

Study of Mataya Festival from Communication Perspective

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Abstract: This study first presents an overview of the Mataya festival followed by an analysis of its various signs and components using communication theory, providing an exploration into the communicative tradition of the festival. The study demonstrates how Mataya communicates its signs to enable the feeling of Sahridayata or oneness as envisioned in Adhikary's Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC). The process of Sadharanikaran is applicable in all sentient beings towards orienting themselves to the attainment of Buddhahood. It ultimately presents how Mataya functions as a medium for fostering social harmony in the heterogenous society of Patan through its universally desired message for alleviation of suffering attained by following the Buddha's guidance.

Keywords: Buddhahood, Mataya, Neku jatra, Sadharanikaran model of communication, Vajrayana Buddhism.

Introduction

The indigenous Newars of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley are renowned for their spectacular festivals known as jatra. Beyond simply a festival, jatra is a special observance that manifests mythological stories to convey their meaning to mass audiences that witness them. Mataya is one of the oldest jattras of Patan, one of the three cities forming Kathmandu Valley, with historical accounts of the festival dated back to more than 1100 years, near the end of the Licchavi period of Nepal. The spectacular aspect of this jatra is the procession of jatra-goers, many of whom appear in various forms such as musical ensembles and light-bearers or in the appearance of demons, monsters, animals, and gods. Mataya participants offer devotional materials to more than 2000 Chaityas, stupas, and other devotional structures across Patan, enduring this difficult journey in veneration of the Buddha.

The jattras of Kathmandu Valley not only carry religious and cultural significance they also carry importance from communication perspective. Mataya is one of these treasured local festivals. Despite its importance Mataya is less known and in a state of cultural decline, making it a pertinent matter to conduct research on the topic of Mataya. Shakya (2019, p. 2) highlights the erosion of traditional practices within Mataya, emphasizing the need for cultural preservation and revival.

The festival of Mataya has a rich body of literature available through the contributions of many authors, historians, and scholars in the form of articles, essays, journals, ritual guides, and various references. However, there is a significant lack of scholarly documentation and research which primarily focuses on Mataya as a whole. The research paper contributes to the documentation of this essential local culture through a case study, applying various qualitative methodologies to present an overview of the festival. Additionally, the study of Mataya as a communication process has not

been explored as of now. Research into Mataya from communication perspectives has a broad scope in understanding how the indigenous Newars of Patan have been practicing mass communication for the past 1100 years.

To apply the communication perspective on Mataya, two prominent communication theories have been presented and discussed. The communication theories applied for the study are Saussure's Theory of Signs and Sadharanikaran Model of Communication.

The symbolic nature of Mataya has inherent qualifications for analysis through Saussure's Theory of Signs. Ferdinand de Saussure is widely regarded as one of the founders of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. His Theory of Signs introduced the concept of the "signifier" (the physical form of a sign) and the "signified" (the mental concept associated with the sign) (Saussure, 1959). The signifier and signified can be related in an iconic or arbitrary way. Fiske (1990) describes this relationship as: In an iconic relationship, the signifier looks or sounds like the signified; in an arbitrary relationship, the two are related only by agreement among the users. This framework is instrumental in understanding the symbolic nature of communication and how meaning is constructed through signs.

The arbitrariness of signs is especially relevant to the study of culture-specific significations as present in Mataya. In this regard "the mental concept" according to Fiske (1990), is broadly common to "all members of the same culture who share the same language" and that the signified and signifiers are both "a product of a particular culture".

Signification of signs in their respective cultural context, thus becomes a key part of signifying any sign. Therefore, the present article approaches Mataya not only through its signs but also by contextualizing the signs within the socio-cultural background of the indigenous Newars of Patan who celebrate Mataya.

The Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC) was first introduced in 2003 by Nirmala Mani Adhikary, and it draws on classic Sanskrit texts - Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* and Bhartrihari's *Vakyapadiya* (Adhikary, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016). The SMC theorizes the communication process as envisioned in Vedic Hinduism through the concept of Sadharanikaran.

According to Adhikary (2014), in the SMC, the communicating parties are known as Sahridayas. The Sahridayas are in an equivalent state of emotion intensity and engaged in sending and receiving messages. The Preshaka (sender) shares bhavas (moods and emotions) into the mind of Prapaka (receiver). There are three types of bhavas: (1) Sthayee bhavas, (2) Vyabhichari or Sanchari bhavas, and (3) Sattvika or Sattvaja bhavas. Sthayee bhavas have been categorized into eight emotions, including Rati (love), Shoka (sorrow), and Utsaha (enthusiasm). Sanchari bhavas are categorized into 33 types, including Harsha (joy), Avega (excitement), and Marana (death). Sattvik bhavas are also categorized into 8 types. When these bhavas encounter a physically perceivable stimulus, known as vibhava, an anubhava or experience is born. Bhavas are encoded through a process called Abhivyanjana and expressed in the Sandesha (message) then transmitted via the Sarani (channel) to be decoded. Rasaswadana (relishing of Rasa) is the process of decoding the message to produce anubhava by achieving the Rasa. There are eight types of Rasas each corresponding to a specific bhava. The Rasas of Vira (heroic) and Karuna (pathos) are particularly relevant to this study. The combination of vibhavas and anubhavas together with vyabhichari bhavas produce rasa. The Sthayee bhava, when stimulated by vibhava in the mind is heightened by anubhava and Sanchari bhava, making the mind highly receptive to the Rasa experience. This is how emotions are transferred through Rasaswadana. However, it is difficult to attend perfect communication due to the presence of Doshas (noise factors),

resulting in Rasa-bhanga (disruption of Rasaswadana). Sandarbha is vital for communication as there can be semantic differences based on context. Finally, Pratikriya (feedback) makes the process of communication ongoing although it will be there only when needed, and it is not universal. In SMC, communicating parties engage in communication process to become a Sahridaya, one who has attained Sahridayata.

Sahridayata is the core concept in which the meaning of Sadharanikaran resides. It is the state of common orientation, commonality or oneness. Communicating parties become Sahridayas with the completion of the process of Sadharanikaran. In a society that has asymmetrical relationships between communication parties, it is only due to Sahridayata the two-way communication and mutual understanding is possible. Thus, communicating parties can attain Sahridayata irrespective of complex hierarchies of castes, languages, cultures and religious practices, and the communication process qualifies to be considered as Sadharanikaran (Adhikary, 2014, p. 320).

The SMC is a key theory for studying the pluralism and multiculturalism in Nepalese society from a native perspective. Thus, SMC provides an ideal framework for understanding Mataya, an inclusive festival with open participation and capacity to attain Sahridayata for people of all backgrounds, genders, castes, ethnicities, and religions.

An Overview of Mataya Festival

Mataya is a culturally significant festival in Patan. In Mataya, participants symbolically represent characters, lighting lamps, and performing music and dance as they journey through the city, worshiping devotional structures to accumulate punya. The name 'Mataya' combines the Newari words 'mata' (light) and 'ya' (journey), meaning "journey of light". Celebrated annually on Gunla

Dwitiya of the Nepal Sambhata calendar, the festival is organized by the Neku Jatra Mataya Management Committee, consisting of 10-member tols (areas/communities), each taking turns as the jatra organizer. The name of tols and the year in which they functioned as organizers is presented here:

Name of Tol	Year as Organizer (AD)
Nakabahi	2014
Mangalbazar	2015
Jyabahabahi	2016
Ikhachien	2017
Bahubahal	2018
Haugal	2019
Okubahal	2020
Ikhelukhu	2021
Kobahal	2022
Saugal	2023

Table (1): Tols in the Neku Jatra Mataya Management Committee.

The observations made in this research are based on the celebration of Mataya in 2023. In this year Saugal Tol is the designated organizer of Mataya. The organizers are also responsible for various events that occur before, during, and after Mataya. The timeline of events associated with Mataya observed through this research are presented here:

Date	Event
16/08/2023	Nrityanath Puja: Nau Baja Performance
17/08/2023	Bogi Procession (Singing of Hymns of the Buddha along the Mataya route)

29/08/2023	Nyakhein Chwekeu (Announcement of Mataya)
30/08/2023	Kwonti: Nau Baja Performance
31/08/2023	Reception of Mataya Chaitya from Hiranya Varna Mahavihar
01/09/2023	Mataya Procession and Neku Jatra
02/09/2023	Bungamati: Nau Baja Performance
03/09/2023	Swayambhu: Nau Baja Performance
04/09/2023	Ganesh Puja and Handover of Mataya Chaitya Ceremony

Table (2): Timeline of events associated with Mataya.

Observation of Mataya Procession and Neku Jatra of 2023

In the early morning of September 1st devotees gather at Saugal Tol to begin the Mataya procession (The organizing tol serves as the start and end-point of Mataya on the year they are designated as the organizer). Figure (1) presents the route of the Mataya procession. On this route the procession travels to more than 2000 stupas, Chaityas, and other devotional structures within the bounds of the 4 cardinal stupas of Patan: Lagankhel (South), Pulchowk (East), Sankhamul (North), and Imadol (West). The procession travels throughout the day with the last of the devotees arriving at the end-point by late evening. The Neku Jatra travels a separate route from the Mataya procession, starting in the afternoon from the organizing tol and performing in various locations of Patan.

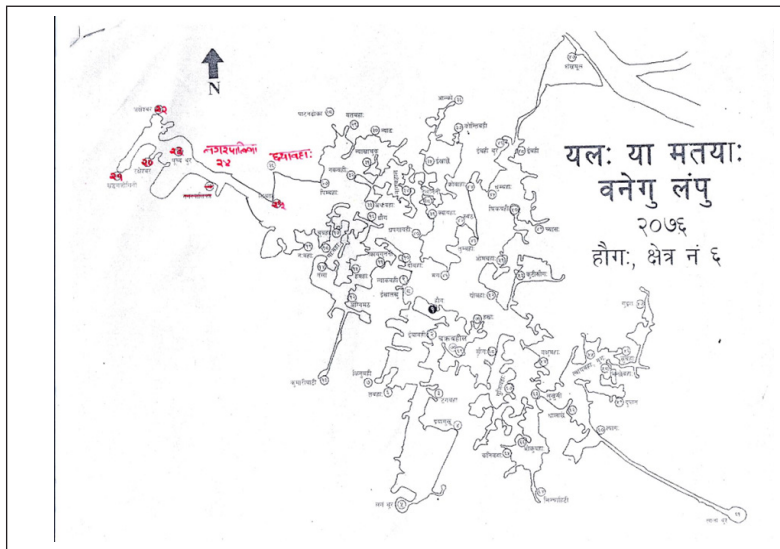


Figure (1): Map of Mataya route.

Some of the key observances during the Mataya procession include: (1) Offerings of food, money, and other items to devotional structures; (2) Khyalah: entertainers in costumes of demons, ghosts, and other figures; (3) Baja performances from various Patan communities; (4) Devotees dressed as Mahadev and sages; (5) Light bearers with candles. Additionally, snacks, refreshments, and medical care are provided to participants, with the belief that supporting them earns punya for the helpers.

Shakya (2004) identifies 41 symbolic rituals, performances, and offerings in the Mataya procession. Key symbols include Bajracharya priests leading performing various rituals, representations of gods like Mahadev (damaru) and Vishnu (conch shells), celestial beings like Kinnarra and Gandarbha (music and dance), and offerings like roti bread, symbolizing victory over Mara.

These symbolisms are given continuity every year by the Mataya organizers and participants. Despite the cultural significance

of these symbols to the festival, some have been lost over time and are in need of revitalization (Shakya, 2019, p. 2). The Neku Jatra Mataya Management Committee publishes the Mataya Smarika annual magazine with articles written by local experts about Mataya to help in cultural preservation and as a record of that years' Mataya festivities.

Mythology of Mataya: Buddha's Victory over the Maras

Mataya is celebrated in remembrance of the day when Buddha defeated an army of demons, overcoming great temptations and disruptions through meditation and divine powers to achieve enlightenment (Joshi, 2013). Buddha's victory over Maras as detailed in the Lalitavistara Sutra has been summarized as follows:

In this story, Siddhartha Gautama is meditating under the bodhi tree to attain Buddhahood. The Mara army attacks him, as they don't want him to be free from their realm of temptation. Their attack fail because his punya saves him from any harm. The Mara King also sends nymphs to seduce and tempt him but it all fails. Eventually, the night arrives when he attains Buddhahood and becomes the Buddha and beings from all of samsara including kings, sages, gods and demi-gods, come to the Buddha lighting lamps to offer devotional worship

Mythology of Neku Jatra: Shringbheri Avadana

Another mythology associated with Mataya is the Shringbheri Avadana as neku, the buffalo horn instrument, is played during Mataya as part of the Neku Jatra. The summary of the Shringbheri Avadana is presented below:

In one of buddha's past lives he was born as King Simhaketu, who relished hunting animals, an act of bad karma which leads to him being reborn as a buffalo upon death and that buffalo eventually dies hunted by wild animals. Fortunately, Queen Sulakshana, the

King's beloved wife, had been reborn as the herder girl taking care of the buffalo, and she remembers the buffalo is her husband from their past life. After the buffalo's death, taking the advice of Suparang Bodhisattva she builds a Chaitya of sand with its remains in the core and circles the Chaitya playing the buffalo's horn. Upon doing this act of punya, the King emerges from the Chaitya as a human and the two are reunited.

Chaitya Worship and Mataya Festival

The Buddhism of most Newars is exoteric Mahayana devotionalism, as they direct their devotions to Chaityas in their courtyards and neighborhoods and to the great stupas such as Svayambhu (Lewis, 1984, pp. 86–120; Gutschow, 1997). The making and ritual veneration of stupas began with the death of Shakyamuni Buddha and up to the present day remains the chief means by which the laity seek the good karma needed to advance toward nirvana (Lewis, 2000, p. 22). Stupa veneration also has a votive aspect (Schopen, 1987), noting Buddhists and monks having their own ashes deposited in small votive Chaityas (Schopen, 1991a, 1991b, 1992). According to Lewis (2000, pp. 25–26), these structures perhaps established a means for perpetual punya-generation for the deceased and Chaitya creation in the Shringabheri Avadana may perhaps be related to this custom.

Shakya (2019, p. 25) describes Shringabheri Avadana as a previous birth story of Gautama Buddha in which he was born as King Simhaketu in Sashipattana city. The avadana begins with a dialogue between Shariputra and Tathagata (Gautama Buddha) as presented here:

Upon hearing this, Tathagata Shakyamuni said to Shariputra within the hearing of all the gods and human beings in the audience, “Verily, Verily, O Shariputra! Emancipation

obtained through Chaitya worship that is accompanied by the blowing of buffalo horns, is illustrated in the following story” (*Shrng Bheri Avadana: The Buffalo Horn-blowing Tale*, Smrti Press, 1979).

The opening lines of the Shringbheri Avadana emphasize that veneration of Chaityas through musical processions ensures a good destiny for oneself and deceased relatives. It also states that seeking refuge at Chaityas leads to attaining bodhi, and building and maintaining stupas brings even greater merit (Lewis, 2000, p. 41).

In Bajracharya (1990), Buddhists in Patan are said to participate in the Mataya festival in connection with the avadana. According to Shakya (2010), Patan has over 2000 Chaityas, stupas, and other devotional structures. During Mataya, participants endure much hardship offering devotions at each site, from morning to evening, emphasizing the importance of merit-making in memory of the dead and contemplating our own mortality by taking refuge in the Buddha and his teachings. Shakya (2010) also mentions that Mataya consists of various pujas and jatras, namely: Bogi procession, Mataya procession, Shringbheri Jatra (also known as Neku Jatra), and Ganesh puja.

Mataya and Shringbheri Jatra have been held together since the rule of Lichchhavi King Gunakama Dev (987–990 AD) according to Wright (1955). Prior to these two jatras being held together Bajrachya (2003) mentions how King Balarchan Dev built Jeshtavarna Mahavihara and held Mataya in Lalitpur under its name. Shakya (2019, p. 26) provides a detailed analysis of the history of Mataya and Shringbheri Jatra, tracing the revitalization of Mataya by various monarchs over time. Through this study he identifies the origin of Mataya as dating back to the rule of King Balarchan Dev (879 AD), near the end of the Lichchhavi period in Nepal.

Shakya (2019, p. 54) adds that from a genealogical context,

Mataya and Shringabheri Jatra are seen as separate jatras with their own mythology- Shringabheri Jatra is associated with Shringabheri Avadana and Mataya is associated with the victory of Buddha Shakyamuni over the Mara as presented in the Lalitavistara Sutra.

A summary of the Lalitavistara Sutra is presented here:

The sutra, which is structured in twenty-seven chapters, first presents the events surrounding the Buddha's birth, childhood, and adolescence in the royal palace of his father, king of the Sakya nation. It then recounts his escape from the palace and the years of hardship he faced in his quest for spiritual awakening. Finally, the sutra reveals his complete victory over the demon Mara, his attainment of awakening under the Bodhi tree, his first turning of the wheel of Dharma, and the formation of the very early sangha (*Lalitavistara: The Play in Full*, Dharmachakra Translation Committee, 2013).

Deep (1996) highlights the Lalitavistara Sutra's significance in the Mataya procession, where participants dressed as ghosts, spirits, and various mythical beings symbolize Mara's attempts to disrupt the Buddha's austerities. Their presence is both an attraction and a requirement, and their participation in the worship of Chaityas represents devotion and willingness of such beings to seek refuge under the Buddha.

Through this genealogical context we can understand the separation of Mataya and Neku Jatra from their mythology. However, as both jatras emphasize the importance of Chaitya worship and merit making, the connection of these jatras can be viewed as complimentary in their goals.

Signifiers and Signified in Mataya

Signifier	Signified
 <p data-bbox="176 584 546 619">Signifier 1: Bajracharya priests</p>	<p data-bbox="658 252 943 443">Mataya is initiated and guided by Vajrayana Buddhist traditions as the procession is led by Bajracharya priests.</p>
 <p data-bbox="176 959 482 994">Signifier 2: Light bearers.</p>	<p data-bbox="658 630 943 821">Light bearers signify Buddha's victory over Mara as offerings of light were made in the myth.</p>
 <p data-bbox="176 1337 426 1369">Signifier 3: Khyalah.</p>	<p data-bbox="658 1008 943 1273">Khyalah can be interpreted as the mythological Mara army, described to have the appearance of animal-faced and hideous monsters.</p>



Signifier 4: Chaitya

Chaityas are perceived as a devotional structure for merit making, as depicted in the Shringbheri Avadana. In the avadana, the punya earned by the queen by building and worshipping of a Chaitya, reunited her with the deceased king.



Signifier 5: Family of the deceased

White clothes, shaved heads and eye-brows for men signify the death of a close relative in the preceding year. Many people participate in Mataya for deceased family members.



Signifier 6. Mahadev and sages

The representation of Mahadev and other gods in Mataya reflects the mythological depiction of such divine beings lighting lamps in honor of Siddhartha Gautama's attainment of Buddhahood after his victory over the Mara.



Signifier 7: Baja.

Playing of baja is a symbol of gandarbhas and kinnaras, celestial beings born from the most basic karma. They are also depicted in the myth lighting lamps in veneration of the Buddha.



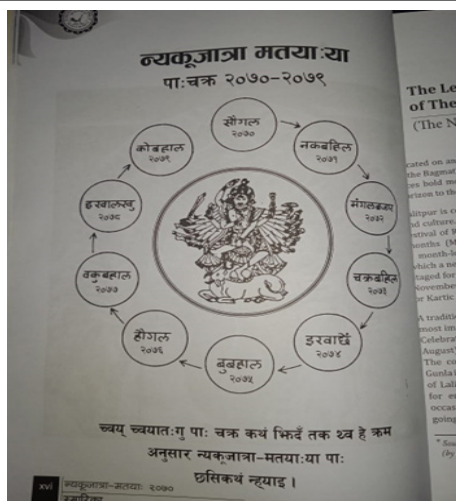
Signifier 8: Neku

Neku is a symbol of karmic retribution. It represents the akusala karma of the king, an avid hunter, being reborn as a buffalo upon death and later preyed by wild animals. It also represents the punya of the queen who created a Chaitya using the buffalo's remains and worshipped the Chaitya while playing the neku, leading to their reunion.



Signifier 9: Sastanga prostration.

Difficult method of worship which presents devotion by offering entire body to the Chaityas.



Signifier 10: Neku Jatra Mataya Turn Wheel

Experts say that the handover of organizing responsibilities between ten castes represents a longstanding tradition of non-discrimination between diverse Newari castes from different parts of the city as each have an equal part to function as organizers of Mataya over a ten-year period.

Table (3): Sausure’s Signifiers and Signified in Mataya.

Elements of SMC in Mataya

(For detailed discussion on the elements of the SMC, please see: Adhikary, 2014.) Sahridaya Preshaka: Neku Jatra Mataya Management Committee is the main preshaka. Various community-

based guthis (management committee) also function as preshaka, maintaining continuity of some signs for example: baja, khyalah, Mahadev and sages, etc. The third type of preshaka are individuals who voluntarily join the procession through its open participation.

Sahridaya Prapaka: Spectators and participants of Mataya.

Bhava: There are distinct Rasa in the myth of Mataya and Neku Jatra. The Rasa of Vira (heroic) stems from Buddha's victory over the Maras, inspiring sthayee bhava of Utsaha (enthusiasm) and sanchari bhava like Harsha (joy) and Avega (excitement). The Rasa of Karuna (pathos) is depicted by Queen Sulakshana's mourning for her deceased husband, inspires sthayee bhava of Rati (love) and Shoka (sorrow) heightened by the sanchari bhava of Marana (death).

Abhivyanjana: The bhavas are encoded through various signs as demonstrated in Table (3). For instance, The carnival-like atmosphere of Mataya full of chaitya worship, baja, lights, and khyalah is a celebration of Buddha's Vira. Another example of Abhivyanjana is the sound of the Neku that resonates with Karuna as it signifies the myth of Neku Jatra.

Sandesha: Mataya informs people about the importance of punya generation for all prapaka. Neku Jatra carries the same message with a different myth.

Sarani: The Mataya procession and Neku Jatra are the channels.

Rasaswadana: The Rasa can be decoded by prapaka, experiencing the emotions conveyed by the myth of Mataya and Neku Jatra. Sahridayata is achieved when Sahridayas attain oneness of these emotions, enabling mutual understanding of the Sandesha.

Doshas: Semantic noise from lack of knowledge on the Jatra mythology and Vajrayana Buddhism are factors hindering Rasaswadana.

Sandarbha: Context on the Jatra mythology and Vajrayana

Buddhism are necessary for Sahridayata to be achieved.

Pratikriya: The procession also serves to foster curiosity amongst prapakas unfamiliar with Mataya, encouraging such prapaka to explore the sandarbha and experience the many signs of Mataya.

Findings and Conclusion

Mataya holds great cultural significance to the city of Patan. Its main goal as a Jatra is to communicate the significance of striving for the attainment of Buddhahood as achieved by Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. Towards this goal devotees walk from morning to evening in procession to worship more than 2000 Chaityas, stupas, and other devotional structures located across Patan. It is an act that is believed to generate punya for Mataya participants as well as their loved ones.

The importance of attaining Buddhahood through Chaitya worship is the central message of Mataya. Understanding Mataya from a communication perspective as a means to deliver this message has produced findings as follows:

1. Mataya is contextualized within its mythology and the religion of Vajrayana Buddhism.
2. The mythological victory of the Buddha over the mara army is signified in Mataya by khyalah, baja performances, devotees in the guise of Mahadev and sages, nymphs, and other symbolic representations. The attainment of Buddhahood is the result of great punya earned over many lives according to this myth. It also presents the willingness of such beings to follow the guidance of the Buddha.
3. The significance of Chaitya worship is rooted in the Shringbheri Avadana. It also signifies the importance of Neku Jatra which is associated with Mataya. This significance is communicated through Mataya for instance by hearing the sound of the neku, one can decode bhavas of Rati as conveyed by the queen who

- through the act of blowing the neku as she circled the dead king's Chaitya, lead to their reunion. The Rasawadana of this bhava can lead to Sadharanikaran of the communicating parties and a deeper appreciation for Mataya becomes manifest in prapakas.
4. These socio-cultural values embedded in mythology are further contextualized within the religious system of Vajrayana Buddhism that prescribes the path to Buddhahood as the ideal goal for all sentient beings. This goal is achieved by understanding the 4 noble truths and practicing the eightfold path.

In this regard this research concludes, Mataya functions as a communication system for the people of Patan to achieve Sahridayata in socio-cultural values fostering social harmony by manifesting mythologies through its jatra procession.

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