts and, by extension, of the written word in oral Somalia, are left uncertain. “The sky is too high to reach and hide them in,” Loyaana tells his sister, “the earth too earthly and too exposed and the boxes are not sufficiently secretive” (224). At the end of *Sweet and Sour Milk* Beydana, as in her dream, dies giving birth to a child called Soyaana who may or may not recover the truth about his dead namesake: “Twenty years later, for all one knew, a Soyaana who survived Beydana’s death in childbirth might walk a street named after a brother Soyaana knighted by a false revolution, made a hero in order to hide in the virtuosity of the generosity of politics” (218). Exactly what is delivered, achieved or brought to fruition at the end of the book and what value it has are left unclear. It may be the new offspring’s gesture of hope for the future; the truth about Soyaana or the promised revival of the written word that will give it expression; Margaritta’s thesis on “The Burgeoning of the National Security Service as an Institution of Power in Africa”, or Farah’s book, which contains that thesis and so is still seen as a threat to oral-based totalitarian power in Somalia.

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