

CHAPTER 9

COPTIC CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENTS IN THE PRESERVATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA: LESSONS FOR NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY

Gideon Y. Tambiyi

Abstract

This paper surveys Coptic religious thought and its expansion in the history of the early church using the historical critical method. It also compares the growth and the challenges encountered by the Coptic Church with those of other African churches, particularly the Nigerian church. Such roles played by the Coptic Church over the years are significant lessons for the modern church particularly the tension-related areas, where religious conflicts are defining the quest for dominance in Africa. The work also discusses the survival strategies employed by the Coptic Church and states what the modern church should aspire for as Islamic tension increases in most African countries.

Key words: Hellenistic Egypt, persecution, Coptic Church, Nigerian church, Holy Family, LXX, Alexandria

Introduction

The coming and death of Jesus ushered in the zeal to multiply the Kingdom of God, which was the primary message of the Messiah. The expansion of the church to Egypt was a fulfillment of the primal message of the cross among the Copts. The Coptic Church had some strong and popular religious ties coupled with their identity as a people, constituted the Hellenistic Coptic religious activities and the endured challenges, which the Coptic Church over the years, continued and surfaced in the heart of their religious activities. Such roles played by the Copts over the years are

considered in this work to be significant lessons for modern Christianity particularly the tension-related areas, where religious conflicts are outlining the quest to dominate by Islam.

The Coptic Church has engaged in working tirelessly to expand its frontiers and establish its religious beliefs even in the midst of challenges and has fought the introduction and acceptance of alien religions by the Arabs even when Egypt was conquered in AD 641. The Coptic survival strategies are depicted as defining and solving the problems facing the modern church particularly the rising Christian-Islamic tensions in most African countries and Islamic dominated countries. Such efforts by the Copts have laid down some sustainable principles, which the current Christian religious bodies need to imbibe to enhance the spreading of the gospel message to other regions and the sustenance of the faith in the midst of religious challenges.

Preserving Christianity in Egypt over the years has been a big challenge. It was not a catwalk to have aspects of the Christian faith preserved in total reliance and dependence. The church in Egypt has worked so hard to extend religious values and maintain its beliefs to showcase the primary beliefs of their faith to the minds of the people. This paper discusses the roles and strategies the Coptic Church adopted to preserve the Christian faith in Egypt which the Nigerian Church can emulate to sustain the faith for the next generation.

Coptic Linguistic Development

The Copts were known for the development of the Coptic language in the midst of world popular ancient languages. Coptic survived and became one of the dominant languages for Bible transmission. The Copts took time to develop the various linguistic aspects of the language. Most of the words and the grammar of Coptic were borrowed from Greek (particularly the alphabets) although there were other grammatical dictions that are unique with few letters from the last stage of Egyptian hieroglyphics called demotic (Lambdin vii; Gordon 22-23; Wegner 246). Thomas Lambdin reveals the historical and dialectical transmission from the Sahidic, Bohairic, and Fayyumic into Achmimic (third to fifth century) and subachmimic (fourth to fifth century) and states the demise of Coptic language in the fifteenth century (ix). Lambdin surveys extensively the Coptic grammar showing their relevance to the

New Testament, being a language that deals with prefixation. He writes, "Coptic is a highly compounding language, mostly by prefixation" (xv). This makes this language interesting in understanding the religious development of the Copts.

On the origin of the word "Sahidic," Lambdin writes that the name Sahidic, from Arabic *as-sa'id*, upper (i.e. southern) Egypt, places it in the south (hence its alternate name: Theban, Thebaic); linguistic considerations, however, favour a northern locale, in the neighbourhood of Memphis and the eastern Delta (viii); Lambdin later states that by the fourth century AD, Sahidic was already established in the literary literature and maintained this standard until the tenth century (viii).

This is evident in the surviving portions of the New Testament and in a good portion of the Old Testament, a corpus of church literature and some secular works, which were translated from Greek (Lambdin viii). According to Lambdin, the natives' works that survived are those of Pachomius (c. 300), the founder of the Egyptian monasticism, Shenute (c. 400), the administrator of the White Monastery in Upper Egypt and Besa, a disciple of Shenute (viii). Lambdin's work is extensive in understanding the history of the language and its development particularly the understanding of the dictions and the grammar as it is useful for Coptic grammatical background and systematization (viii).

Like Coptic, there are other Nigerian languages, which are making progress in terms of development to preserve their values and cultures. The Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa people are working so hard to document the various aspects of their languages and cultures (Bamgbose 231-257; Bamgbose, "Mission" 12-20). Local dialects in Nigeria have been working to develop their languages and make them internationally relevant. The South Africans and other people in the Eastern Africa have been developing their languages and dialects to enable the contextualization of life among their people. Languages, such as Swahili, IsiXhosa, Afrikaans, Shona, and Ndaue etc., have been given attention among the people and the results of such findings are becoming worldwide information and making the Eastern Africa and the Cape to develop their identities (Mwaingeni 2013; Abdulaziz 32-49; Chabata 13-26; Chabat and Sinamupande 1-21; Himhundu 25-46; Fortune 354-64; Heugh 2-9). Many linguists have taught some of these languages in the context of slavery and the struggle for language survival. Similar can be said of the Ghanaians, who are developing and making their languages popular in daily livings. Many Ghanaians have been trying to

engage their local languages in communication even at international basis. Many of them are using their languages on the TV and Radio Stations, which have wide coverage in Africa.

Some of these indigenous languages have been used in churches today in the modern church. There are many indigenous churches among the Ghanaian people who use their indigenous languages during worship as evident in many Ghanaian TV evangelists. Hausa has become a major language among the people of the Middle-belt and the Northern Nigeria. Even in Northern Nigeria, there are Yoruba speaking congregations among the Baptist Convention and ECWA. Majority of the Yoruba speaking churches are in the Western part of Nigeria. The Bajju, who are indigenous people of Southern Kaduna (Nigeria), have been trying to make *Jju* language a standard language for learning and worship among the worshippers. The Tiv people have their NKST, which has dominated the minds of many Tiv indigenous people. The South African people and other people of the Eastern and Western Cape have been engaging their various languages in underscoring cultural and religious values. Among many others, these languages have helped to relate the message of the gospel to indigenous people, who are unschooled in our regions and localities just as the Coptic languages have contributed to uplifting the faith of the native Egyptians.

Bible Translation among the Early Egyptian Christians

One of the major evangelistic strategies adopted by the ancient Christians in Egypt was the translation of the Bible into the indigenous language of the Egyptians. It was a major ancient move for making the people experience God in their own way and context. The translation of the Bible was an attempt to have the people understand the move of God as many of them could read in their Coptic dialects but could not read either the Hebrew scrolls or Greek parchments, papyri in both scrolls, book rolls, codices and during the invention of paper.

It appears that the Egyptian-Jewish Christians were known for Bible translations. Translation from Greek to Coptic in the late second century succeeded in rooting Christianity into the hearts of the natives in Egypt (Walter 320; Kenyon 178; Thiessen 56; Emmel 83; Aland and Aland 68). This explains the Coptic Christian activities that took place in ancient Hellenistic Egypt. Egypt has been a centre for Christian religious activities particularly Bible translation. One could also say that

because of the exile, which influenced the Jews in terms of language, the Old Testament was ordered to be translated by Ptolemy II Philadelphus. This was done by seventy scholars in Alexandria (Egypt), which gave rise to the Septuagint (LXX) around 250-200 B.C., the first translated version of the Bible. G. J. C. Jordaan of Northwest University notes that Africa was an early location of text transmission, much of it centered in Alexandria, Egypt. Similarly, Africa was an early location of Bible translation. The LXX was translated around 250 BC in Alexandria. Carthage played a role in ancient Latin versions. Ethiopic and Coptic versions also were important (“NTTC”).

Before the Latin edition of Jerome's Bible, it is believed that the Copts had a complete Bible. Bible translation from Greek to Coptic continued to be a practice adopted by the missionaries of the Church in Alexandria and other Egyptian cities, which was an attempt to indigenize Christianity among the natives of Egypt. The Coptic people so as to create a platform for the natives to experience God in their existential milieu actualized such an effort in the translation of the Bible. Victor Walter states much earlier that the translation of the Bible from Greek into Coptic was perhaps completed by AD 200 (Walter 178; Thiessen 56; Kenyon 178; Aland and Aland 68). That is to say, Coptic Christianity was rooted by the middle of the second century to enable it to complete the Sahidic Bible. The strategy used to preserve this Egyptian Christianity was the translation of the Bible into Coptic language. Apart from the earlier ecclesiastical and communal efforts to translate the Bible into Coptic, John Gee elaborates the later stages during the Coptic translations:

The translation of the Bible into Coptic is seen as occurring in three distinct stages. In the first stage (4th century AD), independent translators rendered portions of the Bible into their native dialects. Most of our Coptic dialectical material comes from translations made at this stage. In the second stage (4th to 5th centuries AD), the Sahidic version was standardized. In the third stage (9th century AD), the Bohairic version was standardized (“An Overview”).

Gee underscores the various stages of Coptic translation and confirms the standardizing process of the Coptic Bible in both Sahidic and Bohairic. Whether the effort involved participatory exegesis and participatory translation (see Chosefu, “Challenges”), standards would seem vague in view that even the compiler of the

ahidic Coptic New Testament in the twenty-first century believes standards are yet to be maintained (Wells 1). The same can be said of the Coptic version of Hoener as effort is being made to standardize the readings in the text.

However, it was necessary to meet the need of the people with the gospel message using those Coptic versions. Most of the Copts lived in rural centres and were shepherds. Despite the fact that Christianity was a religion of the elites (Greek-speaking Christians) by the end of the second century AD, Christianity dominated Egypt. Sanneh clearly captures it that "For whatever reasons, there was a significant change, beginning about the middle of the third century, when Coptic villages and towns along the Nile embraced Christianity" (7). Rachel Scott relates the size of the church to have made them have regional significance in the entire territories when she writes, "The Copts represent the largest Christian group by population in the Middle East which, by virtue of their relative size, gives them regional significance" (8).

However, in view of the early stage of Greek-Coptic translations, Stephen Emmel explains the important place Coptic translation played on the Greek New Testament.

Some of this Coptic translation literature is of great value either for things it preserves that we might have had in Greek or some other language ... or for its text- and literary-critical value. Furthermore, there are works, or fragments of works, preserved in Coptic that are thought to be translations (presumably, and most probably, from Greek), but which remain thus far unidentified and therefore might eventually contribute to our knowledge of the corpora of Patristic authors (for example, the so-called 'Berlin Coptic Book'). Some Coptologists of the current generation are inclined to work against a view of Coptic literature as primarily an ancillary resource for New Testament and Patristic scholarship ... preferring instead to emphasize that even translation literature can and should be understood in its Coptic cultural context. In other words, the interest of a piece of Coptic translation literature should not end once its Greek *Vorlage* has been identified. Rather, one must still ask when, where, and why it was translated, and how and why it was altered during its transmission (92-93).

Emmel also adds that:

Translated literature was for them, so far as we can tell, as much a part of 'Coptic literature' as was original literature, even if they knew (or merely thought they knew, misled by pseudepigraphy or misattribution) that the author of a given work was a non-Egyptian or a non-Coptic speaker. It is not certain that native Coptic speakers could distinguish between original and translated literature any more easily than we can, and quite probably they were much less motivated even to try (93).

As stated earlier, translation of the scriptures into Coptic was probably completed by AD 200 contrary to the assertion of Sanneh as "beginning in the fourth century" (8). It is within this circulation of the Bible in Coptic that a number of texts were written as early as the third century onward for Coptic Christianity was very strong and needed scriptures for its spiritual nourishments. Hans Jakob Polotsky argues convincingly that the Coptic Bible translators could not possibly have access to the subtleties of the modal system of Classical Greek and based the context of usage of the Sahidic inferential on no longer transparent meaning connotations (73-90). The Greek speaking Jew in Egypt and Coptic Christianity have been well known for translative leadership, which survived many centuries in the area of the LXX and the Sahidic Coptic Bible, which have changed the fate of Christianity and opened the gate for ancient and modern translations of the Bible in our various official and unofficial languages.

Despite this effort by the Egyptians and the prominent place the LXX occupied among the Jews to the days of Jesus (as the Bible, which Jesus and the disciples and the early church read), the Coptic version of the New Testament remained marginalized. Affirming this, Norman Perrin observed that, "Other ancient versions of the New Testament in Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic and Georgian are less important than the Latin and the Syriac..." (340; cf. Tenney 418). This marginalization of the Coptic version and other related versions is a challenge that the African twenty-first century scholars have to face to ensure that proper historical interludes in dealing with the text of the Bible are properly maintained.

Enduring Persecution

It has been argued that these very early periods of persecution and power struggles with the political authorities solidified the Coptic Church's place in Egyptian society even though the population has dwindled significantly (Naguib 124). The Copts are known for enduring the persecutions, which came to them and ravaged their frontiers and tried to shut the Church down.

Egypt is known for expanding their boundaries and being in opposition with the Egyptian rulers. It was a battle to shut down Christian activities in Egypt. William Lyster states "Egypt was one of the first countries to convert to Christianity. The Coptic Church prides itself on being an apostolic foundation that has endured for nearly two thousand years. ...The Copts were usually in religious opposition to the faith of Egypt's foreign rulers" (7-8). Coptic churches, like most houses of Christian worship, have been divided into two distinct areas, the nave and the Sanctuary. The nave comprises the main body of the church, where the laity stand while attending the liturgy. The sanctuary or *baykal*, is at the eastern end of the church. It is small room containing a freestanding altar. Coptic churches usually have more than one *baykal*, each with its own dedication (Lyster 11). The religious tension was tough because "at the beginning of the Christian era, most 'Copts' still worshipped the gods of the pharaohs and spoke Egyptian" (Lyster 8). Persecution broke among the religions in Egypt. The persecution grew much stronger. Eusebius reported that "at times a hundred men would be slain in a single day along with women and children" (Lyster 10). The Coptic synaxarium names 381 martyrs venerated by the Egyptian church. Nearly half of these are stated to have suffered in the Great Persecution. Saint Dimyana was martyred in the eastern Delta at Bilqas, a site associated with the Holy Family. Others include Menas, Mercurius, Apa Anub and Theodore. The persecution continued until the conversion of Constantine (AD 307-37) (Lyster 10). However, according to Iris Habib el-Masri:

Soon, many Alexandrians adopted the New Faith, and as their numbers grew, the authorities became alarmed, for the converts not only increased in number, but their conversion changed them so completely that they seemed as new people, and their newness was very attractive, and the means of winning more people to the Faith, so truthful, so honest, and so contented did they become (16).

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The situation of the Coptic Christians is closely related to the situation in Nigeria as Islam is fighting to ravage the growth of the church with all kinds of scheming. This struggle in Nigeria is common of religious tensions as each religion fights to regain grounds and populate its boundaries in order to promote growth and expansion by adherents (see Kantiok 2-100).

Among the Copts and their cities, there was persecution in the Coptic towns and villages. The Coptic Church is historically known for the persecutions it endured and the power-struggles in which it engaged in throughout its years of existence and dominance. Resulting from these periods of persecution, the Coptic Church also became known as the “Church of the Martyrs” as it has also been under “Islamic militancy” for centuries (Smith 23-31). In addition, Sanneh states that: “Many apparently refused to adjure their faith and accepted death willingly. These persecutions succeeded in driving the Coptic Church into itself so that it became little involved in projects to spread Christianity beyond Egypt, apart from a period of relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church” (8).

Death will always be the result of such religious resistance. Many have died and are willing to die for the sake of their religions. The disciples and early Christians have given up their pride and suffered martyrdom for their faith in Jesus. Throughout the history of the Church, there have been martyrs, who have surrendered their lives for the sake of knowing Christ. The Nigerian Church has faced a number of challenges, which demanded and consumed the lives of many Christians. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East has claimed the lives of many Christians as many of them preferred to die by having their head cut off and made public show. The Christians in the Arab speaking countries have also become sacrifices offered to expand the gospel of the Jesus Christ in those countries. Their Christian testimonies and witnesses have created the zeal in the lives of others and have become a world testimony about a people, who have surrendered their lives for the sake of the gospel. The Nigerian church is getting to the peak of defending itself in the midst of religious challenges and needs to learn from the Coptic Church.

Socio-Economic Development

The Coptic Church grew during the Hellenistic period because the church had some wealth ascribed to its treasury, which contributed to the growth of the church. Lyster captures it clearly that “The Christian community at that time appears to have

been large and comparatively wealthy. It possessed its own churches, as well as the most famous Christian School of Alexandria was founded to instruct converts in the tenets of the faith” (9). El-Masri adds that “...the School of Alexandria became the Lighthouse of Christianity, and throughout its life of five centuries, it maintained the same reputation of erudition and scholarliness” (29). There was a need for a total reflection upon Christian values, which the story of Egyptian Christianity has helped to inculcate in the minds of the Copts.

The Nigerian Church has been passing through the same challenge in terms of expanding its financial scope to stand against economic recession, which affected the affairs of the church. Many Church leaders in Nigeria have prophetically called on the members at the fountain of the Buhari democratic regime to gather wealth; hence, finances will be a challenge to the Nigerian Church. Many did not take such warnings seriously but some months later, those prophetic proclamations traced their realities into the total well being of many Christians as finances became hard and the church in Nigeria began to struggle for survival. The Nigerian Church needs to learn from the Coptic Church as they were wealthy enough to possess their churches, extended their boundaries financially and defended themselves in the midst of external challenges.

Rooting Faith among the Natives

The Coptic Church had the opportunity to influence the entire region and instilled the Word of God in the minds of the native people. The local natives always pay allegiance to their religions more than the elites in the society. Religious values are fairly relevant among the poor natives and they make it relevant to their lives as they struggle to live above their situations. It is stated that by AD 300, according to Jenkins. Coptic Christianity had penetrated into the hearts of the natives and was strong enough to face Roman persecution and all forms of external challenges (Jenkins 231), which Islam later brought in the seventh century. These Roman and Islamic challenges have tried to cripple the Church but lost the battles until the pressure increased so sharply after the Islamic invasion of Egypt in the seventh century. The situation in Nigeria in the early part of this century particularly the rise of the Pentecostal movement in dealing with the hearts of the natives, making them think about themselves and trying to rescue them from their poor socio-economic situations, has caused the growth of the church and made the church in Nigeria today to witness growth in its frontiers.

The condition of the Copts can be seen to overlap with Nigeria's situation in the twenty-first century. The historical analysis and considerate force behind the lives of the Copts in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries have helped to understand the place of Coptic history and how the Copts have fought to preserve their religion as it was an affair of the masses and became a tool for combating persecution and all kinds of external challenges from Rome and other surrounding nations. This understanding helped in the consideration of the Coptic framework and how Christianity grew in Egypt.

Developing Sunday school Movement

Apart from the School of Alexandria, in the fourteenth century, there was an attempt among the Copts to revive the Christianization of their identities in the midst of Muslim neighborhoods. The Copts had demands, instilling the government to maintain a day of rest on Sunday and inculcating Christian education in the schools that matched the government mandated allotment to Islamic studies (Henderson 157). This also led to the founding of the Sunday School Movement alongside Islamic group Jamā'at Shabāb Muhammad. This movement was seen as an ongoing attempt to reform the Coptic Church from its menace in terms of secularization.

Beginning the Sunday School Movement was a great achievement among the Copts. The Sunday School Movement was known for organizing teaching to the children on Sundays on the basis of the Coptic faith under two groups, the group of St. Anthony and that of Giza. The St Anthony group taught and believed the spiritual messages of fasting, prayer, and meditation to prepare the individual for pastoral care. The group also helped to establish the *khilwa*, or retreat, in which schoolchildren were given the opportunity to live monastic lives for a few days and discuss their life options with a monk. On the contrary, the Giza group realized the involvement in the politics and social reforms as being part of the mission of the church (Henderson 158). The influence was also on the priesthood as the groups noticed little priestly influence on the community apart from church services. To curb such a laxity, there was an attempt by the Giza group to keep record of the number of times a person prayed, engaged in reading the Bible and follow-up visits to the members. This was to provide an update for the church and to re-establish a Coptic identity that placed value on suffering and martyrdom within a reality envisaged as anti-Christian propaganda (Henderson 158).

The place of Sunday school in the church cannot be overemphasized. Gideon Y. Tambiyi argues the place of Sunday school in the African church particularly in respect to the children, who are considered the vanguard of every society. Such a teaching would root the children into the basics of the Christian faith, as it would help curb false teachings in the future church (372-4). This is what the church needs in order to save the prospect of the church in Africa.

It can be stated that the effort to implement the religious preaching bill in Kaduna, Nigeria has been an attempt to shut down the church. To my amazement, it is not just Kaduna. There are 19 Northern States, who also met to implement what Kaduna started. The bill attempted to forbid preaching without a license, which is renewable yearly. It forbids the listening of CD in cars and holding crusades are considered as being public nuisance (Akiri, "The Religious Bill"). One is certain that such preaching cannot be stopped in Islamic dominated territories in the Kaduna State and the Northern part of the nation. Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) have all stood against such bill. For me, the church has not prayed enough as in the days of Esther (Esther 4:15-17) and the early apostles of the church (Acts 4:18-24). The church has not declared deliberate fasting and prayers against such religious bill. Christians in Kaduna and other states in the nation and nations of the earth should rise to the task of praying until the bill has been totally withdrawn.

Similarly, the attempt to remove Nigerian history, Christian Religious Studies (CRS) and Islamic Religious Studies (IRS) from the Nigerian curriculum by the Ministry of Education in Nigeria was also an effort to shut down Christian activity in the nation. IRS was not the focus. These courses were merged to "Religion and National values" (see "Religion"; "On the Purported"; "Religious Controversy"). Removing CRS and the history of the Nigerian past was an attempt to bury the historical pages of the nation, which was dominated by Islamic manipulations. Christian Children was to be cut-off from understanding their religious values. The Federal Government' support of the Almajiri School during the Jonathan-Namadi administration and diverting funds to sponsor the Almajiri education have given Islamic children and Islam generally an edge over Christianity. Our leaders in this regime know that the Aimajiri Education cannot be scrapped, as they have become government-sponsored schools.

Removing IRS and CRS in the Nigerian curriculum has no effect on IRS in any way since there is a systematic structure of Islamic education of which many if not all Islamic children attend. The church needs to reconsider this submission and intensify our Sunday school programmes in the church. One sees that we are forgetting the basics of the church and what we have learned in time past. Many have not learned the biblical Christianity, which our early spiritual fathers have laid for us. Even if we have, we have grown and adopted other beliefs and are neglecting the basics of the church. Such a restoration of IRS and CRS in the curriculum is a light for the nation.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the church in Africa has been passing through some vigorous moments. The church comprises of the called ones in Christ as well as an organizational structure. The church is the product of a prophecy, which is connected to man and the Kingdom of heaven. It is also clear that the church concerns herself with battles of survival against the kingdom of darkness. The works of the kingdom of darkness is to checkmate the church and make her conform to the pattern of heaven.

This work reawakens ancient waters, which prospered the ancient Coptic Church in order to help the modern church survive in the midst of modern socio-economic and religious challenges. It is clear that the Coptic Church fell into the hands of the Arabs as the Copts were selling their lands and possessions to the Arabs and there were intermarriages with the Arabs. These were common errors, which led to the Islamic domination of the land of Egypt. Many Africans countries (such as Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, and Kenya etc.) are passing through the same challenges as Islamic adherents are attempting to use wealth to legally acquire lands and marry the indigenous people.

The Coptic Church has maintained its legacy in preserving the Christian faith over the centuries and has been known for effective strategies such as developing their languages, Bible translations, making the church wealthy, developing Sunday Schools, rooting the faith among the natives, enduring challenges and the persecutions, which broke against its frontiers. These are aspects of the Christian faith, which the modern church should focus on in order to develop the faith and prepare the platforms for the next generations.

Our Bible translation agencies should intensify the dialectic translations of the Bible and encourage the development of various languages in order to preserve the cultures and identities of the people. The Coptic Church and the Ethiopian Church have remained examples of all times. One sees the Islamization of Christianity in Nigeria as North Africa was invaded in the sixth and seventh centuries. The next generation of Christianity is losing grounds. The modern church in Africa should place its leg into the ancient shoe, which the Coptic Church wore and ensure that we do not miss the ancient good and preservative Christian steps for sustaining the Christian faith for the next generation in Africa and Nigeria.

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