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## Philosophical Foundations of African Women's Indigenous Knowledge for Food Security: Towards Narrative Feminist Pedagogy

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## Philosophical Foundations of African Women's Indigenous Knowledge for Food Security: Towards Narrative Feminist Pedagogy

### Cover Page Footnote

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**PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S INDIGENOUS  
KNOWLEDGE FOR FOOD SECURITY: TOWARDS NARRATIVE FEMINIST  
PEDAGOGY**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the pedagogical value of African Women's Indigenous Knowledge or Food Security. The approach is narratological and takes into account oral testimonies and life-stories of women farmers in Homa Bay County, Kenya. The paper proposes African feminist epistemology as a viable approach in the pedagogy of food security and agricultural extension in rural Kenya. This is a paradigm shift which incorporates women farmers' indigenous knowledge in formal agricultural education and extension programmes. The paradigm shift to African feminist epistemology is a response to a pedagogical anomaly where women's indigenous knowledge has been relegated to the sidelines, with hegemonic agricultural practices favouring male-dominance in knowledge production. This paper explores ways of recognizing women farmer's knowledge in food security. The paradigm shift is significant because African women are the main custodians of vital indigenous knowledge for food security. The paper recommends that appropriate Government policy should be formulated to take into account women's indigenous knowledge for food security in rural households rather than over-dependence on externally imposed epistemological frameworks. Further, ethnographic research adopting the model of African feminist epistemology is recommended for other cultural landscapes in Kenya and beyond with regard to the role of women farmers in food security.

### Key Words

- i. African Cultural Studies
- ii. African Epistemology
- iii. African Feminism
- iv. African Folklore
- v. African Food Security
- vi. African Indigenous Knowledge
- vii. African Narrative Pedagogy
- viii. African Oral Tradition
- ix. African Philosophy
- x. African Women's Studies

## 1. Introduction

The narrative approach which has been used to investigate the context of food production in Homa Bay County, Kenya is based on a broader African feminist epistemology with the ultimate goal of mainstreaming indigenous knowledge systems. The content of women's indigenous knowledge needs to be integrated in local, national as well as international development discourse (Kabira, 2018:22-23). The approach of African feminist epistemology adopted in this paper seeks to incorporate the discourse content of women's indigenous knowledge for food security in agricultural education and extension programmes in rural Kenya.

Culture and food are always tied together and work out in tandem. The cultural knowledge of a people involves their interaction with the environment holistically. In his philosophic approach to the understanding of nature and environmental ethics, Henry Odera Oruka brought together a large team of scholars to debate on the general themes of philosophy, humanity and ecology at the World Philosophy Conference in Nairobi, Kenya (July 21- 25, 1991). This researcher had the good fortune of attending this important conference which brought together scholars from different branches of humanities and social sciences with interest in philosophy, humanity and ecology. Different themes emerged which may be summarized under the following scientific notions of agricultural sustainability; global warming; technology transfer; and industrial competitive edge (Odhiambo, 1994: 50). He further underscored the fact that a new paradigm of agricultural sustainability and development must adopt four critical themes in Africa, namely: food security; economic security; national security; and productive knowledge industry (Odhiambo, 1994:51).

Critical indigenous pedagogy of women farmers in cultural landscapes needs incorporation in national as well as local agenda in different institutional frameworks. The agro-ecology and food processing domains need to take cognizance of production of knowledge by tapping into traditions and customs which dictate agricultural practices. The role of women farmers is, therefore, critical in designing the inputs and extending the outputs of indigenous knowledge systems applicable in agricultural practices for food security in the household (African Women's Studies Report, 2014: 4-5).

There are many challenges facing Africa, but one of the most critical one is the determination to feed the ever growing populations: how governments go about this is the big question. Odhiambo (1994:51-52) proposes an approach which should transform age-old self-sufficient traditional farming systems of African Communities. The cultural landscapes are created out of

the natural histories of Tropical Africa which guaranteed sustainability within the indigenous peoples' ecological domains. Odhiambo advocates for an integrated farming systems. This kind of approach would, of necessity, include: food plants (both wild and cultivated), forests, livestock, fisheries, bee-keeping, and much more (Odhiambo, 1994:52). By diversification of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, fisheries and other culture-specific practices, grassroots communities in Africa can engage in a new pedagogy of hope for self-determination in terms of agricultural sustainability and food security in the households. What is not mentioned by these food discourses is the role of African women's indigenous knowledge in farming activities. Africa needs a new paradigm by decolonizing the mind by recognizing the epistemologies of women and other marginalized groups in the production of knowledge (NgugiwaThiong'o, 1986). The process of decolonization of agricultural practices must necessarily adopt fresh thinking and the removal of Western prejudices inculcated in Eurocentric education systems which saw African folkways as "primitive" (Okotp'Bitek, 1970). European colonial attitudes which must be banished by indigenous critical pedagogy can be demonstrated in negative descriptions of Africans as "primitive" people who lived in "villages of mud huts thatched with grass or leaves, whose pattern varies with tribe" (Stembridge, 1964: 82). The European colonial ethnography saw the African family as belonging to a "tiny world of mud huts" where life revolved around father, mother, children and possibly a few relatives nearby:

*The youngster helps his father tend the flocks, and assists him to spread out the hunting nets in the bush and to drive away buck and other animals into them. The mother sows and gathers the crops as well as attending to her household duties (Stembridge, 1964:83).*

It is this simplistic view of African cultural landscapes which Ugandan anthropologist, Okotp'Bitek, protested against in his seminal work *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1970) when he stated that cultural anthropology was a handmaiden of European colonialism in Africa which perpetuated the myth of the "primitive". The view that African cultural practices and food production methods are "primitive" persisted during the post-colonial era with some intellectuals holding the same view (Ojany and Ogendo, 1987: 122-124).

French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, was also critical of the idea of "primitive" versus "civilized" minds; he said that it was discriminatory to look down upon cultures "without writing" by dismissing these cultures as being of "somewhat coarser quality" of human survival (Levi-Strauss, 1978: 15). The anthropological debate on "primitive" versus "civilized" mind/thinking set Levi-Strauss against Malinowski who wrote the introduction to

Jomo Kenyatta's intimate account of Gikuyu traditional society under the title "Facing Mount Kenya" (1938). Malinowski stated that "anthropology begins at home"; before European and American ethnographers could proceed to document other cultures of "exotic savages" they first needed to start by knowing themselves first (Malinowski, 1938).

This researcher takes the Afrocentric approach that decolonization of the mind has to: "confront this threat with the higher and more creative culture of resolute struggle" (NgugiwaThiong'o, 1986:3). Critical pedagogy which seeks to liberate minds in the post-colony must drink from the old wells which have watered agricultural sustainability since time immemorial in Africa. Recent research by historical anthropologists has revealed that the beginnings of agriculture and food production dates back to pre-historic times in Africa. Agriculture is fundamentally an attempt at human survival; it is a process of cultivating food plants so that greater quantities of their leaves, fruits or roots which are edible to humans and their livestock are available for domestic use. Grains and cereals were domesticated by Luo-speaking peoples of Eastern Africa many centuries ago; the centrality of grains in human affairs is not just for consumptions – grains are also used for the manufacture of yeast which is critical in alcohol production (Onjala, 2019: 118).

A visit to local market places such as RodiKopany in Homa Bay County reveals displays of grain products such as yeast (Luo: *thowi*) spread out on mats for potential buyers to make their choice. Millet and sorghum are considered to be indigenous crops in Luo society. In a study of Kenya's physical and human geography, Ojany and Ogendo (1988) give sorghum, finger millet and bulrush millet as staple crops which have survived in East Africa since time immemorial. They observe that these grains are drought tolerant crops, they withstand poor soils and rainfall; and they can endure high temperatures. Sorghum is a climate resilient crop which is widespread around the southern part of the Gulf of Nyanza (Luo: *Winam*) in Homa Bay County, Kenya.

The indigenous knowledge of women farmers in Luo-speaking communities is traditionally packaged in folk stories, proverbs and sayings handed down from one generation to the next by old women who are the custodians of folk ways (Luo: *pim*). The gift of story is usually a preserve of these old women who educate the children and grandchildren on old traditions and customs regarding food security and human survival (Cohen and Odhiambo, 1989: 92-95).

In the geographical region around the Gulf of Nyanza in which Homa Bay County lies to the South, old agricultural practices with regard to "subsistence economy" and "shifting cultivation" are still practically deployed by subsistence farmers: "on the whole, the cultivated fields are very small averaging half an acre, 0.2 hectare each" (Ojany and Ogendo, 1988:122). The major

subsistence crops in the Nyanza Region are dependent on the farmers' indigenous knowledge on rainfall patterns and soil fertility; the indigenous women farmers through informal education and socialization in their communities make choices of climate resilient crops suited for different agro-ecological zones around Lake Victoria. The farmers from experience know what to plant where based on the natural vegetation in those local landscapes. The wild plants are known as 'safe tellers' (Ojany and Ogendo, 1988:125) which means that even plants have the gift of story-telling as to what crops should be planted where the wild grasses, trees and shrubs can be found; the indigenous knowledge of the plant geographies in the landscapes and ecosystems. Human beings learn to survive in extreme circumstances even when they are left to their own devices with little or no support. A parallel of indigenous ecological knowledge can be drawn from Velma Wallis (1994) in her narrative of *Two Old Women* (An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival).

The story-teller was born in a large family of thirteen children. They lived and were raised according to Athabascan values which enabled them to cope with extreme Northern ice-frozen winters most part of the year. Stories of courage, survival and resilience were told to instruct the children and youth on ways to survive the extreme weather conditions of North America. The story-teller, Velma Wallis, re-tells an old Athabascan Indian Legend handed down from one generation to the next, from mothers to daughters along the Yukon River in Alaska. It is the tale hunger and cold taking their toll upon an indigenous Athabascan Indian Community, their faces: "stricken with looks of hopelessness as they faced starvation, and the future held little promise of better days" (Velma Wallis, 1994:2). The two old women who had been cared by the people in the band for many years were left to die. The younger people thought that it was a waste to feed these two old women who did not have long to live anyway. The two old women left to the vagaries of harsh winter cold said: "let us die trying." And try, they did by recalling old skills which they learnt from their childhood:

*The women went back in time to recall the skills and knowledge that they had been taught from early childhood (Velma Wallis, 1994:43).*

The skills and knowledge which they had acquired from their elders during childhood kept them going: gathering food from the frosty wilderness and building shelters which kept them going, and telling stories around the campfire – of two old women who were not expected to survive another Alaska winter. Then the band returned, they were surprised that the two old women did not die; they were still alive because of the indigenous "skills and knowledge" they had acquired in their early childhood: fishing, hunting rabbits, and sleeping in warm tents they had made from

hides and skins of animals: “the men realized that these two women not only had survived but also sat before them in good health while they, the strongest men of the band, were half starved ” (Velma Wallis, 1994:113).

When the men of the band which abandoned the women woke up in the morning to return with the good news that the two old women had survived they were sent off with “packed bundles of dry fish, enough to restore the people’s energy for travel” (Velma Wallis, 1994:123). The skills and knowledge of these two old women, which they were taught in their early childhood, saved the band; the story was told and retold to younger generations in that Athabascan Indian community:

*They never again abandoned any elderly person. They had learned a lesson taught by two whom they came to love and care for until each died a truly happy old woman (Velma Wallis, 1994:140).*

Learning lessons from old women’s stories has pedagogical value in different cultures of the world; whether among the indigenous Americans of Alaska in the North or the Luo people around the Gulf of Nyanza on the shores of Lake Victoria in Homa Bay County. The resilience of food customs of Indian vegetarian cooking is well celebrated globally and in East Africa (AdirajaDasa, 1989).

Among the Luo-speaking peoples of East Africa, the oral narrative tradition has been kept alive by women story-tellers such as Grace Ogot (1930-2015); Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye (1928-2015); and Asenath Bole Odaga (1938-2014). These women story-tellers relied on Luo oral literature and folklore to teach their audiences useful lessons as members of society. The story-telling tradition was a useful tool for teachers in the lower primary classes. Teachers such as YukabedObuyaOtieno (1929-2001) used folk songs and storytelling in Dholuo as she taught many generations of children at Kamagambo Primary School in South Nyanza for almost four decades from mid-1950s to mid-1980s. This was the generation of teachers who valued Mother Tongue Education in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. A dedicated breed of educationalists such as E. W. Gachukia; S. S. Gachuhi; A. Nimrod; E. Gatua; M. Muhoro; A. Odundo; S. Dulo; and D. Ongile worked tirelessly under the Ministry of Education’s Curriculum Development Centre which evolved into the Kenya Institute of Education. An example of the supplementary readers was the TKK Dholuo Kenya Primary Course (1967). There were titles such as *AkeyoOlal E Chiro* (Akeyo Gets Lost at the Market) under the TKK series. The course materials were developed in various indigenous Kenyan languages. A critical evaluation of school textbooks

reveals that books were grounded in culturally relevant contexts and they incorporated grammars of social norms (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986: 122-124).

Kenyan woman writer and folklorist Asenath Bole Odaga (1994) captures the Luo proverb on food security which declares that: *Jakech ok or e dero* (A person subjected to prolonged hunger is never allowed in a storehouse for grain). If the person suffering from hunger is allowed access into the granary, then the strategic food reserve might be depleted to the nutritional disadvantage of the entire household. The storehouse for grain is guarded jealously and only members of the household are allowed access. The Luo proverb: *Jakisuma ok or e dero* (A person begging for some grain is never sent to the storehouse for grain). This proverb has the same pragmatic meaning of jealously guarding the storehouse for grain in a Luo homestead (Odaga, 1994:30). When hungry relatives arrive in a Luo homestead to seek food relief, they are never given free access to granaries. Food rationing is part and parcel of indigenous knowledge for food security. Luo proverbs on food security need to be incorporated into formal agricultural education and extension programmes in order to dealing with food insecurity in rural households by avoiding wastage. The deeper meaning of these proverbs reveals that those in authority should not abuse their positions when they have access to strategic food reserves. Systemic corruption in East Africa with regard to storehouses for grain is captured by Joseph G. Healey in his narratives of wisdom and joy in East Africa. He tells the story of President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania who disguised himself as a beggar during a national food crisis in 1974. President Nyerere put on tattered clothes and wore an old hat; he then went to the offices of the National Milling Company of Tanzania and asked for some grain from the manager who did not recognize him. The manager told the strange looking old man to go away and stop bothering him. Meanwhile, the corrupt staff continued with their corrupt deals as Mwalimu Nyerere observed them; he cried out for help but nobody in the office paid attention to his plea for food relief. There is an African proverb which states that the hunger in a neighbour's house does not bother someone: "A satisfied person does not know a hungry person" (Healey, [2004], 2010: 69). As the old strange looking beggar cried out, the manager continued to do business with corrupt traders who were buying the famine relief food meant for poor Tanzanians. In this narrative of the wisdom, President Julius Nyerere eventually removes his old hat and reveals himself to the corrupt officials who were abusing their positions of access to the storehouses of grain meant for food relief to the hungry. President Julius Nyerere fired the corrupt manager and all the assistants who were engaged in selling food relief supplies to corrupt traders. The moral of the story is that

some people should not be entrusted with storehouses for food because they might abuse that privilege (Odaga, 1994: 31).

Oral testimonies and life-stories are an integral part of African indigenous education. African narrative traditions use stylistic techniques of stories within stories or flashbacks as depicted in NgugiwaThiong'o's novel "Petals of Blood" in which the writer borrows from the African oral narrative tradition of life-stories. A textual demonstration of the genre of life-story is that of the tribute to Grace Ogot during her funeral ceremony where little narratives were printed alongside the main biographical narrative. One of her nephews wrote a brief testimony (a story within a story) narrating the following: "Mama Grace Ogot was my mother's younger sister. I only got to know her well in 1955 when I was seven years old. She was part of our family; she would always ensure that we remained clean and happy" (Fred Ogumbo, 2015: 12). In celebrating the life and times of his aunt, the nephew recalls that Grace Ogot bought him an *Abisidi* (a small foot-ball) in the area of Seme-Kowe which made him the envy of many boys among his peers in the entire Jusa Village. The little boy recalls how he walked eight miles from his village in Seme-Kowe to the Maseno School Chapel to witness the wedding of Grace Akinyi and Bethwell Allan Ogot in 1959; during the wedding reception, the little boy ate as much cake as his appetite could allow him. The nephew to Grace Ogot concludes his testimony by saying that during his adulthood, she became a role model of African motherhood: "her kindness was beyond reproach. She was a diplomat and always remained firm" (Ogumbo, 2015: 12). From this testimony of a close relative of an internationally acclaimed African woman story-teller, lessons are learnt from her hospitality and motherly care; loving kindness of an aunt; and diplomacy tempered with firm leadership in the family, the Luo community and Kenya at large.

In pedagogical contexts, Fr Joseph G. Healey (2010) states that stories about people, places and events within the community can deepen identity and belonging by helping individuals, families and nations. He gives the pedagogical term story a wider contextual meaning to include: oral and written narrative forms; folktales; historical fiction; legends; myths; parables; poems; prayers; proverbs; sayings; and songs. He also includes true stories from the African experience; his own and that of others people. They all have pedagogical value since stories are so designed to empower and challenge the people; to inspire, uplift and motivate listeners to greater levels of human achievement. In Luo society, stories are told of days of plenty and days of hunger; days of joy and days of sorrow as we can see in *AheroDhowa:Sigandwa* (I Love Our Language, Our Folklore) (cf. Dulo, 1980: 15-18). Stories about food security are often told in order to teach people about survival during hard times. The eponymous character OkalTako in Dulo's short

story is symbolic of extreme greed; the man went into a home then ate too much of everything offered to him resulting in his untimely and tragic death. In Luo folklore there is the saying: *Ichlach ne onegoOkalTako* (Greed led to OkalTako's tragic death). People are advised to eat just enough to keep healthy and strong; over-indulging in food and drink is frowned upon as can be learnt from this pithy saying about OkalTako (Dulo, 1980: 19).

Learning lessons from documented/written and non-documented/oral sources happens often in African scholarship. The production of African indigenous knowledge by women story-tellers such as Asenath Bole Odaga needs a brief mention at this point. She is seen through the eyes of a former colleague, Chris L. Wanjala, who depicted her in a narrative as “an Africanist and a prototype worker in African studies” (Tribute by C. L. Wanjala: Friday 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2014). He was of course looking at contemporary scholars associated with the then Institute of African Studies of the University of Nairobi over the years from its inception in 1970 to the present; the tribute had rich life-stories of an institutional establishment dealing with African scholarship. It has kept mutating into different life-forms but retaining the original folk resilience encapsulated in narrations of indigenous knowledge systems in “the eternal quest of meaning,” (Healey, 2010).

## **2. Risks of Knowledge and Food Security: The Nyamgondho Folk Narrative**

In African narrative pedagogy, the feminine principle of productivity is well rooted; the mythic consciousness as witnessed in many folk stories. In Luo society, the folk story of Nyanam who made NyamgondhoWuodOmbare fabulously wealthy comes to mind. In Luo mythology, the feminine principle works in critical areas of human survival such as food and nutrition but healing also derives synergy from the same source (Onyango Ogutu and Rosceo, (1992[1974], 139-143).

In different cultures of the world, woman engaged in a journey to the inner-self passing through several stations in life by nurturing her own household from conception to gestation, from birth to adulthood; with the bread for life, meat for strength and the ever-nourishing spiritual milk of sustenance:

*She is not just a fertility deity whose emblem is the ever replenished storehouse of the harvest home, but wields the double-axe symbol of earth and sky, matter and spirit (Begg, 1984: 81).*

Woman always presides over the moral economy and ethical boundaries as the foolish legendary character, Nyamgondho Wuod Ombare, soon discovers when he treats the mystical Nyanam with disdain. As moral retribution, the mysterious woman who was fished out of the water withdraws from Nyamgondho's homestead with all the wealth which she helped to accumulate; she disappears into the depths of lake never to be seen again. Nyamgondho watches in disbelief and dies a poverty-stricken and heart-broken man. In Luo mythology, the lake holds a lot of mystical secrets about life and death; food and hunger; wealth and poverty. The secret struggles of womanhood in a narrative approach to social transformation can be gleaned in the character Nyanam; she is indeed a critical archetype in folk media inquiry into holistic survival of humanity. A narrative approach to pedagogy of social transformation enables communities to come to terms with their development priorities. Bruce Bradshaw (2002: 24-30) has outlined major functions of cultural narratives deciphered from oral literature and folklore as follows:

- i) Explaining and legitimizing human behavior
- ii) Cultivating individual self-concept
- iii) Fostering collective identity
- iv) Empowering people to shape their histories
- v) Fostering the creation of traditions and customs
- vi) Communicating beliefs, virtues and values
- vii) Providing a basis for evaluating morality and ethics
  
- viii) Providing a vision for the future

From the above outline, it can be said that indigenous knowledge systems and food security provide opportunities for cultural narratives of human survival. The cultural narratives of food and nutrition help in understanding how society operates in terms of gender roles: women and men; girls and boys; mothers and fathers; sisters and brothers all have roles to play in African family settings. From Bruce Bradshaw's outline of cultural narratives, food and nutrition legitimizes certain human behaviours; helping individuals to develop self-concept by socialization through food production activities; and fostering family identity in terms of what roles people play in ensuring food security in the household. The cultural narrative approach to critical pedagogy helps the people to shape their histories in terms of what their ancestors used to eat several generations ago and the culture shift leading to what the contemporary society relies upon as staple diets. Cultural narratives help in pedagogical reflections on whether or not contemporary Kenyan families are food secure changing their dietary habits from traditional to

exotic foods (Maundu, Ngugi and Kabuye, 1999: 3). Cultural narratives foster food traditions and customs by transmitting beliefs, virtues and values to the next generation. The cultural narratives of food and nutrition provide an ethical basis for natural resource utilization in communities. The cultural narratives of food security provide a vision for the future (Bradshaw, 2002: 30).

Indigenous Oriental philosophies have given rise to a global awareness of spiritual ecology which has gained ground in the New Age Movement based on the feminine principle (Duerk, 1989; Estes, 1993). Critical discourse analysis of feminisms and power relations from the African world and spiritual ecology in the context of New Age Movement have emphasized the feminine principle both explicitly and implicitly (Nnaemeka, 1998). The feminine principle is from the wisdom of indigenous African thinkers (Oruka, 1991). Agricultural extension workers can learn from African women sages about the wisdom, knowledge and skills of past generations; the cultural heritage of a people can be retrieved from the custodians of old food traditions and then retold to the younger generations for their own survival. This is what is echoed by Thomas R. Odhiambo, formerly of ICIPE, when he states that research and development programmes in the knowledge industry must be designed with the “problem of sustainable tropical agriculture in mind” and with emphasis upon “the new imperative for Africa’s agricultural production, to create long-term security in food and nutrition,” (Odhiambo, 1994:54). Since women are critical in food production in Africa, as they are in indigenous contexts elsewhere, their narratives of resistance to oppression and role in food security need to be collected, documented, analyzed and used in educational contexts to bring about liberation and hope. The younger generations in urban and rural Kenya need to learn lessons from the life-stories of older women farmers operating within the cultural landscapes of the devolved units of governance structures like Homa Bay County. The younger people need to learn lessons from the older women farmers who are the custodians of food and subsistence crops namely: “millet, cassava, sweet potatoes, maize, bananas, beans, groundnuts, and vegetables of which there are numerous wild varieties,” (Ojany and Ogendo, 1988:125).

It should be noted that landscapes are not limited to physical terrain only; cultural landscapes evoke the land to be cultivated by specific people in the community, and traditions which guide how people work on the land. It refers to *piny*(territory) *thur* (home ground) and *lowo* (reproductive soil (cf. Cohen and Odhiambo, 1989:9). Traditional food plants are therefore an integral part of the cultural landscape of a people. Women farmers operating within cultural landscapes in Luo society can be understood not only in contemporary folklore, but also in oral

tradition captured by story-tellers. Paul Mboya captured Luo cultural landscapes in his ethnographic works: *Luo KitgiGiTimbegi* (1938) and *RichoEmaKeloChira* (1978). He also wrote a memoir which detailed his visit to the United Kingdom; the narrative was entitled *Wadhi E Coronation* (1953). In the memoir, Paul Mboya compares agriculture in Britain and in South Nyanza concluding that Luo people had a lot to learn from British colonial agriculture. Paul Mboya's appreciation of British agriculture was understandable given the fact that the Queen of England decorated him with the prestigious Member of the British Empire (MBE) medal of honour. The man who had trained as a teacher and evangelist in Adventist institutions served as a local pastor in the Seventh day-Adventist Church. He was installed as Senior Chief of Karachonyo people in the early 1930s; ultimately, he became the Secretary of the South Nyanza African District Council in 1946. It was in this capacity that Paul Mboya and other eminent Africans attended the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of England; as a loyal subject to the British Crown and civil administrator in South Nyanza District, with his headquarters based in Kisii Town, Paul Mboya travelled to all parts of his jurisdiction to preach the gospel of colonial agricultural practices (Mboya, 1953).

The Luo ethnographer was a beneficiary of the British Council which organized field trips through the Study Tours and Courses Section which was headed by Mr. H.J.Boote: he organized all the educational tours for African colonial administrators to learn from British agriculture. Paul Mboya states in his memoir written in Dholuo that: *Naneno kendonapuonjoragik ma wiya ok nowilgo e ngimanaduto*. This translates as: "I saw and learnt things I will never forget all the days of my life" (Mboya, 1953: 8-10).

The ethnographic narratives of Paul Mboya based on Luo cultural landscapes have pedagogical value in the codification and transfer of indigenous knowledge for food security. These narratives or stories he tells touch on most aspects of anthropological locations; grounds and fields which are of interest in this research project on food security and indigenous knowledge of women farmers in Homa Bay County.

There is the contextual dilemma of the old and the new, however, since a balance in blending tradition and modernity is necessary. How can African women farmers keep old wine with all the traditions and customs of indigenous agricultural knowledge in new wineskins of modern agricultural methods in rural Kenya? How can agricultural extension workers in rural Kenya draw waters of indigenous knowledge from the old springs and fountains of past generations? The Rev John Gatu of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa believed that it was possible to be

“joyfully modern and truly African” in cultural adaptations to globalization. He advocated for a social gospel which preached “The Old Truth” in an increasingly globalizing world which he calls a “New Age” (Gatu, 2006: 52). This would mean that African women farmers and extension workers would have to find ways of resolving the contextual dilemmas in African cultural landscapes (Scharfstein, 1989). This is indeed the struggle for epistemological freedoms to know and practice what is relevant to the local people; but this would have to be actualized in a global context since the world is becoming a global village (Ngugi, 1993).

### 3. African Cultural Knowledge and Natural Resources

The ethnographic work of Paul Mboya entitled *Luo KitgiGiTimbegi* is probably the most influential book by indigenous thinker and sage ever to emerge from Luo society since 1938 when it was first published. It covers different facets of Luo cultural knowledge ranging from motherhood to child rearing; marriage and family life to customary laws and religious beliefs; agriculture; livestock; and fisheries to traditional medicines; witchcraft and exorcism, among others. The work looks at culture as knowledge in terms of possibilities and limitations of space for both individuals and the community in general. The ethnographic narrative gives the processes which a young woman goes through from the time she is a dependent daughter-in-law to the time when she becomes the owner of her own house who could make decisions on what to cook for her husband and children:

*When a woman went to cook on her own, her mother-in-law gave her the following: a pot for cooking ugali, a pot for porridge; a dish for serving fish, a dish for serving general food, a winnowing tray; a food basket; a flour basket; a pot for collecting water; a cooking stick for ugali and other things she may need. The winnowing tray was given out with millet.*

*(Translation of Luo KitgiGiTimbegi by Jane Achieng, 2001:78).*

This excerpt from Jane Achieng’s translation of Paul Mboya’s work depicts the transition from semi-autonomous status of a daughter-in-law to being a fully autonomous head of her own household as far as food security is concerned; the mother-in-law is still the recognized mentor but she must take charge of food matters in her own household according to cultural norms in Luo society. The young woman is traditionally apprenticed to her ageing mother-in-law who guides her on how to ensure food safety and security but she must take charge in her new kitchen after the ceremony of *keto kendo* (establishing the fireplace).

Paul Mboya was a multi-talented leader of Luo Union (East Africa). According to Odera Oruka (1991:37), Paul Mboya served the Luo society in different capacities as teacher, pastor and Chief

of Karachuonyo in Southern Nyanza region. He was regarded as a sage and spiritual leader of the Luo Union (East Africa) with the title of *Ker* (elder) whose work was held in high esteem when it came to traditions and customs. In Luo cultural contexts, polygamy was the norm, but the first wife (Luo: *Mikayi*) was given her rightful place of pre-eminence in all cultural matters (including agriculture and food production). Paul Mboya in his book *RichoEmaKeloChira* (1978) states what the cultural context of Luo family structure. The food security narrative is also captured and contextualized by OgingaOdinga who was a political personality and ethnographer in his own right as follows:

*The women were ready with food at about seven o'clock and the elders sat in their respective offices to be served with it. The children from each hut had to carry the food to the elder and this was the time that the sons joined their fathers to enjoy the food prepared in various huts. Some women had cooked vegetables, others fish, meat or chicken. But the elders were strict about our eating, encouraging us to eat more kuon or cassava, rather than meat, and reprimanding the boys who ate greedily (OgingaOdinga, 1967: 8-9).*

The role of women in food security in traditional Luo society is captured in OgingaOdinga's autobiographical narrative. In the Luo polygamous homestead which he describes, there are distinct gender roles of each member of an extended family. The narrative describes the cultural context of food production in an extended family and the community as a whole. In Luo mythical representation, women were the first to cultivate the land; culturally-speaking, women were the custodians of food security in the household. In Luo mythology, there is a parallel of an Edenic era when people did not have to work the land; everything happened miraculously if customary procedures were followed correctly. Before cultivation was introduced into the Luo agricultural landscape, people used to enjoy a life free of labour in a pristine Edenic world quite similar to what is described in Genesis 1:27-29. In this excerpt which narrates the creation of Adam and Eve we are told:

*God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.  
And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.  
And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be meat.  
(The Original African Heritage Study Bible, 1993).*

In Luo folklore, the story is told of those days long time ago when God spoke to human beings and guided them in all their affairs:

*Men and women got their food and satisfied their needs with scarcely any suffering, and often with no suffering at all (Onyango-Ogutu and Roscoe, 1974. 2011:47).*

This situation changed when God spoke to the newly married Bride, a young woman who was told:

*Take your hoe to the garden.....when you get there, cut the ground once and leave the hoe alone. Your garden will then look after itself, digging, weeding, and finally, even harvesting itself, (Onyango-Ogutu and Roscoe, 1974; 2011:47).*

The young woman, who was a newly married bride, did not obey the voice of God. She took the hoe to the garden and cultivated the land by cutting the ground herself without letting the magical hoe to do its work. In hegemonic patriarchal hermeneutics, this act was interpreted as disobedience in the eyes of God who then pronounced His verdict on the newly married bride that from that time hence, she would have to till the land without the help of the magical hoe doing the work of cultivation:

*Now you must dig for the rest of your life and your food will grow as a result of your sweat. Woe to your children and your great-great grandchildren! They must all from on labour for their food (Onyango-Ogutu and Roscoe, 1974; 2011:47).*

In Luo folklore, this narrative is often on the lips of people when they explain the mythological origin of land cultivation which is attributed to a young bride who did not follow the instructions of God concerning the miraculous hoe which could do all the cultivation on the land on behalf of the people (Taban lo Liyong, 1972: 58). The version of Taban lo Liyong tells the story of people who lived in an idyllic context where manual labour of cultivation was unheard of; all that the people needed to do was to take their hoes to the garden and leave them there over night till the next day and they would find the cultivation already done. The same applied to weeding; harvesting; and even bringing the harvested crop home for storage: things used to happen miraculously but only if one obeyed the voice of God. This trend continued till a new bride arrived in the village. The Luo people have the saying: *Osiekoningenyanyarkawuono* meaning that: “The new bride comes into the scene without any clue and spoils everything” (interpretation my own). The new bride thought she knew what to do but she ended up messing up the entire humanity who now have to eat from the sweat of their brow: she struck the ground several times then left the hoe there on the ground over night but when people came in the morning, they found out that the ground was still intact. No cultivation had miraculously taken place as before; soon it was discovered that the young bride did not do as she was told.

This Luo folktale seems to suggest that there was an equivalent of the Garden of Eden when human beings did not have to work; food plants were provided miraculously which means they did not have to sweat in order to eat. This folktale of how human beings were forced into working the land has preoccupied cultural anthropologists for a long time. In Africa, there are numerous proverbs and sayings to the effect that women are the source of all human suffering; if they are the cause of all evil in the world, then how come women are the ones who nurture young lives from infancy to a state of relative autonomy? Why must they go through the pain of birthing every new life? The answer lies in archetypal symbolism in the discipline of mythology which tries to explain things which have no direct answers. Anthropologists seem to think that proverbs if analyzed in context can help in confirming norms and values in a given society (Schipper, 1991:3). The philosophy and wisdom based on time tested teachings about myths and parables rely on metaphorical meaning; parables and myths are stories about reality and are meant to have pedagogical value in society (Wanjohi, 200: 66). In many different cultures of the world as expressed in proverbs and sayings; myths and legends; parables and metaphors, women are depicted as subordinate to men and yet they are also seen to command the wrath of nature and mete out punishment or grant reward as witnessed in the folktale of *SimbiNyaima* in Karachuonyo where a whole village perished because they did not extend hospitality to an old woman in need. Only one family who hosted the strange woman got saved from the deluge. This family offered hospitality to the strange old woman in need and comforted her; all the carousing villagers who sent the old woman away drowned in what is today Lake SimbiNyaima in Karachuonyo (cf. Ogutu and Roscoe, 1974: 138-139).

The Biblical narrative gives reason for the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden as disobedience to His command against partaking of the forbidden tree when God told Adam:

*Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;  
Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;  
In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it thou were taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shall thou return (Genesis 3:17-19).*

The Original African Heritage Study Bible (King James Version, 1993) from which the narrative is based is an interpretive version of Biblical texts from an African perspective. The basis of this interpretation comes from the ideological position that the Bible is as much African as it is Western in both form and content; it locates the Garden of Eden in the Nile River Basin stretching to Ethiopian Highlands which is equated to Gihon River (Blue Nile) and Lake Victoria

in East Africa which is the source of Pison River (White Nile). It should be noted that these are interpretations by African-American theological scholars based at Howard University in America seeking to appropriate some of the Biblical narratives for identification purposes. Be that as it may, the mythical significance of the creation story in African Christianity is not in doubt. The power of Biblical narratives helps in understanding human experience; however, Occidental literatures and folklores which used to include Hebrew, Greek and Latin were dropped from the curriculum in most institutions which means that a whole tradition of “mythological information was lost” (Campbell, 1991 [1988]:2).

In Biblical as well as African folk narratives, it is evident that the back-breaking hard work of land cultivation is mythically attributed to the disobedience of the woman. Could this be the patriarchal explanation for women and the children who are the offsprings of their wombs being assigned the role of digging, weeding and even harvesting crops in most African societies? Kenyan writer, Grace Ogot, in her Luo novel *Miaha*, translated by Duncan Okoth Okombo as “The Strange Bride” tells the story of how people started cultivation of the land owing to the disobedience of a newly married woman. The main character, Nyawirnyar Opolo, is a dazzling beauty but she is headstrong. She never listens to her husband, Owiny, and even her mother-in-law Lwak, who is the custodian of the golden hoe which worked magic by simply being placed on the garden overnight and the land would cultivate itself. Nyawirnyar Opolo did not do as instructed; she dug the land several times, consequently earning the wrath of God, *Were Nyakalaga*; and to the chagrin of the people of Got Owaga.

In most folk tales of the world, the pedagogic value is to “instruct, renew and heal” the people:

*The story is not told to lift you up, to make you feel better, or to entertain you, although these things of course can be true. The story is meant to take the spirit into a descent to find something that is lost or missing and to bring it back to consciousness again. (Source: Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ interview with Isabella Wylde for Radiance Online Magazine, Winter 1994 Issue).*

The Jungian-trained psychoanalyst and cantador in the Latina tradition says that:

*The ultimate gift of story is two-fold; that at least one soul remains who can tell the story and that by recounting the tale, the greater forces of love, mercy, generosity and strength are continuously called into being in the world (Estes, 1993:3).*

In Eastern and Central Africa, stories (whether fiction or non-fiction) have been used to depict cultural landscapes and the management of natural resources. This includes the pedagogy of

indigenous knowledge for food security with women farmers as the main actors. In work done by the African Centre for Technology Studies in the 1990s, the role of women as managers of natural resources was a major area of concern. Women as custodians of natural resources and food security are an integral part of the cultural landscapes which determine possibilities and limitations of spaces in rural Africa. Kenyan cantadora and oral artist, WanjikuKabira, examines the role of storytellers in environmental management when she declares that:

*The woman storyteller preserves the environment through her stories, and these stories can be revisited for use in re-construction of the environment (WanjikuKabira, 1992:67).*

In her article “Storytellers and the Environment,” she states that through oral culture, one can “rediscover the types of herbs, bushes, trees and food crops that are no longer tendered in communities” but need to be reclaimed for rehabilitation, preservation and conservation by future generations. WanjikuKabira narrates the life-story of one environmental manager, Alice WanjirawaRukenya, who was then aged 54 and had a family of six children (four girls and two boys). Her husband, Jason Rukenya, was about 60 years of age at the time the story was recorded. Wanjira was acknowledged as an educator through storytelling in the community, always imparting critical information about agriculture and food production to her children and grandchildren. Living on a three-acre farm in Kirinyaga, Central Region of Kenya, the family could grow a variety of food crops namely: maize, beans, potatoes, pumpkins, cassava, guavas, arrow roots and sugarcane. In addition to being a successful farmer using age-old agricultural knowledge she acquired from her parents, Wanjira is often called upon as a resource person in local schools within Baricho area of Kirinyaga County.

In one of Wanjira’s stories, there are two brothers (from one father but different mothers). This is a common cultural motif in African folklore where the mother of one of the boys dies when he is still very young. He is left under the care of his step-mother who is very harsh to the young boy. Her hostility to the boy whose mother died is not known to the father for she keeps her feelings secret. Since Muciimi, for that is his name, has no protection from his dead mother and his clueless father, he has to take refuge in Nature which offers him protection. Nature is ever benevolent to the herd’s boy who learns many secrets from the plants, animals, rivers and even salt-licks used by both human beings and livestock. The step-brother, Kathanji, does not get the benefit of learning from the environment because the jealous mother shields him from tasks like tending the cows. The narrative touches on different aspects of the environment through the experiences of the herd’s boy, Muciimi. WanjikuKabira (1992:3) concludes that such stories with environmental thematic concerns should be documented and preserved for use in the

education of future generations. She further states that the indigenous knowledge of oral artists like Alice WanjirawaRukenya, especially on the ethnobotanical nomenclature (local names of plants), should be documented and the vanishing plants named and rehabilitated for agricultural production in the community.

#### **4. Language, Folklore and Ecology**

The word folklore according to Charlotte Burne's definition in the *Handbook of Folklore* (1913) is:

*The generic term under which the traditional beliefs; customs; stories; songs; and sayings; current among backward peoples, or retained by the uncultured classes of the more advanced peoples...It is not the form of the plough which excites the attention of the folklorist, but the rites practiced by the ploughman when putting it into the soil.*

*(Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore, 2000; 2003:130).*

In the class conscious British society, this term folklore was reserved for the so-called "uncultured" classes and "backward" peoples of the world. These are the people who Paulo Freire many decades later would seek to empower through his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Franz Fanon would seek to uplift in his narrative *Wretched of the Earth*. In intellectual history, social class struggles were politically triggered by the publication of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848 in London by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. History has witnessed many struggles in different cultures of the world with working class peoples of all countries being called upon to unite, for they have nothing to lose except their chains. This spirit of revolution is captured by Paulo Freire in his many critiques of oppressive systems which subjugate all peoples (African women included) against their will by labelling their folk ways "backward" and "uncultured;" the oppressed people of the world must be allowed the right to explore the role of their indigenous customs and traditions in a global politico-economic order. The competing power interests describing indigenous agricultural practices as "primitive" and seeking to impose the will of dominant Western interests upon local populations and obliterate their cultures. NgugiwaThiong'o has observed this scenario and encourages the use of indigenous languages which he calls the "National Heritages of Africa" (1986: 22).

Indigenous knowledge for food security is best understood in African languages of the community. A number of cultural and linguistic resources are increasingly available in African languages can aid the study of pedagogy, indigenous knowledge and food security both locally and globally. These indigenous resources include OkumbaMiruka's *Oral Literature of the Luo*

(2001); *Encounter with Oral Literature* (1994); *Studying Oral Literature* (1999); among many other works on oral testimonies and life-stories in Luo-speaking regions of East Africa. Other resources which inform the landscapes include Asenath Bole Odaga's *English-Dholuo Dictionary* (1997); John O. Kokwaro's *Luo-English Botanical Dictionary* (1972); John O. Kokwaro's and Timothy Johns' *Luo Biological Dictionary* (1998); and Carole A. Capen's *Bilingual Dholuo-English Dictionary/Kenya* (1998).

The best example of how linguistics, especially pragmatics, can be applied in agriculture and rural development is a study conducted by Lucia Omondi (1992:75) in Siaya County. This was an attempt at applying pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, in the area of agricultural extension. She proposes that agricultural development strategies involving women farmers should take into account effective communication methods using local languages in the catchment areas. She postulates that communication is usually a problem in these contexts when rural women farmers do not understand English or Kiswahili in some parts of Siaya County:

*There is usually a gap between the people involved in rural farming and the people with the message and the ideas necessary to effect development(Omondi, 1992:78).*

It is ironical that the British Colonial Administration in Kenya paid a lot of attention to indigenous language through missionaries in different parts of the county. In the Nyanza Region, Catholic, Anglican and Adventist missionaries published a lot of oral literature and folklore materials which were used in schools to promote vernacular education. After the New Primary Approach was launched by the Ominde Commission of 1963, vernacular languages were more or less outlawed in schools. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development has in the recent years made feeble attempts at re-introducing what is called Mother Tongue in the lower primary school curriculum, but no attempts have been made to upgrade its teaching to upper primary and secondary school levels. It is interesting to note that Ethiopia, which is Kenya's northern neighbor, is encouraging the teaching of indigenous languages from primary up to college level.

The Constitution of Kenya, 2010 does allow for the promotion of indigenous languages and cultures, but there is need to allocate more resources in the development of these local languages in a more sustainable manner. In this epistemological study, Dholuo as a local language has played a critical role in accessing the indigenous knowledge of women farmers some of whom could not utter a word or two in English or Kiswahili.

The attempt by Omondi (1992:81-83) to work out a word list along semantic fields such as the items given below are pragmatically in agricultural extension work:

<b>Luo</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>Lowo</i>	Land
<i>Tich e Puodho</i>	Farm Activities
<i>GigeTich</i>	Farm Implements
<i>Cham</i>	Crops
<i>Buya</i>	Weeds

**Table 1 Sample of Agricultural Terms (Source: Omondi, 1992)**

As a sociolinguistic approach, it becomes necessary that the agricultural extension worker and the farmer work together in a manner that creates conceptual understanding where there is no translator available. The challenge is that the county governments in Kenya have not addressed themselves to the need for adequate agricultural extension workers in the counties.

*The biggest challenge is that there are a few extension officers, which often results in poor disease management. These pests and diseases can wipe out the entire crop in days if no proper measures are put in place. We need counties to employ more extension officers who will help to identify, monitor and recommend the best control mechanisms. (cf. Joakim Samoei, a Farmer from Uasin Gishu County by Stanley Kimuge, Daily Nation, Saturday December 29, 2018 "Seed of Gold Magazine" p.22).*

The challenge of having shortage of extension workers who are socio-linguistically competent to handle complex agricultural issues requiring environmental problems is something which may need critical policy interventions at national and county levels. This study of the pedagogical value of indigenous knowledge for food security with women farmers in Homa Bay County in mind is largely a sociolinguistic endeavor; the genre of life stories of the women farmers are important for textual and discourse purposes (cf. Omondi, 1992:78).

Among the Luo-speaking people of East Africa, agriculture is a highly ritualized activity. A ritual in religious or secular contexts as activities repeated in regular and predictable ways as in agricultural practices. This includes land cultivation; seed preparation; planting and propagation; weed control; harvesting crops; and storage of the harvested crops. Ritualized activities in food production may include handling and cooking of food to be served to different categories of members of the family and/or guests in the household. Grace Ogot (2012:7) in her autobiography talks of *simsim* (Luo: *nyim*) as being a food of ritual significance in the offering of sacrifices to ancestral spirits and in traditional Luo wedding ceremonies. Indigenous knowledge on traditional agriculture was transmitted from one generation to the next through informal channels: "people

who gathered around the fireplaces learnt a variety of things such as instruction on how to be a successful rarer of animals” (Oruka, 1991:120). Traditional education on poultry keeping included feeding chickens with ants trapped in special ways. This was a skill which needed expertise gained after prolonged apprenticeship under the mentorship of older members of the family or local community. Indigenous thinkers like OrukaRang’inya hold the view that folk sages are consulted because they were wise: “people showed immense gratitude for the pieces of advice which they received from the sages” (Oruka, 1991:120). Agricultural rituals in Luo society are based on gender roles. The indigenous knowledge for food security should be addressed in educational institutions. There is need for critical thinking which seems to be lacking in the Kenyan educational system according to Kenyan professor of literature based at the University of Nairobi and social critic, Henry Indangasi (2018). In a personal literary essay, he reflects upon the Kenyan intellectual history which he finds to be lacking in skills-related development in areas such as creative thinking, critical thinking and problem-solving in practical situations in and out of school. Indangasi laments that the discrepancy is a shameful feature of our educational system which needs to encourage independence of thought and higher order cognition of issues affecting the Kenyan society (Indangasi, 2018: 9-15).

Reflections by African women sages can help address the gap by incorporating indigenous epistemologies in problem-solving situations of agricultural education and food security in rural households. A Luo woman sage, Doris GwakoArodi, aged 89 who was interviewed by Prof Gail Presbey (March 1999) during the Sage Philosophy Project reasoned that social harmony healing can only be attained in areas of food, health, nutrition and spirituality in family and community settings when both women and men work together based on mutual respect. Another Luo woman sage, Julia Ouko (aged 61) was interviewed by Prof Gail Presbey (March 1999) during the Sage Philosophy Project declared that indigenous knowledge called for the practical virtues and values of communal approach to work particularly in agricultural production in order to support the physically weak; both women and men combined efforts in collective work on the farms known as ‘saga’ in the local Southern Nyanza Luo dialect. This application of feminine/masculine principles for balance and social harmony helps in making people do things they are expected to do such as production of knowledge through combined energies with greater efficiency for the common good (Kaplan, 1999: 131-132).

According to these two Luo women sages Julia Ouko and Doris GwakoArodi, both women and men also have indigenous knowledge and traditional practical things society assigns to them in food production and other forms of agricultural practices for collective survival. This study seeks

to connect the thinking of women farmers and their practical knowledge for food security in the rural household (Presby, March 1999).

## 5. Conclusion

African women's indigenous knowledge for food security is embedded in oral narrative philosophy which is transmitted from one generation to the next; the procedural epistemology is also socially distributed in a given agrarian community. It is recommended that the indigenous knowledge systems be reclaimed and incorporated in modern agricultural education and extension programmes in Kenya. Further qualitative research is necessary to establish philosophical foundations of food security in African communities. This is necessary in order to understand the epistemological claims of women's indigenous knowledge systems as custodians of indigenous knowledge for food security. Qualitative research into women's agricultural production activities may also be replicated elsewhere in African cultural landscapes.

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