

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN LAOS

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Historical background

Laos is a country steeped in Buddhism, which is not only a religion, but a civilization, a way of life. The monks are the priests of the Buddha's teachings, but they have always been seen also as teachers responsible for educating the minds. Each village has a temple which from time immemorial has been as much an educational as a religious centre where every Lao could stay for a time to receive instruction, and even training for a job ; the temple was indeed the only place where teaching could take place. Even now, every Lao - especially in rural areas - will don the yellow robe for a varying length of time and, while staying in the temple, learn not only the Buddhist prayers and psalms but also how to read and write. When the French came to Laos, they did not suppress this popular traditional education ; gradually, however, it has ceded importance to the new system.

In 1907, the education department of the French protectorate administration established the first French-Lao schools where an education patterned after the metropolitan model was given in French. From 1927 onwards, Lao teachers were produced in a teacher training college ; the training thus offered, involving six years of study leading to the certificate of primary education, was indeed sound but remained the prerogative of an elite ; in 1945, on the eve of independence, there were only 187 primary schools with 453 teachers and 11,401 pupils, and the enrolment ratio was as low as 2%. In the first two years of independence, tremendous efforts were made to expand education further despite the lack of personnel inherited from the colonial period (in fact, the French had extended their assistance mainly to the richest regions of their Asian colonial empire, i.e. to Viet-nam and to a lesser extent to Cambodia): from 1945 to 1947, the enrolment in primary schools tripled to 31,000 pupils ; this trend continued until 1959/60 when it reached 117,000. After a temporary slackening during the civil war in 1960/61, progress was resumed : in 1963/64, there were 119,537 pupils in the public primary schools and 13,895 in the private ones. In 1971/72, the maximum projections were exceeded with a total of 236,679 pupils and 5,770 teachers in 3,222 schools, to which should be added 76 private schools catering to more than 30,000 pupils in their primary grades.

I. The system of primary education

A. Structure

The present system is the outcome of the educational reform of 1962, and comprises two stages :

1. A first stage, of three years' duration, which is offered in :

- a) Elementary schools, the commonest type of schools in the rural areas; if there is an adequate number of school-age children, an elementary school may be converted into a "demi-groupe scolaire" or a "groupe scolaire" (see below, and under B. Administration);
- b) Community Education Rural Centres (CERCs) which were initiated in 1962 with a view to enrolling as many children as possible: they serve at the same time as lower primary schools, youth centres and adult education centres; a CERC may therefore be either:
 - a temple school, founded in any village where a temple is in existence; or
 - a public primary school; or
 - where there is no temple nor public primary school, a rural school built on the villagers' own initiative with a teacher (sometimes working part-time) selected and maintained by the community.

The elementary schools often consist of one single class divided into three grades, the first grade being split into two divisions if the number of children is large enough; in this case, the provincial primary inspector may authorize the operation of part-time classes or schools where one group of children are taught in the morning and the others in the afternoon.

2. A second stage, of three years' duration, in which the learning of a second language (French at the moment) is compulsory; at the end of the final year, pupils sit for the primary certificate or for the secondary school entrance examination. This second stage is offered either in "groupes scolaires" (comprising the full six years of the primary course) or in "demi-groupes scolaires", i.e. elementary schools which do not yet comprise the six regular grades but are in the process of becoming complete institutions.

Under pressure from the parents, most CERCs have gradually turned into elementary schools with a single class divided into three grades. The only difference between them and the public schools is that their teachers are not civil servants: the Government gives them a monthly allowance which ranges from 3,000 kips (1 US \$=600 kips at the official rate) for beginners to 6,000 kips for those who have participated in at least four upgrading seminars; the allowance is supplemented as needed by parents' contributions in money or in kind.

In 1962, the Government envisaged the establishment of 1,500 CERCs within three years, but owing to the insecurity prevailing in some rural regions, the difficulty of communications and the scarcity of national resources, only 691 have opened so far. Their work is supplemented by that of the monks and the military (especially in remote areas and dangerous operations sectors). In order that isolated communities may benefit from education, the rule that a minimum of

35 children aged from 6 to 9 is necessary for an elementary school to be created has been waived in the case of CERCs where the average pupil-teacher ratio is in fact slightly less than 25: 1 (23,448 pupils for 960 teachers).

B. Administration

For a school to be created, there must be at least 35 children aged from 6 to 9 in the village or group of villages which the school would serve. Children are enrolled when their parents apply for it; the maximum number of pupils in the first grade should not exceed 50 although the headmaster may admit a few more for very special reasons. As well as a playground and a garden, every new school must be provided with enough space for its expansion and eventual conversion into a "demi-groupe" and later a "groupe scolaire". The community is expected to build, maintain and repair the school, to equip it with the necessary furniture and to provide an adequate house for the teacher.

An elementary school may be upgraded as a "demi-groupe scolaire" if and when : (a) its total enrolment exceeds 120 pupils; (b) the nearest "demi-groupe" is more than 5 kilometres away; and (c) there are at least three other elementary schools in the neighbourhood whose older pupils are likely to enrol in the first year of its second stage. The conditions to be met for a "demi-groupe" to be converted into a "groupe scolaire" are as follows: (a) that the total enrolment is 160 at least (this rule may be waived in very remote areas); (b) that the school building has at least five class-rooms; (c) that a sixth grade has been successfully in operation for one year with at least 20 pupils; and (d) that a suitable house is available, in principle, for the headmaster.

The establishment of a primary school and/or its conversion into a "groupe scolaire" is decreed by the minister of Education, as proposed by the Director of Primary Education to whom the provincial primary inspector has submitted a report to that effect after consultation with the competent local authorities.

Pupils in higher primary grades (second stage) are in no case allowed to repeat two successive grades nor to stay for three years in the same grade.

C. Enrolment

School attendance was made compulsory by a Royal Decree of 26 April 1951 as far as elementary primary education is concerned. Village and district headmen, being responsible for the efficient functioning of public utility services, have a duty - each one within the limits of his powers - to keep up-to-date population counts, to know at all times the numbers of school-age children, to encourage parents to enrol their wards and to make sure the latter do not play truant. Furthermore, by its adhesion to the Karachi Plan in 1960, Laos has undertaken - as have all other Asian countries - to achieve free and compulsory education for all school-age children by 1980. Because of budgetary limitations and of population growth, universal education may not be reached by this date; we are nevertheless concentrating all our efforts towards the generalization of elementary education, utilizing the least expensive methods such as the CERCs and recruiting local educators;

All the grades in the two primary stages have a single teacher, who teaches in Lao in the first stage and in Lao and French in the second. Because of the lack of personnel, out of a total of 5,298 teachers, 924 (17.4%) have a single class comprising three grades, and 1,464 (27.6%) a single class with two grades. The average pupil-teacher ratio (40:1) hardly exceeds the optimum value, but there are appreciable variations between some remote villages with a small school-age population and towns where schools may have more than 50 pupils per teacher, especially in Grade I. The number of pupils in urban "groupes scolaires" varies from 1,000 to 3,000; in elementary schools, it should not exceed 300. As for the enrolment ratio, if the period under consideration is extended to 8 years (age-group 6-14) and if it is supposed that 20% of the total population belongs to this age-group, then the ratio stands at 44%, once the high rate of repetition is taken into account. However, large differences exist between Vientiane where it reaches 90% and various areas severely affected by the war where less than 10% of the children are in fact enrolled; furthermore, there is no correlation between population density and school enrolment in provincial regions.

All schools are co-educational, since there is no discrimination according to sex in the traditional structure of the Lao family; however, a lower enrolment ratio for girls can be noted (37.3% as against 62.7% for boys in 1971/72) but the girls' enrolment ratio increases faster than that of the boys: from 1960/61 to 1969/70, while the annual mean rate of increase of the school population as a whole was 11%, it was 9.75% per year for boys and about 14.5% for girls. This was a direct outcome of the Educational Reform Act of 1962 which urged in its Article 3 "a special effort to give women and ethnic minorities real equality of access to education".

Private education is encouraged and schools of all denominations or non-denominational are authorized as long as they abide by health regulations as set out by the Education and Health Ministries, follow the official curriculum and grant the same freedom of conscience to their pupils and teachers that they themselves enjoy. At the moment, private schools, most of them situated in Vientiane, account for 11% of the total primary enrolment.

D. Resources for primary education

The national education budget for 1971/72 represents about 11% of the State expenditures (or 22% of the national resources, not including foreign aid), and the share of primary education amounts to nearly 61%. While the education budget increased by 12% from 1969/70 to 1970/71 and by 11.8% from 1970/71 to 1971/72, the share of primary education grew by 15.7% and 7% respectively. However, almost 99% of the total is spent on staff costs, leaving only an exceedingly small amount for operating the schools and services; therefore, our system is cruelly lacking in teaching materials, with the exception of textbooks adapted to the new curriculum. In 1971/72, the budget for primary education was 1,350 million kips for staff costs and 7.2 million kips only for operating expenses, but the targets for 1975/76 are 2,200 and 10 million kips respectively; school buildings will continue to be financed through self-help while their upkeep and equipment costs will be the community's responsibility.

Even though foreign aid is important to Laos (the largest amount coming from the United States) it is difficult to set it out in figures. However, the amount allocated to educational projects is extremely limited because enormous sums are earmarked for financing the war, making up budgetary deficit and maintaining monetary stability.

In 1971/72, USAID's contribution towards primary education was 125,000 dollars, which were spent mainly on training seminars for in-service teachers; to this should be added gifts of equipment, building materials and school supplies for the refugees, as well as a contribution for the printing of textbooks. Other aid programmes sponsored by the Colombo Plan, the Governments of Canada, Australia and France and the Asia Foundation have made more specific contributions to primary education in the form of equipment and scholarships abroad. This assistance - difficult to be reckoned - not being taken into account, the average cost per pupil stood at 5,800 kips in 1971/72 and the annual cost of a teacher is about 236,000 kips. As a matter of fact, the level of teachers' salaries and allowances is rather low in Laos, and is even lower than in other Asian countries.

In order to involve children in village improvement activities, teachers may organize every year a so-called "social week in the school": during 5 days, not necessarily consecutive, pupils participate in the laying out of tracks, the erection of fences, the maintenance of furniture, etc. with funds raised by the parents' association or allocated to the provincial primary inspectorate.

II. Difficulties and problems

A. School wastage

Our main concern being the qualitative improvement of the education system, the problem which reduces the most the efficiency of our schools is undoubtedly that of wastage. This scourge obviously obtains also in many developing countries, but in Laos it is out of all proportion: it is most acute at the end of the first year of schooling (38% of pupils had to repeat and 2% dropped out in 1970/71) and at the transition from the first to the second stage; in the latter case, one could more accurately describe it as "rejection", since many pupils who finish their first three years in a remote place have no complete school available within reasonable distance of their village. This phenomenon can also be explained by the introduction of the French language in the second stage, which is a nuisance to both teachers and pupils: selection for secondary education (given exclusively in French in the majority of schools) begins at this time, and less than one in 10 pupils is able to overcome the obstacle.

From Grade I to Grade VI, enrolment thus goes whittling down in such a way that the total average rate of wastage was 77.5% for the cohort 1965 to 1971; this ratio is even higher in rural areas than in urban centres for well-known reasons: lack of a sufficient number of complete schools, overcrowded classes, low quality of the teaching staff, children working on the farms with their parents, etc.

B. Teaching staff

On the other hand, as living conditions are tougher in rural areas, the more qualified teachers are greatly reluctant to accept being posted there; and since secondary schools are found mostly in towns, teachers sent far away from urban centres tend to worry about the difficulties their own children will face when they are of

secondary school-age. Although they would enjoy a certain prestige among country people, very few newly appointed teachers will agree to leave town unless they go and teach in the village where they were born. Finally, the low salaries in the teaching profession makes recruitment of qualified people very difficult, and the brightest pupils prefer to continue into secondary schools or to choose other fields of study giving access to more lucrative jobs or offering more definite employment prospects in town.

A survey made in 1971 has shown that only 18% of teachers possess the CEP (certificate of primary education) with four years of training in the primary teachers' college, that almost 70% have the CEP with 3 to 6 months' intensive training (or at the most 2 years) and that 12%, mostly CERC teachers, do not even have the CEP.

C. Openings for pupils

Another problem which is no less serious stems from the rigorous selection made at the end of the primary course for entry into secondary education: in 1971/72, owing to lack of places, only 1,164 pupils out of a total of 14,809 candidates could be admitted, i.e. hardly 8%. This situation should gradually improve, but there will always be a number of young CEP holders without sufficient qualifications for entry into the productive sector and dreaming of nothing else but leaving their villages and becoming civil servants in town. With a view to giving these young misfits enough instruction to enable them to play a rôle in their village life, and some practical training in workshop and agricultural skills with which they may actively participate in local development and especially in raising the standard of living and of agricultural productivity, four rural schools have been in operation since 1964 with a view to "facilitating the training and settling of independent craftsmen in the villages". As this initial aim cannot be widened at the moment because of the lack of resources and of competent teachers, the authorities are now carrying out a study to set up 20 new pilot centres in areas offering prospects for economic and social development; each centre will have its own training objectives, dictated by the specific needs and possibilities of the area. If this experiment turns out to be successful, it will be extended to other regions as and when the necessary funds are made available.

III. Objectives and experiments

As in every other traditional society, the education, both religious and secular, given in the past by the monks was meant to pass on the national traditions and culture so that the individual could better identify himself with his village community. But our modern society is undergoing change; it was therefore necessary to integrate education into the socio-economic fabric of a nation which is experiencing far-reaching transformations, to stop trying to adapt the individual to his own group and to show him instead how constantly to adapt himself to rapid changes in structures and to the quick tempo of knowledge evolution. This was the main guideline of the 1962 Reform, which gave priority to the acquisition of skills rather than of academic knowledge, and to practice rather than theory, yet without neglecting a constant reference to our cultural background. Tradition and progress are thus associated and people are enriched by values and experiences.

Whatever its deficiencies and limitations may have been in reality, this traditional education given in the temples had an objective that was appropriate to a static society limited to the village community; it also contained some principles of universal wisdom. During the colonial period, it was supplanted by an educational system which also aimed at training "good citizens" - that is those whom the colonial system needed: subordinate civil servants and just as many low-grade executives as would ensure the the proper functioning of the administrative machinery; qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion were never its major aim and concern. Our educational system has been stamped by this heritage both in its orientation and in its structure, and it was not until 1962, when its inadequacy to the new conditions prevailing in an independent country had been recognized and the people's strong aspirations to education had been acknowledged, that its basic principles were reconsidered.

On the quantitative side, the initial goal was to give the whole population the benefit of a modicum of instruction, which implied enrolling all children aged from 6 to 12 and providing education for all those, adults as well as adolescents, who had missed the opportunity of going to school or had dropped out. This meant increasing considerably the number of schools and of teachers, an impossible task to achieve with our modest resources and in view of our limited teacher training capacity: the mere salaries of the 20,000 teachers needed would have amounted to 118% of the national budget. We therefore chose a more realistic method and embarked upon a process of gradual and rational enrolment of school-age children, as a result of which the set targets have been reached and exceeded; the projected targets for 1976 are 281,000 pupils in both primary stages and a total of 9,000 teachers, with 4,500 classes in the elementary schools and 4,200 in the complete primary schools.

The second objective, a qualitative one, was first of all to reduce wastage and to improve the efficiency of the educational system. Actually, one major cause of wastage is poorly qualified teachers; the necessity of opening more and more schools meant that people with only a low level of general education and very poor professional training had to be recruited. The measures adopted by the Directorate for Teacher Training in the Overall Plan for 1969-1974 (i.e. various structural reforms and some modifications in the length of schooling and the curriculum) are inadequate: experience in other developing countries shows indeed that a sound professional training can only be obtained through a series of up-grading sessions and that it is by sharing and discussing individual difficulties that teachers will devise new solutions which may later be applied nation-wide. To this end, 7,400 "seminar units" (their length depending on the kind of seminar and on the level of the people to be up-graded) have taken place up to 1971/72, and the total should reach 9,450 by 1976.

Regarding the "laocization" of education, it should be noted that while all teaching and administrative staff are Lao, only the first stage is completely laocized; French is taught from Grade IV onwards in order to ensure a transition with secondary education where laocization is much slower.

The curriculum and syllabi were radically transformed in 1962 in order to better adapt them to the national context. The subject-matter is now organized around special interest themes: Laotian towns and villages in the elementary grades, various sectors of human activity in the country and the West in the second stage (agriculture and rural life in Grade IV, industry and urban life in Grade V, commerce and human relationships in Grade VI). Moral, social and religious education (in Laos, the latter is an integral part of the former two) is strongly emphasized and the creation of a youth organization in every school is encouraged.

Actually, since 1962, the development of education has somewhat diverged from the main orientations defined in the Reform. Achievements and projects in the field of training have been no better linked than formerly to the human environment, nor to the foreseeable needs of the national economy. The political situation as well as the level of competence of our teachers have certainly not permitted establishing the new structures and effectively implementing the new curricula. However, the Overall Plan now makes it possible for new educational projects to be fitted properly within the framework delineated by the 1962 Reform, which called for the following actions:

1. Integration of school education, through the "interest themes" approach, the continuity in the acquisition of knowledge and the linking together of the different stages of education.

2. Deliberate adaptation of education to foreseeable needs of the economy, by the following means:

- a) A determined orientation of the primary curriculum towards the acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary for an immediate improvement in the standards of living and of production (possibly in co-operation with the economic and social ministries);

- b) A progression from the practical towards the theoretical, and the introduction of manual work which should, as far as possible, be profitable (school garden, animal farm or workshop);

- c) A switch of emphasis from knowledge towards skills and attitudes required of a modern worker: diligence, team spirit, curiosity, initiative, punctuality, sense of productivity, etc.

- d) A flexible adaptation of education, its structures, its curricula and its enrolment to the foreseeable manpower needs;

- e) A revitalization of our traditional culture and an extension of the Buddhist teaching and law so that individuals and society may maintain their inner balance.

3. Mobilization of all the nation's educational resources, the school being only one educational tool amongst many others; to this end, a "Special Commission for the study of educational development in conjunction with economic and social development"

has been created in March 1962, of which representatives of the various ministries interested in education are members.

Despite the progress just described, Laos is still far from achieving the aims stated in 1962. It is however not the spirit of the Reform which is at fault, but the conditions in which it was implemented: this has raised many difficulties - formidable but not insuperable. For the Reform to be properly effected, the quality of the teaching staff must be focused upon; teachers must be made to fully understand its meaning, and then be able to develop and adapt the curriculum and syllabi accordingly. Equally imperative is the elimination of the prejudice which would have our youth believe that education leads only to the civil service; they must be convinced that middle-level personnel are just as important as top executives.

As far as curricula are concerned, several seminars have already been held which brought together, at the central, provincial and local levels, those principally in charge of primary education in order to adapt the syllabi of the various school subjects: two syllabi have thus been revised in 1971/72, and five more will be by 1976 when 21 textbooks will also have been recast.

On the other hand, special importance has recently been attached to the pedagogical role of the educational leaders, particularly at the local level, through the setting up of the National School Inspectorate, whereby the administrative and the pedagogical functions formerly vested in the same officials will be split. The problem of selection has also been rethought: in 1971, the CEP which crowns the six years' primary course has been modified and the traditional essay-type tests were replaced by a series of multiple-choice tests which make it possible to assess not only the body of knowledge assimilated by each pupil and the gaps wherein, but also and most importantly the skills he has acquired and his thinking and reasoning ability.

Conclusion

In spite of the difficulties inherent in the present situation and of the scarcity of resources, the results that Laos has obtained in the field of primary education over the last few years are by no means negligible. All our achievements would have been impossible but for the participation of the people who have contributed towards the building of numerous schools and classes, especially through the self-help program, and the devotion of the parents' associations, the number of which is growing throughout the country; but our aim is to go beyond this simple material assistance and to deeply involve the parents in their children's education.

Our goals for the first half of the present decade are realistic and may be summarized as follows:

1. Quantitative goals (for 1976) :

- 281,000 pupils enrolled in the two primary stages ;
- 9,000 teachers, i.e. 500 new teachers per year ;
- 9,600 class-rooms to be built, including 4,100 in the complete schools (6 grades).

2. Qualitative goals

- Reduction of school wastage so that at least 40% of the pupils complete Grade VI ;
- "Laocization" of all stages of primary education ;
- Revision of syllabi in all subjects so that they conform to actual needs and realities ;
- Production of the necessary textbooks in line with the new syllabi ;
- Improvement of teaching methodology ;
- Upgrading all the teachers now serving and developing the Pedagogical Inspectorate ;
- Lowering the pupils-teacher ratio to 35:1 ;
- Extending a practical education to those pupils who are unable to enter secondary school ;
- Increasing and developing the numbers and the role of the parents' associations.

Statistics of primary education
(public and private schools)

Table 1. Trends in primary school-age population and primary enrolment

School year	School-age population (6-14 years) ¹	Primary enrolment ²		Enrolment ratio (%)	Annual enrolment increase (%)
		Total	Private schools		
1965/66	523 400	161 235	15 602	30.8	-
1966/67	537 200	178 470	16 688	33.2	10.7
1967/68	551 000	197 805	18 983	35.9	10.8
1968/69	564 800	206 103	20 379	36.5	4.2
1969/70	578 600	217 359	23 614	37.6	5.5
1970/71	592 400	245 492	27 593	41.4	12.9
1971/72	606 600	265 923	29 244	43.8	8.3

1. Estimated at about 20% of the total population, using the statistics of the Ministry of Planning and Co-operation.

2. There are about 2.9 % pupils under 6 years of age (in Grade I) and 12.5% pupils over 14 years of age (mostly in Grade VI).

Table 2. Total enrolment, and repeaters, in public primary schools, by grade and sex, 1970/71

Grade	Enrolment both sexes		Girls only	
	Total	Repeaters	Total	Repeaters
I	84 895	35 163	33 787	13 490
II	44 692	10 236	16 739	4 019
III	33 963	7 904	12 024	2 705
IV	22 241	4 465	7 405	1 485
V	15 854	2 879	4 812	925
VI	14 728	4 101	4 050	1 211
Total:	216 687	64 748	78 999	23 835

Table 3. Trends in the teaching staff, public and private primary schools

School	Numbers of teachers		Female teachers			Number of pupils per teacher
	Total	In private schools	Total	%	In private schools	
1965/66	4 336	379	944	21.8	215	37
1966/67	4 703	389	1 043	22.2	226	38
1967/68	4 886	432	1 185	24.2	276	40
1968/69	5 101	379	1 298	25.4	247	40
1969/70	5 465	615	1 563	29.0	410	40
1970/71	6 227	735	1 833	29.4	472	39
1971/72	6 558	788	1 981	30.2	490	40

Table 4. Trends in primary schools ¹

School year	Public schools	Private schools	Total
1965/66	2 629	79	2 708
1966/67	2 744	78	2 812
1967/68	2 857	85	2 942
1968/69	2 944	69	3 013
1969/70	3 101	79	3 180
1970/71	3 152	95	3 247
1971/72	3 216	76	3 292

1. Not including: public and private kindergartens, four rural handicrafts schools, one home economics school, a few laboratory schools annexed to the teacher training colleges and the primary school which is attached to the "lycee" in Vientiane.

Table 5. Numbers of primary schools by types, school year 1970/71

Types of schools	Number	Enrolment
1. - Complete schools ("groupes scolaires")	293	97 678
- Incomplete schools ("demi-groupes scolaires")	225)	
- Schools with Grades I to III only (elementary schools)	1 756)	95 581
- Community education rural centres (CERs)	878	23 438
- Kindergartens	6	365
- Laboratory schools	4	837

Table 5. Numbers of primary schools by types, school year 1970/71 (cont'd)

Types of schools	Number	Enrolment
2. - Urban schools	83	...
- Rural schools	3 071	...
- Private schools	95	27 593
3. - Public schools	3 162	217 899
- Private schools	95	27 593
4. - Single sex schools	0	0
- Co-educational schools	3 257	245 492

1. In provincial capitals.

Table 6. Examination results (public primary education)

School year	Enrolment in Grade VI	Successfully passed the CEP ¹		Pupils admitted in 1st year secondary ²	
		Number	%	Number	%
1965/66	7 279	5 063	69. 6	956	13. 1
1966/67	8 397	5 544	66. 0	925	11. 0
1967/68	10 200	6 772	66. 4	2 576	25. 2
1968/69	11 101	7 616	68. 6	1 118	10. 1
1969/70	12 579	7 578	60. 2	1 254	10. 0
1970/71	14 728	10 369	70. 4	1 249	8. 5
1971/72	16 323	8 491	52. 0	1 164	7. 1

1. Primary education certificate

2. Competitive examination (limited number of pupil places)

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