

EXPLORING THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF IGBO QUESTION NAMES

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Abstract

Question names are not common in most languages. They are in Igbo though not explicit in the written form of the language. The objective of this study is among others to: (i) find out the spread of question names in Igbo land; (ii) explain why they are not recognized as a prominent form of Igbo names and (iii) explain the bases of question names in the life of the Igbo people.

The theoretical framework adopted for the study is the conversation analysis framework. Survey research method is used for the investigation. The respondents were randomly selected from their state groups in Ilorin metropolis, Kwara State to ascertain the question names in their various areas; the reason for the use and adoption; the distribution and spread and philosophy behind the names. The findings of the study showed that: (i) question names are spread throughout Igbo land and are found among the rich and the poor; (ii) question names are not easily recognised because in writing they are not written as questions and (iii) The bases of the question names spring from the spiritual, cultural and philosophical nature of the people. Question names create avenue for continuous contemplation and examination of life and life circumstances. Question names are recommended to be recognised as a common and prominent form of Igbo names that should be studied in-depth.

Keywords: Igbo; question names; Igbo philosophy; identity.

Introduction

Question formation is a universal linguistic principle but different languages also have specific strategies in its adaptation. The ability to ask questions is a fundamental aspect of human communication. It facilitates knowledge acquisition, clarification, logical reasoning, thinking and interaction. Igbo is one of the languages known for its wide use of questions for personal names. Question names in Igbo are widespread, plenty, increasing, despite this, academic interest in question name has been shallow and perfunctory.

The Igbo are one of the largest single ethnic groups in Africa based in southeast Nigeria and they can also be found in significant numbers in diaspora. They are known as Igbo people and their language is known as Igbo. The people are proudly Igbo and wish to be recognised as such. Identity politics is the right of every individual or group of people and the Igbo people pursue their own identity today as the indigenous people of Biafra. Identity is heavily influenced by memory, history and migration, as these things combine to create the pattern by which people understand themselves. The Igbo people have a contentious history, from the indigenous autochthonous Nri group, to the Semitic hypothesis group from Israel, to the geographical evidence of the Awgwi, Udi and Nsukka mountain range among other stories of origin (Nwabara, 1982). Chukwudera (2023) describes them as possessing:

the characteristic of a nation, even if the complex system of pre-colonial Igbo society did not have that kind of political definition. It is a civilisation formed from the booming commerce which began from Arochukwu in present-day Abia State and the overarching spirituality of the Nri in present-day Anambra state, both places 167 kilometres apart. It was around these booming centres of commerce and spirituality that people from different parts migrated and settled across the rest of the region to form the Igbo civilisation as the colonialists met it.

Culture is the way of life of a people and it is usually peculiar to their owners as a people, the Igbo also have a culture that is peculiar to them. This is what can be referred to as Igbo cultural identity. There is no human society that is devoid of a particular way of life. This particular way of life distinguishes a group of people from among other cultures that spice the world of man. Every culture is good in itself and identical to itself. The culture of a people forms the fulcrum of their identity. Igbo cultural identity is the sum total of customs, practices, traditions and values of the Igbo people of south eastern Nigeria. The uniqueness of the Igbo is enshrined in their way of life. This uniqueness cuts across their archaic and pristine practices, as well as new concepts added into the Igbo culture either by continuous cultural evolution or by outside influence, for example migration.

The naming system like other language systems has its own peculiar style or convention and does not need to follow other languages' patterns or logical rules of everyday language. It is a kind of system that functions and makes itself familiar with the context it is used. The Igbo naming system has its peculiar features known and acceptable to them. It creates its own influence and spreads in the society to the extent of having society-wide acceptance. The composition of the names is informed by the message or philosophy it intends to put across. Some Igbo names are used to vent long standing or vexed issues.

Question names are also found in Warlpiri, Pitjantjatjara, Arrernte, aboriginal languages of Australia and in Inuktitut, an Inuit language and also in Shona, a Bantu language. In Nigeria question names are seen in Eggon language spoken in Adamawa state. Eggon according to Blench (2019) belongs to the Eggonic Southern Benue-Congo Plateau group of African languages with examples like:

| | |
|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Akyenayi | who is s/he running from? |
| Ayiayi | who knows? |
| Awushi | why shall I cry? |
| Akpomoshi | what has he/she done to them? |

From Ashesla (2022)

Generally, a name serves the purpose of identification. It is used to distinguish one person from others. Without tags like names, reference to one particular person among many would be a difficult and arduous task. Even with names, the difficulties have not been totally removed but it has reduced. Names are also used in genealogical tracing and identification (Nnaji, 2021). Lineage order and line of succession are successfully mapped and proved with traditional names in some areas like, Amagunze, Ihuokpara and Akpugo (Nnaji, 2021). Care is taken to ensure that one name is not duplicated in households as a result of this. All the human care notwithstanding, duplications

are still observable as in birthday names when a mother for example gives birth on the same day of the week. Rather than allow unnecessary duplication of a particular name in a family home or family affixes are added for better identification or clarity. For example, (zine or ukwu, or nnukwu(big) or obere or nta (small), ọcha (light in complexion), ojii (black), ogologo (tall)) and such additions.

Another purpose a name serves the name-giver in Igbo land is affording him the opportunity to vent his long-standing question or query about God, human beings, children, future, self, life and life circumstances etc. This contemplation makes the person eventually leave the name in a question form. This is a unique feature of a significant proportion of many common Igbo names. In writing such names, however, the question mark is for unexplainable but conventional reasons usually left out. This anomaly in the writing convention could be the reason why such types of names have not attracted much interest ordinarily and academically. The question names are; at times, like rhetorical questions posed without immediate verbal answers, but, culturally expected to be answered none verbally or silently by all who hears or mentions the name.

Question names do not seem to occur in all languages. So, what is the significance of such names in the cultures where they are found? It is like, in the cultures where they are found responses to long standing and disturbing questions in one's life, perplexity, unbelief, confusion, gossip, suspicion, or accusation. Such deep-rooted concerns are shared by the Igbo people through names as agenda setting. As many as would call or mention the name, as it were, are conscripted into the debate. For example, some people are used to condemning others as people that can never conceive or bear a child and when they succeed in having a child of their own, they kick back at their detractors by giving their child names like: "Onyebuchi?" (Who is God?), "Ibuchi?" (Are you God?), etc.

Onumajuru (2016) studied Igbo names in categories of lexical (or mono-morphemic) names, Noun-Noun phrasal names, Noun-Verb phrasal names, Noun-Verb Phrasal-Complement/Sentential names and Interrogation/Injunction names. His findings showed that Igbo names structurally fall into three broad categories: lexical, phrasal and sentential.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this work is the African philosophy approach. The African philosophy provides a nuanced understanding of the Igbo philosophical concepts and values associated with their worldview, faith and religion, thoughts, rational and contemplative spirit among others. It focuses according to Wiredu (2005) on the indigenous knowledge systems and philosophical traditions native to the African people. African philosophy embodies the entire religion, proverbs, ethics, oral traditions, morals and way of life of the African people (Mbiti, 1982). African philosophy is rich and has a varied history and some has been lost over time or sipped into oblivion due to the dominating influence of the western civilization (Holton and Nasson (2009).

Methodology

This is an empirical survey study that employed interviews and focus discussion to obtain data from selected men and women from the five core Igbo states which include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states in Ilorin, Kwara state.

B. Question names related to God

| | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Àfùrùchí? | Was God seen or contacted? |
| Àfùrùenū? | Was heaven seen or contacted? |
| Gínìkàchúkwú? | What is greater than God? |
| Ìjùóláchí? | Have you asked God? |
| Ònyédìkàchí? | Who is like God? |
| Ònyékàchúkwú? | Who is greater than God? |
| Ònyébùchí? | Who is God (unto man)? |
| Ònyédìkàchúkwú? | Who is like God? |
| Ònyenáàtùrùchí? | Who decides for God? |
| Ònyémàchúkwú? | Who knows God? |
| Ònyébùchíibèyá? | Who is God to his or her colleague? |
| Ònyémàuchèchúkwú? | Who knows the mind of God? |
| Ònyéhùrùchí? | Who saw God? |
| Ònyénàtùrùchí? | Who plans for / directs God? |
| Ònyéjèrèbèchí? | Who went to God's home? |

Theophoric names reference God. In question forms they argue that God is the ultimate being, omnipresent, all-powerful, without rival, unfathomable, etc.

C. Question names ascribed to personal or impersonal Pronouns

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Àlàjùrùònyé? | Who did the ground (earth) reject? |
| Ànàgwàònyé? | Who is being addressed? |
| Àzùònyé? | Whose back? |
| Èjiàkònyé? | Who is holding another person's sense? |
| Èmègbùrùònyé? | Who did I cheat? |
| Nwàònyé? | Whose child? |
| Ònyédímmānāāzu? | Who is good behind? |
| Ònyéjèkwé? | Who will agree? |
| Ònyémèlùkwé? | Who committed (a crime) and agreed he did? |
| Ònyédìwe? | Who is stingy? |
| Ònyékàònwù? | Who is more than death? |
| Ònyékàòzùrù? | Who is it sufficient for? |
| Ònyénwéndù? | Who does life belong to? |
| Ònyénwéíké? | Who does strenght belong to? |
| Ònyénwémádù? | Who do human beings belong to? |
| Ònyénwèùwà? | Who does the world belong to? |
| Ònyekwere? | Who believes? |
| Ònyékànwá? | Who is greater than a child? |
| Ònyémàéché? | Who knows tomorrow? |
| Ònyéjèèkwú? | Who decides? |
| Ònyédìmmā? | Who is good? |
| Ònyénàékè? | Who shares? |
| Ònyénwèùbá? | To whom does wealth belong? |
| Ònyéjiégō? | Who has money? |

| | |
|-----------------|------------------------------------|
| Ònyémàdíké? | Who knows the victor? |
| Ònyémàéché? | Who knows tomorrow? |
| Ònyémàòkè? | Who knows shares? |
| Ònyémàékkè? | Who knows how to share? |
| Ònyékāibè? | Who is more than the others? |
| Ònyémàúchèazì? | Who knows the mind of the infants? |
| Ònyémàúchēmádù? | Who knows the mind of man? |
| Ònyémàúchēmū? | Who knows the mind of the Gods? |
| Ònyémàúchénwā? | Who knows the mind of the child? |
| Ònyémàóbì? | Who knows the heart (of a person)? |
| Ònyékaísò? | Who are you following? |
| Ònyékaózùrù? | Who has enough? |
| Ònyéjiáká? | Who is sure? |
| Ònyékàgùrì? | Who is reckoned with? |
| Ònyékèrè? | Who created? |
| Ònyénàèméézè? | Who enthrones kings? |
| Ònyéjiùbá? | Who is holding wealth? |
| Ònyéfùrù? | Who saw it? |
| Ònyénwèùbá? | Who owns wealth? |
| Ònyémàùwà? | Who knows the world? |
| Ùwàbùnkéonyé? | Whose own is the world? |
| Ùwàzùrùonyé? | Who is the world sufficient for? |

D. Other Question names

| | |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| Àmùrùnwáézzè? | Was a child born king? |
| Ànàèkwénàmbù? | Does one agree the first time? |
| Àmàéché? | Who knows tomorrow? |
| Àmàógèchi? | Is (God's) time known? |
| Àmàúchèchi? | Is the mind (of God) fathomable? |
| Àmàóbichì? | Who knows the heart of God? |
| Èmèrèòlè? | What happened? |
| Gịnịkánwá? | What is greater than a child? |

The question names here are assorted or mixed group or fluid type of question names. We distinguished four groups above. The groups are not very stringently distinctive. Some names can appear in more than one or two groups depending on the emphasis. The grouping can be elastic and stretched using many other sub-divisions. The present effort is used to guide discussion for now.

Data Analysis

The question names showcase the Igbo people as a people with deep tradition of philosophical inquiry and introspection. It reflects a culture that values questioning, critical thinking, and exploration of existential questions. Such names are used as a philosophical approach to interrogate self, others, the world, life value and living because a life without reflection, self-examination, and pursuit of wisdom is a life without true value or purpose to the Igbo people (Achebe, 1976; Okolo, 1993).

Similar to that dictum or otherwise cornerstone of Western philosophy of emphasizing the importance of introspection, critical thinking, and personal growth is the Igbo people's use of question names to interrogate the philosophical bases of "greatness, the worth of a child, power of death, God etc." It is a way of placing matters of individual or community concern in the front burner for public scrutiny or consideration. They use it to open conversations of sometimes delayed response as in: "Gịnịkachukwu?" or "Onyenaeké?" Such questions are very penetrating, deep and meaningful question constructions in Igbo language. They are more compelling than ordinary rhetorical questions.

The presentation of names in question forms is a strategy of avoiding the names in the negative forms. For example, the question name, "Ginikachukwu?" (What is greater than God?), can be put in a negative form as "Enweghi ihe ka chukwu" (There is nothing that is greater than God). In the wisdom of the people the earlier form is shorter and more appealing than the latter – hence the preference.

Irrespective of their forms, questions names are like signs - they point to something important in the interim or in the past life or circumstance(s) of the name-giver. Most question names are loaded and philosophical in meaning. They say much about the worldview of the people. They show, for instance, the incomparability of God, his awesomeness and unfathomable nature, as in:

- | | | |
|------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| a. Onyekachukwu? | - | Who is greater than God? |
| b. Onyedikachi? | - | Who is like God? |
| c. Onyebuchi? | - | Who is God? |
| d. Gịnịkachukwu? | - | What is greater than God? |
| e. Onyejekwu? | - | Who decides or who has the final say? |
| f. Onyenaeké? | - | Who creates? |
| g. Onyedimma? | - | Who is good? |

The answer to the above question names is "*enweghi onye o bu*" (There is *nobody*) as in (a, b and c) "or *enweghi (onye ka Chukwu)*" (nobody is greater than God) in (d) or "*Chukwu*" (God) in (e); "*Chukwu na-eke*" in (f); or "*Enweghi onye di mma*" (Nobody is perfect) in (g). In all the above instances the answers show that there is none to compare with God in Power, majesty and splendour.

Question names are shortened or contracted conversations between two or more people: a name-giver or the bearer and the person mentioning the name and possibly listeners. The initiator of the conversation is the name-giver, who is voicing his or her "concern or confusion" for others to agree or disagree with him or her. It is usually a two pair part conversation between speakers.

The component pair parts are like this:

- | Pair part A | Pair part B |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 1a. Gịnị ka Chukwu? | 1b. Enweghi ihe ka Chukwu. |
| 2a. Onye na-eke? | 2b.(i). Chukwu na-eke. |
| | 2b. (ii). Mmụọ na-eke. |

The second pair part may not always be given on the hearing of the first pair part and can be assumed as a rhetorical question in the conversation encounter. The follow up to the interrogation

is usually a debate on the issue raised in subsequent discourses. Part of such could involve guessing the origin of the name which often is the personal experience of the name giver, taunt by one's adversaries, derision or ridicule. Ginikachukwu? for example is given as a name to child as a response to derision, taunt or ridicule of a name giver, while in difficult times like not being able to bear a child or in lack of means or in serious health condition among others. The question name: "Ginikachukwu?" (What is greater than God?) Usually elicits the answer "Enweghi (ihe ka Chukwu)." - (Nothing (is greater than God) and can only be used when the situation of the name-giver is reversed.

Question names are also used to trace the original cause of events and happenings. In the probing nature of the Igbo people, question names are used to promote the ever-active question about the original cause. This projects the philosophical nature of the people, probing all things: self, God, man, nature, the unknown etc.

They are also used to absolve self from ranging storm, blame or accusation. If a person has plenty of male children or numerous offspring, the contemporaries allege the follow of stealing other people's luck of child bearing by evil devices. The same thing applies to persons with too much material possessions who they allege of all manner of fraud (physical and spiritual) and illegal actions. Situations like that can give birth to names like: "Obumnaeke?" (Am I the creator?), or "Abu m Chukwu?" (Am I God?) or "Emeremnnini?" (What did I do?), etc.

Question names are used to attribute certain happenings to an unknown source or the supernatural. They are used to mildly present things beyond ordinary human imagination.

In the same vein, some Igbo question names are used to recognize God's absolute greatness, emphasizing that there is no being or entity or force greater than the Almighty God in the whole universe as revealed in: Onyekachukwu? Onyebuchi?, Onyemaechi?, etc.

Furthermore, by acknowledging that nothing surpasses God, the name humbles human knowledge and understanding, recognizing the limitations of human comprehension. Questions highlight the importance of community and shared values in Igbo culture. This is manifest in the quantity and spread of the question names like Onyeka? and the rate of replication of such names in virtually all areas of Igbo land.

The name offers a rich tapestry for philosophical exploration, inviting people to contemplate about their existence, values, and relationships. Its philosophical import lies in its ability to: emphasize the supremacy of the divine; acknowledge the limits of human understanding; inspire introspection and self-awareness; encourage humility and reverence; ground human existence within a larger cosmic framework.

Another profound question name that can be used to show the vitality of question names to the philosophical foundation of the Igbo people's life is:

- A. "Onyekaonwu?" – Who is greater than death? The answer to question could be: "Enweghi onye ka onwu." No one is greater than death. This name reveals several insights about the Igbo

people and the fact that they are deeply entrenched in spirituality (Chukwudebelu, 2021). Such question names reveal among others things:

- i. **Universal impermanence:** “Onyekaonwu?” acknowledges that death is an inevitable and universal force, transcending human power and control. They reiterate that all mortal being must taste death without any exception. Death therefore is a reality that is employed to moderate human excesses at times. It is an equalizing enigma, an ultimate end that no human ingenuity has been able to overcome or manipulate.
- ii. **Mortality as a great equalizer:** By recognizing that no one surpasses death, “Onyekaonwu?” underscores the equalizing force of mortality, which affects all individuals regardless of age, status, wealth, or achievement.
- iii. **Humility and Finitude:** the name encourages humility by recognizing human finitude and the limitations of human existence. It is a humbling reminder of the power of death over all living things, especially human beings.
- iv. **Prioritizing values and legacy:** In acknowledging the inevitability of death, the name invites individuals to reflect on their values, legacy, and impact on the world. It encourages people to behave well on earth because.
- v. **Encouraging mindfulness and present-moment awareness:** By confronting the reality of mortality, the name promotes mindfulness and appreciation of the present moment.

The philosophical importance of the question name, therefore, lies in its ability to: confront human mortality and finitude; encourage humility and self-awareness; inspire reflection on values and legacy; emphasize the universal impermanence of all things; and foster mindfulness and present-moment awareness as guide to human thoughts and actions.

- B “Onyeneke? (Who creates?) is a highly spiritual question name that could be given as a name to a child by a name giver in response or as a reaction to public ridicule for childlessness or accusation of impotence tag for inability to bear a child. Childlessness is not kindly seen or accepted by the Igbo people as possible condition by nature or God. Either of the spouses is usually suspected to be responsible.

The question names are used to raise issues for re-examination in the life of the Igbo people and the centrality of venerating God in all things, bright, beautiful or ugly. Chukwu (God) is revered as the ultimate source of life, sustenance, and blessings as also noted by (Madu, 1996). The continued use of such names validates its continued relevance and importance in the life of the people. ‘The unexamined life ...’ is, therefore, a pillar in Igbo philosophy of life. It gives life value and purpose among the Igbo. ‘The unexamined life ...’ relishes in power, wealth, possessions among other human wants while the examined life relishes in the truth, justice, betterment of the society among other lasting things. In life, one needs to examine one’s thoughts, opinions, and senses. Socrates exemplified the pursuit of wisdom through questioning and logical argument by examination and by deep thought. It points towards:

- i. **Spirituality and Religiosity:**
This study shows that many of the question names reference God or the divine. This is strong evidence of the high spiritual foundation in Igbo culture. They trace every triumph, success, achievement to God. They acknowledge the mysterious and the unknown indicating a sense of reverence and awe as noted by Mbaegbu, 1977; Chukwudebelu, 2021;

Chukwudebelu et al. (2024), Egbo, 1972 to Him. Mbiti (1999) has earlier asserted that Africans do not know how to exist without religion. Onwuegbuchunam (2022) adds that religion and spirituality occupy central positions, and play essential roles in Igbo cultural worldview.

ii. Community and Shared Values:

The use of rhetorical questions as names highlights the importance of community and shared values in Igbo culture. These names often convey messages that are relevant to the collective, rather than just the individual.

iii. Linguistic and Literary richness:

The Igbo language is known for its poetic and metaphorical nature. These names showcase the language's capacity for creative expression and its ability to convey complex ideas through simple, yet profound, questions.

iv. Cultural continuity and heritage:

The persistence of these names across generations demonstrates a strong connection to Igbo heritage and a desire to preserve cultural traditions.

v. Philosophical and introspective nature:

Igbo people have a deep tradition of philosophical inquiry and introspection. These names reflect a culture that values questioning, critical thinking, and exploration of existential questions.

C. "Afūluenu" (Was heaven seen, consulted or bought over?) is another Igbo question name that embodies a rich philosophical outlook. The name can be interpreted as:

Embracing resilience and fortitude: the name encourages the bearer to develop inner strength and resilience. The name giver is enjoying the gift from Heaven, which others are envying and as such s/he asks them that he/she did not bribe Heaven. That heaven decided to bless him/her.

The name encapsulates or embodies the Igbo values of courage, perseverance, and community and invites the bearer to embody these principles in their daily life. The name carries the weight of cultural significance and meaning.

D. "Onyedikachi" has a profound philosophical and theological implications like:

i. Existential inquiry: "Onyedikachi" – "Who is like unto God" poses a fundamental question about the nature of God and humanity's relationship with the Divine. This inquiry encourages individuals to ponder the mysteries of existence and the human condition (Okolo, 1993).

ii. Theological reflection: the phrase "Who is like unto God?" invites theological reflection on the nature of God, divine attributes, and the concept of divinity. This reflection can lead to discussion on theodicy, divine providence, and the problem of evil.

iii. Human limitations: "Onyedikachi" acknowledges human limitations and the impossibility of fully comprehending God's nature. This recognition encourages humility, awe, and reverence for the divine.

iv. Moral and ethical implication: the phrase raises questions about moral and ethical responsibilities, encouraging individuals to consider how they can emulate divine attributes like compassion, justice, and mercy.

- E. Mdionyemma? “Who am I good to?” This has the following philosophical importance:
- i. It challenges ego-centrism by:
Shifting focus from self to others: it redirects attention from individual achievements and accomplishments to the impact one has on others and encourages empathy and compassion by considering who benefits from one’s actions. It encourages individuals to cultivate empathy and compassion, essential for building strong relationships and communities.
 - ii. It fosters Personal Reflection and Growth through:
Self-evaluation and accountability as it prompt individuals to assess their actions, values, and priorities, promoting personal growth and self-awareness and re-evaluating relationships and community. This question name encourages individuals to examine their relationships and community involvement, leading to a deeper understanding of their place within society.
 - iii. Raises questions about identity and purpose through existential inquiry. It sparks existential questions about one’s purpose, identity, and meaning of life and through exploring values and principles. The question encourages individuals to reflect on their core values and principles, guiding them toward a more authentic and fulfilling life.
 - iv. Encourages Community-Oriented Living by interconnectedness and interdependence. “Mdionyemma?” highlights the importance of community and mutual support, recognizing that individual well-being is linked to the well-being of others.
 - v. Cross-cultural significance by transcending cultural boundaries, inviting individuals from diverse backgrounds to reflect on their relationships and contributions to society. The name is also used to encourage individuals to consider their role within the global community, fostering a sense of shared humanity and responsibility.

“Mdionyemma?” is a powerful Igbo question name that challenges individuals to re-evaluate their relationships, values, and purpose. The name encourages individuals to cultivate empathy, compassion and a deeper understanding of their place within society.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

It is evident from the analysis above that Igbo question names reveal a rich philosophical underpinning that reflects the Igbo worldview. The question names encourage existential reflection among the people; emphasize the importance of community, relationships, and mutual support; encourage people to reflect on their values, principles, and actions, promoting moral and ethical awareness; convey a sense of humility and modesty, recognizing the limitations of human knowledge and understanding; imply a holistic understanding of the world where an individual well-being is linked to the well-being of others and the community; invite individuals to engage in critical thinking and reflection, questioning assumptions and exploring new perspectives; and touch on spiritual and metaphysical themes, encouraging individuals to ponder the nature of the divine, the universe, and human existence. It showcases the entire worldview of the people.

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