

Fieldwork Report for “2014 World Austronesian Studies”

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China has been increasing its international influence in developing countries in recent years through the mining of natural resources like liquid gas, petroleum, and precious metals. In the case of Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Chinese central government and the Papuan government has signed a mining contract, which allows a Chinese state-owned mining company, known as *Ramu Nico*, to develop a nickel mining project at *Usino-Bundi* district, *Madang* province, highland area of north PNG. *Ramu Nico* aims to dig the mineral nickel from the soil of this environment, producing the nickel/cobalt intermediate product, and shipping it back to China for further processing. Yet, for the sake of Chinese interests, the people of *Bundi* have been displaced, left their homes, lost access to their gardens, and now spend most of their time waiting, as their future is unclear. This essay will address how China’s nickel-mining project have influenced the lives of *Bundi* people, and eventually sparked conflict between *Bundi* people and the staffs of *Ramu Nico*.

This past summer I traveled to *Madang*, PNG, to conduct fieldwork about the social impact of *Ramu Nico* on local *Bundi* communities. The town of *Madang*, which is located in northern PNG, is the third largest city in this country and the capital city in this province. Created from the convergence of the South Bismarck and Australian tectonic plates, blocked by the East-West Central Mountain range, there is no land transportation between Port Moresby (the capital city of PNG) and *Madang*, but air transportation is available between them. The day I arrived, the airport of *Madang* was merely a small hut used as a lobby lounge and a small wooden desk used as a baggage conveyor belt. Making eye contact but avoiding conversation with the Chinese passengers, I looked for my hotel bus driver, as I did not want local people considering me as connected in any way to the Chinese people. On my way to the hotel, the driver asked what my nationality was: “Are you Japanese or Chinese?” “I’m Taiwanese,” I answered. The choices he gave me were the first and second largest foreign investment countries in Papua New Guinea in recent years. “Taiwan, I know! You have many fishing boats in Port Moresby. But why you come to *Madang*?” He asked. “I want to understand the influence of China’s *Ramu Nico* project and how local people feel about it,” I answered, and remembered

being told about the Niugini Tuna Limited – a transnational canned tuna company constituted by Taiwan, Philippines, and Singapore. “*Ramu Nico*? There is their head office!” he said and showed me the building, which was right in front of the capital building of the *Madang* province government. As we neared the city’s central area, there were many supermarkets with security guards, some of whom were holding guns. “Who owns these stores?” I asked. “Chinese people. In the past, we liked the commodities introduced by Chinese people, but now we don’t like them. They sell the same things in different stores with high prices but poor quality,” he replied emotionally.

Different groups and kinds of Chinese immigrants came to *Madang* at different periods. The Chinese immigrants from Southeast China and Southeast Asian countries first settled in northern PNG, named ‘German New Guinea’, which was colonized by the German New Guinea Company in 1884, in order to plant colonial crops (Wu 2005). Some of these male migrant workers, who were shipbuilders, engineers, or tailors, also moved to the towns of *Lae* and *Madang*, which were built by the German company (Ichikawa 2006). By the end of the First World War, the Australian government took over sovereign control of German New Guinea and formulated an immigration restriction act for the Chinese. During the Pacific War, some Chinese immigrants chose to move to Australia, others worked for the Japanese colonial government. After the Australian government seized control of PNG after the Second World War, the Chinese immigrants were allowed to operate small businesses. After the independence of PNG in 1975, a new wave of Chinese immigrants from Southeast Asian countries moved in due to the development of the timber industries in this country (Chin 2008); after PNG’s government began to strengthen their relationship with China in the 1990s, there were also a number of Chinese workers employed by China’s state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and business traders who came to PNG.

For instance, in 2006, a Chinese transnational mining company, Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC), launched a nickel-mining project in *Madang* and brought both the Chinese managers and workers into this area. MCC dug and extracted laterite nickel – created by long-term weathering and iron oxidization in tropical and semi-tropical areas – from the top soil of latosol in a highland area of *Madang* province. They also built up a project company (*Ramu Nico*) and introduced a set of infrastructure improvements that tremendously changed the landscape of this bush ecological environment: the construction of bridge and road systems, and the supplying

of water and power systems. To understand the social impact of this project, I visited the main office of *Ramu Nico* in the town of *Madang*. Without a formal relationship with any employee in this company, I tried to ask local people who worked in this company to introduce me to their Chinese managers. When I finally got into this company and introduced myself to two managers of public relations, one of the managers asked me “Who let you get inside? Why you come here?” I answered: “I am a Taiwanese graduate student and I go to school in New York. I was wondering whether I can have a chance to visit your mining site in order to understand the impact of this mining project on the lives of local people” Then I gave them my business cards. They continued asked me: “The impact of our project? Our project is undergoing a period of construction for two years, which means we already finished our community survey and facilities construction,” one of the managers answered. I continued asked: “May I get some previous research reports in terms of your community survey?” They replied: “All of them were kept in our main office in Beijing. I cannot give you the permission to go to our mining area, but you can check our website and visit a local *Usino* village that is close to our mining site,” he replied and wrote the name of the village on a paper.

After being rejected by *Ramu Nico*, I asked local people whether they have relatives living in *Usino* village. One of the security officers in my hotel told me that I should visit another village, *Enekuai*, because *Usino* is too far from the mining area. *Enekuai* was a resettlement village built by *Ramu Nico* in 2008, as compensation for local landowners because of their loss of lands. I checked out my room the next morning, carrying my backpack and luggage, and waited in the guardroom. The security officer tried to arrange my trip to *Enekuai* with a local young man who provided me a room to rest, and to protect me when I was in the village, since some local people were not friendly with Chinese and they did not know the markers of difference between East Asians. At around 2 pm, they found a teenager named Tony. Tony took me to an Australian supermarket to buy mosquito lotion, rice, sugar, and salt. Then we took a bus to his home. On our way, Tony introduced me to people on the bus. Some of them talked to me and showed me facilities built by the Chinese company: “This is the road built by *Ramu Nico*; this is the bridge built by *Ramu Nico*; and those two large pipes that carry ore nickel are also built by *Ramu Nico*.” After driving on the bumpy mountain roads for about four to five hours, we arrived in *Enekuai* at about 7pm. The sky was already dark, the temperature was cold, but I saw sporadic houses with light aggregated in a small valley surrounded by mountains. As we

approached Tony's house, I heard the songs of American Pop music from a local grocery store. "The Chinese company provides us with power after 6pm everyday," Tony told me.

The resettlement village, *Enekuai*, is located in a valley with an altitude of 700-800 ft., circled by mountains of temperate coniferous forest, with a climate of 86 degrees Fahrenheit in the daytime and 60 degrees Fahrenheit at night. The landscape of *Enekuai* is mainly constituted by houses of local landowners that were built by *Ramu Nico*, as well as two schools, an aid post (hospital) and a local built church. In the adaptation to the tropical highland atmosphere, traditional *Bundi* houses (*Kokopo*) were made from timber or bamboo with many windows, four beams dug into land in order to maintain heat and keep away from moisture, and took local men six months to one year to build. To compensate local landowners from the *Maure* and *Pagaize* clans, *Ramu Nico* built thirty-three houses in 2008 that are now inhabited by around 2000 people. There are two types of houses: One type is for landowners with one restroom and three rooms; the other type is for landowners' sons with one rest room and two rooms. These resettlement houses are shaped like traditional *Kokopo* but with a problematic quality. People call them "kit houses," because *Ramu Nico* made building materials at the town of *Lae* (the second largest city in PNG), transported them to *Enekuai*, and organized them into houses. Since the majority of these houses are made of thin iron sheets, the support beams are merely wood without anti-corrosion treatment, I found it was hot and stuffy in the daytime but cold at night. The floor was already buckling, the beams were eroded, and it shook violently when an earthquake happened.

Papuans who live in *Enekuai* are known as *Bundi* people. The ancestors of the *Bundi* moved to this area around 10,000 years ago and developed agriculture at around 8,000 to 9,000 years ago (Fitz-Patrick and Kimbuna 1983). Before this mining project, the lives of *Bundi* were mainly about gardening, by which they planted staple foods including taro, banana, and sugarcane. The gardening work of *Bundi*, which is similar to "swidden agriculture" and was influenced by the introduction of axes by German missionaries in the 1930s, consists of five steps during the dry season (April to October) of the year: cutting down the trees, letting trees and grass dry, burning dry wood and grass, cleaning and weeding grass, and planting seeds. Making a garden is also a rite of passage for local boys learning to become *Bundi* men (Fitz-Patrick and Kimbuna 1983). Using an account from one of Tony's friends, Jacob, as an example, his father used to take him to their gardens to teach him how to build one, while his father cut big trees and Jacob cut small trees. Under his father's guidance, Jacob learned how to make his

garden, went to school, and raised a pig as his future bride price. In contrast, without his father, Jacob would not be able to go to school and have a wife since he would have to spend most of his time gardening. However, working in a Chinese mining company changed his gardening life. Although this company allows male workers to work two weeks and have one week off in order to take care their gardens and fix their houses, local boys are gradually reluctant to work in the gardens because working in the company is an easier way to earn income in order to buy household items, clothes, and electronic products in town.

During the beginning few days of my life in *Enekuai*, I hung out with Tony, and he introduced me to local elders, his father and mother in-law, his cousin brothers and sisters. One day after hanging out, a man named Rico, who worked in *Ramu Nico* as a driver, came to Tony's house and wanted to talk to me. Rico told me this mining project is problematic and pointed out many problems: the environmental destruction, the water pollution, the lack of opportunities for local people to operate small businesses, the low payment, and the lack of job training for local young men. At the end of our conversation, he told me that he could come back if I needed any pictures or questions. The later days after conversing with Rico, I was surprised by how *Ramu Nico* has become a topic of daily conversation in *Enekuai*. When I took a local bus to town, people talked about *Ramu Nico*; when I traveled to a local market, people shared their opinions about *Ramu Nico* with me; and when I took a walk in *Enekuai*, some people from other villages asked my local friends about my background, because they wondered whether I worked for *Ramu Nico*. I gradually felt overwhelmed by the tension between local community and this Chinese company. Finally, I decided to visit the mining site of *Ramu Nico* in order to get some corporate information and how they deal with local complaints.

To interview a *Bundi* worker, named Charley, at *Ramu Nico*, I visited their mining site, named *Buduwa*, with Tony and his friends. As we were approaching *Buduwa*, the beautiful scenery of semi-tropical forest turned to bare rocks, the comfortable feeling of cool wind became dry and muddy dust, and the cheerful sound of bird songs were replaced by the annoying operating sound of excavators. "This used to be a bush area," Tony told me while some *Bundi* men carried timber passing us. "When they finish *Buduwa*, they will move to *Enekuai*. We don't know where to go and what to do until then," he kept saying. Having made an appointment at 1:30 pm and gotten there two hours early, we decided to wait under the shadow of a tree on a cliff. The area of *Buduwa* was a plateau consisting of units such as an open-pit mine, a de-

agglomeration plant, a beneficiation plant, and supporting facilities (water plant and power plant). When I was trying to take some pictures of the office building, a *Bundi* worker shared his lunch box (Chinese stewed meat with rice) with me. At that moment I felt the office building of *Ramu Nico* was huge but cold, and local people were powerless but friendly. Two hours later, I visited *Ramu Nico*'s office and introduced myself to a Chinese employee. However, I was declined an interview because I did not have permission from their head office in *Madang*. While I was feeling frustrated and walked back to the tree, Tony and his friends told me they could introduce me to other local workers in the village.

As we journeyed back to *Enekuai*, two guys approached us and asked my friends about my identity. After they conversed for a while, one of them, Peter, who had been a security worker in the company for five years, came to me and told me that these Chinese employees only think about themselves and do not make friends with local people: "They think we are primitive and know nothing. They dig our land, but do not become our friends, even produce problems for our future." The term 'friend' caught my attention and I asked him the definition of making friends in local tradition. He replied: "When my brother married a woman from another tribe, for example, people from different villages talked to each other, shared things with each other, stayed together, and helped each other. When people share things, such as betel nuts, they become friends." I then asked him why the Chinese employees cannot be their friends. Peter responded: "Chinese people are bad people, their culture is communist and they do not share with us. They don't even share small things, live with us, or stay with us like one community. They don't adapt to our culture; they stick to their own culture; they don't share or talk to (local) people. If they talk, share things, we'll be all right. But the Chinese came with their culture, how can we become friends? Our cultures are very different." When Peter explained why they cannot become a community, the slogan of this Chinese mining company came to my mind: "One *Ramu NiCo*, One community. We are committed to building a harmonious relationship with communities." Ironically, *Bundi* people did not feel the same way.

The other man we met on our way back to *Enekuai* also shared his experience in *Ramu Nico* with me. His name was Nathan, a 30-year-old man, who had worked in *Ramu Nico* for five years before he left one year ago, and now planted yams in his garden. He told me about how he was treated in this company: "When *Ramu Nico* came, most people here were uneducated. Yet, my parents sent me to school in *Lae* to be educated when I was a teenager. When I worked in

Ramu Nico as a cleaning worker for few years, I asked the company for better training and a chance to go to school, but their response was that they did not any have related policies.” After being rejected by *Ramu Nico* for better training, he decided to leave this company, because the company did not really care about the future of his younger brothers: “They (*Ramu Nico*) kicked me like a soccer ball from different departments. During the five years, I had been working as a cleaning worker, administrator, and a site supervisor. There was no training. Chinese have been here for ten years but there has been no improvement in employment and education.” Therefore, Nathan thought it was better to leave and stay at home.

After hearing his story, I asked him about whether there was any official contract between *Ramu Nico*, PNG government and *Bundi* people, because there should be some information about job training and employment. “There were two versions of MOU – government to government and *Ramu Nico* to local landowner association. But they (*Ramu Nico*) did not follow the MOU. There are lists of job trainings and local employment, but they did not implement them,” he replied and promised me that he will bring me the MOU signed in 2002. “Did local people have any chance to engage in the enactment or discussion of MOU?” I asked. He answered: “Most of us are uneducated. We are low level. How can we know high level? It’s good for our government (PNG). It’s government to government. But we are a democratic country and people have rights. China is a communist country and they only communicate with our government. They come to our land but merely contact our government. These are our lands,” He summarized his feeling about this mining project.

Having heard lots of complaints from people but having failed to gain access to *Ramu Nico*, I decided to explore more kinds of local opinions by visiting local markets and villages. One day on the way to a market (*Banu*) with Tony and his friends, I jokingly asked if we could take some fruits from the trees since we had been walking for a long time, and the sun was really burning. Taking me to rest in a straw shed, their faces turned serious since it can be dangerous to take other’s crops in *Bundi* society. While we were resting, a man with extremely dark black skin walked by. “He’s a *Bougainvillean*. You see his skin color is darker than us,” Tony told me.

For Papuans who live in an area with mineral deposits, bringing up the closure of the *Panguna* mine in the island of *Bougainville* in the late 1980s always reminds them of their ownership of the resources of their lands. The island of *Bougainville*, which is an autonomous province of PNG, is located at the north end of the Solomon island archipelago. Due to the

humid and rainy weather and active volcano activities, there are ample forestry and mining natural resources in this island. For *Bougainvilleans*, their ownership of the land includes the forest on the ground and the mineral deposits underneath (Denoon 2000). However, after the discovery of copper ore deposits in 1969 and the establishment of an Australian mining project known as '*Panguna*' in 1972, the Papuan government occupied the mineral resources of this island. The Papuan government claimed its ownership of the mineral resources through providing local people with health services, education, development aid and so on (Ballard and Banks 2003). However, after receiving little benefit from this project, which accounted for merely 0.5-1.25 percent of total revenue in a period during which this project contributed forty-five percent of the GDP of this country, the anger and disappointment of *Bougainvillean* landowners mounted. In the year 1988, *Bougainvillean* landowners accused the *Panguna* project of polluting their environment, including the pollution of rivers and the extinction of animals, launched an armed attack in concert with the revolutionary army of *Bougainville*, and successfully closed the *Panguna* mine in 1989. Inspired by the story of *Bougainville*, which was also the only successful case of this sort, other Papuans, including *Bundi* communities, use this example and deploy different strategies in order to claim their ownership of lands in the face of continuing development projects by the Papuan government.

I also went to a church in order to experience a sermon, to understand the role of the church in *Bundi* community, and asked their opinions about *Ramu Nico*. The Catholic Church has provided Papua New Guineans with a number of services ever since the advent of German missionaries in the 1930s. For instance, *Bundi* people learned Catholic lessons when they were teenagers and go to church every Sunday morning between 7 am and 11:30 am. Differing from their appearance on working days, every Sunday morning *Bundi* people wear their most beautiful clothes and happily go to church with their friends and family. Sitting together in the sermon, two church leaders respectively shared some stories in the Bible, relating them to the events that had happened in the village recently. Through these stories, people were being asked to work hard, to stop gambling, and to stop drinking too much alcohol. After the sermon, I briefly conversed with two church leaders: "What's the position of the church in the conflict between *Ramu Nico* and *Bundi* people?" "They brought development and it is good. However, many systems and ideas are different. So we don't really like this company," the older leader explained. The younger leader kept saying: "We told people not to fight with these Chinese. We give

lessons every Sunday morning to educate people not to fight, steal, and be honest, kind and love each other.” The mention of systems caught my attention and I asked: “What do you mean by many systems?” The older leader answered: “*Bundi* people already adapted to Western ways of development. *Ramu Nico* came with their Chinese systems and we can not get used to it.” As we were ending our conversation, they shook my hand and went home for lunch.

Before I finished my fieldwork, I made a last attempt to contact the staff of *Ramu Nico*. After calling them for a few times, finally, one of the managers gave me a chance to do a telephone interview. Yet something unexpected happened and changed my plan. It was about 10:00 in the Monday morning of my last week in *Enekuai*. When some male voices woke me up, I first wondered whether some of them were drinking alcohol and fighting with each other, since I had noticed men here like to drink. As I walked out of my room, Tony’s sister told me there was a fight between staff of *Ramu Nico* and local boys – eight excavators and one truck were burned, and three Chinese staffs were injured. The voices I heard were local men talking about preparing to fight with the Chinese. At that moment, I was worried about not being able to make my appointment with a manager of *Ramu Nico* two days later, but I realized soon after my safety was also endangered. On the way to fetch water, people congregated and some of looked at me, and I could feel that they were talking about me. “I-Chang, I-Chang,” a familiar voice called my name and it was Tony’s friend Jacob. As we went home, he explained that he had loudly called my name to make sure the others knew that I was his friend. It was not until then I felt endangered, and I realized he was trying to protect me. Later, people began to ask me some questions and tried to figure out what position I stood in relation to them. I could no longer position myself as some neutral student who was trying to understand the social impact of this mining. My Chinese appearance had forced me into in a different form of engagement.

In the evening of the same day, the leaders of *Bundi* called people to congregate. The sky was getting darker and darker, but people’s emotions were getting stronger and stronger. A leader first explained what happened today and how to respond to policemen tomorrow. When I was walking to the crowd, I was a little scared but still smiled to people with a nervous face. Finally, I went there safely and stayed in the crowd. “I-Chang stays here,” a local boy said loudly. It was that moment that I felt that local people really accepted me and did not think I am a Chinese. This unexpected accident was both frustrating and exciting for me. Although I was not able to interview the Chinese manager, this accident provided me with a chance to witness how

local people interpret their action, to experience how the Chinese company deals with it, and to observe how the Papuan government and related organizations were involved in this incident.

During the following two days, I experienced the most dramatic conditions in *Enekuai*. People were waiting for officials and the Chinese employees, preparing for the explanation of damaged machines, and arranging where to hide for the young boys involved and their families. Eventually, both officials and the Chinese managers did not come, except the policemen. It was 9 am in the morning when four police cars with ten policemen came to village. *Bundi* male elders congregated and sat in the meeting tent, *Bundi* young men stayed beside the elders and made jokes, and *Bundi* women and children stayed at the edge of the meeting. A policeman, who wore a blue suit, broke the silence and said they already knew the damage of the accident, they needed a list of the names of the young boys involved. They asked the village people to give them an explanation, and they urged people to respect the laws of PNG. Later, a *Bundi* lady emotionally spoke out with tears: “We are a community. We as a community burned the machines. If you want to arrest our boys, arrest my father, my mother, and my sisters.” There was a period of silence. As the situation became more and more tense, a group of angelic school boys and girls came with their hand-made posters reading: “Our Land, Our Future, No Hope.” There was no solution on that day. Even though the chairmen of the local landowner association came at 5 pm in the afternoon, *Bundi* people again emphasized the lack of local benefits and the solidarity of their community. *Bundi* people continued to wait for the officials or the managers of *Ramu Nico*. During the rest of the days, *Bundi* people told me that they hoped officials and the Chinese employees would come this time. They had been protesting for many times and all of them were useless. All they got were the exhibition of the military power of policemen and the intimidation of the punishment of law.

The serious situation continued until the last day before I left *Enekuai*. I woke up at 9 am in the morning and the village was strangely quiet because there was only a few people walking on the road and no people were gambling. When I was having my breakfast, Tony’s sister told me we might be able to visit *Buduwa*, to take some picture of the burned machines, and to check the situation after the accident happened. As soon as I had prepared and walked out of my room, a man passed by our house and told her only women were permitted to enter mining area. Soon after, Jacob came to our house and we sat on the ground of living room. “We are going to do some bad things to the Chinese people. We might burn down the pumping station since some

Chinese workers live there,” he said. I was deadpan when he told me this and then answered him, “how about *Bundi* people who also live there?” “We will inform them,” he replied. After we conversed for a while, he went back to meet up with other *Bundi* boys, and I was wondering whether they would really do these things, and whether he was giving me a test with a wrong information.

On the same day in the evening, power did not come at 6 pm as usual. When I was thinking about whether I should cook with fire and whether this was a punishment from the company, eventually the power came on 7 pm. I saw people went out, playing cards, and I heard loud music from the grocery store. The life of *Enekuai* became usual. When I finished dinner, Jacob took out a wild boar tooth as a gift for me because I was leaving tomorrow. As soon as I began asking him why he gave this to me, people began to congregate and ask all the *Bundi* people to go to the field in front of the aid post, because they saw the car lights and the policemen came. I felt nervous again, failing to catch the tooth, and telling Jacob to leave, because he was involved in this accident. The police cars did not drive into the village but circled the boundary of *Enekuai* because there might be some young boys who ran out from village. People congregated and made loud noises. Tony’s sister closed the door, turned off the light, and called me to stay inside. After about one hour, people began to go home, the grocery store played the music again, and I did not know why the policemen left. When I was sitting and talking with Merry, a guy came in the dark and it was Jacob. “Why you are still here?” I asked. “The *Bundi* fellows want us to stay and fight with the policemen as a community,” he answered and gave me the tooth. I prepared a papaya he gave me before and ate with them. I also gave him a ring carved with my name as return.

I left *Enekuai* safely the next day morning. On my way to town, the circumstance on the bus was strange compared to my previous experiences. Usually, *Bundi* people happily sing songs, joking with each other, or chewing betel nuts on the bus. Yet, this time people seldom talked to each other, and they also did not talk to me. The only one person who talked to me was a local entrepreneur of farm products. He shared his project for me, asked for my phone number and email, and wondered whether I can introduce him to some foreign organizations, because he wants to help local farmers to sell their products to foreign countries. Before arriving in my hotel, we stopped at a street vender. When I was buying a newspaper, the radio news on the bus was reporting the incident and said that the development brought by *Ramu Nico* was not what local

people wanted. The guy I conversed with before told me his opinion of that incident and that was one of the reasons he wanted to help local farmers.

The sign of my hotel gradually came to our eyes. I got off the car, shaking hands with the guy and the bus driver. When I checked in my room and read the newspaper, a report described the accident, saying how good *Ramu Nico*'s project was, how dangerous these village people were, and how important this project was for this country. I found similar reports in other newspapers the following days. The local opinion I heard on the bus radio was the only form of local information. Before my flight to Port Moresby two days later, I visited the downtown of *Madang*, buying some souvenirs, and taking some pictures of this unusual trip. I went there with the guard of a local gardener in my hotel, because it was still unsafe for me to walk on the street. When we walked through the main bus station and the markets near the seashore, local people looked at us curiously. When I was buying coffee in a Chinese supermarket, the Chinese manager and cashier seemed to try to talk to me because they saw me came with a Papuan. There was such a clear racial boundary and tension between local people and the Chinese. I had been told how insatiable and stubborn the Chinese were by some local people; I had also been told how dangerous local people were by the Chinese in the restaurants. I wonder whether these are normal conditions regarding China's overseas natural resource projects, and whether there is a way to achieve an agreement between the locals and *Ramu Nico*. These ideas accompanied me after I left Papua New Guinea.

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