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The Use of Visual Arts in Environmental Conservation in Ghana: The Case of Adams Saeed

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Abstract

The use of Visual Arts to promote environmental conservation is an important vehicle but its strategy for effective conservation outreach is hidden. In Ghana, the use of Visual Arts to promote environmental conservation and preservation is accelerating on a very low-pace, and those who try to initialize this culture have often remained largely undocumented, or stigmatized and stereotyped as mere objects of decoration in public space and homes. The aim of this is to recommend a return to a primary lifestyle which reminds us of basic realities easily forgotten in modern way of life which can be much more than just a necessity. The study sought to identify and document some visual arts works of Ken Kojo Adams Saeed which promote environmental conservation in Ghana. Descriptive research methodology was utilised in this study. The study concluded that, Ken Kojo Adams Saeed, a Ghanaian young artist, identified waste that create nuisance and sanitation problems in communities and used them as a resource material to create phenomenal sculptural works. His works educate and conscientize the public on waste management and environmental conservation. The study, therefore, recommends the promotion of environmental artists to harness development.

Keywords

Visual Arts,
environmental
conservation,
preservation,
sanitation,

1.0 Introduction

Globally, the spatial environment is threatened due to some human activities such as deforestation, industrialization and mining discussed in Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR, 2019). Continuing these attitudes would endanger lives; for instance, cutting trees and littering with plastic waste in the environment. To arrest this chaotic environmental problem, humans need education about environmental conservation and its adverse effects on posterity. Berenson (2002) believes that, if people are going to have a new connection to the environment, it will have to happen in individual hearts and souls with the artists being the driving force to help people fall in love with the earth again. The arts offer a way to make an emotional connection to people, and help conservation practitioners reach new audiences. Locher (2015) (as cited in Conservation Biology, 2007) put forward that, Art can provoke reactions that typical education and outreach methods do not. It has the potential to inform audiences or participants in a new way about conservation topics, and it can stimulate new dialogues and actions. By engaging multiple senses and emphasizing social interaction, the arts can provide people with emotional pleasure and support (Locher, 2015; Leder & Nadal, 2014). Meanwhile, conservation educators often focus solely on technical dissemination of scientific information and overlook other ways of understanding the world from different perspective especially from the arena of Visual Arts (Turner & Freedman 2004).

Using Visual Arts to promote environmental conservation is an important vehicle, but its strategy for effective conservation outreach is usually hidden. Turner and Freedman (2004) discussed that, arts can stir emotions and attract new audiences, increase awareness, elicit actions, improve classroom instruction, introduce new perspectives, and foster environmental stewardship. Encouraging a variety of ways to use Visual Arts to promote environmental conservation and preservation would yield better result if we better understand its concept (Turner & Freedman, 2004).

In Ghana, the use of Visual Arts to promote environmental conservation and preservation has receive little attention. Artists who create works in that regard have often remained largely undocumented while the artworks created are stigmatized and stereotyped as mere objects of decoration in public space and homes (O. Q. Essel, personal communication, January 01, 2017). The aim of this study was to recommend a return to a primary lifestyle which reminds us of basic realities easily forgotten in our modern way of life which can be much more than just a necessity. Encouraging variety of ways that visual arts

can be used to promote environmental conservation and preservation is imperative, hence this study which investigates Adams's use of found objects in creating environmental artworks as his contribution towards environmental conservation in Ghana.

As customary of Visual arts forms, researchers draw on Laing and Todd, (2015), theory of change to articulate explicitly how a project or initiative is intended to achieve outcomes through actions while considering its context. This study, is positioned in the prevailing Visual arts forms concept to enhance attitudinal change towards the environment for development. The study gives insight to artists, policy makers and all other institutions that are involved in environmental protection on the use of visual arts to curb problems of sanitation and environmental degradation in Ghana.

2.0 Review of Related Literature

2.1 Visual Arts and Environmental Conservation

The world would be a better place to live in, if maximum attention is given to art activities which will be a driving force for sustainability and environmental protection. Laval (1982) discussed that, art has continued to enrich the quality of living not only through the creation of necessities of life such as shelter, utensils, and clothing but also in making them more pleasant in appearance and use. He continued that a skillful and articulate artistic embellishment on display in the built environment would elicit the mind to educational discussion as viewers attempt to answer questions that prods the mind about the works. Some works are for historic documentations and may be for cultural preservation.

Igbaro et al (2010) is also of the view that, the importance of the visual arts for economic vitality well-packaged and when well-arranged would be a viable tool for nation building. Every generation of people all over the world cherishes cultural mementoes. Art is the most potent tool for the promotion of cultural heritage and the preservation of family values (Nwoko, 2013). Recycling of both biodegradable and non-degradable materials are accepted as a rational, sensible, and necessary activity and responsibility of all including artists. However, the idea of recycling often seems somewhat boring and does not normally have aesthetic attraction. Emphatically, recycling can be much more than just a necessity. Hence, when well managed can help preserve the environment and sustain natural resources for posterity. The rationality or material profit of using found objects are probably not great, but creating and recycling at the same time

is a very sustainable and joyful concept. This recycling-creating combination also has fascinating symbolic and spiritual connotations to move mankind to act (Reich, 1998). Bower (2014) viewed *environmental art* as an umbrella term for an artistic movement that encompasses both historical approaches to nature in art and more recent ecological and politically motivated types of work. Based on this definition, it is worthy to look at possible predecessors and recent examples in art history that dealt with natural and environmental issues and concerns. What influences and backgrounds led to the development of the emerging, yet academically underexplored genre of environmental art?

An obvious and pressing reason to develop a coherent approach to culture and environmental sustainability is to support the post 2015 and 2019 Sustainable Development Agenda on the Environment. The significant investment and the strenuous efforts of many, especially United Nations agencies in this Agenda, have begun to pay off as the outcomes of the Millennium Development Goals are evaluated (Global Sustainable Development Report, 2019). Culture as the sphere within which humans freely think and act has been promoted by many as a vital contributing element. During 2013 and 2014 a widely supported campaign to include culture as part of the Sustainable Development Goals, championed by International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA) and five other key international networks and undertaken in consultation with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), highlighted the potential benefits of giving greater attention to culture's fundamental role in achieving development outcomes and reiterated in 2019 meeting on Sustainable Development Agenda. Human activity affects other people just as it does the world around them. Most art are designed with a largely human audience in mind, even when its actual impact is much greater (Moore & Tickell, 2014). Environmental Art often takes into consideration this larger context, the origin of materials used, and the ecological impact of the ways an artwork was constructed and disseminated, as well as long term effects on non-human life and systems (Bower, 2014).

Weintraub (2012) discussed that, during the 1990s, a global division into the rich North and the poor South became increasingly apparent, and artists and intellectuals began criticizing Western and Euro-centrism in art and thinking. Innovations and technologies were introduced into art, and the scope of artistic media diversified with an important purpose, because it frequently seems indistinguishable from engineering, gardening, farming, researching, educating, and so forth, eco art can temper with the popular assumption

that art engages the human spirit (Weintraub, 2012). In recent years, critical scholarship, university programmes, and institutional support for this type of work have grown. The Internet has played a pivotal role in the dissemination of artists' work, promoting Zucivic discussion and increasing access to often remote or ephemeral projects internationally.

The field of Environmental Art is as diverse as the natural world that inspires it. Art provides a lens through which all aspects of society from urban food production, climate policy, watershed management, and transportation infrastructure to childhood education and clothing design-from an ecological perspective can be explored. The rich cultural practices of Ghanaian ancestors combined art and respect for the natural world in almost everything they did which allowed them to hunt, farm and pattern their lives with the land and the seasons. Their art was sustainable. We are slowly seeing this whole-systems approach emerge again today, through contemporary approaches to art and environment (Bower, 2014).

Artworks that directly address issues of pollution and consumption often involve connecting people to the world outside the gallery or museum walls. For many, the use of trash and found objects in art is a powerful point of entry. This is inspired by Mierle, Laderman Ukeles, who has worked with the New York City Department of Sanitation on a wide range of art projects since the late 1970s and artist Jo Hanson founded of the Recology Artist in Residence Programme at the San Francisco Dump in 1990 (Bower, 2011). Environmental organizations often use art exhibits to raise funds and stimulate social interaction. Art exhibits can go beyond this by engaging audiences in contemplating new perspectives about the environment (Withrow-Robinson et al., 2002 & Darabas, 2014). The artworks themselves may or may not have environmental themes but their provenance offers a strong opportunity.

2.2 Some Environmental Artists in Ghana

To help curb global menace of environmental degradation and support Sustainable Development Agenda on Environment, some artists in Ghana are now increasingly using odds and ends to create artefacts to educate as well as sustain and preserve our natural resources. Example of an environmental artist is El Anatsui. A Ghanaian sculptor, actively practising his sculptural work in Nigeria as postulated by the Cultural Trip limited (2019). He got the world's attention for his "bottle-top installations". The work comprises of thousands of aluminium pieces gotten from alcohol recycling stations and sewn together

with copper wire. This is then transformed into metallic cloth-like wall sculptures. Such materials, while seemingly stiff and sturdy, are free and flexible, which often helps with manipulation when installing his sculptures. Another great Ghanaian Environmental artist is Ibrahim Mahama. He was born in Tamale, Ghana in 1987 where he currently domiciles and performs his duties. Ibrahim Mahama conceives large-scale installations to drive home his conceived ideas to the public. He likes the use of old jute sacks, which were previously used to transport cocoa beans and charcoal, stitching them together and draping them over architectural units. The use of plastics into plastics patchwork installation brought Serge Attukwei Clottey into the public gallery in the field of art. He was born in 1985 in Accra. He is ubiquitous in the field of arts, apart from the usage of plastics for his works, Serge is also known for his performance in charcoal portraits, photograph, and sculpture. The artist interrogates personal and family narratives, as well as collective histories, and maps consumerism to trade and migration. With bold assemblages of cut or whole yellow gallon containers, he comments on modern Africa. He is the founder of Ghana's GoLokal performance collective, which aims to transform society through art (Culture Trip, 2019).

Aside these renowned Ghanaian environmental artists, there are other emerging ones whose works educate public on the need to preserve and conserve their natural resources through the usage of found objects in the environment. Ken Kojo Adams Saeed is one of such upcoming Ghanaian environmental artists who uses odds and ends to create wonderful works to contributing to environmental conservation and preservation.

3.0 Methodology

Biographical research design named narrative inquiry was utilised in this study on environmental conservation. The population of the study constituted selected Environmental visual artists in Ghana. Purposive sampling technique was used to select one of the emerging artists whose work promote environmental conservation. The use of purposive sampling technique was considered desirable because it allows the researchers to carefully select the sample to reflect the purpose of the investigation (Saunders, 2011). The researchers made use of non-participant observation and interviews as data collection instruments for the study. Structured interview with interview guide was adopted for the research. Phone recorder was used to record the message with consent of the interviewee. Secondary data was also utilized. Narrative and visual analysis were done using the data collected through interviews, observations, and the pictures from the field.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Twenty-year-old Ken Kojo Adams Saeed is a genius and young innovative environmental visual artist in Ghana. Adams Saeed was born in 1998. His artworks always surprised his viewers and sometimes confused them about his newly hatched ideas in the field of art. Ken Kojo Adams Saeed is a sculptor by profession and talented painter by nature and at the same time a student of Takoradi Technical University. He was born to Mr. Adams Mohammad and Mrs. Rabi Mohammad. Adams hail from Daboya in the Northern region of Ghana, but currently stays at Accra-Adenta. Adams had his primary education at Kantanga Roman Catholic primary school and continued at Kepi Senior High School. He earns some minor income from commission works and attracted much admiration from his contribution to environmental conservation and preservation. Ken works mostly in wood off-cut and chip-off from carving studio and saw mill, wood pieces and found objects in the environment. Most of his central themes are inspiring and educative. His works makes attempt at realistic depictions despite media use. Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are some of his creative that promote environmental conservation in Ghana.



Figure 1: Adams Saeed. *Man of Honor*. 19 x 9 x 8 inches. 2018.
(Source: Courtesy of artist)

With reference to his work titled *Man of Honor* (Figure 1) Saeed remarked that 'Greatness and honour are sweet and glorious; but were not found on a silver platter. So as wishes and ambitions, this is like a ripped fruit on a tree. You must walk to it. Nothing great is ever achieved without toil and sweat' (A. Saeed, personal communication, January 01, 2020). Behind the veil lies the real beauty; honour does not come on silver platter as opined by the brain behind the beautifully sculpted artwork entitled *Man of Honour* (Figure 1). On a close shot we walk up to the reality of embracing the charming beauty of deserted wood pieces wonderfully assembled to create bust mounted at the environment of Takoradi Technical University (TTU). Ingenuity at its peak, as the young artist used deserted wood pieces artistically to create awareness on environmental conservation. Philosophically, using wood pieces rather than huge log would help to arrest de-forestation. This is in line with Berensohn (2002) who posits that, if we are going to have a new connection to the environment it will have to happen in individual hearts and souls, and the artist can help us fall in love with the earth again. It is truism that, the arts offer a way to make an emotional connection to people, and the visual arts can help conservation practitioners reach new audiences. Visual Art can provoke reactions that typical education and outreach methods do not, because artists delve into mysterious places and bring forth hidden ideas into reality. In this sense, Adams used wood pieces which in actual sense littering the environment creating sanitation problems to create artistic work which draws the mind into nature using material. Visual Arts has the potential to inform audiences or participants in a new way about conservation topics, and it can stimulate new dialogues and actions. By engaging multiple senses and emphasizing social interaction, the arts can provide people with emotional pleasure and support (Levinthal, 1988).



Figure 2: Adams Saeed. *Garden set of furniture*. 70 x 25 x 26 inches. 2016.
(Source: Courtesy of artist)

Another creative work of the young talented Ghanaian artist is *Garden set of furniture* (Figure 2); in this work the young artist used pre-determined shaped waste wood from saw mill to create garden furniture. In figure 2, Adams used two naturally curved waste wood for the legs and oval red-faced wood for the base which gave stability to the table. The top of the table is formed with two oval-shaped waste woods joined. The surface of the table presents cheerful natural colours of cream surrounding brown at the centre. The table is well finished which reveals the natural textures of the wood. The chair on the other hand is created from off-cut wood. It is a long chair with three pieces off-cut wood serving as backrest. The backrest is joined to the seat with four vertical upright wooden poles. At the right and left of the gentle curved seat is armrest made with waste wood. The armrest is connected to the seat with two wooden poles each of which gives stability to the armrest. To ensure stability on the ground, the talented artist used strong wooden poles in a form of triangle to form the legs. The harmonious usage of natural colour of cream and shades of brown make the work looks sparkling. This environmental furniture is situated at Katanga formerly in Volta region, currently, Oti region in Ghana. Again, the young talented environmental artist tries to use furniture made from waste

wood to conscientize the populace on environmental conservation and preservation through visual arts medium. The use of these subjective wood waste pieces by Adams to create furniture helps suggest in passer-by, how waste materials in the environments can be utilized to beautify their environment. In figure 2, Adams used his artistically created furniture to educate, beautify, and most importantly, creating awareness on the possibility of using art to arrest environmental degradation.

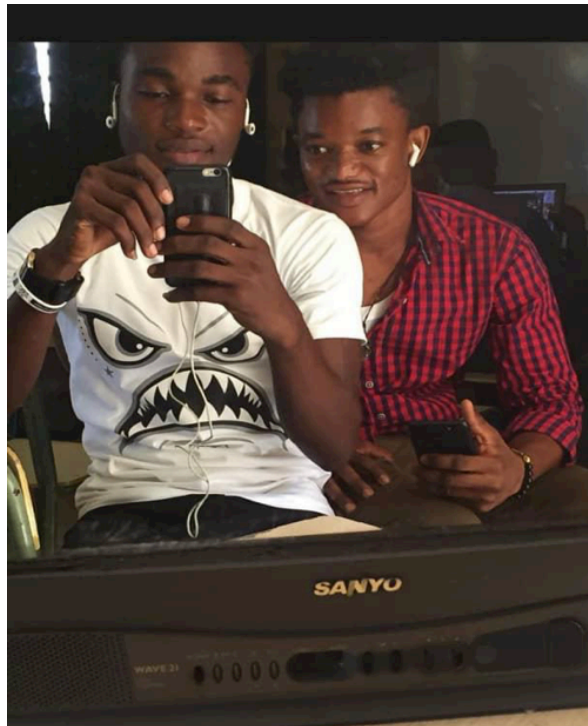


Figure 3. Adams Saeed. *Self-Reflection*. 18 x 22 x 17 inches. 2019.
(Source: Courtesy of artist)

The versatility of Adams Saeed comes to play as he used different media to address issues on environmental conservation. On this instance, Adams used spoiled television set and mirror to create simple but educative artwork titled *Self-Reflection* (Figure 3). He assembled found objects to reflect his ideas on how odds and ends can be utilized to create something meaningful to avoid its littering around to create health problems. The work is located at Takoradi in Ghana. During our encounter with him, he made one emphatic statement that, "You know yourself better than people know about you". It can be inferred from

this statement that people should stand for right values inculcated in them. His concept is therefore in line with Walden (1854) in as cited in Huck (2012) who posited that

It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look...To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. (p. 1).

Using found objects to create visual art creates avenue for industrialisation, and using found objects for production of sculpture help to preserve other materials for posterity. Re-cycling of material such as plastics and rubbers help our environments to be clean and more importantly the re-usage of junks materials to produce sculpture and other visual arts help to prevent the societies from health hazards this is in line with Weintraub (2012), who puts forward that, due to the ever-expanding and all-embracing industrialization in the late 1950s and 1960s of the twentieth century, environmental issues became increasingly prominent in Western societies' discourses and an environmental scene for the protection of the environment arose. Environmental artists work with an inter and trans disciplinary approach to create awareness for sustainability issues and the present and future compatibility of human lifestyles with other living creatures and ecological systems (Susanne, 2014).

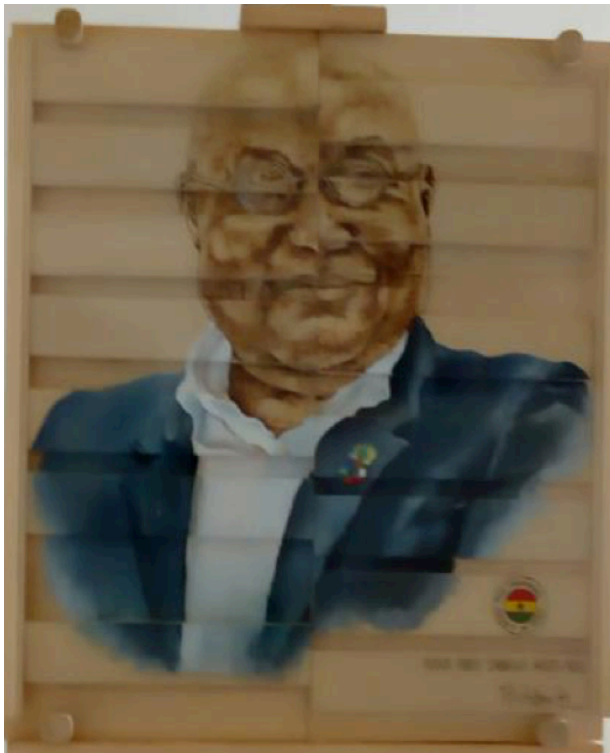


Figure 4. Adams Saeed. *My Role Model*. 22 x 18 x 2 inches. 2016.
(Source: Courtesy of artist)

My role model is the title Adams gave to the portrait painting of President Nana Akufo Addo. He used wood pieces from carpentry shop to serve as support for his painting. Adams blended pyrography and oil paint techniques to paint Ghana's fifth and sitting president of the fourth republic. The beautifully arranged pieces of wood from carpentry shop has been utilized by Adams after gluing them together to form the support. The face of painted portrait of Nana Akufo Addo is made with pyrography painting technique. The technique is explicitly applied in black and white evenly distributed to bring out the joyful looking president of Ghana. The blue paint represents serene atmosphere the newly elected president found himself in. The colour is skilfully applied to bring out folds. The inner attire is also well treated to depict a sense of perspective. He used light blue for the inner dress. On the left bottom of the portrait is nicely painted Ghana flag which indicate patriotism on the part of the president. The work is located at Accra.



Figure 5. Adams Saeed. *Wooden Pavement*. 55 x 28 x 15 inches. 2016.
(Source: Courtesy of artist)

Adams made use of teak (off-cut) to design pavement for Garden titled *Wooden pavement* (Figure 5). The *Wooden Pavement* found at Kantanga in Oti region, opposite the health centre is made with off-cut wood. He skillfully blended small and big sizes of the off-cuts in his arrangement to make it appealing. Hard wood was chosen by Adams to avoid wear and tear when used. The rhythmic pattern of the surface makes it more charming. At the end of this wonderful project, information from residents indicated that, all those who chanced to see reported that they viewed the natural environments differently and had increased desire to visit natural environment areas more often. Adams's works always bring viewers closer to nature. Belden and Fessard (2001) remarked that artists create artworks to communicate or express their thoughts and ideas, to provide their audiences with a cooperative learning experience that can motivate people to express their ideas in a variety of shapes and means. "Art thus has the capacity to trigger reflection, generate empathy, create dialogue, and foster new ideas and relationships and offers ways of expressing, sharing, and shaping ideas" (Wright, 2013, p.4). The life sketch of genius Adams Saeed is a true reflection of hidden roles artist can bring on-board to whip-up developmental agenda on environmental conservation. This can be materialised by creating artworks to communicate, motivate, and promote good manners which reflect the ideals of environmental conservation.



Figure 6. Adams Saeed. *Struggle for Power*. 48 x 42 x 20 inches. 2019.
(Source: Courtesy of artist)

Undoubtedly, the use of unconventional materials in the environment to address issues by young artist (Adams Saeed) is simply overwhelming. His inventive work called *Struggle for Power* (Figure 6) is an impressive sculpture piece made from multiple techniques in sculpture production (modelling, Carving, Assemblage and construction). The delightful work is measured 135 by 110cm and located at Takoradi Technical University campus in Ghana. Wood chip off, wood board, metal pole and stones were used to erect the magnificent sculpture piece. It is philosophically composed of a charming eagle, a scary snake, wooden board, a beautifully and skillfully erected metal pole inserted in artfully arranged stone which serve as base for stability to the work. Adams once again, in his quest to manage waste in the environment, skillfully used wood chip-off to model and assemble a charming eagle. The Eagle is perched on the erected pole with one leg while the other leg is used to grip a helpless snake. The wood chip-off used for the Eagle is bonded skillfully with white glue. The eyes soar high to success. The snake on the other hand is fabricated beautifully from plastics wastes found

in the environment.

The phenomenal young artist conceptually arranged these dreadful animals to drive home his concern on power struggles in the communities and nations at large. The eagle symbolises greatness, superiority, and determination to succeed while the serpent represents creative life force, cunningness, transformation, and rebirth as stated by Adams the artist. The work represent how we crash equally competent and knowledgeable people in the society for power, by defaming and tarnishing others images. We need not to destroy to achieve greatness because strong people do not put others down, they lift them up. In other instances, people triumph in their comfort zones and should not assume their strength and power is cast in stone. The serpent is stronger on the earth but when whisked unto an uncomfortable (sky) aura it becomes powerless.

5.0 Conclusions

Adams Saeed is a Ghanaian young artist in his early twenties who has identified waste materials in his environment as creating nuisance and sanitation problems. He utilises the waste materials as a resource to create phenomenal sculptural works to educate and conscientise the public on waste management and environmental conservation. Adams is a student of Takoradi Technical University who has specialised in environmental art. Some of his works like “Man of Honour”, “My Role Model”, “Struggle for Power” and the likes are typical conceptual sculpture works made from waste materials found in the environment. The use of wood off-cuts, discarded materials in the environment and recycling of material such as plastics and rubbers help our environment to be clean and can be much more than just a necessity. Using found objects for production of visual art help to preserve other materials for future generation. This power of creative imagination is hidden from some peace makers to utilise which would serve as driving force for national development. The study recommends that the use of Visual Arts to promote environmental conservation is crucial to national growth and must be consolidated by some government agencies who deem it appropriate. Also, the government agencies, communities and non-government organisations should support environmental artist by creating the enabling environment to assimilate these artists after the completion of their tertiary education.

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