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Death by Injustice:
Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Laws, Christian Fundamentalism,
and the Politics of Global Power

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REL 336: Christian Traditions
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Abstract: Across Africa, the persecution of gay people is gaining momentum. Gay people have been denied health care, detained, tortured, and killed. In 2009, the Ugandan parliament drafted *The Anti-Homosexuality Bill*, which has accrued significant attention, mostly negative, from the international community. However, it seems that any attention, positive or negative, only serves to fan the flames from which the laws were created. Anti-homosexuality laws, both formal and informal, have existed for decades within Uganda, but the current laws being drafted are by far the most formal and comprehensive. This paper will examine the political and religious context in which Uganda's anti-homosexuality laws were created and discuss some of the present and potential implications of the bill.

Keywords: anti-homosexuality laws, Uganda, Christian fundamentalism, religion, politics

Introduction

Across Africa, the persecution of gay people is gaining momentum. Gay people have been denied health care, detained, tortured, and killed. In the late afternoon of January 26, 2011, David Kato, Ugandan gay rights activist, was bludgeoned to death by hammer in broad daylight on his own front porch in the capital, Kampala. A tabloid publication, *The Rolling Stone*, bearing no relationship to the American publication, had recently published a story and a list of the nation's 'top homosexuals,' upon which, located at number one, was Kato. The story included the photos and addresses of those listed as well as a banner with the words *Hang Them*. Just months before, Kato informed media sources that he feared for his life because he knew too well the depravity of the current socio-political Ugandan atmosphere in regards to homosexuality.

The international community revered Kato as an outspoken and influential leader of human rights. Upon hearing of his death, President Barack Obama declared Kato a "powerful advocate for fairness and freedom."¹ His death marks much more than the death of a great leader; it echoes and solidifies the growing animosity towards homosexuality in Uganda. When confronted about the death of Kato, the editor of *The Rolling Stone*, Giles Muhame, "sympathized... 'When we called for hanging of gay people, we meant... after they have gone through the legal process.'"² Muhame's opinion is representative of a larger Ugandan consensus: it is morally permissible if gay people are killed as long as it is legal. As one the fathers and

¹ McKenzie, David. "Ugandan Gay Rights Activist Bludgeoned to Death." CNN.com. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/01/27/uganda.gay.activist.killed/index.html?hpt=T1>. Last Accessed: 11 December 2012.

² McKenzie, David. "Ugandan Gay Rights Activist Bludgeoned to Death." CNN.com. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/01/27/uganda.gay.activist.killed/index.html?hpt=T1>. Last Accessed: 11 December 2012.

heroes of the nascent gay rights movement in Uganda, Kato was right to fear for his life.

Unfortunately, his caution was not enough to protect him. As animosity trends as a result of an expanding political justification for the persecution of homosexuality, gay people in Uganda are beginning to face more violent, incessant persecution.

In 2009, the Ugandan parliament drafted *The Anti-Homosexuality Bill*, which has accrued significant attention, mostly negative, from the international community. However, it seems that any attention, positive or negative, only serves to fan the flames from which the laws were created. Anti-homosexuality laws, both formal and informal, have existed for decades in the countries surrounding Uganda, but the current laws being drafted are by far the most formal and comprehensive. Shelved at the end of 2011, the laws have recently been introduced as a “Christmas Gift” and are slated to be in effect by the end of 2012.³ Nearly a year after the death of Kato, tabloids are pressing more stories to rile the public consensus in favor of the laws. *Red Pepper*, similar to the tabloid *Rolling Stone*, ran a piece that accused Chris Mubiru, head of the Ugandan National football team (The Cranes), of sodomy and pieced together several false photos of Mubiru in bed with his players.⁴ Fortunately, he has not met the same fate as Kato. If these laws do pass in Uganda, the plight of African homosexual men and women will only get worse, resulting in more oppression, torture, and deaths across much of the continent.

Aside from the far-reaching political, social, and cultural implications of *The Anti-Homosexuality Bill*, the religious origins of the laws are important to note. Evangelical forms of Christianity have become more widespread across Uganda, giving rise to more conservative

³ Associated Press. “Uganda to pass anti-gay law as ‘Christmas Gift?’” Usatoday.com. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/12/uganda-gay/1699065/>. Last Accessed: 11 December 2012.

⁴ Ford, Zack. “Ugandan Tabloid Runs Photos of Soccer Official ‘Sodomising Players.’” Thinkprogress.org. <http://thinkprogress.org/lgbt/2012/12/07/1303611/ugandan-tabloid-runs-photos-of-soccer-official-sodomising-players/>. Last Accessed: 11 December 2012.

views of family that are in conflict with the fledgling gay rights movement.⁵ However, the current situation in Uganda is much more complex than a few disagreeing factions.

The laws have been created within a unique and tumultuous political and religious context, ripe with power struggles and cross-border relations, specifically between Africa and the United States. The Ugandan parliament lauds Christian fundamentalism, stemming mainly from American pundits, as a pinnacle for justice, resulting in “the convergence of American homophobia with African religious zeal.”⁶ Corruption at the government level, triggered by religious fanaticism, has played an important role in the foundation and backing of *The Anti-Homosexuality Bill*. This paper will examine the political and religious context in which Uganda’s anti-homosexuality laws were created and discuss some of the present and potential implications of the bill.

The Anti-Homosexuality Bill

Before continuing, it is necessary to discuss the provisions of the bill. As it stands, the law dictates, among other stipulations:

Three years in prison for failure to report a homosexual within twenty-four hours of learning of his or her crime; seven years in prison for ‘promotion,’ which would include not only advocacy but also even simple acknowledgement of the reality of homosexuality; life imprisonment for one homosexual act; and, for ‘aggravated homosexuality’ (which includes sex while HIV-positive, sex with a disabled person, or simply sex, more than once, marking the criminal as a ‘serial offender’), death.⁷

According to the laws, not only is a gay person considered illegal, but also any person who *promotes* homosexuality by simply acknowledging its existence can potentially be detained. The authors of the bill were careful to frame the argument against homosexuality as “a

⁵ Raghavan, Sudarsan. “Gays in Africa Face Growing Persecution, Activists Say.” *The Washington Post*. 12 December 2010. Section, A12.

⁶ Sharlet, Jeff. *Dangerous Liasons*. *Advocate*. Issue 1041. September 2010. pp. 1-12.

⁷ Sharlet, Jeff. *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 4, p. 130.

comprehensive consolidated legislation to protect the traditional family...” suggesting that it aims to strengthen the nation’s capacity to deal with emerging internal and external threats to the traditional heterosexual family.”⁸ Because it is understood as a threat, it has more weight in the Ugandan public. In the United States, loaded rhetoric such as that used in the bill would almost certainly prevent the bill from moving beyond the author’s desk; however, because of Uganda’s religious zeal and the powerful influence of its leaders, the bill has accrued phenomenal support within the country.

This support is evident in the development of the Ugandan mob mentality that has given rise to various crimes such as the killing of Kato. To show how the anti-homosexuality message is disseminated throughout the population, Jeff Sharlet conducted several interviews across Uganda. In one poignant interview with a young student attending a weekly abstinence rally at one of Uganda’s top universities, the conversation flowed:

‘Is the death penalty a good idea?’ I asked a pretty girl named Sharon... ‘Yeah!’ She smiled... ‘Have you ever met a homosexual?’ I asked... ‘I have never!’ ... ‘If you ever met one would you kill him?’ ... ‘It’s hard for me to kill... It is hard for me to do alone... But together?’ She giggled and nodded.⁹

David Bahati, the primary author of the bill, claims that the text is based on a long-standing tradition of Ugandan family values. Dr. James Nsaba Buturo, Uganda’s minister of ethics and integrity and advocate of the bill, argues that homosexuality and its diagnosis are both products of the West, and the solution to the problem came directly from the Ugandan people.¹⁰ If what

⁸ Ugandan Parliament. *The Anti-Homosexuality Bill, 2009*. Uganda Gazette. No. 47, Volume CII. 25 September 2009.

⁹ Sharlet, Jeff. C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 4, p. 131.

¹⁰ Sharlet, Jeff. C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 4, p. 130-131.

these two men say is true, the bill is not merely the result of a culmination of fuming animosity towards homosexuals, but also, it seems, towards Western cultural hegemony.

The levels of hatred are only increased when the definition of homosexuality becomes skewed to meet the ideological views of the politicians. Pastor Moses Solmon Male, leader of the National Coalition against Homosexuality and Sexual Abuses in Uganda, asserts that “Pedophilia is really just a euphemism for homosexuality.”¹¹ Male has also led an ideological war against one of Uganda’s most famous pastors, Robert Kyanja. Male claims that Kyanja is responsible for heinous rape crimes linked to homosexuality. One of Kyanja’s alleged victims argues that the preacher has “breasts as large as ‘Dolly Parton’s’” beneath his suit, and that there is a “vast, underwater city of homosexual witches beneath the surface of Lake Victoria.”¹² Because of the internal bias against homosexuals being taught and dispersed through venues such as universities and skewed perceptions of homosexuality, the implications of the bill become more dangerous and far reaching. Not only does the bill target homosexuals and people remotely associated with it, it is also based on a loaded definition of homosexuality.

The Confluence of Religion, Politics, and Power

As mentioned earlier, the anti-homosexuality laws emerge from a particular political and religious context. There are several forces at work, and the bill is a culmination of several plots and ideals stemming from various different levels of power. Yoweri Museveni, Ugandan dictator since 1986, rose to power after winning the bush wars against previous dictator, Milton Obote. As a dictator, he needs enemies to stay in the good graces of his people. For years, Museveni fought the Lord’s Resistance Army, but the LRA has been reduced to a few hundred child soldiers. To maintain power, Museveni, riding the heels of African nationalism, has shifted

¹¹ _____, *Dangerous Liaisons*. Advocate, Issue 1041. September 2010. p. 3.

¹² _____, p. 10.

his focus towards purging his country of the Western “disease:” homosexuality. Propaganda depicts homosexuals as “shape-shifting millionaires buying sex with technology,” and as the reason for inter-tribal conflict based upon family values rising out of decadent living.¹³ As Museveni leads a crusade against homosexuality for his own power, there are forces at work within the country, which further complicates the issue.

Though the authors and major pundits of the anti-homosexuality bill operate beneath the banner of the Museveni, they derive their sources of advocacy largely from a religious arena, specifically from Christian fundamentalism. Even though “fundamentalism” is a grossly generalized term, it is sufficient for the purposes of this paper.¹⁴ The ideological framework of the bill’s framers can be traced directly to missionaries and Christian Right politicians from the United States. The rest of this paper will focus on the marriage between religion and politics in the making of the anti-homosexuality laws as well as the relationship between Ugandan and American religious and political leaders that made the bill possible.

In order to clarify fundamentalism and its relationship to anti-homosexuality sentiment, it is necessary to define it within the Ugandan context. Fundamentalism, in any context, is more than a set of ideas. When examined closely, a movement towards fundamentalism denotes a social, cultural, or political shift in a population.¹⁵ It usually comes to life under conditions of:

...(a) widespread poverty and associated ignorance, and (b) profound revulsion against the unpardonable inequity, crass materialism, and unwarranted flaunting of a depraved lifestyle by the ruling classes.¹⁶

¹³ Sharlet, Jeff. C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 4, p. 155.

¹⁴ Nagata, Judith. *Beyond Theology: Toward and Anthropology of “Fundamentalism.”* American Anthropologist, New Series. Vol. 103, No. 2. June 2001. p. 481.

¹⁵ Nagata, Judith. *Beyond Theology: Toward and Anthropology of “Fundamentalism.”* American Anthropologist, New Series. Vol. 103, No. 2. June 2001. p. 481.

¹⁶ Ghosh, Arun. *Fundamentalism, Its Roots, Rationale and Remedy.* Economic and Political Weekly. Vol, 31, No. 19. 11 May 1996. pp. 1115.

People who subscribe to a fundamentalism base their worldview on an abject understanding of their society. Fundamentalism, generally defined as a strict adherence to traditional tenets, becomes a way for individuals to make sense of the world.¹⁷ In the widest sense of the word, fundamentalism constitutes a way of finding oneself in the world. It categorizes the gray areas of life into black and white, allowing a person a sense of certainty. Because of the nature of fundamentalism, there is an inert fear of liminality which blocks an individual's willingness to consider alternative possibilities or ways of being in a given situation.¹⁸ Although fundamentalism exists in various forms, this paper will focus on Christian fundamentalism.

The basis for Christian fundamentalism is a strict adherence to the texts of the Bible under the assumption that every passage was literally written by God and must be understood as such.¹⁹ This way of viewing the world allows Christians to make sense of a changing world. Christian fundamentalism calls for a return to the traditional lifestyle espoused in the Bible, including living by the laws and standards of the time period during which the Bible was written. Beneath the terms of fundamentalism, even the rules written in the Old Testament apply, resulting in orthodox laws that deal with dress, the rights of women, and homosexuality among other issues. In regards to homosexuality, most Christian fundamentalists reference Genesis 19:4-5, Leviticus 18:13, Leviticus 18:22, and Romans 1:22-27 as the basis of their argument against it.²⁰ In the eyes of many fundamentalist Christians, the "acceptance of homosexuality is

¹⁷ _____ . pp. 1115.

¹⁸ Nagata, Judith. *Beyond Theology: Toward and Anthropology of "Fundamentalism."* American Anthropologist, New Series. Vol. 103, No. 2. June 2001. p. 494.

¹⁹ _____ . p. 482.

²⁰ Spong, John Shelby. The Sins of Scripture. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 2005. Section 4, Chapters 12-15, pp. 112-113.

the last step in the decline of Gentile Christianity.”²¹ Because it undermines fundamental tenets, it is no surprise that the contention over homosexuality results in discrimination, hatred, and inevitable violence.

Studies have augmented the above argument that there is a relationship between religious orientation and prejudice. Statistics prove that extrinsic religious orientation, or the outward expression of religious direction, directly correlates with prejudice.²² However, the issue of intrinsic religion is more difficult. A study conducted in 1993 suggests that intrinsic religious orientation, the internal expression of religion, develops a more biased discrimination, specifically against “gays and lesbians, competing political/religious groups, communists, and women.”²³ Another study conducted in 1999 attempts to find a correlation between Christian fundamentalism, both extrinsic and intrinsic orientations, and discriminatory attitudes towards homosexuality. Because of their belief that the Bible is the actual words of God, Christian fundamental biases may develop from the idea that homosexuals are essentially condemned people. Regardless, the study proved that fundamentalists judge homosexuals harsher than other people defined as ‘sinners’ by the Bible.²⁴ Now that one can see the direct correlation between Christian fundamentalism and anti-homosexual sentiment, we can begin to understand the situation in Uganda.

The Ugandan Context

²¹ _____-. Section 4, Chapters 12-15. p. 114.

²² Kirkpatrick, Lee A. *Fundamentalism, Christian Orthodoxy, and Intrinsic Religious Orientation as Predictors of Discriminatory Attitudes*. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. Vol. 32, No. 3. September 1993. p. 253.

²³ _____. p. 253.

²⁴ Fulton, Aubyn S., et al. *Religious Orientation, Antihomosexual Sentiment, and Fundamentalism Among Christians*. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. Vol. 38, No. 1. March 1999. pp. 14-19.

Christianity has been a part of African identity since the latter half of the nineteenth century, where it served to minister to a continent of people who had been reduced to second-rate citizens.²⁵ As mentioned earlier, the nature of fundamentalism comes to fruition under conditions of widespread poverty and oppression by an upper class. Fundamentalism allows people to ‘find their way’ in a shifting culture, ultimately pointing people to the past for answers. As the African continent was swayed by colonialism, Christian fundamentalism provided African people with an answer. Now, since the latter half of the twentieth century, Christianity ministers to an African continent that has been racked by a revival of African nationalism, the desire of the African people to establish indigenous sovereignty and terminate any foreign rule.²⁶ As African nationalism flourishes, one would think that the removal of Christianity, brought to Africa predominantly from the West, would be a natural progression. However, the claws of Christian fundamentalism seem to have dug deeper into African culture. Because of its undeniable impact on African society, “Neither dependence or independence can put out of action the religious function of Christianity.”²⁷ For better or worse, Christianity has been a major benefactor of African development.

The shift towards a more fundamental understanding of Christianity in Africa took place on the heels of a fundamentalist revival in United States in the 1970s. Coming to fruition in the 1980s, there was a large fundamentalist revival observable in every country in Africa. As a result, “countless new missionaries, new ministries, new churches, increased media involvement, and perpetual crusades...” have developed, adding to the already persistent presence of

²⁵ Sithole, Ndabangini. *African Nationalism and Christianity*. Transition. No. 10. September 1963. p. 37.

²⁶ _____ . p. 37.

²⁷ _____ . p. 37.

Christianity in Africa.²⁸ In order to add a sense of authenticity to their movement, fundamentalists adopt a two-fold strategy, which is simultaneously global and inward looking. It is global because fundamentalist movements have a knack for:

...breaching institutionalised cultural and national frontiers and spreading their influence across the globe, producing strikingly similar rituals and doctrines in widely dissimilar cultural contexts.²⁹

For the sake of this paper, it is important to note the American involvement in the fundamentalist revival in the African continent. Again, African nationalism calls for a rejection of foreign rule. However, Christian fundamentalism in the United States, due to the nature of fundamentalism, also calls for a rejection of modernity. Thus, the relationship that has developed between American Christian fundamentalists and African, specifically Ugandan, Christian fundamentalists begins to make sense. The inward looking nature of fundamentalist movements draw "...elaborate attention to boundary maintenance, creating a quasi-ethnicity through the control of sexual behaviour..."³⁰ The Ugandan anti-homosexuality laws are a codification of this two-fold strategy brought about by the coalescence of American and African Christian fundamentalism. However, as noted previously, the issue is far more complicated than religious ideology. Both American and Ugandan politicians fan the flames of fundamentalism.

Museveni has declared war on homosexuality in Uganda in order to maintain power. To make matters worse, his ideals are derived from his skewed perception of Christianity. Riding the heels of African nationalism, Museveni is able to capitalize on the Ugandan propensity for Christian fundamentalism in order to maintain the support of his people. His regime has been

²⁸ Gifford, Paul. *Christian Fundamentalism and Development*. Review of African Political Economy. No. 52, *Fundamentalism in Africa: Religion and Politics*. November 1991. p. 10.

²⁹ Lehmann, David. *Fundamentalism and Globalism*. Third World Quarterly. Vol. 19, No. 4, *Rethinking Geographies: North: South Development*. 1998. p. 630.

³⁰ _____ . p. 630.

lauded by the United States “as a democracy since the general marched into Kampala twenty-fours years ago...”³¹ In addition, Museveni’s war on homosexuality has accrued support from the American Christian Right, a political group founded upon the tenets of Christian fundamentalism. Again, the two come together as a coalition of sorts against modernity and change.

Winston Churchill once noted that Uganda is the “pearl of Africa.” American fundamentalists are aware of the influence that Uganda has over the rest of the continent. If the bill passes in Uganda, it is likely to carry to surrounding countries. For years, fundamentalists have viewed Uganda as a type of laboratory, sending not only money but also ideas. Ugandan evangelical churches sing American hymns and listen to sermons about American issues, often from the pulpit of American preachers. Ugandan politicians attend prayer breakfasts in America and make deals with American businessmen. However, American fundamentalists cite Ugandan churches as models for their own and note Ugandan AIDS policy as a praxis that public health is a moral issue. Because the American fundamentalists are essentially losing the battle at home, they marginalize it abroad and publicize their results as successful.³² The interwoven nature of African and American fundamental religiosity and the backing of powerful politicians on both sides have resulted in a nation where morality is legislated by skewed religious ideology. In Uganda, pastors and moral elitist hold the power, resulting in horror stories like that of Victor Mukasa, a male born female.

Mukasa attended a large American-style Pentecostal church in hopes that he could resolve his identity crisis. Because Mukasa is a female that dresses like a male, the pastor

³¹ Sharlet, Jeff. C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 4, p. 131.

³² _____ . Chapter 4, p. 131-133.

diagnosed her with demon possession by a male spirit and asked the congregation to help him heal Mukasa. The exorcism took place at the church altar, in front of a thousand Christians. Boys and men were asked to come lay hands on Mukasa and speak to her in tongues while the female members of the church sang for her liberation. The men held her arms firmly and stripped her slowly, praying over each garment as it was removed.

They bared her breasts to the congregation, slapped her in the name of God, and made her stand in front of the audience naked. Then, the men proceeded to run their hands across and inside her naked body. Afterwards, they locked her in a room and raped her for a week in order to ‘cure’ her.³³ Ugandan religious leaders, backed by the government, feel it is their duty to ‘cure’ the disease of homosexuality plaguing their country. Fortunately, Mukasa lived. However, there are several who have not. If the laws are passed, more horror stories will surface, only they will be legally permissible.

The U.S. Connection

The bill was never the result of a random series of events led by religious politicians and ideological groups. The entire bill was orchestrated carefully between the American evangelical groups with strong ties to the American government and Museveni’s regime in Uganda. The connection between the two nations can really be traced back to the Family, the oldest and most powerful Christian conservative organization in Washington, D.C.³⁴ The Family views itself “as a ministry for the benefit of the poor, by way of the powerful. The best way to help the weak... is to help the strong.”³⁵ God chooses members of the Family, including former Mississippi

³³ Sharlet, Jeff. C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 4, p. 142-143.

³⁴ Sharlet, Jeff. *Dangerous Liaisons*. Advocate. Issue 1041. September 2010. p. 4.

³⁵ _____ . C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 1, p. 6.

representative Chip Pickering. They are tools used directly by God to advance his kingdom. Originally titled the Worldwide Spiritual Offensive, the Family's membership spans globally, attracting the powerful elites from each involved country. The worldwide membership composes the Fellowship, a group of people with financial and political connections meant to further God's kingdom.³⁶ Museveni, Bahati (the author of the bill), and several other anti-homosexual pundits in Uganda are a part of this fellowship.³⁷ The Family's current leader, Senator Tom Coburn has been quoted as saying that the "greatest threat to our freedom today are [sic] gays who have infiltrated the very centers of power."³⁸ It is then no surprise how the laws have developed in Uganda. The fight against homosexuals is carried on the backs of religious folk, capitalizing on African religious zeal; however, the politicians, both American and Ugandan, have incited this war to maintain power.

Conclusion

Several online petitions have surfaced that disagree with the bill, one in particular asking Museveni to not "let this law, and the worsening human rights situation in the country, make Uganda in to a pariah nation in the international community."³⁹ As the international community continues to decry the Uganda anti-homosexuality bill, the foundations of the issue continue to fester, resulting in Uganda's current "Christmas Gift." Because of the Christian fundamentalist backing for the bill, it is easy to blame the growth of fundamentalism for the bill, but the issue is much more complex. True, Christian fundamentalism does denounce homosexuality, spurring

³⁶ _____ . *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 1, p. 29-31.

³⁷ _____ . *Dangerous Liaisons*. *Advocate*. Issue 1041. September 2010. p. 3-4.

³⁸ _____ . *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2010. Chapter 3, p. 98-99.

³⁹ AllOut.org. *Uganda: Stop the "Kill the Gays" Law Now.*
<http://www.allout.org/en/petition/uganda>. Last Accessed: 15 March 2011.

religiously led movements against homosexuals. However, the coercive nature of fundamentalism, especially in Uganda, serves as a tool for the powerful elite. Unfortunately, homosexuality is just a target.

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