

The Da'wah Strategy of The Wali Songo: A Synergy Between Islam and Local Traditions in The Northern Coastal Region

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Abstract: The spread of Islam in East Java, especially on the north coast, was driven by the synergy between da'wah, education and respect for local culture. Wali Songo uses adaptive methods, including the establishment of Islamic boarding schools and traditional arts such as wayang kulit, to convey Islamic teachings. Their approach not only focused on spiritual aspects but also involved politics and social values, resulting in a strong and sustainable Muslim community to this day. Wali Songo also understands that da'wah is not only through religious teaching but also involves aspects of politics and power. Wali Songo also focuses attention on Islamic education as one of the main ways of da'wah. They founded Islamic boarding schools as educational institutions that not only taught Islam, but also other sciences. The Wali Songo da'wah in East Java played a very strategic role in the process of spreading Islam on the island of Java, especially in the 15th to 16th centuries. The Wali Songo da'wah in East Java is carried out with an approach that respects local traditions while conveying Islamic teachings in a peaceful and wise manner. Through Islamic boarding schools and an intelligent cultural approach, Wali Songo not only spread Islam, but also introduced moral and social values that shape a better society. One of the distinctive characteristics of Wali Songo's preaching on the north coast of Java is the use of art as a means of conveying the preaching message.

Keywords: da'wah, wali songo, strategy

Abstrak:

Penyebaran Islam di Jawa Timur, khususnya di pesisir utara, didorong oleh sinergi antara dakwah, pendidikan, dan penghormatan terhadap budaya lokal. Wali Songo menggunakan metode adaptif, termasuk pendirian pesantren dan seni tradisional seperti wayang kulit, untuk menyampaikan ajaran Islam. Pendekatan mereka tidak hanya berfokus pada aspek spiritual tetapi juga melibatkan politik dan nilai-nilai sosial, menghasilkan komunitas Muslim yang kuat dan berkelanjutan hingga saat ini. Wali Songo juga memahami bahwa dakwah tidak hanya melalui pengajaran agama, tetapi juga melibatkan aspek politik dan kekuasaan. Wali Songo juga memfokuskan perhatian pada pendidikan Islam sebagai salah satu cara utama dalam dakwah. Mereka mendirikan pesantren sebagai lembaga pendidikan yang tidak hanya mengajarkan agama Islam,

tetapi juga ilmu pengetahuan lainnya. Dakwah Wali Songo di Jawa Timur memainkan peran yang sangat strategis dalam proses penyebaran Islam di pulau Jawa, terutama pada abad ke-15 hingga ke-16. Dakwah Wali Songo di Jawa Timur dilakukan dengan pendekatan yang menghormati tradisi lokal sambil menyampaikan ajaran Islam dengan cara yang damai dan bijaksana. Melalui pesantren dan pendekatan budaya yang cerdas, Wali Songo tidak hanya menyebarkan Islam, tetapi juga memperkenalkan nilai-nilai moral dan sosial yang membentuk masyarakat yang lebih baik. Salah satu ciri khas dakwah Wali Songo di pesisir utara Jawa adalah penggunaan seni sebagai sarana penyampaian pesan dakwah.

Kata kunci: da'wah, wali songo, strategi

INTRODUCTION

The spread of Islam in East Java, particularly in the northern coastal region, represents a significant aspect of the history of Islamic da'wah in Indonesia. The northern coastline of Java long established as an international trade route since the era of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms became one of the primary entry points for Islam into the island. The coastal trade routes most frequently visited included Tuban, Gresik, and Surabaya in East Java; Demak and Kudus in Central Java; and Cirebon in West Java (Afandi, 2024). Within this historical context, the Wali Songo a group of esteemed Islamic scholars and spiritual leaders played a crucial role in the Islamization process of East Java. One of the most distinctive characteristics of their da'wah approach was their ability to adapt Islamic teachings to local culture and traditions. This approach allowed Islam to be widely accepted by the local population in a harmonious and gradual manner.

The spread of Islam in the northern coastal regions of Java, including areas such as Gresik, Surabaya, and Tuban, was profoundly influenced by the da'wah strategies of the Wali Songo. Through their wisdom and cultural sensitivity, the Wali Songo not only introduced a new religious system but also integrated Islamic values into the established Javanese cultural framework. This resulted in the emergence of a syncretic cultural expression in which Islamic elements were embraced naturally and seamlessly. Their methods included the use of local arts, cultural practices, language, and traditions as effective media for conveying Islamic teachings. In the context of East Java, the synergy between Islam and local traditions can be seen clearly in the da'wah approaches of figures such as Sunan Ampel, Sunan Giri, and Sunan Bonang. They spread Islamic teachings not only through religious instruction but also through cultural mediums familiar to coastal communities, such as wayang performances, gamelan music, and local ceremonial traditions. This harmonious integration allowed Islam to flourish rapidly in coastal regions, forming strong Muslim communities that have endured to this day.

This study aims to explore more deeply how the synergy between Islamic teachings and local traditions in the northern coastal areas of Java particularly in East Java became one of the key factors behind the successful spread of Islam. By focusing on the da'wah strategies of the Wali Songo in these regions, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Islam interacted with local culture and how this interaction shaped the social and cultural identity of East Javanese communities during that period. Through this analysis, it is hoped that effective da'wah patterns can be identified patterns that emphasize not only religious instruction but also the importance of harmonizing Islamic teachings with

local cultural values, which served as the foundation for the successful Islamization of East Java.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical approach to analyze the da'wah history of the Wali Songo in East Java, particularly in relation to the synergy between Islamic teachings and local traditions in the northern coastal region. The qualitative historical method was chosen because the focus of this research is to understand and explain social and cultural phenomena within their historical context, as well as to analyze data obtained from both primary and secondary sources.

The research methods used include the following steps: 1. Literature Review (*Library Research*) The research begins with an extensive literature review to gather relevant sources such as books, articles, journals, and other scholarly works that discuss the history of Islamic da'wah, especially those related to the Wali Songo, local traditions, and the spread of Islam in East Java. These sources provide a strong theoretical foundation and essential information regarding the social, cultural, and religious developments in the northern coastal regions of Java. This literature review includes an examination of the history of the Wali Songo, their role in the Islamization of Java, and the synergy between Islam and local culture. 2. Case Study This study also employs a case study method to examine the specific roles of several Wali Songo figures such as Sunan Ampel, Sunan Giri, Sunan Drajat, Sunan Bonang, and Sunan Kalijaga in the process of da'wah in the northern coastal areas of Java, particularly in regions such as Gresik, Surabaya, and Tuban. Through this case study, the research identifies the da'wah approaches applied by the Wali Songo.

By combining historical methods, qualitative analysis, case studies, and interviews, this research aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of the da'wah practices of the Wali Songo in East Java and their contribution to the integration of Islamic teachings and local culture in the northern coastal region.

RESULTS

The Wali Songo are well known for their highly adaptive approach to local culture in spreading Islam throughout Java. Their methods allowed the Javanese people to understand Islamic teachings without feeling detached from their cultural identity. In the northern coastal regions particularly in Gresik, Surabaya, and Tuban the Wali Songo employed various da'wah strategies that demonstrated a clear synergy between Islamic teachings and existing local traditions (Sudarno Shobron, 2015).

The da'wah approaches of the Wali Songo in East Java represent how Islam was introduced in a contextual manner, blending Islamic values with pre-existing Javanese cultural practices. The Wali Songo, as pioneering religious figures in the Islamization of Java, applied various da'wah methods that addressed spiritual, social, cultural, and intellectual aspects of life. Their flexible and innovative strategies allowed Islam to be embraced warmly by Javanese communities, who previously adhered to Hindu-Buddhist and animistic beliefs. Below are several key approaches used by the Wali Songo:

Cultural and Traditional Approaches. One of the main characteristics of the *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) of the Wali Songo was their ability to adapt to the local culture and traditions. They understood that in order to be accepted by the Javanese people, Islamic teachings needed to be aligned with the norms, customs, and cultural practices that already

existed. Therefore, they chose to integrate many elements of Javanese culture familiar and well-accepted by the community into the process of spreading Islam (Nurul Idhayani, 2023).

For example, Sunan Kalijaga, one of the most renowned members of the Wali Songo, used *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) as a medium of *dakwah*. *Wayang kulit*, which at that time was a highly popular form of entertainment among the Javanese, became a tool through which Sunan Kalijaga conveyed Islamic moral and religious teachings. In the performances, he inserted Islamic messages that not only taught religious values but also instilled wisdom in the social life of the community. Similarly, Sunan Giri used *gamelan* music in his Islamic teachings. *Gamelan*, already an integral part of Javanese culture, was utilized as a *dakwah* instrument to introduce Islamic teachings in a gentle way that did not threaten or erase local traditions (Istiqomalia, 2024).

Education and the Establishment of Pesantren. The Wali Songo also had a deep understanding of the importance of education in spreading Islamic teachings. They established *pesantren* as centers of Islamic education that not only taught religious knowledge but also provided general education useful for everyday life. The *pesantren* became places where young Javanese generations could study Islamic teachings while preserving existing local knowledge and culture. Sunan Giri, for instance, founded a *pesantren* in Gresik that not only taught Islamic religion but also served as a center of general education, involving the community in various activities that combined religious and cultural aspects. The *pesantren* established by the Wali Songo did not focus solely on religious instruction; they also made significant contributions to the development of knowledge and culture in East Java.

Social and Economic Approaches. The Wali Songo emphasized social harmony and justice. Beyond religious instruction, they taught principles of social welfare, compassion, and community responsibility. They promoted the importance of *zakat*, *sadaqah*, and *infak* as essential elements of social support in Muslim communities. They also encouraged economic empowerment based on Islamic values, such as fair trade, workers' rights, and poverty alleviation. These principles resonated with the socio-economic conditions of Javanese society at the time and strengthened the social foundation of Islamization.

Language and Literature. To expand the reach of their da'wah, the Wali Songo used the Javanese language, which was widely understood by the local population. They produced various written works in Javanese, including religious texts and literary pieces containing Islamic teachings. Sunan Bonang, for instance, used poetry and *tembang* (traditional songs) to convey Islamic messages. These literary forms, already an integral part of Javanese culture, allowed Islamic teachings to be absorbed naturally and effectively by the community (Azizah, 2017). Political and Leadership Approaches. The Wali Songo also understood the role of political influence in spreading Islam. They built relationships with local rulers—both Hindu-Buddhist and newly converted Muslim leaders. Sunan Ampel, for example, had strong ties with Raden Patah, the first Sultan of Demak, one of the earliest Islamic kingdoms in Java. Through these relationships, Islamic influence spread more rapidly, supported by rulers who implemented pro-Islamic policies.

Synergy Between Islam and Local Customs. A defining feature of Wali Songo's da'wah was their effort to harmonize Islamic teachings with local customs. Instead of eliminating Javanese traditions, they modified them to align with Islamic values. Practices such as *slametan* and *ruwatan*—traditional Javanese ceremonies—were maintained but infused with Islamic prayers and teachings. This approach ensured that Islam was not perceived as a force

that erased existing traditions, but rather as a religion that enriched and elevated them (Ismail, 2024).

DISCUSSION

One of the main characteristics of the Wali Songo's da'wah in the northern coastal region of Java is their use of arts as a medium for delivering Islamic teachings. Wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), gamelan, and traditional songs (tembang) became effective tools for communicating Islamic messages to communities that were still largely influenced by Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. Sunan Kalijaga, for example, is well known for using wayang kulit as a medium of da'wah. Through puppet performances, he was able to convey moral messages and Islamic teachings while simultaneously educating the public without erasing their existing cultural elements.

In the spread of Islam in Java, the Wali Songo adopted a highly innovative approach by integrating local arts and culture into their da'wah methods. They understood that the arts were an integral part of Javanese life and played a significant role in shaping the community's worldview and daily practices. Therefore, to facilitate understanding and acceptance of Islamic teachings, they did not rely solely on formal religious sermons or textual instruction, but also introduced Islam through cultural media that were familiar and widely accepted by the Javanese people.

Below are several forms of local arts and culture used by the Wali Songo in their da'wah activities in East Java: Shadow Puppetry. One of the most renowned and effective artistic media used by the Wali Songo was wayang kulit, a traditional performance art involving leather puppets projected onto a screen. Wayang kulit had long been a popular tradition among Javanese communities even before the arrival of Islam. The Wali Songo—particularly Sunan Kalijaga—used wayang kulit as a powerful tool to deliver Islamic teachings.

Through shadow puppet performances, Sunan Kalijaga subtly inserted Islamic values into the narrative without confronting or undermining local beliefs. The stories, originally based on Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, were adapted to incorporate Islamic values such as justice, loyalty, and piety. Characters like Arjuna, Krishna, and Duryodhana were given symbolic meanings that aligned with Islamic moral teachings. In this way, wayang kulit became a medium that educated the public while preserving cultural continuity.

Gamelan is a traditional Javanese musical ensemble composed of various instruments such as gongs, kendang (drums), saron, and metallophones. Gamelan music has long been an inseparable part of Javanese society, whether in traditional ceremonies, religious rituals, or entertainment. The Wali Songo utilized gamelan in various da'wah activities, both in religious teaching contexts and in community-based religious events (Foley, 2001).

Sunan Giri, one of the prominent figures among the Wali Songo, was known for using gamelan as a medium for da'wah. Gamelan was not only used to accompany religious ceremonies but also served as a tool in Islamic teaching, especially to create a calm and harmonious atmosphere during lessons on prayers and dhikr (remembrance of God). Through the use of gamelan, the Wali Songo were able to cultivate a deep spiritual ambiance without disrupting local cultural traditions.

In addition, gamelan was employed in religious artistic performances that combined Islamic values with local art forms. For instance, in macapat performances (a form of traditional Javanese chanting), the Wali Songo conveyed Islamic teachings through lyrics

containing moral advice and religious messages. Thus, gamelan and traditional Javanese musical arts became highly effective instruments for spreading Islamic teachings among the community.

Tembang (Traditional Songs) dan Poetry. Aside from *wayang kulit* and *gamelan*, *tembang* (traditional Javanese songs) also became one of the media used by the Wali Songo in their da'wah efforts. *Tembang*, or traditional Javanese singing, typically consists of verses that convey moral values and the aesthetics of life. The Wali Songo used *tembang* as a tool to deliver Islamic teachings in a gentler form, making them easier for the Javanese people to accept.

Sunan Bonang is one of the Wali Songo figures well known for using *tembang* as a medium for da'wah. In his compositions, Sunan Bonang embedded Islamic teachings that the community could easily understand without removing elements of local culture. These religious-themed *tembang* were often performed during various religious events, such as *Maulid Nabi* celebrations or other important Islamic occasions. Through *tembang*, Sunan Bonang encouraged the community to understand and practice Islamic teachings in a pleasant and non-coercive way.

Slametan dan Ritual Keagamaan .In addition to performing arts, the Wali Songo also utilized *slametan* and religious rituals that were already part of Javanese traditions in their da'wah activities. *Slametan* is a traditional ceremony practiced by Javanese communities as an expression of gratitude or a prayer for safety and well-being. During a *slametan*, people gather, pray, and share food together. The Wali Songo not only allowed this tradition to continue but also taught how *slametan* could be adapted to align with Islamic teachings.

Sunan Kudus is one of the Wali Songo known for teaching that *slametan* can be conducted in an Islamic manner, such as by reciting Islamic prayers and encouraging people to perform *dhikr* and express gratitude to God. In practice, the *slametan*, which originally had animistic elements and was associated with honoring ancestral spirits, was gradually transformed into a ritual aimed at strengthening one's relationship with God (Allah). Furthermore, in various larger traditional rituals, such as *ruwatan* (a ceremony intended to dispel misfortune), the Wali Songo also introduced methods that were consistent with Islamic teachings. These ceremonies were then adapted with Islamic prayers, seeking not only worldly protection but also salvation in the hereafter.

The Production and Use of Javanese Islamic Manuscript. As part of their efforts to spread Islam among the Javanese people—most of whom were unable to read Arabic—the Wali Songo also produced religious manuscripts written in the Javanese language. These manuscripts often contained Islamic teachings, prayers, and guidance for living an Islamic life in a way that was easy for the local community to understand. By writing in Javanese, they ensured that Islamic teachings could be comprehended without any language barriers.

Sunan Bonang and Sunan Kalijaga are examples of Wali Songo figures who created Islamic literary works using the Javanese language, such as *tembang* and poetic verses that conveyed Islamic messages. Through these works, the Javanese people were able to learn about Islamic teachings without having to rely on Arabic literature, which was unfamiliar to them.

The Wali Songo also placed strong emphasis on Islamic education as one of the primary methods in their da'wah efforts (Yanti, 2023). They established *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) as educational institutions that not only taught Islamic religious knowledge but also other fields of learning. Sunan Giri, who founded a large *pesantren* in Gresik, for

example, introduced Islamic teachings in a more systematic way by providing education that combined both religious and general knowledge. Thus, the *pesantren* became a center of learning that integrated religious teachings with worldly sciences relevant to the daily lives of the community.

Islamic da'wah and education are two closely interconnected aspects in the spread of Islam in Indonesia, particularly in East Java. The Wali Songo, as the leading figures in the Islamization of Java, played a crucial role in developing both aspects. They did not rely solely on oral preaching or sermons, but also established various educational institutions to teach Islamic teachings while integrating Islam with local cultural practices. In this context, Islamic da'wah and education in East Java were not merely efforts to propagate the religion, but also to build a strong social and intellectual foundation for the Muslim community.

Da'wah as a Process of Spreading Islam. Da'wah is the process of inviting people to the path of Allah with wisdom, compassion, and thoughtful guidance. In the context of the Wali Songo, the spread of Islam was not carried out solely through sermons, but also through the use of local culture and traditions that had long been established among the Javanese people.

Da'wah Through Local Cultural Approaches The Wali Songo understood that for Islam to be accepted by the Javanese who at the time still held firmly to Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and local traditions they needed to use methods that aligned with the customs and cultural norms of the community. The Wali Songo used local arts and cultural expressions such as *wayang kulit*, *gamelan*, and *tembang* to convey Islamic messages without offending existing traditions. For instance, in *wayang kulit* performances, they incorporated teachings related to morals and life values consistent with Islamic principles. In addition, the Wali Songo utilized *slametan*, a ritual already well known in Javanese society, as a medium for da'wah. By modifying the *slametan* to include Islamic prayers, the Wali Songo not only preserved the tradition but also guided the community toward a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings.

The Importance of Social Da'wah. Beyond religious instruction, the Wali Songo also emphasized the importance of social da'wah, which addressed broader aspects of community life. They taught values such as social justice, generosity, and care for the environment. Through this approach, the Wali Songo successfully positioned Islam not only as a personal faith but also as a religion that regulates human relations and pays attention to social, economic, and political dimensions of life.

Islamic Education as a Means of Developing Knowledge and Shaping Character. One of the significant contributions of the Wali Songo to the spread of Islam was the establishment of *pesantren* as Islamic educational institutions. Islamic education in the *pesantren* did not focus solely on teaching *fiqh* (religious knowledge), but also included lessons on ethics, social values, and culture. The *pesantren* became important intellectual and cultural centers for Javanese society at that time.

Pesantren as Islamic Educational Institutions. The *pesantren* established by the Wali Songo did not merely teach Islamic doctrines in theory; they also served as places where Islamic teachings were practiced in daily life. Sunan Giri and Sunan Ampel were among the Wali Songo figures known for establishing large *pesantren* that provided religious education as well as practical skills to the surrounding community (Azra, 2006). Pesantren and Moral Education In the *pesantren*, education was not limited to intellectual learning; it also emphasized morals and good character. The Wali Songo believed that religion should not be taught solely through religious texts, but also through the development of character and

behavior aligned with Islamic teachings. Students (*santri*) were taught to embody noble qualities such as patience, honesty, sincerity, and generosity. In addition, *santri* were also trained to become independent individuals by developing practical skills useful in everyday life. Thus, education in the *pesantren* aimed not only to produce scholars or religious leaders, but also individuals equipped with the skills needed to live in society and contribute to social progress.

Contextual and Adaptive Islamic Education The Wali Songo developed an educational approach that was contextualized to the social and cultural conditions of Javanese society. Rather than enforcing the acceptance of Islam through rigid or coercive methods, they chose to adapt Islamic teachings to the existing local culture. For example, they taught Islam through familiar arts and traditions such as *wayang kulit* and *gamelan*, and used the Javanese language in religious instruction. This contextual model of education enabled Islamic teachings to be well received by the Javanese people without diminishing their cultural values. Through this approach, Islam was not only accepted as a new religion, but also became an integral part of Javanese culture and identity.

Teaching and Disseminating Knowledge Beyond the Pesantren. In addition to establishing *pesantren*, the Wali Songo also spread Islamic knowledge to the wider community through more informal teaching methods. They frequently conducted public religious gatherings (*pengajian*) in mosques or other communal spaces to educate people about Islamic teachings. At that time, these gatherings took the form of lectures, discussions, or question-and-answer sessions covering various aspects of Islamic life. The Wali Songo also sought to reach all levels of society—not only the educated class, but also ordinary villagers, traders, and even local rulers. Through this inclusive approach, they succeeded in building an extensive da'wah network and fostering a deeper understanding of Islam within the community (Azizah, 2017).

Pesantren as Centers of Da'wah and Education. In addition to serving as religious educational institutions, *pesantren* also functioned as highly strategic centers of da'wah. Within the *pesantren*, students (*santri*) were trained to become *da'i*—religious preachers who would later disseminate Islamic teachings to other regions. This played an essential role in expanding the influence of Islam in East Java, especially in areas far from established Islamic centers of authority. The Wali Songo also introduced a more systematic educational structure, including the teaching of classical Islamic texts—such as works on Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and prophetic traditions (*hadith*)—which became foundational knowledge for the *santri*. As a result, *pesantren* emerged not only as institutions dedicated to deepening religious understanding but also as centers that taught various other forms of knowledge important for social and political life.

Synergy Between Islam and Local Traditions. The synergy between Islam and local culture in East Java played a crucial role in facilitating the process of Islamization. The Wali Songo successfully created a form of integration that allowed Islamic teachings to be accepted without replacing the existing Javanese cultural framework. One prominent example of this synergy can be seen in the adaptation of traditional celebrations and religious rituals. Rather than requiring the community to abandon their customary practices and traditional ceremonies, the Wali Songo guided them to incorporate Islamic values into these activities. For instance, in the celebration of *Slametan* or *Ruwatan*, which are integral components of Javanese tradition, the Wali Songo introduced the practice of reciting Islamic prayers and *dhikr* in a way that aligned with local cultural norms. This is an illustration of how the Wali

Songo harmonized Javanese traditions with Islamic teachings, allowing the community to maintain their customs while adding a deeper spiritual dimension to their daily lives (Kurniawan, 2010).

Impact of Da'wah Synergy on Society. The impact of the da'wah synergy carried out by the Wali Songo in the northern coastal region of East Java was highly significant in shaping the social and cultural identity of the local communities (Estuningtiyas, 2023). The Islamization process initiated by the Wali Songo not only transformed religious aspects but also introduced new values into social, economic, and cultural life. The community gradually embraced Islamic teachings that were inclusive and moderate, fostering peace, harmony, and social justice within Javanese society. In addition, the acceptance of Islam by the community also brought changes in governance and administrative structures, as reflected in the emergence of Islamic sultanates in coastal regions such as the Giri Sultanate in Gresik and the Surabaya Sultanate. These sultanates played a crucial role in continuing the da'wah efforts and expanding the influence of Islam into the inland areas of Java.

CONCLUSION

The da'wah of the Wali Songo in East Java played a highly strategic role in the spread of Islam on the island of Java, particularly during the 15th to 16th centuries. Through an adaptive approach toward local culture and the integration of Islamic teachings with existing traditions, the Wali Songo successfully introduced Islam into Javanese society in a manner that did not disrupt but instead enriched local cultural life.

The da'wah efforts of the Wali Songo in East Java were carried out with great respect for local traditions while conveying Islamic teachings in peaceful and wise ways. Through pesantren institutions and culturally intelligent methods, the Wali Songo not only spread Islam but also introduced moral and social values that contributed to the development of a more virtuous society. Their legacy in Islamic education and social da'wah continues to be felt today, offering essential lessons on how religion can be accepted and practiced harmoniously within diverse cultural and social contexts.

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