

Muslim Religious Conservatism and Dissent in the USSR*

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Today the USSR is the fifth Muslim power in the world (behind Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh). The total number of Muslims in the USSR is estimated at 45 to 50 million (as against 140 million Russians). Eighty per cent are Turks and 75 per cent live in Central Asia. The remaining 25 per cent are divided equally between the Middle Volga area and the Caucasus. Except for some three million Azeris who are Shi'a-Jafari, some 100,000 Ismailis in the Pamir and a few Bahais and Ali-Illahis (in Transcaucasia), all Soviet Muslims belong to the Sunni of Hanafi rite.

Soviet Muslims are experiencing what the demographers call a "demographic explosion": between 1959 and 1970 (the last two census in the USSR), according to different Muslim ethnic groups, they increased by between 45 per cent and 53 per cent (compared with the very slow increase of the Great Russians which was 13 per cent for the same period). It is estimated that by the turn of this century, there will be at least 100 million Muslims in the Soviet Union (as against some 150 million Russians) and that they may in the future challenge the Russians as the leading community of the USSR.

Muslims do not feel themselves threatened in their national existence (with two notable but minor exceptions, the Crimean Tatars and the Meskhetian Turks). There is no biological symbiosis between Muslims and Russians (mixed marriages are extremely rare); there is no cultural and linguistic assimilation; national languages, the traditional Turco-Iranian culture (thoroughly impregnated by Islam) and even the traditional Muslim way of life are preserved. Communism was forced on them by the Russians, but did not destroy the *Umma* – the "community of believers" – because communism is understood by Muslims not as a political doctrine but rather as a technique of power for preserving a regime which all Muslims of the USSR consider to be *Russian* and directly descended from Tsarist Russia.

* This article is an enlarged version of a report presented by Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay at the Biennale meeting in Venice in October 1977. In collaboration with Alexandre Bennigsen, she is currently engaged in research on various conservative groups (Muslim, Christian and Jewish) in the Soviet Union.

Active political dissent has been expressed only by two small Muslim communities which are isolated among a non-Muslim population: the Crimean Tatars and the Meskhetian Turks. Both have been the victims of genocide. The Crimean Tatars (250,000) were deported in 1943. Although they were rehabilitated in 1965, they have not been allowed to return to their homeland, the Crimea. The Meskhetian Turks (a conglomerate of some 150,000 Muslims of various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in the region of Akhalsikhe in south-west Georgia) were deported in 1944. They too were not allowed to return to their homeland. The claims of these two groups have often been expressed in *samizdat* and have been supported by Russian dissidents. Their struggle, however, seems hopeless. Crimea's coastline – "the Riviera of Russia" – has been occupied by Russians and Ukrainians; as for the Meskhetian Turks, their territory borders on the strategic Turkish-Soviet frontier. So it is unlikely that they will ever be allowed to take possession of their homeland. As an alternative, the Meskhetian Turks are demanding the right to emigrate to Turkey.

No Muslim religious dissent is openly expressed, although a violent, vicious and brutal anti-Islamic campaign has continued unabated in all Muslim territories of the USSR almost since 1928. In spite of the new pro-Arab orientation of Soviet policy in the Middle-East, this anti-Islamic campaign has never lost its virulence. Islam is certainly one of the most attacked of all religions in the Soviet Union.

The official Muslim establishment presents a sad picture: less than 300 "working mosques" remain,¹ as compared with 24,000 before 1917. There are probably less than 1,000 "registered clerics" who are paid and controlled by the official Muftiats – too few to satisfy the religious needs of the population. Only two medressehs remain with less than 50 students graduating each year.² No religious literature has been published except for two editions of the Koran since 1945 (in a limited edition), a religious calendar in Uzbek (in Arabic script) and a monthly journal, *Muslims of the Soviet East*, (*Musulmane sovetskogo vostoka*) published in Arabic, Uzbek, French, English and Russian by the Muftiat of Tashkent, mainly for foreign propaganda.

The official Muslim hierarchy, grouped around the four Muftiats, or "Spiritual Directorates" (Tashkent, Ufa, Baku and Buinaksk in Daghستان) is perfectly loyal and obedient to the Soviet regime. It is certainly the most obedient of all the ecclesiastical administrations in the USSR. No protest has ever been raised against the flow of anti-religious propaganda. Not one official mullah has ever challenged the godless State. There is no Muslim equivalent of Solzhenitsyn or Fr Dudko. But by a strange paradox, the extreme weakness and submissiveness of the official Muslim "ecclesiastical" hierarchy has not been accompanied by any disaffection of the masses towards Islam. On the contrary, as a religion

Islam fares better than any other religion in the USSR. In 1974, for instance, in the Caucasus 46 per cent of the Daghestani rural dwellers and 63 per cent of all Chechens declared themselves to be believers (compared with 12 per cent among the Russians³). The same year, only 21 per cent of the Chechens identified themselves as atheists (compared with 69 per cent of Russians).⁴ All Soviet sources testify that circumcision is performed in almost 100 per cent of cases, that religious customs (the feast of Ramadan, religious marriages and burials in Muslim cemeteries) are widely observed even by atheists.

How can we reconcile the persistence of Muslim religious practices with the decadence of the official Muslim spiritual hierarchy? Soviet sources generally point to the confusion between the spiritual and the national; religious customs, they claim, survive only as "national traditions" having lost their spiritual meaning. But this simplified explanation seems dubious because other Soviet sources reveal that in the Muslim territories of the USSR there exists a powerful and active religious opposition, not in the form of a dissent movement, but as an organized underground movement.

Academician L. Klimovich, the leading and perhaps most qualified anti-Islamic specialist, writes:

In Islam – both Sunni and Shia – there exist two opposite trends: the official "mosque" trend led by the muftis, the Sheikh ul-Islam and other representatives of the four official Muslim Spiritual Directorates, and the non-official, "non-mosque" trend. The latter is a communitarian trend, sufi-dervish, *mürîd* trend, led by the *ishans*, *pirs*, *sheikhs* and *ustads* . . . Everywhere the clerics of the "non-mosque" trend are many times more numerous than the clerics of official Islam. In some important areas – for instance in the North Caucasus and in particular in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR – almost all clerics belong to a *mürîd*-dervish brotherhood.⁵

This "non-official" Islam is based on the Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*: the "Path" leading to God). The *tariqas* are secret societies. The adept (*mürîd*) is accepted into the brotherhood after a ritual of initiation and remains under the control of his master (*mürshîd*). Throughout his life (even if he is only a "lay brother"), he must follow a complicated and compulsory spiritual rule in which permanent prayers, invocations and litanies – loud or silent – (*zikr*) accompanied by peculiar breathing and physical movements, play an important part and prepare the adept for a state of intense mental concentration. The *tariqas* represent perfectly structured, hierarchical organizations, with an iron discipline able to challenge the Communist Party.

Two *tariqas* dominate Soviet Islam: the Naqshbandiya, founded in the 14th century in Bukhara and introduced into the North Caucasus in

the late 18th century; and the Qadiriya, a Baghdad order founded in the 12th century and introduced into the North Caucasus at the end of the 19th century. Both orders have a long tradition of holy wars, of resistance to the Russian conquest in the Caucasus, in the Middle Volga and in Central Asia: Imam Mansur in the 18th century, Sheikh Shamil in the 19th century; Imam Najmuddin of Gotzo and Sheikh Uzun Haji who led the last great Daghestani revolt in 1920–21; the Ishan Madali, the leader of the Andizhan revolt in 1897, and many leaders of the Basmachi revolt in Central Asia (1918–1929) were all Naqshebandi *mürshids* or *mürids*.⁶ The anti-Russian and anti-communist movements which broke out in the Chechen country in 1924, when the German armies were approaching the North Caucasus, seem to have been led, or at least inspired, by the adepts of the Qadiriya *tariqa*.⁷

Sufi orders are to be found in all areas of the Soviet Union. In Central Asia the old Naqshebandiya still exercises its influence which seems to push other less influential native *tariqas* (Qubrawiya, Hamadiya, Yasawiya) into the background.⁸ In the Volga (Tatar, Bashkir) territory, where the Naqshebandiya penetrated in the 18th century, some leaders played a major role in the Tatar intellectual and cultural revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, however, Tatar Sufism, if indeed it has survived at all, continues in a very reduced form.⁹ But it was in the North Caucasus – their traditional home – that the *tariqas* fared the best.¹⁰ According to recent Soviet sources, in this area the number of Sufi adepts is probably higher today than before the Revolution; new branches of old orders were founded during the Soviet period, some quite recently even and despite the violent anti-religious campaign.¹¹

The Sufi orders are not small “chapels”, but mass organizations (despite their clandestine character). For instance, according to Soviet estimates (Soviet sources have no interest in exaggerating the number of Sufi adepts), “. . . more than half the total number of believers and almost all clerics in the North Caucasus belong to a Sufi brotherhood”.¹² This means that in the case of the Chechen-Ingush and Daghestan republic alone, there are more than half a million adepts, a fantastic number for an underground society which is banned by Soviet law. Furthermore, today the adepts of Sufi orders are not merely mountain peasants or poor artisans; the proportion of industrial workers is increasing and during recent years the number of intellectuals has grown particularly.

The organization of today's brotherhoods is a curious blend of the traditional and the new. The innovations which have been introduced aim to give the brotherhoods greater protection against the Soviet authorities, and to root them more deeply in the popular masses. Among the most important of these innovations are the following: first, in some areas and especially in the North Caucasus, certain Sufi orders, such as the Naqshebandis and the Batal Haji group (a Qadiriya branch) in the Ingush coun-

try, are limiting their recruitment of adepts to specific clans. This provides the *tariqa* with a greater degree of secrecy since adepts are subject to the dual loyalties of brotherhood and clan.¹³ Second, the Sufi orders have also begun to accept a large number of women as adepts and even leaders (*sheikhs*). Certain official sources even lament the fact that the *tariqas* seem to be more effective at mobilizing Muslim women than the Soviet anti-religious organizations.¹⁴ Finally, the membership of the *tariqas* has become much younger than ever before and is increasingly drawn from the Soviet intelligentsia.

The *tariqas* are not a "passive force" which is detached from the world, but dynamic and aggressive. The adepts are not only interested in advancing spiritually towards God, but also in building God's rule on earth. Soviet sources describe them as a "fanatical anti-Soviet force". One Soviet source admits that the emotional and aesthetic aspect of Sufi ritual* appears much more attractive than the dull and vulgar official Soviet ceremonies: "The sound of violins, the beating of drums, the poetic ecstasy of the adept dressed in ritual clothes", writes a Soviet author in 1971 about the Vis Haji *zikr*, "produce a strong effect even on non-religious people".¹⁵

The Sufi orders represent a kind of "Parallel Islam" which is more dynamic than "official Islam", represented by the Muftiats. It lies outside the control of the Muslim Spiritual Directorates and therefore of the Soviet authorities. Official Islam, unable to satisfy the religious needs of the population, has thus been replaced by the Sufi orders. The adepts perform the necessary religious rites, run their own clandestine religious schools where Arabic is taught, and have their own clandestine mosques which are more numerous than the official "working" mosques. According to a recent Soviet source, in the Republic of Azerbaidzhan, where only 13 official mosques were operating, there were "many hundreds" of clandestine mosques.

The activities of the Sufis are usually centred on various "holy places", the tombs of mythical or real men (often Sufi leaders) who died fighting the Russians.¹⁶ These "holy places" serve as substitutes for the mosques which the Soviet regime closed, and as meeting places for adepts where they perform the *zikr* and are taught prayers, Arabic and the rudiments of Islamic theology. Simple believers make pilgrimages to these "holy places" as a substitute for the impossible *hajj* to Mecca. These tombs therefore provide an excellent forum for the brotherhoods to influence the Muslim masses during religious festivals and other holy events. Most Muslim cemeteries are near a "holy place", and often near the tomb of a Sufi *sheikh*; and the guardians of the cemetery, as a rule, are also adepts of a *tariqa*. All Muslims (including Communist Party officials) are usually buried in Muslim cemeteries from which non-Muslims are excluded.

* Particularly in its most recent form (the group of Vis Haji Zagiev in the Chechen country).

Of particular importance is the constant active counter-propaganda which the Sufi orders oppose, often victoriously, to the official, hopelessly dull, bureaucratic, anti-religious *agitprop*. The *tariqas* thus exercise a deep influence on public opinion and are responsible for the high proportion of practising believers in the Muslim areas of the USSR, especially in the North Caucasus where, according to recent Soviet sources, Sufi brotherhoods still dominate much of the private and collective life of the Muslim population. According to a Soviet social scientist: "... Under the influence of a 'collective conservative public opinion', the local non-believers are obliged to hide their atheistic ideas from their relatives and friends."¹⁷ This is an incredible situation 60 years after the victory of a Marxist Revolution which supposedly destroyed the social roots of all religions.

In the North Caucasus, the proportion of native atheists in 1974 was as low as 20 per cent.¹⁸ In the Karakalpak republic of Central Asia, another area where the Sufi brotherhoods (Naqshbandiya mainly) are traditionally strong, the average for local atheists in 1972 was 23 per cent for men and 20 per cent for women, the remaining 77 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women being divided in the following way:¹⁹

	Men	Women
Firm believers	11.3%	11.0%
Believers by tradition	14.0%	15.0%
Hesitant	13.3%	14.3%
Non-believers who accomplish Muslim rites	17.2%	19.3%
Non-believers who accomplish Muslim rites under the influence of their relatives	21.2%	20.0%

Two important questions remain: first, what is the ideology of the *tariqas* and what are their goals? And second, can some form of co-operation develop between the Sufi adepts and other religious or non-religious dissenters? The Sufi brotherhoods appear to have no other "ideology" apart from a very conservative form of Islam; and their goals are those of the traditional *jihad*, or "Holy War", which fights against sin, the infidel rulers and the "bad Muslims" who serve them. They are certainly not fighting for democratic human rights, or even for the liberty and freedom of their faith. They are struggling to build a world which is sanctified by faith, in which Islam penetrates every aspect of private and public life. They live in their own "closed world" and resist the Soviet establishment in isolation. They are unlikely to ask for or accept any co-operation with other dissenters. We must remember that they are fighting not only communism, but also the Russian presence in their lands; and in their view it is the Russians who are responsible for the advent of communism.

Sufism is an ultra conservative force. Soviet sources call it "fanatical"

and classify it among "the most dangerous adversaries of Soviet power", together with various millenarian sects, such as the Adventists, the True Orthodox Christians, the Molokans and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Often they are called "criminal", anti-Soviet, anti-Russian and anti-socialist.²⁰

Sufi *tariqas* are tightly-knit religious organizations with a strong leadership and a disciplined apparatus, and they enjoy solid, and possibly even growing support from the Muslim masses. They are well-suited to clandestine activity and have survived all attempts by the Soviet regime (and before it, by the Tsarist regime) to infiltrate them, to win them over or to destroy them. From what we know of their activity, they remain conservative, closed societies, despite their changing social composition, intolerant of any innovation, hostile to any form of modernism, for whom religion alone – not ethnic ties, or nationality or language – must be the basis of unity for the Muslim *Umma*.

As such, these conservative groups are a dangerous foe for the Soviet establishment. It is the only underground organization in the Soviet Union which has not only managed to survive all persecution, but also to acquire a new vigour during the last ten years. It is an historical paradox that Muslim conservatism – in decline in all *Dur ul-Islam* – has survived in the Soviet Union as an organization, whereas all the liberal *jadid* (modernist) movements, which were so powerful before 1917, have disappeared without a trace.

¹ A recent traveller in the USSR (1976) reported to the authors that according to a representative of the Tashkent Muftiat there were 146 working mosques in Central Asia and Kazakhstan as a whole (compared with more than 12,000 prior to 1914), and 65 in Azerbaidzhan. In Daghestan-Chechnia, there were 27 mosques in 1967 (2,060 in Daghestan alone before 1914. Cf. I. A. Makatov, "Kult svyatykh v Islame", *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma*, III, 1967, p. 176). In the Tatar country, there are some 20 mosques left (2,200 in 1927. Cf. L. Klimovich, "Borba Ortodoksov i Modernistov v Islame", *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma*, II, 1966, p. 78).

² Mir-i Arab of Bukhara and Baraq Khan of Tashkent.

³ E. G. Filimonov, "Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya protsessa preodoleniya religii v selskoi mestnosti – Itogi, problemy, perspektivy", *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma*, XVI, 1974, p. 80.

⁴ V. G. Pivovarov, *Na etapakh sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya*, Grozny, 1974, pp. 158-9.

⁵ L. Klimovich, "Borbo Ortodoksov i Modernistov v Islame", *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma*, II, 1966, pp. 66-7.

⁶ Cf. Satynbaldy Mambetaliev, *Sufizm zhana anyn Kyrgyzstan agymdary dagy* ("Sufism and its development in Kirghizia"), Frunze, *Kyrgyzstan*, 1972, (in Kirghiz), pp. 43-4, quotes among the adepts of various *tariqas*, many leading Basmachi *Kurbashis*, including Madamin beg, Kurshimat, Abdul Aziz Maksum, Molla Dehqan, etc.

⁷ Cf. A. M. Tutaev, *Reaktsionnaya Sekta Batal Haji*, Grozny, Checheno-Ingush Knigoizdat, 1968, p. 8, on the uprising in 1942 of Qureish Belkhoroev, *müdshid* of the Batal Haji, a Qadyri group; and Kh.B. Mamleev, *Reaktsionnaya sushchnost müridizma*, Grozny, Checheno-Ingush Knigoizdat, 1966, p. 27.

⁸ On the recent development of Sufism in Central Asia, cf. Satynbaldy Mambetaliev, *Sufizm ... op. cit.*, and *Kyrgyzstandagy Musulman Sektlary*, (Muslim Sects in Kirghizia), Frunze, *Kyrgyzstan*, 1966, (in Kirghiz); O. A. Sukhareva, *Islam v Uzbekis-*

tane, Tashkent, Ac. of Uzb. SSR, 1960, and Zhumanazar Bazarbaev, *Sekulyarizatsiya naseleniya Sotsialisticheskoi Karakalpakii*, Nukhus, "Karakalpakistan", 1973.

⁹ Cf. on this subject, Chantal Quelquejay, "Introduction à l'étude des Confréries musulmanes – Le Vaïsisme à Kazan", *Die Welt des Islams*, VI, Nos. 1-2, 1959, pp. 95-113.

¹⁰ The deporting of the North Caucasian Chechens, Ingushs, Karachais and Balkars to Siberia and Kazakhstan in 1943, did not destroy North Caucasian *tariqas*, but rather led to their expansion. For the deported Muslims, the Sufi brotherhoods became not only a symbol of their nationhood in the lands to which they were deported, but also proved to be efficient organizers for community survival. Moreover, the deported Caucasians introduced in Kazakhstan their branches of the Qadiriya. Cf. A. Hakimzhanov, "Religioznaya sushchnost Islama", *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, Alma-Ata, 17 September 1964, on the expansion of the Kunta Haji group. Also, L. Klimovich, "Borba Ortodoksov", *op cit.*, p. 85, and A. D. Yandarov (a Chechen living in Kazakhstan), *Sufizm i ideologiya natsionalnogo osvoboditel'nogo dvizheniya – Iz istorii razvitiya obshchestvennykh idei v Checheno-Ingushetii v 20-70 godakh XIX veka*, Alma-Ata, 1975.

¹¹ In North Caucasus, the old Naqshbandiya is still present, but a new branch (wird, in North Caucasian terminology) appeared during the 1930s. Its founder, Arsanukay Khidirzov ("Sheik Amay"), a Daghestani, was arrested and executed for taking part in an uprising in Daghestan, (Cf. I. A. Makatov, *Religioznye gruppy Amaya i Kunta Haji*, Makhach-Kala, DaghKnigoizdat, 1965). After a period of eclipse, the "Amaya" group became active once more in the '60s. A group of "Amaya" *mürids* were tried and executed in January 1964 (*Dagestanskaya Pravda*, 1 January 1964). The Kunta Haji *tariqa* (a branch of the Qadiriya), founded in the 1850s by a Daghestani, Kunta Haji Kishiev, survived the death of its founder in 1867 (in a Russian prison camp) and gave birth to three independent branches: (1) Bam-mate Giray Haji; the son and successor of the founder, Ali Mitaev was executed by the Soviets in 1927 (Cf. A. A. Salamov, "Pravda o svyatykh mestakh v Checheno-Ingushetii" in *Trudy Checheno-Ingushkogo Nauchno-Issledovatel'skogo Instituta pri Sovete Ministrov Ch-In ASSR*, Vol. IX, Grozny, 1964 p. 165); (2) Batal Haji Belkhoroev, a purely Ingush group. Nine sons and seven grandsons of the founder were either executed by the Soviets between 1930 and 1947, or "killed in battle", probably during the 1942 uprising (Cf. A. M. Tutaev, *Reaktsionnaya Sekta Batal Haji*, Grozny, Checheno-Ingushky Knigoizdat, 1968, pp. 7-9; and (3) Chim Mirza; this last group gave birth in the 1960s (during the deportation of the North Caucasians in Central Asia) to the latest of the Caucasian Sufi Orders, the Vis Haji Zagiev group (Cf. M. M. Mustafinov, *Zikrizm i ego sotsialnaya sushchnost*, Grozny, Checheno-Ingushsky Knigoizdat, 1971, and Kh. B. Mamleev, *Nekitorye Osobennosti Islama v Checheno-Ingushetii*, Grozny, Checheno-Ingushsky Knigoizdat, 1970, pp. 26-28.

¹² Cf. V. G. Pivovarov, "Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya problem byta, kultury, natsionalnykh traditsii i verovaniy v Checheno-Ingushetskoj ASSR", *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma*, Moscow, XVII, 1975, p. 316. As more than 50 per cent of Chechens, Ingushs and Daghestanis are "believers", according to several recent Soviet surveys, and the total number of the nationals of these three nations is more than two million, the number of Sufi adepts is probably more than half a million.

¹³ A. D. Yandarov, *op. cit.* p. 147.

¹⁴ I. A. Makatov, "Kult svyatykh v Islame", *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma*, III, 1967, p. 177. Another Soviet specialist, Kh. B. Mamleev, *Reaktsionnaya sushchnost Müridizma*, Grozny, 1966, p. 36 talks of "religious women activists", members of Sufi brotherhoods.

¹⁵ M. M. Mustafinov, *Zikrizm i ego sotsialnaya sushchnost*, Grozny, Checheno-Ingushsky Knigoizdat, 1971, p. 31.

¹⁶ According to V. N. Basilov, *Kult svyatykh v Islame*, Moscow, 1970, among the most famous "holy places" in North Caucasus are the tomb of Haji Murat, the companion of Shamil, killed by the Russians in Southern Daghestan; the tomb of Tasho Haji, another of Shamil's *naib* in Chechnia; the entire village of Akhulgo, former residence of Shamil where many of his *mürids* were killed by the Russians; the tombs of the leaders of the 1877 uprising, and the most popular of all, the mazar of

Uzun Haji, the Naqshebandi *sheikh* who fought the Bolsheviks in 1919-20. In 1961, the Soviet authorities closed this "holy place", but "masses of pilgrims are still streaming from all other republics and regions of North Caucasus and even from Georgia, by car and on foot".

¹⁷ V. G. Pivoverov, "Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya . . .", *op. cit.*, p. 318.

¹⁸ Cf. Note 4.

¹⁹ Zhumanazar Bazarbaev, *Sekularizatsiya naseleniya Sotsialisticheskoi Karakalpakii*, Nukhus, "Karakalpakistan", 1973, p. 61.

²⁰ In 1970, Chechen press (*Groznensky Rabochi*, 17 January 1970) mentioned the trial and execution of Hamad Gaziev, a Chechen Kunta Haji *sheikh*, accused of having created a "bandit order" (quoted by M. M. Mustafinov, *Zikrizm i ego . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 37). In January 1964, a group of "mürid killers" belonging to the "Amay" group of the Naqshebandiya were tried and executed in Makhatch-Kala (*Dagestanskaya Pravda*, 9 January 1964, quoted by Makatov, *Religioznye gruppy . . . op. cit.*, p. 19).

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