

Racial Discrimination of Afro-Cubans: Past and Present

By Jose Perez

From the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to Cuba in 1513, people of African descent have experienced copious forms of discrimination. Cuba's history has shown that from the forced arrival of the Africans to today that people have fought against discrimination for a better future. This essay will argue that racial discrimination in Cuba is still evident today and has been an ongoing issue. First, by way of how sugar plantations affect the labor that is imported from Africa. Next, it will provide additional information on acts of discrimination and violence perpetrated against Afro-Cubans, including the massacre ordered by President Jose Miguel in the "Race War," along with the Morua law that targeted black political groups. Following that, Fidel Castro fought to end racial prejudice. Lastly, the essay will provide research on the population of Afro-Cubans in Cuba and how people are still fighting for racial justice.

Spanish Colonialism played a significant role in the outcome of enslaved African people in Cuba. Spanish colonialism in the New World fueled the missionary zeal to convert non-Christians, the Crown's desire for gold and silver beginning with labor exploitation of native people, and the personal motives of the conquistadors and settlers.¹ As the years went by, torture and abuse by the Spanish caused a decrease in the indigenous population. Despite the Spanish not finding more gold in Cuba, they still structured Havana as a main harbor point. As Havana became a success, the first enslaved Africans arrived in Cuba. Havana became one of the most important cities; with the natural Gulf Stream, many travelers found it

¹ Staten Clifford L. 20152003. *The History of Cuba*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

helpful to extract riches from the Americas. With Havana's success, there came a need for enslaved workers to work around the urban occupations that many travelers used. Many of the first Africans were immediately forced to work in the mines of Cuba as replacements for the rapidly disappearing enslaved indigenous Taino-Arawak laborers.² The first ship to arrive in Cuba bore the name *John*, and its captain, Bisset Andrew, held custody of fifteen prisoners.³ The ages of these enslaved Africans ranged from six to thirty years of age, all landing in the intended disembarkation port in Havana awaiting work instructions. Also, during this time, the enslaved workers would unload ships, work construction, and work as merchants. The persistent mistreatment and discrimination against Africans in slavery began Cuba's first uprising. Many of them fled into the surrounding mountains following in 1533, which sparked subsequent uprisings. There, they would meet with fellow indigenous enslaved people and create the first free African independent town settlements known as Palenques. The Palenques were strategically located in areas of difficult access, becoming a haven for slave refugees and a place for organizing freedom uprisings. With time, Palenques developed their own economic and social structures and acquired political recognition from the colonial powers.⁴

In the nineteenth century, Havana transitioned into a new form of labor that enabled more enslaved people and caused runaways. Cuba transformed into a highly structured plantation society with all the attendant class and caste relationships, as well as cruelty towards

² "Afro-Cubans." Minority Rights group, January 28, 2021. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/afro-cubans/#>.

³ "Slave Voyages." John 100012,1730. <https://www.slavevoyages.org/american/database>. Accessed December 14, 2023.

⁴ Camargo, Blanca, and Alain Lawo-Sukam. "San Basilio de Palenque (Re)Visited: African Heritage, Tourism, and Development in Colombia." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 34, no. 1 (2015): 25–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26334887>.

Africans being routine practice.⁵ This new plantation society enabled the population of enslaved Africans to increase drastically. By 1840, ten thousand enslaved people entered society, which transformed Havana into the largest market for enslaved Africans.⁶ Consequently, with an increase in newly enslaved Africans, many fled their positions and became runaway slaves. A letter to the civil governor on November 8, 1860, documents the events of the runaway slaves.⁷ To the Superior Civil Governor - Havana, It would appear that several black escapees are about to disembark on the coast of Camarioca.⁸ Due to the continued cruelty and abuse, a large number of escaped enslaved people started to leave. As a result of many escapes of enslaved people, Spanish minister Antonio Fernando Castillo asked for money to prevent any future attempts. To the Governor and Political Chief of Havana - “Dear Sir, The Mayoralty of Santiago de Cuba has asked the Council of the Indies for the reimbursement of the sum of 44,000 pesos to be utilized to prevent the escape of the enslaved Black people from their masters.”⁹ Subsequently, more enslaved Africans arrived in Cuba, 600,000 arrived in Cuba throughout the 19th century; the majority of them came after 1820 when Spain and Great Britain decided to put an end to the slave trade in the Spanish territories. Consequently, Cuba experienced a flourishing of a new industry centered around sugar.

The Cuban sugar industry impacted the colony of Cuba. Through the use of

⁵ Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Cuba: Afro-Cubans*, 2008.

⁶ “Afro-Cubans.” Minority Rights group, January 28, 2021. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/afro-cubans/#>.

⁷ *Cuban Slavery Documents collection, 1820 - 1892*. https://www.riamco.org/render?eadid=US-RPB-ms2014.018&view=inventory#aspace_ref4_w7a

⁸ *Cuban Slavery Documents collection, 1820 - 1892*. https://www.riamco.org/render?eadid=US-RPB-ms2014.018&view=inventory#aspace_ref4_w7a

⁹ *Cuban Slavery Documents collection, 1820 - 1892.*, 1820.

narrow-gauge railroads and steam-powered mills, the Cuban sugar industry became the most technologically advanced in the world between 1838 and 1880.¹⁰ From Havana to Puerto Príncipe, the terrain dominated in expanding sugar mills that drove out local farmers and destroyed the island's vast hardwood woods. Four-fifths of all exports by 1850 came from the sugar sector, and by 1860, Cuba produced about one-third of the world's sugar.¹¹ The sugar industry's extraordinary expansion catapulted a new class of affluent plantation owners. The need for finance, technology, and a sugar market made the growers look increasingly to North America.¹² The first known slave strike took place in 1865, where enslaved Africans demanded their freedom and compensation for their labor through a walkout.¹³ Although the walkout was put to an end by the Spanish troops, this demonstrated the increasing challenge of using slave labor for Cuba's primary export. Spanish tax increase on sugar and denial of political autonomy to Cubans led to the outbreak of the Ten Years' War 1868 through 1878, the country's first struggle for independence.¹⁴ With the Grito de Yara (Cry of Yara) proclamation, made on October 10, 1868, eastern planter Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, now regarded as the "father of his country"—declared Spanish independence.¹⁵ Also, he set his slaves free to participate in his revolution. Some landowners, as well as a large number of laborers and farmers who wished to eliminate slavery and gain a more significant political

¹⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica. "Cuba | Government, Flag, Capital, Population, & Language," December 6, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cuba/Filibustering-and-the-struggle-for-independence>.

¹¹ Staten Clifford L. 20152003. *The History of Cuba*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin

¹² Staten Clifford L. 20152003. *The History of Cuba*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

¹³ Encyclopedia Britannica. "Cuba | Government, Flag, Capital, Population, & Language," December 6, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cuba/Filibustering-and-the-struggle-for-independence>.

¹⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica. "Cuba | Government, Flag, Capital, Population, & Language," December 6, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cuba/Filibustering-and-the-struggle-for-independence>.

¹⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica. "Cuba | Government, Flag, Capital, Population, & Language."

voice, supported Céspedes. The incapacity of the rebel movement to unite behind a common objective turned out to be its gravest issue, leading to the war's failure. Despite the Ten Years' War's failure, the events demonstrated Cubans' ability to band together against Spain.¹⁶ The Ten Years' War started mainly as an unorganized guerilla conflict but eventually involved over 12,000 warriors and produced several influential leaders.

Revolutionary leader Jose Marti advocated for equal rights to all citizens of Cuba and fought against racial discrimination. In 1878–1879, after being exiled he returned to Cuba and joined an organization with other exiled Cuban revolutionaries in New York. On August 6, 1879, a new revolt broke out in Cuba. The revolution prematurely known as La Guerra Chiquita ended a year later with the surrender of the Cuban patriots.¹⁷ José Martí claimed that there is no racism in Cuba because there are no races in his 1891 essay "Nuestra América." His thesis was that the identification of all Cubans as Cubans, rather than by race, was the basis for Cuban unity and identity.¹⁸ As time progressed, José Marti's call for a society in which there would be no Blacks or whites but simply Cubans kindled hopes for a genuinely egalitarian society; Blacks flocked to Marti's banners during the last war of independence, 1895-98, and made up the bulk of the Army of Liberation; After independence, in the 1900s, many of them formed a Colored Independence Party (Partido Independiente de Color) and took other steps to participate in the political process as equals. But tragically, Marti had been killed in the first battle of the war.

¹⁶ Dyal, Donald H.. *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish American War*. Greenwood Press: Westport, CT, 1996.

¹⁷ Suchlicki, Jaime. "The Political Ideology of José Martí." *Caribbean Studies* 6, no. 1 (1966): 25–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25611924>.

¹⁸ Suchlicki, Jaime. "The Political Ideology of José Martí." 25-36.

Alongside Jose Marti, Jose Antonio de la Caridad Maceo Grajales advocated for equal rights and a passion to fight against racism. The "most popular leader of the nationalist movement," Maceo was the child of an Afro-Cuban woman and a mulatto from Venezuela. Of Afro-Cuban ancestry, Maceo was the first of nine children of Venezuelan-born Marcos Maceo and Cuban-born Mariana Grajales. Marcos Maceo owned several farms in the rural town of Majaguabo, in the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba.¹⁹ In 1868, he became involved in the independence movement. He rose to the rank of general during the thirty years of the Cuban War. Leadership actions that eliminated racial barriers and brought all Cubans together in support of freedom were what defined the Cuban War for Freedom. It was evident from his public statements that racism was unacceptable to him. Because "El Pacto de Sanjon" did not outlaw slavery, Maceo refused to sign it, ending the Cuban War for independence and accepting Spanish control.²⁰ The rebels under the command of Maceo avoided big fights and concentrated on guerilla tactics and sabotage, such as cutting telegraph wires, demolishing sugar mills, and trying to impede commercial activities on the island, because they were ill-prepared to face the Spanish army; Maceo demonstrated his skill as a master guerilla strategist.²¹ Maceo persisted in his refusal to take part in any arrangement that maintained the bondage of Afro-Cubans. During the second stage of the Cuban War of Independence, Maceo made his first public declaration inviting the enslaved people to join the uprising. In 1879, he declared what was the true purpose of the conflict. "[African Cubans] would achieve the

¹⁹ Bodenheimer, Rebecca. "Biography of Antonio Maceo, Hero of Cuban Independence." ThoughtCo, July 2, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/antonio-maceo-4688532>.

²⁰ Rivera, Alicia. "Antonio Maceo Grajales (1845-1896)," June 9, 2020. <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/grajales-antonio-maceo-1845-1896/>.

²¹ Biography of Antonio Maceo, Hero of Cuban Independence." ThoughtCo, July 2, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/antonio-maceo-4688532>.

emancipation of the 300,000 slaves [then] living in Cuba with the help of [the war for independence]," he said. "The movement's flag [was] the flag of all Cubans, and its principles [were] the equality of men."²² In addition to being an Afro-Cuban abolitionist and civil rights activist, Maceo was an outstanding general. His horseback march, which covered over 1,000 miles in 92 days and resulted in 27 engagements with the Spanish. His most renowned feat, making him dreaded by the Spanish and famous among the Cuban people. At last, on December 7, 1896, Maceo would be hunted down, taken prisoner, and executed.²³

Discrimination and prejudice on Afro-Cubans continued with The Morua law and the execution of Afro-Cubans in the twentieth century. Urban society experienced division along racial and social lines in the early 1900s, with whites enjoying superior status over black and mulatto people in all spheres of life. A preponderance of white people held some jobs and occupations, while black and mulatto people held other positions. White people still kept Afro-Cubans apart. In the lowest classes, it was not unusual for mulatto or black women to marry white men; nonetheless, white society opposed black males marrying white women. Private schools that generally did not accept students with darker skin tones limited the access that Black and mulatto students had to higher education, even after integration into public education. There was segregation favoring white people. Public baths and ballrooms were frequently split into two.²⁴ In 1910, Afro-Cuban Conservative Martin Morúa Delgado sponsored a bill in Congress that specifically targeted the PIC and prohibited political parties

²² Rivera, "Antonio Maceo Grajales (1845-1896)" June 9, 2020.

²³ Research Guides: World of 1898: International Perspectives on the Spanish American War: Antonio Maceo," n.d., <https://guides.loc.gov/world-of-1898/antonio-maceo>

²⁴ Helg, Aline. "Afro-Cuban Protest: The Partido Independiente de Color, 1908–1912." *Cuban Studies* 21 (1991):101–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24485704>.

based on race.²⁵ The Ley Morúa, which forbade parties that grew their membership base based on race and specifically targeted the Independents of Color—a group that included white members despite being primarily made up of Afro-Cuban veterans of the liberation wars from Spain—was a precursor to the practice of accusing people of African descent of practicing racism when they are defending their rights. After independence, the marginalization of Liberation Army members, eighty-five percent or more of whom were of African descent, led to policies that were inherently rooted in racial identity. Following the event of the new law, President José Miguel Gómez of Cuba issued the order to slaughter more than two thousand Cubans of African heritage during the infamous "Race War" of 1912, many of whom were only guilty for being black. The majority of these soldiers who died participated in the island's battles for independence from Spain between 1868 and 1898. The majority of these Afro-Cubans were not just former soldiers but also members of the newly established Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color, PIC).²⁶ The PIC was founded in 1908 by Generals Pedro Ivonnet and Evaristo Estenoz to oppose the exclusion of Black people from the national office and to present a more liberal political platform for Cuba. People of African heritage in Cuba, particularly those who lamented their inability to secure steady work or gain entry into specific public areas despite their sacrifices to Cuba's liberation, were generally in favor of the PIC. However, both white and black Cubans supported the PIC's persecution since its success threatened to undermine support for established political parties.

Fidel Castro, an advocate for Afro-Cubans, fought and bettered the lives of many

²⁵ Benson, "Fears of Black Political Activism in Cuba and Beyond, 1912–2017."

²⁶ Devyn Spence Benson, "Fears of Black Political Activism in Cuba and Beyond, 1912–2017," AAIHS - African American Intellectual History Society, June 14, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/fears-of-black-political-activism-in-cuba-and-beyond-1912-2017/>.

Afro-Cubans. During his time as leader of Cuba 1976-2008, the Afro-Cuban community in Cuba was disproportionately poor and disenfranchised when Castro took office, with little access to social services, healthcare, and educational opportunities. Castro enacted laws desegregating beaches, parks, workplaces, and social clubs because he felt that overt racism like this went against his dedication to social justice and equality.²⁷ He prohibited discrimination in work education and other legal and overt contexts. Castro's redistributive social and economic measures had a beneficial and measurable impact on the quality of life for Afro-Cubans. Racial differences in life expectancy and matriculation rates have decreased due to the government's outstanding accomplishments in providing healthcare and education to all Cubans. Furthermore, Afro Cubans used educational reforms to assist the improvement in literacy and educational attainment throughout the entire island. By 1981, there were equal numbers of Blacks, Mulattos, and Whites working in professional fields due to the higher percentages of Blacks (11.2%) and Mulattos (9.6%) who had completed high school compared to Whites (9%).²⁸ Fidel Castro forbade the topic of racial inequality going forward. In official discourse, racism and capitalism have remained intimately associated. Consequently, racism ended when a just society came into being. With the help of Fidel's new reforms that helped many Afro-Cubans, the population of African descent stayed relatively high.

With the Cuban census, many citizens describe themselves as mixed race; however, most

²⁷ Naomi Glassman, "Revolutionary Racism : Afro-Cubans in an Era of Economic Change – Centre Tricontinental," Centre Tricontinental, January 9, 2014, <https://www.cetri.be/Revolutionary-Racism-Afro%E2%80%91Cubans?lang=fr#nh3>.

²⁸ Glassman, "Revolutionary Racism : Afro-Cubans in an Era of Economic Change – Centre Tricontinental."

of the Cuban population is of African descent. Eleven million people live in Cuba,²⁹ with 70% of them in cities and 30% in rural areas. Ethnic groups: 51% mulatto, 37% white, 11% black, 1% Chinese.³⁰ The majority of the population is 51% mulatto (mixed race); the citizens of this mixed race still experience discrimination. Some scholars estimate that over 70% of Cubans have African ancestry. In Latin America, ethnic self-identification is the basis for the official census, and being white is a goal shared by everybody. However, in many contexts, such as professional schools or the tourism industry, where light-skinned Cubans occupy the majority of employment that pays in hard currency, these data are used to legitimize racial mixing.³¹ With the Afro-Cuban population still present, many continue to face racial discrimination. Black activist, religious leader, and president of the Asociación Yorubas Libres de Cuba, Donaida Pérez Paseiro, combats racial discrimination in contemporary Cuba. Donaida was taken into custody on July 16, 2021, and found guilty in February 2022 of "public disorder," "contempt," and "attacking" an official.³² She received an eight-year prison term. Amnesty International has information that suggests Donaida was not entitled to prosecution for these offenses in the first place. In Cuba, the accusations of "contempt" and "public disorder" are

²⁹ U.S. Department of State. Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/c/13238.htm#:~:text=Population%3A%2011%20million%3B%2070%25,Literacy%2D%2D95%25>.

³⁰ "Cuba." United States Census Bureau. Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/popclock/world/cu#world-footer>.

³¹ "Race & Identity in Cuba." n.d. © 1997-2013 AfroCubaWeb, S.A. <https://afrocubaweb.com/raceident.htm>.

³² Amnesty International, "Nine Afro-Latina and Afro-Caribbean Women and Collectives Who Have Devoted Their Lives to the Struggle for Justice," July 25, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/afro-latina-caribbean-women-struggle-for-justice/>.

widely employed to restrict the freedom of speech and nonviolent assembly. She and her spouse, Loreto Hernández García, were put on trial among fourteen other demonstrators in what seemed to represent an unfair trial. Donaida symbolizes bravery and tenacity in the Cuban resistance movement against persecution. Her family claimed that she worked as a freelance journalist and established the Laurel Express press agency, where she brought attention to the problems and injustices that her community in the city of Placetas faced.³³ Having been a part of both the core opposition alliance and the Orlando Zapata Tamayo rebel front, her involvement is multifaceted. The legacy of Donaida is international and a great source of inspiration. Black activist, religious leader, and president of the Asociación Yorubas Libres de Cuba, The experiences of Donaida Pérez Paseiro with racial prejudice are related to the discrimination that black lesbians in modern Cuba encounter.

In present-day Cuba, black women must navigate various crucial elements that impact the formation of their identities, including skin tone and gender, material security, racial identity, physical attributes, sexual orientation, and marital status. To control their perceived hypersexuality or feminine masculinity, black women face constant pressure to lose weight, wear clothing that covers up their bodies, and straighten and elongate their hair. Black women have experienced various subjectivities in the post-1959 revolutionary era as a result of revolutionary bans on racial discourse and Cuban cultural taboos on the subject.³⁴ While some women identify as black and struggle with the psychological and material impacts of systemic racism, others support Cuba's philosophy of racial blindness and do not identify as black women. Black women often receive comments in Cuba to straighten their hair to look more

³³ Amnesty International, "Nine Afro-Latina and Afro-Caribbean Women and Collectives Who Have Devoted Their Lives to the Struggle for Justice."

³⁴ Tanya L. Saunders. "Black Lesbians and Racial Identity in Contemporary Cuba."

attractive or feminine. Stereotypes in Cuba that black women who have well-defined hips and buttocks and unprocessed hair are overweight and indifferent to their beauty. Women who feel they can make themselves "more attractive" with their hair and weight are frequently the target of suggestions from random onlookers, most of whom are other women. Women in Cuba are primarily assessed based on how they look; Afro lesbians made remarks about themselves, "I received on the bus included advice from women to straighten my Afro hair and remarks from Cuban coworkers that I would be With straight hair and a bit less weight, I would look much nicer." These remarks are frequently attached to the very physical characteristics of black women—hair, skin tone, weight, hips, and buttocks. In Cuba, race and class are often mediated. Wealthy black Cubans who reject Afro-Cuban culture and accept European fashion and culture as a cultural ideal are viewed as "cultured" or on a "higher cultural level," and as such, they are frequently integrated into the white and Mulatto social spaces. They are invited to concerts and house parties, and their presence is honored at events. At public events that are attended mainly by white, mulata, and black Cubans of all backgrounds, black Cubans who are viewed as belonging to a "low cultural level" are frequently viewed with distrust or dislike or are even ignored.³⁵ The economic crisis during the Special Period led to employment losses and a rise in the number of women providing care. With racial problems still evident in Cuba, Afro-Cuban professor Amelia Dache calls for a new government in Cuba.

Afro- Cubans have used academia as a platform to protest, for example, Amelia Dache, an Afro- Cuban professor at the University of Pennsylvania, speaks about the ongoing issues of contemporary Cuba. In an interview in 2019 she reveals that, she began a study in Cuba,

³⁵ Tanya L. Saunders. "Black Lesbians and Racial Identity in Contemporary Cuba."

where she interviewed Cubans in my area about their political and racial ideas and discovered that their primary revolved around fear. Fear and a great deal of secrecy about what they can say are prevalent. She reveals that she found being a member of the Communist regime is a requirement for obtaining a higher education. Dache explains that people will experience repression from the government if they produce a dissertation or thesis criticizing the Communist rule. It won't be published. There isn't any freedom in academia. Cuban universities lack disciplinary peer review and academic independence, which results in a society where people's knowledge bases are restricted, and they are unable to interact with the outside world due to the Communist government. She goes on to explain about the recent uprisings in Cuba. Young Afro-Cuban people have taken the lead. They reside in some of Cuba's most marginalized, oppressed, and repressive areas. Thus, the starting point of this resistance originated in one of Havana's southern barrios, which are highly marginalized in terms of racial and economic status. She explains that in Cuba, there are still neighborhoods and barrios that are worse in terms of housing and the demographics of the people who live there, including predominantly Black communities that are underprivileged and impoverished concerning the overall level of poverty in the country. However, there is an authoritarian state, and everyone is supposed to be the same throughout the economic system. Thus, there is still a hierarchy of poverty and those most impacted by this type of administration. Dache ends her interview by explaining that Black history can not be studied in Cuba. As it is not a part of the revolution, the Cuban curriculum is unable to participate in these discussions.³⁶ Engaging with

³⁶ Jason Johnson, "From Ferguson to Havana, Black Youth Lead the Resistance," Slate Magazine, July 17, 2021, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/07/afro-cuban-youth-resistance-protests-racism-history.html>.

and discussing Black history in Cuba is counterrevolutionary. Black Cubans are ignorant of their past. The Black resistance is unknown to them. They are unaware of how Black and Afro-Cuban Cubans contributed to transforming the island nation's still-developing society between 1901 and 1959.

In conclusion, this paper explained the historical background to comprehend how Africans arrived in Cuba, primarily with the involvement of Spanish colonialism. Next, it went into detail about the long fight against racial discrimination against Afro-Cubans with information on individuals classified as revolutionaries who did not keep quiet about discrimination and fought for every person to have fundamental human rights: the revolutionaries Jose Marti and Jose Antonio de la Caridad Maceo Grajales. Then, it provided information on acts going against Afro-Cubans with discrimination and murder, including the massacre ordered by President Jose Miguel in the “Race War,” along with the Morua law that targeted black political groups. The paper then explained how Fidel Castro fought to end racial prejudice. Castro enacted laws desegregating beaches, parks, workplaces, and social clubs because he felt that overt racism like this went against his dedication to social justice and equality. He prohibited discrimination in work education and other legal and overt contexts. Castro's redistributive social and economic measures had a beneficial and measurable impact on the quality of life for Afro-Cubans. Lastly, the essay provided research on the population of Cuba, with the citizens primarily considering themselves mulatto and also how people are still facing discrimination with the experiences told by black lesbians and how Amelia Dache, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, speaks about all of the ongoing issues of contemporary Cuba.

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