

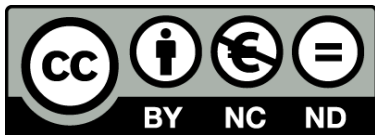
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Hidden Transcripts of the Christian Century: Power and Global Goods in Early Modern Japan

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Introduction

This essay employs James Scott’s (1990) concepts of *hidden* and *public transcripts* to explore shifting power relations during the Iberian encounter with early modern Japan. Introduced by Charles Boxer (1951), the term ‘Christian Century’ is sometimes used to refer to the dynamic period of contact between Europe and Japan between 1543 (the first recorded arrival of Europeans in Japanese waters) and 1639 (the expulsion of all Iberian merchants and missionaries from the archipelago). This was Japan’s first global moment, a time of intense cultural contact with Europe and new links with India, Southeast Asia, coastal Africa and the Americas. While the dynamism of the period makes the phrase ‘Christian Century’ inapt in certain respects, it will be used here (without scare quotes) as a convenient label.

The question of the nature of power is central to my discussion. Japanese archaeologists and premodern historians often work with a view of power which, in the terminology of Michael Mann, is both *intensive* and *authoritative*. *Intensive power* “refers to the ability to organize tightly and command a high level of mobilization or commitment from the participants”, while *authoritative power* is “actually willed by groups and institutions” comprising “definite commands and conscious obedience” (Mann 1986: 7–8). Such a view of power is arguably appropriate for the ‘absolutist’ regime of the early modern Tokugawa era (1603–1868), but can hardly be applied to the Kofun period (250–700) when an early state first appeared in the Japanese Islands. For instance, the influential proposal made by archaeologist Yukio Kobayashi in the 1950s that the distribution of a particular type of bronze mirror in the third century reflected the spread of state power now seems like a clear over-interpretation (cf. Edwards 2006). In Mann’s (1986) IEMP model of the sources of social power (ideological, economic, military and political) situated within overlapping networks, the bronze mirrors analysed by Kobayashi were a source of *ideological* power, but the extent to which they also supported *economic*, *military* and *political* power remains an open question.

Within Japanese historiography, naïve approaches to power continue to be noticeable for the Christian Century era. Both native and international scholars frequently assume power to have been both *intensive* and *authoritative* at this time. American historian James Huffman (2010: 57) describes the arrival of “hundreds of gun- and Bible-bearing Westerners who had come to make a profit and save souls”, a rendition that glosses over the complex social relations of the period. Some historians even entertain the fantasy of a potential Iberian colonisation of early modern Japan (cf. Ucerler 2022; Hudson 2024). To borrow Scott’s (1998) terminology, such arguments are a clear example of *seeing like the Japanese state*, because that state generated fear of a military and ideological threat from the Europeans to cement its own power (Paramore 2009). During the Christian Century period, it was Japan that was the most aggressive military state in East Asia, invading Korea in 1592 and 1597 (precipitating the largest sixteenth-century war anywhere in the world), conquering the Ryukyu Islands (1609), attacking Taiwan (unsuccessfully) in 1609 and 1616, and planning an invasion of Luzon – an idea that was still being entertained in 1637 (Hudson 2024). A utopian scheme for a joint Iberian-Japanese invasion of China was promoted by Spanish Jesuit Alonso Sánchez (1547–1593) but encountered strong opposition and was abandoned after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in the English Channel in 1588 (Ucerler 2022: 118–141). As I have noted elsewhere (Hudson 2024: 57), this *empresa de China* necessitates a careful reading of some Jesuit public transcripts. Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) warned against any invasion of Japan, not only because the Japanese were militarily so strong, but also because “the land is the most barren and poor that I have ever seen” (Ucerler 2022: 119). The latter comment stands in stark contrast to other European accounts which stress the fertility of the land and (by implication) its potential for conversions.

Iberian and other European (English and Dutch) operations in Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were centred on seaborne trade managed from small coastal enclaves, a pattern that characterised other European colonial activities in Eurasia and Africa at the time (Darwin 2007; Roy 2025). As a result, the power wielded by Europeans in Japan was (again, in Mann’s terminology) *diffused*. Diffused power spreads in a “spontaneous, unconscious, decentered way throughout a population, resulting in similar social practices that embody power relations but are not explicitly commanded” (Mann 1986: 8). The power of the Catholic Church and especially the Society of Jesus in Japan might be regarded as *intensive* over its European members, who were controlled from Rome and by the Church in Goa, but more *extensive* within the world of Japanese converts. At a time of enormous historical change in both Japan and the world, one size did not fit all.

Japan’s Christian Century was a period of state-building through war. It also marked a shift from a decentralised, mercantilist society to one based on ‘agrarian fundamentalism’ (Amino 2012). Like the Nichiren and True Pure Land schools of Buddhism, Christianity in sixteenth-century Japan can be considered as a religion linked with seafaring and urban-based merchants (Amino 2012: 100–102). The iconoclastic medievalist Yoshihiko Amino (1928–2004) was in certain respects a Japanese James Scott. Although the dominant, *seeing like a state* view of historiography has emphasised Japan as an agrarian nation, Amino explored the archipelago’s *barbarian* (*sensu* Scott) past. What Scott (2017) termed the ‘Golden Age of the Barbarians’ lasted in Japan until the early seventeenth century when the Tokugawa shoguns finally managed to establish a secure ‘grain state’. More precise dates for the end of what I have termed the ‘barbarian niche’ (Hudson 2022) in the Japanese Islands can be linked with Japan’s 1609 invasion of the Ryukyu kingdom (which had been a major medieval trading state), the 1637–38 Shimabara peasant revolt (which took on a Christian aspect), and the 1669–72 Shakushain war of the Indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido against the Japanese.

Given this dynamic background of shifting power relations, Scott (1990) provides us with a language to discuss the manifold ways in which domination and resistance were expressed (or hidden) in the lived experiences of people in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Japan. In my view this provides an important antidote to the rigid approaches that command the literature. For some Japanese, Christianity had a strong spiritual appeal, in part because it seemed to provide a way to resist dominant structures of political and patriarchal power. Many female converts were likely attracted to Christianity in opposition to Buddhist teachings that, due to menstruation and childbirth, they would be condemned to a ‘Lake of Blood’ after death, with little hope of salvation (Ward 2009). Over 300,000 Japanese are thought to have converted to Christianity during a period of a few decades. Many of these converts had little choice but to follow the lords of their domains, although in private there was no doubt a range of opinions between support and opposition. Other Japanese embraced the new faith in a fervent way. One example here comes from Jesuit descriptions of a Corpus Christi procession in Nagasaki in 1614:

“Some walked dressed in the same hempen rice bags tied up with many ropes as they had heard had been the punishment of the Christians elsewhere in Japan. Other went about as if crucified, carrying large crosses [...]. Again others carried muskets that had been lashed to their legs so tightly that it looked like the barrels had penetrated their flesh.... [Others had their naked] torsos wrapped in thorny vines [...]. Others used oyster shells strung tightly together [...] and suffered great pains in this way. [...] There was one man who carried two entangled snakes over his naked flesh that would bite him from time to time [...].” (Hesselink 2016: 148)

This remarkable procession is not simply a case of Japanese believers following practices that had ‘diffused’ from Counter-Reformation Europe. It was, above all, a performance of resistance against the Tokugawa regime wherein the violence of the procession comments publicly – yet in a way perhaps hidden or ambiguous to non-Christians – on the violence of the state. The re-purposing of weapons of persecution into acts of resistance gives a new nuance to the phrase ‘weapons of the weak’ (cf. Scott 1985).

Materiality, Display and ‘Global Goods’

Both archaeology and history have taken a ‘material turn’ in recent years (e.g., Gosden and Marshall 1999; Gosden 2005; Joyce 2012; Aram and Yun-Casalilla 2014; Gerritsen and Riello 2016; Richardson et al. 2016). Morgan Pitelka (2016) has discussed the role of the accumulation, exchange and display of *meibutsu* (famous objects) in the establishment of the Tokugawa regime. Timon Screech (2020) looks at the role of European objects,

trade and gift-giving during the same period. Even if they did not convert to Christianity themselves, Japanese élites used the ‘global goods’ brought by Europeans in political theatres of accumulation and display. In fact, fascination with such global goods seems to have been widely shared – albeit no doubt in different ways – across Japanese society. A 1594 letter by Francisco Pasio explained that:

“[The warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi] has become so enamoured of Portuguese dress and costume that he and his retainers frequently wear this apparel, as do all the other lords of Japan, even the gentiles, with rosaries of driftwood on the breast [...] and with a crucifix at their side [...]; some of them are so curious that they learn by rote the litanies of *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria* and go along praying in the streets, not in mockery or scorn [...] but simply for gallantry, or because they think it is a good thing and one which will help them to achieve prosperity in worldly things.” (Boxer 1951: 207–208)

Late medieval Christianity had developed a strongly material aspect (Bynum 2020), and this also influenced Japan.

In his article “What do objects want?”, archaeologist Chris Gosden (2005) has discussed how things can lay down certain ‘rules’ or ‘trajectories’ of use. The Christian Century provides numerous examples of this process. One fascinating case is recorded by John Saris (c. 1580–1643), captain of the first English ship to reach Japan. Saris had purchased a painting of Venus for his cabin and noted in his official diary that it was “somewhat wantonlie”. Upon arriving in Japan in 1613, Saris gave a tour of his ship for local ladies “of the better sort” who, mistaking Venus for the Virgin Mary, began to “worship” the painting, even though they were not Christians themselves (Screech 2020: 134). In the meeting of very different cultures, the material provided points of familiarity to negotiate the encounters. Catholic and Buddhist rosaries, for example, were outwardly rather similar, and the Virgin Mary became linked with the Kannon bodhisattva, the ‘goddess of mercy’. Jesuit João Rodrigues’ (c. 1561–1633) *Historia da Igreja do Japão* revels in deep details about the materiality of Japanese life, providing an account that is at once strange yet familiar (Cooper 2001).

The familiarity of some material objects could also, however, hide complexities, contradictions and resistance. Even new food crops might encounter resistance, for both economic and symbolic reasons (e.g., Levi 2014; Pelloli 2023; Findley and Roberts 2024). All artefacts can be said to have a range of performers and audiences. Sometimes the object provides or attempts to provide a “self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” (Scott 1990: 18). In other cases, the object is more evasive; it may not be hidden itself but its meanings are fluid and potentially incorporate readings linked to hidden transcripts. An example is provided by Izumo no Okuni (c. 1578–c. 1613), a female performer who is said to have begun the *kabuki* style of theatre in Japan. A painting of Okuni now in the Tokugawa Art Museum shows her dressed as a samurai with a rosary and crucifix around her neck (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Izumo_no_Okuni). Is the painting a critique of the shallow ‘cosplay’ of contemporary samurai, or does it depict an ‘authentic’ Christian retainer? From an initial openness, indeed embrace, of such ambiguities, in the early seventeenth century the Tokugawa regime began to see Christianity as an ideological threat to its dominance (Elison 1973; Paramore 2009). In a sense, the regime began to concern itself with the hidden transcripts of the Christian Century. Christian decorative art, previously used by a range of people and classes in Japan became a means to enforce anti-Christian regulations. In the late sixteenth century, devotional metal medallions became an important element in Counter-Reformation practices (Riordan 2015). Numerous such medallions have been discovered in Japan, often as grave goods (Gotō 2023). From the late 1620s, the Tokugawa Inquisition (*shūmon aratame yaku*) began to use these medallions and other images in *e-fumi* displays of obedience whereby people were forced to stamp on devotional objects to demonstrate their rejection of Christianity (see below).

Jesuit Casuistry: Public Deliberations on Hidden Transcripts

Jesuit writings from Japan’s Christian Century provide us with fascinating material to consider the issue of the relations of power discussed in Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. In sixteenth-century Japan, Christian teachings were potentially revolutionary; yet the Society of Jesus was essentially opposed to a major *social* transformation. Spanish Jesuit Pedro Gómez (1533–1600) explained this clearly in a 1595 work written in Latin and Japanese:

“[...] even if a Christian’s lord is a pagan, one should obey him with regard to most things. [...] In Matthew 22 we read: *Reddite ergo quae sunt Caesaris, Caesari* [‘Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s’]. [...] Everyone is thus obliged to obey one’s superiors. The reason is that the purpose of the incarnation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, was not to abolish the natural law [...] but to bring it to completion.” (Ucerler 2022: 52)

There were, however, exceptions to this obligation, expounded through the Jesuit method of *casuistry* – the moral theology of individual cases (*casus*) – which was designed to provide ‘solutions’ to moral dilemmas (Friedrich 2022: 173–184). In England and other Protestant countries, casuistry became notorious as a way to hide the truth through ‘equivocation’, considered as little more than deception. John King, Bishop of London from 1611–21, condemned the Jesuits as “changelings, chameleons [...] ambiguous in their answers [...] with their meandering turnings and windings, their mental reservations, their amphibolous, amphibious prepositions, which live, as these creatures, part in the land, part in the water” (Screech 2020: 192). In Scott’s terms, we might say that Jesuit casuistry was thought to undermine the ‘official’ distinction between public and hidden, thus posing a perceived danger to the social order.

Japanese ‘public transcripts’ of the sixteenth century said little about the social or theological aspects of the encounter with Europe, especially as it affected the broader population of the archipelago. By contrast, Jesuit records afford invaluable materials to understand *both* the public transcript of how the Church saw the relationship between secular rulers and their subordinates *and* hidden-transcript insights into how converts attempted to negotiate the demands of their new faith with requirements imposed by non-Christian lords. Ucerler (2022) has discussed at length a section in Gómez’s 1595 text structured in question-and-answer format. Gómez built on principles dating back to Aquinas’ thirteenth-century *Summa theologiae* but his approach differed from contemporary decisions by the Church in Goa (from where the Japanese mission was administered), which rejected any authority by ‘pagans’ over the faithful and tried to restrict contact between the two groups (Ucerler 2022: 55). In Gómez’s explanation, “acts that are neither good nor bad, i.e. those that are of an ‘indifferent’ nature, are admissible.” This meant that making Shinto or Buddhist images or constructing temples was forbidden, but “cutting wood or transporting stones for these purposes is not in itself a sin.” Participation in various Japanese festivals was accepted (“To perform dances is not forbidden at all”), but the point was not to acknowledge that the ritual would accrue any religious benefits (Ucerler 2022: 52, 57). As the Tokugawa persecution of Christianity gained force, Japanese believers were instructed that “it was not sinful to deny Christ if professing Him would cause the death of a Christian (including oneself), and neither was it sinful to conceal rosaries, images, or other ‘meritorious objects’ (*kuriki no mono*)” (Screech 2020: 193). All transcripts of Christian belief were now forced into hiding.

Hidden Transcripts of the Crypto-Christian Era: *e-fumi* and Burials

After extensive persecutions in the early seventeenth century, Christianity in Japan went underground (Elison 1973). Communities of crypto-Christians continued to maintain their faith in several locations until the late nineteenth century when the ban on Christianity was lifted (Turnbull 1998). Sites related to crypto-Christians in north-west Kyushu were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage in 2018 (Delakorda Kawashima 2021). This section will briefly introduce two contrasting hidden transcripts of this period: burials and the *e-fumi* ceremonies whereby Christians were forced to publicly renounce their faith.

The term *e-fumi* means ‘stepping upon an image’ and refers to the procedure introduced by the Tokugawa regime whereby Japanese people were required to put their feet on Christian images – most frequently of Jesus or Mary – in order to demonstrate their rejection or indifference to that faith.¹ The images used were initially paper pictures that had been confiscated from the printing press established in Kyushu by the Society of Jesus; wood and copper images were later produced especially for the purpose (Hesselink 2016: 212), though paper prints continued to be made throughout the nineteenth century (Montanari et al. 2025). First introduced in 1629, *e-fumi* was but one of many measures through which the Tokugawa regime attempted to eradicate Christianity from Japan. It was a highly symbolic attempt to inscribe rejection of the faith into the public transcript. Historians have noted that the

1 Although often conflated, the terms *e-fumi* and *fumi-e* can be distinguished as process and object. *E-fumi* refers to the ceremony of trampling on the image whereas *fumi-e* denotes the image itself.

‘mental reservation’ of Jesuit casuistry undermined this measure in a fundamental way – and “The alternative was to be killed” (Screech 2020: 193). Yet Japanese believers also adopted their own symbolic ‘reservations’ or resistance. The *e-fumi* ceremony required that shoes – in practice straw sandals – be worn while stamping on the image since the failure to remove footwear was itself a type of defilement in Japanese culture. After the ceremony, some groups of crypto-Christians on Fukue Island (Nagasaki) would first burn the sandals, then mix the ashes with water in a bowl and drink the mixture in penitence (Whelan 1996: 134).

As there are relatively few written texts relating to the crypto-Christians of Japan, research on those communities has often taken an ethnographic approach (Whelan 1996; Turnbull 1998). Archaeology provides another perspective and the field of *Kirishitan kōkōgaku* (‘Christian archaeology’) has a long history in Japan, dating back to the early years of the twentieth century with surveys of gravestones in Kyushu from around 1902 (Tanaka 2023). Beginning in 1917, Kyoto University’s Department of Archaeology carried out more systematic investigations, which were published with long English summaries (Hamada and Umehara 1923; Shimmura 1923; Shimmura and Hamada 1923).² ‘Christian archaeology’ in Japan has remained almost totally separate from ‘mission archaeology’ as practiced in the Americas and from new work on the global archaeology of Iberian colonialism (cf. Graham 1998; Montón-Subías et al. 2016). In her review of the former approach, Elizabeth Graham (1998) stressed the novelty of employing archaeology to explore the role of Christian missions and missionaries beyond Europe. Although she explicitly limited that new field to the Americas, Graham noted the important potential of archaeology in understanding “changing cultural imagination and reordering of a conceptual universe.” From the perspective of Japanese research on the Christian Century, Graham (1998: 29) makes the interesting point that views which emphasise Christianity as a “religion of the state” encourage the assumption that “pre-Columbian elements in religious material culture [were] resistance phenomena”. This resonates closely with influential opinions in Japanese historiography that Christianity existed in a single ‘authentic’ form which Japan lacked. ‘Folk’ responses to Christianity meant Japan did not produce “full-fledged European-style Christians” (Higashibaba 2001: xv) or that “the Christianity prevalent in Japan during this period should not be regarded as true ‘Christianity’ but as a unique Japanese religion called ‘Kirishitan’” (Oka 2021: 1) – *Kirishitan* being a Japanese word derived from the Portuguese *Cristão*. The term *Kirishitan* does, however, develop some resonance by the late nineteenth century since, by that time, some crypto-Christians had come to regard their faith as differing significantly from European Catholicism (Whelan 1996: 133).

The question of interaction between native and Christian beliefs is an important one in both Japan and other parts of the world. Robert Ricard (1966: 278) had already noted that many native ‘superstitions’ found in the Americas were in fact European in origin, a point made for Japan by Turnbull (1998). Based on earlier observations by Royall Tyler (1993), I recently discussed the possibility of Christian influence on folk beliefs related to Mount Fuji (Hudson 2024: 35–37). Although medieval Europe had a long tradition of heart burials, at least amongst the aristocracy (Weiss-Krejci 2010), Alice Kehoe (1979) made the suggestion that beliefs about the Sacred Heart were influenced by native Mexican iconography. We can thus agree with Graham’s (1998: 29) insistence that “Archaeologists must be careful not to adopt the simplistic approach of colonial Catholic priests and interpret the material culture of mission sites as manifestations of either acceptance or rejection of Christianity.” European missionaries quickly realised that Japan possessed a civilisation that was in many ways as complex as that of Europe; how they attempted to propagate their faith in that context was anything but ‘simplistic’ (Ucerler 2022).

European visitors to Japan in the Christian Century made surprisingly few comments about burials and mortuary customs (Moriwaki 2023). João Rodrigues (1561/2–1633/4) left exhaustive descriptions about numerous aspects of Japanese society and history but had almost nothing to say about funerals (Cooper 2001). In a 1585 work usually known as the *Tratado* (‘treatise’), Luís Fróis (1532–1597) noted four differences in the burial customs of Japan as compared to Europe. First, “[o]ur deceased depart with their hair as it is when they die; in Japan the deceased (both men and women) must go with their heads entirely shaved.” Second, “[o]ur caskets [i.e. coffins] are elongated; theirs are round, that is, in the form of a half-barrel.” Third, “[o]ur deceased are buried face up in a reclining position; theirs are seated and bound with their face between their knees.” Finally, “[w]e bury our dead; the Japanese generally cremate theirs” (Danford et al. 2014: 120). Fróis’ text was likely compiled as a guide to Japanese

2 This research was re-published as a book with the English title *Studies on the Christian Relics in Japan* by Tōkō Shoin, Tokyo in 1926. Citations here follow the romanisation of names in the original. The files can be downloaded from: <https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/handle/2433/180759>.

culture for Jesuit missionaries. His comments apply especially to the aristocracy and warrior class; in general, there was considerable diversity in burial customs in early modern Japan (Tanigawa 1992; Suzuki et al. 2014).

Fróis’ *Historia de Japam* described a lavish funeral for an important Japanese Christian. The body was wrapped in golden damask fabric. A procession consisting of a hundred Christians, each with a lit candle, was led by a gilt gold and silver calvary (a cross with encrusted skull and bones) and followed by twelve white silk flags bearing insignia of the Passion. Moriwaki (2023: 36) suggests that the use of the flags may have been inspired by Buddhist or military-style vertical flags of the period. According to Fróis (1981: 336–337), this elaborate burial “caused many Gentiles to become Christians, as they later did.”

As seen from archaeology, the main features of the Christian mortuary style adopted in Japan were rectangular burial pits, headstones inscribed with Christian symbols such as crosses or the Christogram IHS, and grave goods such as crucifixes, rosary beads and devotional medallions (see Hudson 2024: 25–26). Although grave goods are relatively rare in practice (Gotō 2023), the Christian mortuary style was adopted quickly and widely, with the earliest dated headstone from 1581. In the context of the present essay, it is especially interesting that these mortuary customs were continued in some areas *after* the prohibition on Christianity. Northwest Kyushu remains the best-known region in this respect (Ōishi 2023). Endō (2023) has summarised evidence from the Tohoku region of northeast Honshu. Excavations at the Nihongi site in Ōshū city, Iwate prefecture uncovered 15 graves from the early modern period. Grave SK14 produced remains of a seated, barrel-like coffin together with a number of grave goods. Though heavily encrusted on the surface, a small metal object (1.7 x 1.0 x 0.2 cm in size) appears to be a Catholic medallion. The presence of this probable medallion in turn suggests that the 54 glass beads from the burial came from a rosary. Other grave goods included pieces of a pipe and 11 coins. The coins date the burial to the eighteenth century or later (Endō 2023: 89–90), long after Christianity had been banned in Japan.

Concluding Comments

This essay has sketched, in a provisional fashion, a few ideas for future research based on Scott (1990). For me, discovering the rich debates in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* has nevertheless been an exciting journey. I had previously paid greater attention to Scott’s more archaeological and anthropological writings, especially *Against the Grain* and *The Art of Not Being Governed*, works that Scott (2024: 5) himself categorised as “leaps into the abyss.” Many archaeological studies of early modern European colonialism have contrasted European ‘domination’ with native ‘resistance’ (e.g., Panich and Schneider 2015). My recent book on Japan’s Christian Century (Hudson 2024) is not the first to argue that this framework needs careful nuancing in the Japanese context. Scott’s concepts of public and hidden transcripts provide one productive approach to this question – and indeed to other periods of Japanese history. Reading the work of James Scott is always stimulating and quickly suggests new research projects and framings. Although several of Scott’s works have been translated into Japanese, as far as I am aware *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is not one of them. Yet in my view the book offers enormous potential for critical analyses of the archaeology and history of Japan. The public/hidden transcript framing would, I believe, provide new angles on a range of diverse topics in Japanese history from the decorative tombs of Late Antiquity (Zancan 2023) to the vexed question of premodern meat consumption (Hudson and Muñoz Fernández 2023) to peasant revolts (Vlastos 1986). Excavating the hidden transcripts of Japanese history is a compelling task for future research.

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