

The Fight for Social Justice – Lalage Bown: A Lifetime’s Mission*

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Abstract:

This chapter examines the life and legacy of the remarkable and inspiring Emeritus Professor Lalage Bown, OBE, who died in 2021, aged 94. The author locates Lalage’s commitment to adult education to a post-war Second World War period, when many believed that the kind of injustices suffered under colonial rule had to end. It is demonstrated that she was a globalist who believed that all humanity was interconnected, and that education could promote transformative change across and within national boundaries. An eminent women’s literacy advocate, who devoted her life’s work to improving education for the disadvantaged, especially women, Lalage sought to bring university opportunities to the widest possible sections of society. She was immersed in a tradition which regarded adult education as a catalyst for significant social change, and this chapter highlights how she developed new inclusive, post-colonial approaches to education, including the reform of university curricula across many countries in Africa and Europe.

Keywords: Access; Adult Education; Decolonisation; Universities; Women’s Literacy

A product of an Oxford education, Lalage chose to serve overseas, leaving behind the comfort of her environment for more challenging terrain in Africa. Her long and distinguished 30-year career in various parts of Africa from 1949 is traced here. Lalage became so influential that she was styled by many admirers as the ‘mother of African adult education’. Of particular significance, attention is devoted to her crucial support of the ‘Africanisation’ of the curriculum. Her anthology *Two Centuries of African English* (1973) arguably transformed approaches to literature in the continent. She also saw first-hand the effects of illiteracy and dedicated much of her time in Africa to helping adult women learn to read and write.

The chapter also focuses on Lalage Bown’s return to the UK in the late 1981, where she continued to highlight the need for those in developing countries to have access to the knowledge community. Her message was about equality and

* Portions of the article previously appeared as Hamilton 2021a. “Lalage Bown (1927-2021). Adult Educator for the Right to Education, Women’s Literacy and Decolonisation”.

access between countries as well as within the UK. The author contends that she succeeded in giving Adult and Continuing Education a recognised profile as a major field of education policy in Africa, Europe, and beyond. It is concluded that Lalage's ideas and her lifetime commitment to social justice serve as an enduring resource.

Emeritus Professor Lalage Bown, OBE, died on 17 December 2021, aged 94 (Hamilton 2021b; *The Times* 2021; Innes 2022). Lalage was a life-long fighter for social justice. An eminent women's literacy advocate, she dedicated her life's work to improving education for the disadvantaged, especially women, seeking to bring university opportunities to the widest possible sections of society. Lalage's ideas were informed by a post-war world in which many believed that the kind of injustices suffered under colonial rule had to end. But, beyond this, in her radical way, Lalage also saw the need to develop new inclusive, post-colonial approaches to education, including the reform of university curricula. She devoted her life to this mission, inspiring and challenging all she met – professionals and learners – across many countries in Africa and Europe.

1. Background

Daughter of Dorothy Ethel Watson and Arthur Mervyn Bown, Lalage Bown was born in Croydon on 1 April 1927. Her name, Lalage, derives from Horace's Ode XXII «*dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo dulce loquentem*» which appropriately transfers to 'I shall love Lalage, who laughs and talks so sweetly'» (University of Glasgow 2022). The oldest of four children, she was destined for a strong start in life. Lalage's mother was denied the opportunity to go to university because, as a woman, 'it was not the done thing'. However, nothing would be too good for any daughters she might have. Lalage's mother agreed to marry Arthur Bown – on the condition that, if they had any daughters, they would be entitled to education opportunities equal to any sons, quite remarkable for the 1920s. Her father was the author of a First World War memoir, *Was it Yesterday?* Lalage had two brothers, Hugh and Mark, and a sister, Jacqueline. Their parents lived abroad because their father's work with the Indian Civil Service was based in Burma (Myanmar). The children lived «a bit of a ragamuffin's existence» in childrens' holiday homes and boarding schools (*The Times* 2021). As the oldest, Lalage was responsible for keeping an eye on her younger brothers and sister, effectively bringing them up. Their mother would travel home by boat every summer, but their father had leave only every third year. They would speak to their parents for five minutes on the telephone each Christmas.

Lalage was shaped by many forces and especially by education. She enjoyed a privileged education from the outset and quickly learned about the value of learning and how it can change lives. She was educated at Wycombe High School for Girls (1939-42), Cheltenham Ladies College (1942-45) and Somerville College at the University of Oxford (1945-49), gaining an Honours Degree in Modern History (1948) followed by a Master of Arts (1949). At that time, she was one of just 600 female students at Oxford among 6000 males. In common with all her

generation, Lalage experienced the challenges of the Second World War. During the recent lockdown at her home in Shrewsbury in 2020, Lalage reflected in an interview on the fight against fascism during Second World War and the then current fight against the coronavirus (Bown 2020a). Describing both as «struggles without boundaries» (Bown 2020a) she recalled the fear of imminent death in Second World War through bombing, of carrying a gas mask, and queuing with schoolmates, each paying sixpence for the Red Cross just to smell a single grapefruit. Demonstrating the sense of social justice, she displayed all of her life, Lalage observed «the advantage then was that everyone had a basic equality. I never foresaw a time when millions had to go to food banks» (Bown 2020a). She added that «the greater social equality of the war years ('all in it together') resulted in welfare reforms, including, of course, the National Health Service» (Bown 2020a). Without it, she concluded, our present 'war' against the coronavirus would be unbelievably more frightening.

While at Oxford, Lalage went to Germany in 1947 at the age of 20 as a member of a group of British university students contributing to the Allies humanitarian and educational work. They met with other students from all over Europe to think about a peaceful living together with other nations on the continent. They worked day and night in a half-ruined hotel in Bonn (Bad Godesberg), where almost a decade earlier, Chamberlain and Hitler met during peace negotiations just before the outbreak of war. She was particularly impressed at Somerville College by the «exceptional diversity» of her fellow students, whose cohort included people from Denmark, France, Poland, Guyana and New Zealand. One of her fellow students was the daughter of a Nottinghamshire coal miner, whereas another, Lalage recalled, had «never learned to make her own bed» (Bown 2020b). Lalage's particular interest in Africa was awakened by childhood reading and by the talented African fellow students she met at Oxford, including Alex Quaison-Sackey, who became the first black African to serve as president of the United Nations General Assembly. Undertaking postgraduate courses in adult education and economic development further stimulated this lifelong interest in Africa. She left Oxford with a strong sense of responsibility to make good use of her privilege.

2. Pioneering Adult Education in Africa

It is not surprising, therefore, that after her studies, Lalage applied in 1949 for a resident tutor post based at the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University College of the Gold Coast (subsequently Ghana). She set down a marker for what became a lifetime of commitment to the educational needs of those who are marginalised. As an African colleague said, she chose to serve overseas, leaving behind the comfort and serenity of her environment for the more challenging terrain of Africa. During her interview for the post in the Gold Coast, Lalage was challenged by a man who was sceptical about her ability as a young woman to survive in her new environment. She was asked «Now Miss Bown, supposing you were to get the job and you were in the jungle in a car and your car broke down, how do we know you wouldn't have a fit of hys-

terics?» She simply replied, «Well sir, if you don't give me the job, you'll never find out, will you?» (*The Times* 2021). She was given the job. At just 22, Lalage travelled via Senegal to Gold Coast where, in her words, she immediately «felt the warmth of the climate» (*The Times* 2021). Lalage became involved in teaching African literature and arts and helped to create the first folk high school on the African continent.

Lalage remained in Africa until 1980, living and working in Gold Coast, Uganda, Nigeria and Zambia. Over a distinguished period of 30 years, she was central to institution building across the continent. She became the first field resident tutor in the Extra-Mural Department at Makerere University College in Uganda and held various positions at the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, the University of Zambia and the University of Lagos. She made use of a museum in Uganda to help build a sense of cultural identity. In Zambia, Lalage established a national extra-mural programme, emphasising the role of the university in promoting discussion of current issues, with special courses for trade unionists, politicians and the police, and through *University of the Air* made use of radio, television and theatre for public education. She also helped to set up the first systematic university training for adult educators in Africa. She was an activist who served as the founding Secretary of the African Adult Education Association and was an active participant in the building of the Nigerian National Council for Adult Education. For her role in these institutions, she received numerous awards and recognitions. A special issue of the journal *Adult Education in Nigeria* was dedicated to the celebration of her seventieth birthday in 1997, when she was named the 'Mother of Adult Education in Africa'.

Of most significance, Professor Lalage Bown saw first-hand the effects of illiteracy and despite opposition from some men she dedicated much of her career in Africa and beyond to helping adult women learn to read and write. She observed that many widows were stripped of absolutely everything and if «they could not read or write they were utterly helpless» (*The Times* 2021). Lalage viewed literacy as a human right and an instrument for transformation. She recognised that literacy was intimately linked to voice, identity, status, aspirations and power. In 1990, she drew on experience in Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom, and as an active member of the Canadian-based International Council for Adult Education, to produce a significant report for Action Aid, *Preparing the Future: Women, Literacy and Development*. In 2009 she gave the UNESCO International Literacy Day Lecture and took the opportunity to appeal for more support from member nations. Interviewed by Mary de Sousa in 2009 for the UNESCO Education Sector Newsletter, she said: «I was left [...] with the huge conviction that even the simplest acquisition of literacy can have a profoundly empowering effect personally, socially and politically. When it comes to women, there is a huge change in their self-worth and confidence» (Millora 2022). She was an advocate for adult literacy throughout her life and sought to change a situation in which literacy programmes were marginalised in almost all societies and the number of non-literate people in the world remained fairly static. In an address to the British Association for Literacy in Develop-

ment (BALID) in 2015, she called on members to educate themselves in political literacy and not think of literacy only in the traditional sense (Bown 2015). Lalage rejected the narrow view of literacy within adult learning which views it instrumentally, as a means to employment in a capitalist society, or formally, as part of the formal educational structure. In her later years, Lalage often quoted the words of Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General in 2014, that «literacy not only changes lives, but it also saves them» (United Nations 2014). She took inspiration from the UNESCO meeting on Global Education for All in 2014, which adopted a framework for education which in addition to other keywords of inclusivity, equity, and quality, included a commitment to *lifelong learning*. For Lalage, this last phrase provided the basis for the advocacy of adult literacy. She learned through personal experience that developing countries had much to offer to rich countries regarding the nature and purposes of adult education. From her experiences in Africa, Lalage recognised that developing countries often located adult education in a wider context of lifelong learning and with an emphasis on meeting the educational needs of the most marginalised in society.

3. Early Efforts to Decolonise the Curriculum

Lalage was also instrumental in supporting the ‘Africanisation’ of the curriculum. Speaking on BBC Radio 4 *Women’s Hour*, she described how, when she arrived in Africa, the students were required to study standard English texts such as William Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” poem (Innes 2022). She thought this was absurd and that they should be studying more relevant African texts. Lalage challenged her colleagues to rethink the curriculum. She suggested to her (mostly male) colleagues that more relevant material, by African authors about African life, would be more appropriate, but they said there was no material available in English. She informed her sceptics that she could identify texts written in English by Africans with African concerns, over a period of 200 years. Lalage’s colleagues laughed at her but within two weeks, aided by her training as a historian, she had found relevant letters, diaries and texts. This eventually led to the publishing of her book, in 1973, *Two Centuries of African English*, which became a much relied-upon resource for the African universities at the time and helped transform approaches to literature in the continent. It featured among other writers Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere and Chinua Achebe. It also meant that the voice of Africa could be heard on a broader international stage. Her passion to get the outside world to work with adult educators in Africa led, partly, to the publication of the *Handbook of Adult Education for West Africa* by Hutchinson Press in 1979 (Department of Adult Education, University of Lagos 1979), supported with funds from the German Adult Education Association. This work established a starting point for broader discussions about the scope of adult education beyond basic literacy. One reviewer noted that the most important aspect of this book was that it was written at all and that it would encourage others to further develop their own adult education texts based upon their own cultural systems.

On a personal level, Lalage Bown embraced African culture and life in so many different ways. She tried to speak the local language Yoruba in Nigeria but, in her own estimation, with limited success. When in Nigeria, Lalage looked after five-year-old Nigerian twin girls. After six months, she had bonded so strongly with the girls, she asked if she could keep them on. There were no formal adoption arrangements, but they became her daughters. Her friends also described her as a woman of ‘sartorial flair’. Following her death, a collection of Lalage’s clothing was donated by her family to the Victoria and Albert Museum in response to the Africa Fashion call-out in 2022. Lalage typically purchased her clothes from local tailors in Africa, recommended by her students. The collection included *busuuti*, a common form of dress for women in the Buganda kingdom in Uganda, made of Barkcloth. Lalage received the *busuuti* as a gift from the wife of the Uganda Minister Amos Sempa. She also commissioned a *grand boubou* from a local tailor in Dakar in 1966, and it was designed to make a statement. She wanted to wear the complete outfit worn in the streets by almost all of the women in Senegal at that time. She visited Dakar a few times in the lead up to, and for, the Second International Congress of Africanists, of which she was the Joint Executive Secretary. She wore the outfit several times, at the opening ceremony hosted by Senegalese President Leopold Senghor, and some of the receptions in 1966 and 1967. Lalage later commissioned Shade Thomas-Fahm, ‘Nigeria’s first fashion designer’, to create an ensemble for her to wear to receive her OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 1977 at Buckingham Palace.

4. Returning to the UK

Lalage’s work in Africa did not go unnoticed. In 1974, she became a Commonwealth Visiting Professor at Edinburgh University; and in 1975, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Open University for services to the education of the underprivileged. She received the William Pearson Tolley Award from Syracuse University in 1975, the first woman to receive that award in memory of an American academic who, among other achievements, expanded access for women to higher education and helped to create the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill). Lalage was then, as previously mentioned, awarded an OBE in 1977. The honours and accolades continued throughout her life; she received her sixth honorary doctorate (from the University of Chester) during a graduation ceremony in 2018. Lalage returned full-time to the UK as Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in 1980. Whilst there, she assisted a colleague who was running a small independent adult education centre based in the Quaker meeting house in Brighton and embroiled in political struggles to defend learner-centred literacy work. Lalage arrived as ever a whirlwind of energy, advice and clarity of thought; radical, disciplined, inspiring and determined that the adult education centre should combine internationalism and the pursuit of social justice in its work. For the remainder of her life, whenever they met her, colleagues were inspired by her distinct combination of a challenge to be rigorous, coupled with encouragement and renewed motivation.

5. University of Glasgow, Scotland

In 1981, Lalage was appointed to the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) at the University of Glasgow as Director and titular professor. All of those who had the chance to work with Lalage in Glasgow were privileged in a directly personal way. Under her leadership in the 1980s, Glasgow University had the widest subject range of all continuing education departments in the UK, and the fifth highest enrolment figures (Hamilton and Slowey 2005). Close to Lalage's heart was the establishment in 1990 of an Equal Opportunities Training Unit with three members of staff. This unit provided pioneering anti-racism training for the police and for Glasgow District Council. She brought to Glasgow a determination to ensure that everyone who could benefit from it should have effective access to higher education. A programme providing a pathway to degree study for underrepresented groups flourished under her leadership, with many former students even going on to achieve higher degrees. She looked outward from the university to promote public engagement outside of the university walls, connecting with the important regional authorities at the time, to the wider community, the media, the City of Glasgow, museums and the like. She was a trustee for National Museums Scotland and a board member of the National Trust. An annual highlight for her, involved a visit to all the outlying DACE centres of learning throughout the West of Scotland. She also looked inward to the university, working tirelessly to engage with colleagues in all Faculties and Departments about the importance of widening access, promoting lifelong learning, part-time study opportunities and outreach activities. She also played a significant role in the major committees of the university, ensuring that adult education had a voice where decisions were made on institutional priorities (Hamilton and Slowey 2005).

Lalage also maintained significant links with African nations. In 1986 she delivered a lecture at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, as part of its Faculty of Education Silver Jubilee celebrations. That same year a group of African adult educators visited the Department. Throughout her tenure at Glasgow, Lalage's reputation encouraged many African students to undertake postgraduate work in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE). She was particularly proud of the growth in the number of students taking postgraduate courses in adult education. Given her belief in the importance of the relationship between theory and practice in adult education, postgraduate studies held particular significance for her. Many of the part-time postgraduate students were employed in work with ethnic minorities and low-income students. 1983 saw the first graduate from the MEd in Adult and Community Education. Lalage believed firmly in the maintenance of high academic standards, rigour and excellence in the discipline of adult education. She insisted that academic colleagues in the Department from other disciplines study the principles and practices of adult education.

On her retirement from the University of Glasgow in 1992, Lalage was delighted that her successor was also a woman, Maria Slowey – at a time when 6% of the professoriate were women – setting the stage for subsequent women in sen-

ior leadership roles. Lalage maintained her links with the University for the remainder of her life, including as a strong supporter of the Centre for Research & Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning (CRADALL). In the late 1990s, in line with her appetite to widen access to knowledge across international boundaries, she agreed to act as External Examiner for an innovative University of Glasgow Masters in English and Educational Studies, which was partly delivered on-site in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Hamilton and Slowey 2005).

Unusually, in recognition of her distinctive contribution, Glasgow University awarded an honorary degree to one of its own Emeritus Professors. Lalage received a D.Litt. in April 2002 and was invited to give the charge to the graduates. In a stirring address, she stressed the importance of equality in learning. The graduates were spellbound as Lalage laid out her conviction that everyone had a right to knowledge, but that knowledge must not just be information but should include analysis, interpretation and critical appraisal. From her personal experiences in Africa, she stressed the importance of adult literacy and, in praise of lifelong learning, advised students that their degrees were only a start, not an end to learning. In further support of adult education, public engagement and lifelong learning, she called on the University to strengthen its service to mature citizens who wanted access to some university knowledge, but not always necessarily a degree. She also highlighted the need for a better gender balance, especially in postgraduate study. She looked forward in her address to the day when the University might have a female Principal. Finally, she drew from her long career in Africa to highlight the need for those in developing countries to have access to the knowledge community. Her message was, therefore, about equality and access between countries as well as within the UK. Again, unusually for such an event, this oration received a standing ovation. She fought the corner for adult education and widening participation long after she left the University of Glasgow. Successive Principals received communications from her whenever the provision of courses for the general public came under internal scrutiny. She said she would rather argue with academic colleagues than have adult education funding 'earmarked' by government bureaucrats. Lalage was dismayed in the 1990s and in the twenty-first century to see the disappearance of so many adult education departments in universities as funding priorities changed throughout higher education in the UK. She kept up the struggle through argument, and an unquenchable hope and vision that universities could be organised by dialogue and would remain accessible to under-represented groups.

6. On-going Global Engagement

The post-Second World War interest in international adult education saw UNESCO-led attempts to facilitate engagement between adult educators, researchers and policy-makers. Such collaboration across international boundaries was second nature for Lalage Bown. She stressed the benefits of global partnership throughout her career and incorporated this ideal into her practices. Through her work in the Gold Coast, Uganda, Nigeria and Zambia, Lalage engaged in educa-

tional collaboration and exchange between Commonwealth member states. Because of this commitment to African university development and international exchange, she was a natural choice to serve from 1989 on the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility and Higher Education Development, where she became involved in the shaping of central Commonwealth policy-making (Williams 2022). The Committee looked at distance education and capacity building in the universities of developing Commonwealth countries. Lalage helped the Committee set up the Commonwealth Higher Education Support scheme with component programmes close to her heart in university management; books, journals and libraries; academic staff development and women's leadership. She later served as one of the Deputy Chairs of the Council for Education in the Commonwealth (CEC) during which time she co-authored several important studies on Commonwealth academic exchange and student mobility, the first forty years of Commonwealth Educational Co-operation and the experiences of English-speaking African countries on introducing universal primary education. In all these endeavours she worked with a group of co-authors and for many of them it was much the experience of collegial working under Lalage's chairmanship as the final product itself, that lingers in the mind. At CEC she supported gender equality issues. She strove successfully to bring younger people, particularly women from different ethnic backgrounds, on to a committee that had been populated by older white males (Williams 2022). Her contribution to the work of the CEC and to Commonwealth educational cooperation was therefore particularly significant.

Lalage retired to Shrewsbury in England in 1992 holding honorary positions from Warwick University and the University of London Institute of Education. She continued to work to try and make a difference in people's lives all throughout her 'retirement'. She observed that «they say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but research has shown you can go on learning new things until you drop off the perch» (*The Times* 2021). In the 1990s, she pulled together her experiences on the effects of literacy on adult women into a ground-breaking report *Preparing for the Future: Women, Literacy and Development. The Impact of Female Literacy on Human Development and the Participation of Literate Women in Change* (1990). She was also named a Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1991. In 2009 Lalage was inducted into the International Hall of Fame for Adult and Continuing Education. She was Hon. Vice-President of the Townswomen's Guilds in the UK for 24 years. She chaired both the British Association for Comparative and International Education and the Development Studies Association. Lalage remained an active member of many boards, trusts, committees and councils concerned with higher education, adult education, literacy and community enrichment in Africa, the Commonwealth and the UK, including being life member of the African Adult Education Association. She recalled being the only woman on some committees «they look at you if you open your mouth as if you are a kind of talking dog on its hind legs» (*The Times* 2021).

To her friends and colleagues, Lalage appeared both phenomenal and indestructible. Just before her planned ninetieth birthday celebration in Glasgow in 2017, she fell and broke her hip. As she was wheeled into hospital in great pain, Lalage found the strength to chuckle when the young volunteer pushing her wheelchair said it «made her day to meet a celebrity». The indomitable Lalage came to Glasgow the following year to celebrate a belated ninetieth birthday. Among other commitments in her final years, she was an engaged patron of the *Adult Education 100 campaign* – celebrating and taking forward the ideals of the ground-breaking 1919 British Government report on adult education. Lalage remained active in her local community in Shrewsbury and regularly recorded newspaper readings for the blind. At the age of 94 she enjoyed participating in a local campaign against a new development in her area but complained it got in the way of her academic work! She was a generous donor to appeals for public monuments in Shrewsbury, was Chair of the townships residence association and was an active member of the local Rotary.

7. Legacy

Professor Lalage Bown was an outstanding communicator: she wrote, edited or contributed to around 26 books and monographs plus 86 articles. In her leisure time, she enjoyed travelling, reading and entertaining friends. She was living proof of the adage, «If you never stop learning, you never grow old» (Hamilton 2021b). One colleague said if he were to highlight one special characteristic of Lalage's among so many, it would be her open, friendly, and collaborative attitude to working with other people. He added that she was not self-seeking or competitive but enjoyed bringing out the best in others – she was interested in and valued every contribution, yet if she disagreed with you, she would let you know in a straight way. Another colleague had one abiding memory of her formidable and impressive qualities. At Lalage's urging, he went (with her) to a conference in Nigeria, her old stomping ground. The campus was sadly decaying, and things were obviously in poor shape. The conference dinner was in a bizarre setting of military opulence, with a row of men sitting on the dais; in her after-dinner speech, Lalage managed to combine perfect politeness with a blistering attack on their failure to maintain the place and the lack of educational opportunity. Her colleague was torn between admiration and fearful anxiety as he scanned their faces (Hamilton 2021b).

In the words of one of her African colleagues, Lalage was a trailblazer in the global Adult Education movement. She was emersed in a tradition which regarded adult education as a catalyst for significant social change. Her understanding of adult education extended to and integrated with economics, ecology, health education, literacy, religious and linguistic traditions. Her commitment to, and insight about, democratic adult education was unbounded. She succeeded in giving Adult and Continuing Education a recognised profile as a major field of education policy in Europe, Africa and beyond. All recall her commanding presence at conferences (Little 2022). She initiated and strengthened programmes

based on the fundamentals of individual tradition, traditional culture and religion. In conclusion, Lalage was a people's person. She had a strong commitment to her family. Lalage had a truly unique gift for people and engaging in the communities in which she found herself. Her friends were always impressed by her engagement with everyone she encountered, including taxi drivers, porters and even strangers on the train. Lalage was a friend and mentor to countless people who loved and admired her.

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