

The Owegbe Cult: Political and Ethnic Rivalries in Early Postcolonial Benin City

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Abstract

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with various distinct ethnicities, religions, and languages represented in the population. As a precondition to an integrative process of nationhood, political ideologies and economic interests often retreat along and into traditional or revised ethnic loyalties. The Owegbe cult is a case in point. Traditionally, Owegbe is a fortifying ritual that offers spiritual armor against physical harm. But it is also a socially transformative group enterprise that inducted entrants into a powerful organization to serve collective political ends. Documents from the courts and the Alexander Commission suggest that Owegbe's social, political, and ethnic functions emerged in the volatile atmosphere of Nigeria's Midwest State Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. This paper uses the ethnic theories of the time, government reports, and popular press accounts to examine Owegbe as a secret society in a contentious regional environment. Owegbe served economic aspirations in a region once dominated by a dynastic political kingship system that by the 1960s included increasingly sophisticated and educated entrepreneurial and political elites; Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo national interests; as well as the patrimonial interests of the palace. Recently, Owegbe has functioned as a university student secret society.

Introduction

Studies of political mobilization in sub-Saharan African nation-states of the 1960s have focused on identities and political interests as the basis for rivalry, dissension, and conflict. One cohort of scholars viewed ethnic coalescence as the key element around which Africans organized their social and political existence, and especially their relations with others. *Ethnicity*—or its less laundered form, *tribalism*—referred to an intense attachment to one’s immediate kin group, or “tribe,” and therefore to a hostility toward outsiders (recent theoretical formulations call this “ontological formations.”)¹ In this scenario, mutual suspicion and cultural incompatibility in a “we-versus-they” dichotomy had, until independence, been restrained by the presence of a neutral colonizing power. Writing on urban pluralism in Africa, Leo Kuper informs us that “prior to independence, the hostility tribesmen felt for their western overlords must have been great enough to overcome any repugnance for each other.”² In this view, or “ethnicity as cause,” ethnic coalescence offered the fundamental expression of primordial sentiments (cf. Clifford Geertz for the classic elaboration of this theme).³ Ethnicity as cause focused on the continued primacy of traditional loyalties at the expense of other, more broadly based, multiple, cross-cutting allegiances.⁴

Other scholars perceived ethnicity as emergent and situational phenomena (in recent framings, “representations,”⁵ “subjective and ideological formations,”⁶

¹ P. James, *Globalization, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In* (London: Sage, 2006).

² Leo Kuper, “Sociology: Some Aspects of Urban Plural Societies,” in R. Lystad (ed.), *The African World: A Survey of Social Research* (Praeger: New York, 1965) 67–95.

³ Clifford Geertz, *Old Societies and New States* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1966).

⁴ In a typical comment, W. Arthur Lewis writes, “Plurality is the principal problem of most of the new states created in the 20th century. Most of them included people who differ from each other in language or tribe or race; some of these groups live side by side in a long tradition of mutual hostility, restrained in the past only by a neutral power. French writers use the word ‘cleavages’ to describe a situation where people are mutually antipathetic, not because they disagree on matters or principle . . . but simply because they are historic enemies. Cleavages cannot be overcome by argument and economic concessions . . . because it is not based on disputes about principles or interests.” William A. Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), .65

⁵ Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: The Transformation of an Illusion* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁶ James, *Globalization, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In*.

and “orientations”⁷). Such scholars posited that ethnicity is emergent in the sense that as it secures valuable and scarce goods, an ethnic group is an interest group that mobilizes ethnicity to achieve its goals. While the roots of mobilization lie in economic interests, the outlet may be cultural or ethnic, or “ethnicity as consequence.” Ethnicity is situational in that it is one path of articulation by which secular interests are expressed and necessitates multiple responses,⁸ or criteria of relevance.⁹

Ọwegbe is a Nigerian secret society that gained currency in the 1960s as a potent agency for political mobilization. I argue that both theoretical orientations (“ethnicity as cause” and “ethnicity as consequence”) are germane to an analysis of Ọwegbe, including its dynamics, organization, and meanings. Nigeria is a heterogeneous society divided by distinct ethnicities and diverse religious and linguistic groups. Political ideologies typically follow the path of least resistance along traditional cleavages.¹⁰ The fluidity of *both* shifting parochialisms and opportunistic pragmatism are essential to understanding the emergence of the Ọwegbe Society as a powerful political force in Benin City, center of the former Great Kingdom of Benin. The Benin Kingdom is famous worldwide for its brass art castings, its moats that are part of the *Guinness Book of Records*, and a system of political centralization through kingship and primogeniture that dates from the ninth century AD.

In the context of Nigerian ethnic regionalisms as perceived at the time, Ọwegbe was described as a recidivist expression of primordial sentiments designed to maintain the hegemony of the dominant Edo ethnic group in south-central Nigeria. Though its origins are obscure, this secret society gained

⁷ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff in *The David Skomp Distinguished Lectures in Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁸ M. Morrison, *Ethnicity and Political Integration: The Case of Ashanti, Ghana*. Foreign and Comparative Studies/African Series 38 (Ithaca: Syracuse University Press, 1982). This is a consistent theme in studies of African and other ethnicities.

⁹ James Watson, *Between Two Cultures: Immigrants and Minorities in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). Situational analysis continues to be an important concept and method in comparative anthropology and urban sociology. See Alisdair Rogers and Steven Vertovec (eds.), *Urban Context: Ethnicity, Social Networks and Situational Analysis* (Oxford: Berg, 1995).

¹⁰ Chima Njoku, “Awo Destroyed Nigerian Unity” (BNW: Biafra World Message Board: The Voice of a New Generation. <http://messageboard.biafranigeriaworld.com>, Jan. 4, 2005).

prominence in the early 1960s out of the political strife within the Benin Division of the then Western Region of Nigeria and was touted as an instrument of terror against political opponents. Media reports regarded it as a classic example of tribal blood loyalties endemic in African societies. The most lurid picture of the Owegbe Society was painted by *Time* magazine:

Owegbe was active as a kind of Ku Klux Klan to protect backward Beni [*sic*] tribesmen against the political inroads of their more aggressive, better educated neighbors, the Yorubas and the Ibos. When the pushy Ibos captured the post of provincial prime minister in the traditional home of the Benis—Benin City—Owegbe leaders were humiliated and ordered a rampage of terror, filling Nigerian newspapers with stories of Owegbe beatings and intimidation.¹¹

Police raided shrines in Benin, discovered banned devices used in juju ceremonies and two human skulls, feeding rumors that the cult engaged in human sacrifice. To ensure compliance with Owegbe commands, initiates were ushered through a grisly ritual, cut three times on the cheek or chest, then made to eat the heart of a cockerel and down a loathsome liquid potion brewed from kola nuts and wine and the blood, hair, finger - and toenails of a dead cultist. They finally bound themselves to Owegbe with 24 oaths, each ending with the chilling refrain: “If I refuse . . . let Owegbe make juju.”¹²

This description fed into Western notions of atavism in sub-Saharan Africa. Devoid of purple prose and allusions to apotropaic rituals, however, *Time* magazine’s is not far removed—especially in its insinuation of tribal tit for tats—from the concept of “ethnicity as cause,” with Owegbe expressing primordial loyalties and categorical sentiments.

¹¹ Anon., ‘Tribal cults and politics’ *Time* (New York, Time Inc. 3 September 1966), 36.

¹² Anon., ‘Tribal Cults and Politics,’ 36.

A Note on Political Ethnicity Theory in the 1960s

Leaving aside *Time* magazine's journalistic jingoism, the passage suggests two conflated views of political ethnicity: ethnicity as cause and ethnicity as means. One view refers to tribalism and its corollaries, such as nepotism, as worthy of moralistic condemnation in the same manner as racism.¹³ It suggests an attachment to a particular group and therefore a cultural incompatibility and an inherent hostility to or suspicion of outsiders.¹⁴ This is ethnicity as generic.

Another view is ethnicity as artifact. Here, ethnicity is, as Henry Bretton says, "a nest egg or a political insurance to be drawn on when needed for added strength." He goes on to assert that ethnicity is utilized by politicians as "the simplest language one could relate to . . . [but] as soon as a public position has been attained . . . tribal spokesmen decry tribalism as divisive, enervating, and debilitating forces that must be discouraged."¹⁵ Elizabeth Colson notes that political leaders "mobilize a body of followers responsive to common symbols . . . It is the potential leaders' need for loyal followings rather than any ethnic group's need for self-expression that lies behind the mobilization of tribes and the manifestation of tribalism in contemporary Africa."¹⁶

The way Owegbe was portrayed in the media and by social scientists of the time turned on ethnicity as the basis for conflict. Primordial feelings explained political rivalries. Juxtaposed, however, appeals to ethnic loyalties served as a useful means to secure the reins of power and prestige, an efficient avenue to aggrandizement that calls up attachments to the readily familiar bases of family, land, patrimony, and language. On the broader canvas of political activities in the

¹³ E. Huxley, "Death in Nigeria," *National Review*, New York (Feb. 22, 1966), 163.

¹⁴ Simon Ottenberg, "Ibo Education and Social Change," in H. Weiler (ed.) *Erziehung und Politik in Nigeria* (Rombach Frieberg in Breisgau: Verlag, 1964), 28.

¹⁵ Henry Bretton, 'Political Influence in southern Nigeria,' in E. Spier (ed.) *The Primacy of Politics* (New York: Random House, 1966), 120–132.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Colson, "Contemporary Tribes and the Development of Nationalism," in June Helm (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1967 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 205. Gerhard Lenski's comments on categorical concepts versus variable ones: "Categorical concepts, by their very nature, force one to think in limiting either-or terms." But, he argues, when categorical concepts are transformed into variable ones, we cease to ask whether ethnicity exists or not, but rather the extent to which it is present and influences interpersonal relationships. Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), 20.

Benin Division of the Western Region, communal loyalties were said to have been expertly juggled by adroit politicians to serve commercial, entrepreneurial, and bureaucratic regional interests. *Ọwegbe* offered a way of achieving political control by separation from the Western Region, and securing the new opportunities that colonialism afforded, with *Ọwegbe* expressing instrumentality.

The meanings of *Ọwegbe* lend credibility to both ethnicity as cause and ethnicity as consequence. *Ọwegbe* can be glossed as “strong body.” As a member of the Otu-Edo Divisional Committee reported during testimony before the Alexander Commission, set up to investigate alleged atrocities by *Ọwegbe*,

Owegbe has variable meanings. It is a strong shrub in the desert which resists all weather. *Owegbe* is a strong person. In another reference when there is a dividing line between two properties and anything happens to fall on the boundary, *Owegbe* takes possession of that thing as his own; hence, the man who takes possession . . . is referred to as the *Owegbe*. In Benin it is said: “*Owebe Orheimioin no/re/uvow.*” (*Owegbe* takes what is in no-man’s land).¹⁷

Actually, it is *Ọwegbe ọrhiemwin nọ re uviẹn*, or “It is the strong man [body] that takes what is on the land.” It means ownership of the land by indigenes. The relationship between land (in terms of personal property) and kingdom (in terms of identity) is a historic one. Property rights are now adjudicated by the courts, but there remains a sense in which the king is the owner of the land, at least the rightful guardian of it. The patrimony of the Benin Kingdom includes citizenship, as in *ọvien oba*, “slaves of the king.” This is acknowledged in the title of the king: *Ọmọ n’Ọba n’Edo*, “the child that is the king that is the land.” The king is the dynastic overlord of the land from time immemorial into perpetuity.

¹⁷ D. A. R. Alexander, *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Owegbe Cult* (Lagos: Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1966), D.21.114–5.

Politics in the Midwest Region of Nigeria

In 1963, three years after Britain granted independence, Nigeria had about forty million people divided among three political regions: North, East, and West. There were three political parties, each nominally in control of a region: the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the North, the Action Group (AG) in the West, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the East. Each region had a complex makeup, generally a preponderant majority of culturally related ethnic groups in addition to linguistic minorities. The major groups were the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East, and the Yoruba in the West. None of the regions could be described as homogeneous in religious or ethnic terms, and minority groups added to this diversity.

On August 9, 1963, following a referendum favored by eighty-nine percent of the voters, the Midwest Region was carved from the Western Region. The Midwest Region consisted of two provinces—Benin and Delta—and a number of divisions. The largest divisions consisted of Edo-speaking peoples, including Benin Division, Ishan Division; groups in Afenmai, and the Urhobos, sometimes regarded as a separate “tribe” (though they are village-based politically), with a form of “Edo” that is unintelligible in Ishan (another Edo group), but politically linked to the historic Benin Kingdom. A large Ijaw population lives in the Western Ijaw Division, and Western Igbo live in the two eastern divisions of Asaba and Aboh. The Western Igbo have affinities to the Edo and notions of kingship, and also to the Eastern Igbo, with a traditional egalitarian village structure.

The census for 1952 (Table 1) lists the areas' ethnic groups, the first five of which are regarded as Edo. Tables 2 and 3 are ethnic groups by political divisions.

Table 1:ETHNIC GROUPS IN BENIN AND DELTA PROVINCES, 1952

<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Benin Province</u>	<u>Delta Province</u>
Edo (or Bini)	420,842	6,608
Urhobo	27,893	244,755
Etsako	90,000	-----
Akoko-Edo	17,788	-----
Ivbiosakan	47,788	-----
Igbo	150,409	139,068
Ika	113,114	-----
Ijaw	6,035	66,175
Itsekiri	3,042	28,295
Yoruba	10,979	5,031
Isoko	-----	93,740

Source: Population Census of Western Nigeria 1952. Lagos: Government Printers. 1959:17.

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Table 2: POPULATIONS OF PREDOMINANTLY EDO-SPEAKING DIVISIONS
1952

<u>Division</u>	<u>Edo Speakers</u>	<u>Non-Edo Speakers</u>
Benin	225,000	67,000
Ishan	184,000	8,000
Afenmai	172,000	32,000
Urhobo	295,000	28,000

Willink Commission: Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allaying Them. London: HMSO. 1958:7.

Table 3: POPULATIONS OF PREDOMINANTLY NON-EDO SPEAKING DIVISIONS 1952

<u>Division</u>	<u>Edo Speakers</u>	<u>Non-Edo Speakers</u>
Asaba	6,000	206,000
Aboh	19,000	111,000
Western Ijaw	18,000	65,000
Warri	13,000	41,000

Source: Willink Commission: Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allying Them. London: HMSO. 1958:7.

By 1965 the Midwest House of Assembly had sixty-three NCNC members. The AG and the Midwest Democratic Front (MDF), which was a local constituent of the NPC, had one member each. The situation was more complex than these figures indicate. The NCNC was national; Benin Division was a special area in which the NCNC allied with the Otu-Edo, a local and ethnocentric party whose name means “Benin Society.” Notionally fused with the NCNC, Otu-Edo enjoyed autonomy as the Benin branch of the NCNC. The NCNC/Otu-Edo represented the parochial interests of the Edo (mainly Bini), while the NCNC-Pure, as it was known, represented the interests of Igbo living in the Midwest Region and outside the fold of Otu-Edo. To understand this alliance and its relationship to the Owegbe Society, we need to discuss the Minority States Movement.

Minority States Movement

From the 1940s both Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo, Nigerian nationalists, looked to a future independent from Britain and proposed creating states along broad cultural and linguistic lines. Their immediate concern was that new states and national-regional sentiments would emerge more easily if ethnic diversity—to avoid particularism—was taken into account. Nigeria has more than 300 ethnolinguistic categories, each with localized sentiments. However, by the

1950s, as greater political power devolved on the three existing regions—North, West, and East—the movements for separation from these three regions gained ground among the non-Yoruba of the West, the non-Igbo of the East, and the non-Hausa of the North's Middle Belt. Aware of these sentiments, the NCNC and the AG acknowledged minority interests in order to achieve a national following. The AG forged links with proponents of a non-Igbo Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State in the Eastern Region, while the NCNC, based in the East, led the drive for a non-Yoruba state in the Western Region. Igbo in the Benin and Delta Provinces looked for support from the NCNC, which they saw as their party. So long as the NCNC fought for creation of a Midwest State, and vicariously identified with Edo interests, the Edo accepted their support.

The success of the Minority States Movement in the Midwest provinces resulted from crises in the Western Region: the split between Awolowo and his successor as premier, Samuel Akintola, and the investigation of the AG government's illegal financial practices. By 1962 the AG had lost its political grip on the region.

The Minority States Movement also benefited from popular sentiment in the Benin and Delta Provinces. Many Midwesterners, especially the Edo, felt that the AG had concentrated development in Yoruba West while neglecting them. They directed their hostility at the Benin branch of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF), an exclusive society that had been founded by aspiring Yoruba in Lagos, the federation capital. In the Benin Division this included Edo men of repute. Ogbonis, as members of the ROF came to be known, controlled the markets, the tax system, and influential businesses. Ogbonis are reported to have violated the law with impunity, not difficult where civil law is weak.

At first a revival of an old secret society based on a cult of the Yoruba gods, the ROF later evolved into an elite social club, with initiation rituals that mimicked those of the Masons. Eventually, the ROF transformed into a political organization that came to dominate the administration of Benin Division, much to the chagrin of its traditional ruler—the Oba of Benin, Akenzua II—and the people. The influence of the ROF spread among officials of the Benin and Delta

Provinces, who sought membership to curry favor that advanced their mobility. Edo cringed under what they saw as Yoruba domination. Locals feared domination by nonnatives. Many feared a permanent AG majority in the Western House of Assembly, with the AG drawing its backstage support from the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, an organization that fostered pan-Yoruba unity in a region of religious and cultural complexity. The Egbe Omo Oduduwa (whose title literally means “body of the children of Oduduwa,” the presumptive progenitor of all Yoruba) manifested its public activities through the ROF by controlling boards of directors, commissions and corporations, and the magistracy and customary courts. Although the Willink Commission set up in 1957 to look into the fears of ethnic group minorities¹⁸ dismissed charges against the ROF as baseless, the popular belief in the validity of the accusations affected local attitudes. By the 1950s, Ogbonism had become synonymous with oppression. That the AG still succeeded at the polls reflected that party’s control over the police, harassment of opposition candidates, preferential treatment for party candidates, and heavy tax assessments on non-supporters. Voters also turned against known Ogboni members rather than on the AG itself. Voting patterns focused on local rather than regional and national issues.

The widespread influence of the ROF among chiefs and civil officers roused popular resentment in Benin City. This antipathy led to the formation of the Otu-Èdo, an organization that supported Edo cultural and commercial interests, the traditional form of kingship and the Oba, and independence from Yoruba and Ogboni influence. Members leaned toward the NCNC as a buffer. Otu-Èdo leaders hoped to wrest power from the AG generally and the Ogbonis in particular. Under the leadership of Chief Omo-Osagie, the Otu-Èdo affiliated with the NCNC, made more palatable because the Oba of Benin—no longer a member of Otu-Èdo and therefore no longer perceived as a patriot for Edo advancement—

¹⁸ Set up in 1957, the Willink Commission named after Harry Willink, former Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, who headed the Inquiry, looked into the fears of ethnic group minorities that the imposed colonial regional divisions of the country, could lead to the domination of the minority ethnic groups in the three regions of the Nigerian federation. See R.T. Akinyele, ‘State Creation in Nigeria: The Willink Report in Retrospect’ *African Studies Review*, 39:2 (1996), 71-94.

had accepted a position as minister without portfolio in the AG, thereby automatically becoming an AG member.

The AG promised to support creation of a Midwest State, but the Oba's paradoxical action was regarded with suspicion among local Edo, who maintained their allegiance to the Otu-Edo (their perceived communal party) and shied away from their traditional loyalty to the Oba of Benin. The vacuum of leadership left by Oba Akenzua II was filled by Chief Omo-Osagie, who in addition to heading the Otu-Edo was Federal Minister of Internal Affairs of the NCNC.

The Oba saw many of his affluent chiefs aligning themselves with AG patronage. More germane, Omo-Osagie represented the loyal opposition, the traditional town chiefs versus the palace chiefs, a separation that had been a hallmark of the society for centuries. This arrangement often worked very well: the town chiefs offered useful governance on behalf of the citizenry and served to blunt the autocratic powers of the king in an elegant balance of power. The Oba appointed the *iyase*, head of the town chiefs, and in ordinary circumstances this functioned both to support the king and allow for expression of popular sentiments and popular disapproval.

But in times of extraordinary change, the delicate balance of power shifted from mutual accommodation to animosity. Town chiefs in the past, notably the *iyase*, challenged the king, even the system of kingship itself. Town chiefs rallied against inept kings; the uneasy transition to colonial rule offered ways to usurp the kingship. Colonial rule provided a fluid landscape for numerous avenues of negotiation and redefinition never before available. New elites attempted to rearrange the traditional landscape while following traditional procedures governing the separation of powers.¹⁹

¹⁹ Richard Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963). Writing about these processes, Richard Sklar argues that Oba Akenzua II joined the AG as a member of a rising class. *Class* in a Marxist sense is a misnomer. But differences in attitude and social status distinctions in the American sense are apropos. The Oba joined the AG, and also by implication the ROF, not in support of Ogboni class interests but to align himself with whomever was in power and in opposition to Omo-Osagie. Like many other traditional rulers, the king felt insecure under colonial rule, especially because the British had sent his grandfather into exile after the Punitive Expedition of 1897. Although the kingship system was reinstated in 1914, the lull gave opportunities for those savvy enough to take advantage of the conquest. See Richard Sklar, 'The Contribution of Tribalism to Nationalism in Western Nigeria,' *Journal of Human*

The king endeavored to remain a father to his people so that when they requested jobs, he could pass on these requests to the government with some chance of success. Political alignment with the AG boosted palace authority as the font of patronage, as had been done in the past, and then adjusted to present circumstances. The Oba's affiliation with the AG offered an oppositional base to Omo-Osagie and the shifting venues of political authority in Benin City, font of Edo kingship. However, election results thwarted the Oba. Following the demise of the AG as a significant political force in the Midwest, the NCNC/Otu-Èdo won overwhelmingly.

NCNC and OTU-ÈDO Conflict

Although Otu-Èdo—and its militant supernatural branch, Owegbe—came to the fore in opposition to the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF) it is in the context of its alliance with the NCNC that it gains special relevance. Tension arose between the Otu-Èdo and what was known as NCNC-Pure. The rising crescendo and press publicity given to alleged atrocities by Owegbe members, and reports of secret initiations and the taking of oaths of allegiance, proved a threat to the NCNC-Pure. The NCNC ineffectually attempted to control Otu-Èdo and bring it into conformity with the NCNC constitution.

An obvious manifestation of these efforts focused on changing the name of Otu-Èdo. It was suggested that the local branch of the party be referred to as NCNC-Simpliciter. However, Otu-Èdo leaders insisted that *NCNC Otu-Èdo* was the equivalent of *NCNC-Simpliciter* and that, in any case, the name would not be dropped because it had political significance and emotional appeal for adherents.

Relations, 8:3/4 (1960), 407–418. Richard Sklar, “Political Science and National Integration—A Radical Approach,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 5:1 (1967), 1–11.

Britain sought to combine bureaucratic efficiency with the recognition of “natural rulers” according to the doctrine of indirect rule, formulated by Lord Lugard and designed for India. The policy emphasized colonial control through local intermediaries. In southern Nigeria, the colonial government created or supported chiefs amenable to its policy. In the former kingdom of Benin, the effects of indirect rule exacerbated the traditional cleavages of town and palace. This carried right up to the eve of independence and the creation of political parties. Although one can overtly divide conflicts in terms of “traditionalism” versus “modernity,” contentions actually represented the multiple economic and political goals of different groups, as adjudicated within a known frame of reference.

Particularly virulent was the animosity between the *Midwest Voice*—the mouthpiece of the Osadenis Crusade (the militant arm of the NCNC),²⁰ which was instrumental in highlighting the activities of the Otu-Edo—and the *Midwest Champion*, the mouthpiece of the Otu-Edo that accused the political enemies of Otu-Edo with political discrimination and recrimination.

Reasons for this mutual antagonism between allies are not hard to surmise. Frustration raged among the Edo, who were confronted not only with the AG Ogboni but also with the local victories of the mostly Igbo NCNC. The Edo were not privy to the spoils of politics. Igbo premier of the region Dennis Osadebay had garnered the gratitude of many Edo because of his support for a Midwest State, and Osadebay was president of the Midwest State Movement beginning in 1956. However, it became increasingly galling to the Edo that he was responsible for the disproportionate share of patronage, senior civil service appointments, and other amenities that benefited the Igbo.

As Osadebay's interests at the national level were intimately tied to NCNC leaders in the Eastern Region, many Edo sensed a lack of relevance in his local leadership. Galling, too, his residence in Asaba Division, the easternmost sector of the region and one populated almost entirely by Igbo, meant that the Edo could not readily appeal to him. They felt insulted that he did not reside in Benin City, the seat of traditional Edo supremacy. To counteract the perceived neglect and Igbo domination, Otu-Edo leaders made increasing use of Ọwegbe rituals and intimidation. The militancy of Ọwegbe and the fear of ritual means for political usurpation created a miniature reign of terror in Benin City and areas under Ọwegbe influence.

²⁰ Not proved one way or another, the crusade's name lends itself to speculation. *Osa*, the first three letters of Osadebay's surname, is a variant for the word *god* in several southern Nigerian languages. Might the name of this organization have been a subliminal association with divinity or royalty, like the Ooni (king) of Ife or the Oba (king) of Benin? It is supposed that traditionally the Igbo had no chiefs and are egalitarian, but their oracular shrines (Arochukwu and a kind of sacred kingship at Nri), supported by archaeological excavations, suggest otherwise. In any case, the Igbo have caught up in allocating chiefships to all and sundry as patronage and social status yearnings.

Origins of Ọwegbe

Some secret societies grow to political prominence with deep cultural and historical roots. The Ogboni Society originated as a cult to the earth. Embedded in the fabric of Yoruba social life, it became a nexus of political influence and garnered allegiances that skirted colonial authority. The AG employed it as a means for political solidarity both before independence in 1960 and as Nigeria moved rapidly to parliamentary self-rule.

Ọwegbe has a more recent, but murky, history. Its genesis can be traced anywhere from 1944 to 1954. In 1944 Chief Omo-Osagie brought together a consortium of native doctors to help him win a civil libel action. They concocted an assortment of protective medicines that were rubbed into body cuts—a series of X-shaped patterns made with razor blades or needles on the chest, back, arms, and legs of initiates. The concoctions of herbs were reputed to make individuals impervious to machete cuts and gunshots. Procedures included bathing in traditional Osun water, a fetid mixture of dead animal parts made of crocodile head, dead birds, and forest ingredients. Osun water was intended to ward off harm, while the “marks of Ọwegbe” served as a visible warning for others to beware.²¹ After the libel action of 1944, Ọwegbe survived as a secret cult.²² As independence neared and political rivalries intensified, Ọwegbe became a counter to the AG, which was backed by the Ogboni Society.

As head of a new regional party, Omo-Osagie sought the premiership of the Midwest Region. Omo-Osagie’s seniority as a seventy-year-old chief, backed by the medicines of Ọwegbe and supported by the NCNC, engendered fear, and with a supernatural mystique base, he could directly challenge the ancestral

²¹ The author underwent this initiation and therefore has firsthand knowledge of the ritual aspects and the implications.

²² Another origin story of equal credibility is that Otu-Edo created Owegbe from a cult practice in Ishan Division, an Edo-speaking area to the north of Benin. Prince Shaka Momodu, who is known as the Lion of Ishan and was a Midwest Minister of Internal Affairs, denied he was a member of Owegbe but claimed that Ishan militant youth under his employ had initiated into a cult offering invincibility greater than that offered by its offshoot, Owegbe. Prince Momodu insisted that, like Owegbe members, he was impervious to machete cuts and gunshot wounds. At the Alexander Commission inquiry, set up to investigate alleged Owegbe atrocities, the presiding judge remarked that even lions are not gunshot proof, to which Prince Momodu appealed that he was a special lion and offered to give a demonstration of his invincibility. The report of the commission notes that the tactful judge did not pursue the matter.

powers of the Oba of Benin. How this challenge to the Oba could be played out became apparent in the pompous but effective number plate of his car. The plate could not be “B1,” reserved for the Oba, so Omo-Osagie took “B2,” a signature of power and a modern competitive advertisement.

The Owegbe Society offered the Otu-Edo a powerful weapon to effectively block inroads made by the AG and the Ogboni Society (ROF). The formal structure of the Owegbe Society consisted of thirteen enclaves covering Benin Province, with Benin City as headquarters. Influential villagers controlled the enclaves. Each was self-contained and met independently. With Owegbe’s autonomous structure, the center in Benin City exerted a kind of loose, amorphous control. The supreme authority for Owegbe existed in the form of the Divisional Executive Committee of Otu-Edo, headed by Omo-Osagie. Below this executive committee and the enclaves were the individual chairmen of the respective branches, or *ogua* (initiation shrines), constructed in all the wards of Benin Division and in many other wards in Benin Province’s other divisions.

This structure mimicked the traditional hierarchy in the kingship system. At the center resided Omo-Osagie, in a position of authority not unlike that of the Oba of Benin, the traditional ruler. At the other end were local shrines and a system of village control by elders or influential villagers, such as the traditional *enogie*. As half brothers of the Oba of Benin, the *enogie* did not often live in any of the villages they supervised but received tribute from them and reported problems to central authority. That kind of loose structure combined a system of kingship with autonomous villages, a neat blend of two seemingly opposed forms of political authority that could be manipulated and that required extraordinary astuteness to artfully operate within.

Ritual Features of Owegbe

Owegbe leaders used shrine initiations and administration of oaths. The use of traditional forms of juju (i.e., magical medicine) established a cohesive political organization that obliged villagers to support particular candidates. Initiation also ensured an unquestioning obedience to the Owegbe Society.

Common features of induction included members' being initiated at night at an Ogun shrine. Ogun is the god of iron and, by extension, of war. Ogun is a hot god, the patron saint of warriors, metalworkers, and blacksmiths. As testified to by one member of the Owegbe Society, devotion to Ogun called for (1) dog sacrifices, in which heads of decapitated dogs appeared as offerings; (2) other sacrifices, in which initiates paid between five and ten pounds sterling (British and Nigerian currency were equivalent in value) and animals such as chickens and goats were bled over the shrine and then cooked for feasting; (3) oaths of fidelity, which initiates swore over a stone vessel (akin to a large bird bath) dedicated to Osun (deity of the forest and herbs and leaves that offer protection), followed by ablution with the sacred and protective Osun water; (4) the initiate's consumption of the heart of a cockerel; (5) ritual cutting, in which initiates stood on a large flat stone—indicating inviolability—and were marked with knife or razor blade cuts meant to render the initiates invulnerable to machetes or gunshots, after which gunpowder was rubbed into the wounds; (6) oaths of secrecy and obedience; (7) herb rituals, in which initiates lay on broken bottles with a mortar on their chests while herbs placed in the mortar were pounded with a pestle and the ground herbs later rubbed into the cuts; and (8) dancing on broken bottles.²³

The Owegbe member further described the initiation as follows:

For some of these people can have broken bottles all over the floor of any place and when they shoot their guns they dance on these broken bottles and they are not cut. Some of them among the "Ewaise" [medicine men]—they can have somebody lying on the ground—a mortar placed on his chest and they will be beating it—I mean many people will be pounding and pounding a pestle in a mortar while it is on his chest, a big mortar. Well, all these terrified the Action Group and they feared.²⁴

In a modern twist each initiate was given a fidelity ring that bore one of the following inscriptions, "V," "BI," or "CII." The significance of these inscriptions could not be determined during the course of the inquiry into Owegbe activities,

²³ Owegbe Inquiry Transcripts, *Daily Transcripts of the Owegbe Commission* (Benin City: Ministry of Information, 1965). Ex. 63/3.

²⁴ Alexander, *ibid.*, D.5.7–9.

though such rings served as court exhibits.²⁵ One guesses that “B” stood for “Benin” and “BI” for a new dynastic Oba-ship. “V” may have stood for “victory.” The meaning of “CII” is unknown.

Qwegbe Society Objectives

Besides resisting AG and Ogboni Society pressures, Qwegbe served as a social services organization for “any member of Otu-Edo in financial difficulties” and “to combat collectively, robbery, stealing and immoral practices” through a supernatural agency for the punishment of wrongdoers.²⁶ Qwegbe had not initially employed initiations and the taking of oaths (not to mention the fealty identity rings). This lack of supernatural sanctions led to “weather-cocking,” (i.e., carpet crossing, switching political affiliations). Initiation centers (shrines) soon opened in Benin City, spread to outlying areas, and terrorized those who failed to comply.

An early reluctance to use rituals and large-scale swearing of oaths was due to fear that any outrageous attempts to create a subversive political interest group with a solid infrastructure of adherents bound by oaths of allegiance and cultic practices would have alarmed the government of the Western Region and possibly the federal government. An order in council (1959) had prohibited the worship or invocation of any Qwegbe juju. The Oba of Benin regarded Qwegbe rituals as dangerous, a violation of Benin native law and custom, and, incidentally, a threat to his own authority:

May I say the self-made President-General of the NCNC/Otu-Edo Alliance and his lieutenants are the people who have violated fundamental human rights because they have been goading, instigating and coercing the simple pagan folks in the rural areas and the impetuous and unthinking youths in the Benin Division to take oaths or swear by Owegbe juju that they will do this or that thing and will follow this or that way against their conscience.²⁷

²⁵ Owegbe Inquiry Transcripts, *Daily Transcripts of the Owegbe Commission* (Benin City: Ministry of Information, 1965). Ex. 63/3.

²⁶ Owegbe Inquiry Transcripts, *ibid.*, Ex. 63/3.

²⁷ Owegbe Inquiry Transcripts, *ibid.*, Ex. 63/4.

As the NCNC/Otu-Edo alliance became more powerful, and the creation of Midwest State imminent, Otu-Edo/Owegbe leaders assumed they were safe in tailoring the aims of the society to their objectives. After 1963, oaths taken by initiates ensured election success for Otu-Edo candidates and an unquestioning loyalty to the organization. The main goal was to build up a strong base of supporters with unswerving obedience to Otu-Edo leadership in Benin Division and other divisions where Owegbe influence was having an impact. The tempo of initiations, some of which included non-Edo, into Owegbe dramatically increased after its success against the AG and Ogboni in the Midwest Region. Initiations escalated following the installation of a new regional government in February 1964; by 1965 there were more than 300 initiation shrines, each with between 200 and 250 members, or anywhere from 60,000 to 75,000 members in Benin Division alone—a sizable and significant militant wing.

By this time, too, Owegbe controlled the customary courts and had made inroads into other governmental agencies and statutory corporations. Owegbe maintained this influence after the need to recruit members to combat alleged persecution by the AG had disappeared. The initial impetus for the development of a militant arm had ceased, as the NCNC/Otu-Edo alliance now effectively controlled the political apparatus of the Midwest State.

The reasons for this jump in recruitment are not hard to find. When the perceived enemies were the AG and the Ogboni Society, expediency dictated an alliance with the NCNC as the surest way to undermine that political superordination. With the inception of the Midwest Region, Otu-Edo discovered that a secure hold on political power had again eluded them and resided this time in the hands of the NCNC, a predominantly Igbo political party.

To counter this threat, Otu-Edo, through the Owegbe Society, sought to increase its core of adherents, bound by ritual and oaths, to usurp power in the Midwest. For Chief Omo-Osagie, control of the government in Edo hands, with himself as premier, was an important personal goal. At 73, he was still politically astute and ambitious but complained that his lack of the premiership had denied

him the *fons et origio* for the distribution of patronage. He felt unable to adequately fulfill promises made to “his people.”

And for the Edo—a very proud people who have an illustrious history and who were not far removed from ancestors that had held hegemony over a kingdom that included Lagos and part of the Yoruba west and Igbo areas to the river Niger—the lack of political control was frustrating. So long as outsiders did not figure prominently in the political, economic, and social landscape, no one cared, and there was little if any animosity. Personal contacts were remote, or instrumental, or unimportant. But in the ensuing struggles over new strategic positions of power (those involving taxation, public works, employment, and education), the Edo coalesced for mutual interest.

As AG influence waned, Ọwegbe supporters rioted against the Ogboni, physically inflicting punishment on them to make up for years of oppression. Now the economic threats by the Igbo demanded action. Commentators argued that any tour of Benin and its districts would show that most were foreign natives (i.e., Igbo). Interviewees noted that the Igbo had tapped the resources of the state, especially rubber production. Leases of landed property to non-Edo were on the rise. The Igbo, instead of maintaining a subservient attitude and occupational relationship (as menials, or household servants) were becoming politically uppity. Worse, their economic inroads devastated the proud Edo. Ethnic articulation, by means of powerful agencies that employed supernatural means for political solidarity, served as a response to potential domination, from wherever it came.

Analysis of Ọwegbe

In the politicized atmosphere of Midwest Nigeria, Ọwegbe allegiances provided an effective political weapon that, by reconstituting and reinventing certain traditional features of Edo ritual practice, bound adherents collectively. However, to understand the Ọwegbe Society as a political interest group in which ethnicity was articulated as a political weapon rather than an atavistic arrangement in which endemic tribal animosities were carried over into the present, one must distinguish

between the form and the meaning of Owegbe rituals. A preoccupation with only the ritual and traditional aspects of Owegbe obscures the deeper significance of the rituals as organizational features of political mobilization.

The initiations and taking of oaths under impressively secret circumstances served as both a sacred and social event not unlike the inductions performed by fraternities and sororities, as well as by freemasons. By taking an Owegbe oath, the initiate associated themselves with certain sacred symbols. Oaths acquired a sanction that went beyond the individual and established a sacred tie to others in the group. Initiation ceremonies were also social events, a consciousness-raising feature that solidified the initiate to the party. Such social solidarity raised the level of political commitment.

A reciprocal function of oath taking bound individuals firmly to the group and made them susceptible to group demands. A member of Otu-Edo pointed out in testimony that the deterrent effect of taking oaths resulted from autosuggestion. A high level of conformity to principle became necessary, as ordinary villagers and townspeople had at times to defy constituted authority.

Initiation and the taking of oaths became imperative to overcome fragmentation, weather-cocking, and passivity. Any political unit had therefore to employ all the symbols recognized as commonly sanctioned. The form of oath that Owegbe initiates undertook deterred defection by requiring the initiate to state that if he defected from the Otu-Edo and the NCNC, or contested as an independent candidate, food would kill him.²⁸

For members of Owegbe, such practices ensured solidarity. For Otu-Edo, Owegbe provided a militant means to manipulate ethnicity, an available all-encompassing political symbol. Ethnicity offers individuals a distinctiveness and continuity in aspects of life untouched by instrumental organization or ideological commitments. Ethnicity consists of untransformed, non-ideological identifications and cultural values. Ethnicity is not in itself productive of conflict because different groups express amorphous and sometimes incompatible values. Ethnicity becomes coherent and conflict producing when manipulated by individuals

²⁸ Alexander, *ibid.*, D.16.15.

employing organizational strategies, or when there are perceived economic threats to security and well-being.

In the classical “folk” sense, ethnicity—or its popular counterpart, “tribalism”—is a primordial holistic guide to behavior; an encompassing constellation of integrated beliefs; an environment that is not complicated by juridical principles of various allegiances and that is limited in internal differentiation and certainly constrained by a limited consciousness of self. Outside the folk model, life is more complicated. The contemporary utility of an ethnic paradigm is circumvented by segmental ties of friendship, occupation and association, and a multitude of cross-cutting affiliations.

Not all Edo belonged to Otu-Edo or Owegbe. (One could belong to Otu-Edo without belonging to Owegbe, but to belong to Owegbe, one had to belong to Otu-Edo.) Some joined out of fear of reprisals, but others disliked the secrecy, the rituals, or Omo-Osagie and even when threatened refused to join.²⁹ Others maintained their affiliation with the AG, the anti-NCNC Midwest Democratic Front, or, as with Chief Gaius Obaseki, who was head of the ROF. Some experienced a feeling of terror and insecurity, not as a result of Yoruba or Igbo domination but because of Owegbe victimization. Forced initiations were not unknown.³⁰

If we think of ethnicity as a matter of degree or part of a complex flowchart, rather than an all-or-none categorical concept, we are closer to an understanding the nature of social action and political dynamics as evidenced in the raucous context of Midwestern Nigeria. Each individual in that highly charged atmosphere held multiple loyalties and social identities, the prominence of which varied by situation. At any moment, each actor was a member of a family, religion, village or town, division, province, culturally defined loyalty (traditional palace loyalty and/or political elites), and an imposed nationality (citizen of Benin and/or citizen of Nigeria). The relative salience of each reference point shifts according to the changing political situation and defined personal interests. As Mitchell has noted

²⁹ Alexander, *ibid.*, D.12.22; D48.2.

³⁰ Alexander, *ibid.*, D.3.4; D56:99; D.54.159–60.

for his Rhodesian materials, an alien in one situation could be a political ally in another³¹ and is similar to other scholars “situational analysis.”³²

In the political sociology of the time, social scientists focused on which ethnic groups lived in which area and on what ethnic group individuals belonged to, as though these facts automatically determined one’s actions. Often left out of this simple tabulation was the more difficult task of inquiring the extent to which ethnicity operated as a significant (or not significant) variable in intergroup relations. In this sense, ethnicity is a dynamic phenomenon, not a pigeonhole into which data can be fitted on the basis of nominal criteria.

The exploitation of ethnicity for political and economic interests explains the development of the Owegbe Society. Owegbe leaders made use of cultural idioms to morally bind members to the group’s political interests. Less an end in itself, ethnicity offered an expedient route to power. The Owegbe Society’s successes were due to disparities of power and conflicts of interests far more than to a *gemeinschaft* participation in a unified moral universe similar to a symbolic universe of primordial sentiments.

Concluding Remarks

In the traditional sense Owegbe is a fortifying ritual for personal protection, involving body modification procedures that offer a kind of spiritual armor against physical harm and that are believed to make a person impervious to gun wounds or machete cuts. Owegbe is also socially transformative. As a group rite of passage, the political enterprise of Owegbe inducted entrants into a secret but

³¹ J. C. Mitchell, *The Kalela Dance*. Rhodes Livingstone Institute, Paper 27 (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 46.

³² J. Mitchell, *The Kalela Dance*. 46. [33] A client is typically offered this protection by a native physician, a sort of spiritual counselor. The X body markings are specific to Owegbe. The author is the recipient of such markings and other body transformations that include eyelid cuts for a sort of x-ray vision that allows one to recognize a potential enemy, parallel leg and arm cuts for protection from road accidents (and public signatures of Owegbe), and 201 (= an infinite number) scalp cuts that protect the head, the seat of a person’s wisdom, authority, and maturity.

The tensions between the Oba and his *iyase*—the king and senior town chief, respectively—that had figured prominently in the configuration of local politics for hundreds of years resurfaced after colonial usurpation with the exile of Ovonramwen (Oba Akenzua’s grandfather), the latent fluidity of a seventeen-year interregnum, and a new sociopolitical system.

powerful collectivity. The historical changes over the last half century had led to new social and political formations.³³ Ọwegbe was one of those formations. With the Oba of Benin aligned as a token of the AG and its affiliate the ROF as well as continued Yoruba hegemony on the one hand and the NCNC party, dominated by the Igbo, on the other, Edo citizens of Benin found their traditional loyalties to the king and notions of identity conflicting with their allegiances to a bureaucratic modernism. With ethnicity as a salient political feature of the landscape, primordialism—rather than arising from an innate sense of kinship—had become politicized. In situations like this, ethnicity as cause and ethnicity as consequence are conflated, intertwined as expressions of both affiliation and interests.

Ọwegbe has reemerged several times over the past twenty years, usually under extraordinary circumstances. Outbursts of Ọwegbe activity occasionally reappear when it seems that the very fabric of society is threatened either from inside (disputes between the Bendel State governor and the Oba, for example) or from outside (conflicts between Benin and Urhobo, Ijaw, or Igbo). Ọwegbe has also emerged as a university secret society, similar to a fraternity but more politically oriented. Like other Nigerian university fraternities (e.g., the University of Ibadan's Pirates, associated with Yoruba politics, or the University of Calabar's Leopard Society, associated with traditional initiations),³⁴ Ọwegbe as a university phenomenon has its roots in the traditional politics of the Midwest Region of Nigeria, now Edo State.

In the contemporary context, it is evident that traditional Nigerian society has provided the impetus for fraternity groups in institutions of higher education to easily assimilate the secret, cultic aspects of traditional groups.³⁵ Although administrators in Nigerian universities downplay the associations between the

³³ The emergence of a literate population, an educated and entrepreneurial elite, a politically aware press and public discussion, a stable colonial polity, a post-World War II forum for party politics, and the contentious environment of Nigerian politics, ethnically and socially, allowed for historical, and conflicted, oppositions to reassert themselves in reinvigorated and collective formations.

³⁴ Examples are the Ogboni, Sango, and Gelede among the Yoruba; the Odumu in the Cross Rivers area; the Okija in the Delta; and the Amadiora and the Okija among the Igbo.

³⁵ Stephen A. Oyebade, 'From Society into the Schools: How Tradition and Leadership Failure Breed Violent Cultism and What to Do about It' (Geneva: International Cultic Studies Association Congress, July 2-4, 2009).

names of fraternity groups and secret societies, dismissing such groups as harmless or even progressive, there are resemblances in initiation practices, oath taking, identification marks, and symbols that, at times, include violence, force, and intimidation.³⁶ The Internet has now been employed as a means of conveying secret messages by members.³⁷

This paper calls into question some widely held assumptions that have guided analyses of political conflict and ethnicity in Africa. The data presented here run counter to the view that political rivalries are solely the result of tribal animosities and primordial sentiments. The analysis also runs counter to the view that tribal differences are solely the result of material and political interests. The analysis of political dynamics in Midwest Nigeria, and especially the dynamics of Owegbe, suggests that the causes of conflict lie in divergent economic and political interests *and* in cultural or ethnic ones.³⁸

³⁶ Adewale Rotimi, 'Violence in the Citadel: The Menace of Secret Cults in the Nigerian Universities,' *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 14:1 (2005), 79–98.

³⁷ Valentine Ojo, "IBK Afis the Con+To Chukwuma's Rabbits Odera . . . and Other Ethnic Cyber-Warriors," (USA Africa Dialogue Series, <http://groups.google.com/group/USAAfricaDialogue/browse>, February 4, 2009).

³⁸ These interests—the distribution of patronage—may be expressed along ethnic, religious or other cultural lines. As has been argued so often, in conflicts over scarce resources, ethnic groups are interest groups that articulate ethnicity to obtain desired goals. Abner Cohen, in *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Immigrants in a Yoruba Town* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), informs us that as an interest group, an ethnic group has the advantage of possessing some of the basic requirements for developing a political organization: identity, language, cohesion, location.

The assumption of incompatibility between ethnic loyalties and nonethnic ideological commitments, instrumental activities, or identities is at best an oversimplification. Ethnicity is variable rather than constant, a shifting allegiance rather than a categorical one. Political interests are negotiable, as are material desires. To understand the political dynamics of the Midwest State, it is not sufficient to think in terms of massed ethnic groups, primordial loyalties, ingrained sentiments, innate values, or social stereotypes. Nor can one consider only the objective material circumstances of particular groups. Instead, one considers the variable situations in which people are "mobilized by different goals and values out of a medley" (Gluckman, *ibid.*, 1969, p. 379). Political mobilization may be operationally ethnic, and ethnic values may be politicized; the two sides of the coin serve as a vehicle for self-interests *and* ethnic values, and are more sophisticatedly varied. In contemporary jargon (Comaroff and Comaroff, *ibid.*), the complex senses of social and material interests are reduced to fabrications of collective consciousness, and ideology feeds into ideas of ethnic preservation, and notions of ethnicity feed into social and political action, which feed back into collective identifications.

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