

ORAL HISTORY AND ITS ADOPTATION IN THE STUDY OF CREATIVE ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to discuss the relevance of oral history, its validation to African traditional religion – taboos, poems, praise songs and drama. It highlighted the strength of oral history as a means of collecting data or information for a research work, although there are a lot of disadvantages. However, the present day historians and many researchers make use of this method. Some oral historians believe that most documented papers or written academic works are embodiments of oral interviews from interviewees, which are also prone to interpolations. As such all sources of collecting information for any project or research work takes its route from oral history or tradition. The paper also discussed oral history as it is projected, preserved and promoted for conceptual visual artworks made concrete for everybody to see, criticize, appreciate and discuss these visual creative elements for national development. It is therefore necessary to encourage and inform our literary and visual artists to look into their cultural environment and use their socio-cultural experiences to innovate, create artworks and drama that can stand the test of time for posterity.

Keywords: Oral history, validation, taboos, traditional Ifa religion, narratives, adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

Oral history could be regarded as an account of event or experiences of an individual that is spoken by mouth to an interviewer or any researcher who is interested in getting information related to what the interviewee knows. Moyer (1999:2) states that oral history is the systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore gossip, hearsay or rumour. Mayor believes that oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyse them, and place them in an accurate historical context. She went further to say that oral history depends upon human memory and the spoken word. Sean Field (2007:13) sees oral history as a “research methodology that records oral stories drawn from living memory; and that oral traditionalists are more specifically interested in stories, fables and legends that have been transmitted across generations and go beyond the confines of living memory”. But in a broader sense, he states that it is a cluster of research and life skills which is constituted through several forms of practice. However, East Midlands oral History Archive opines that oral history is the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. This may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past, but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth, it is also stated that the spoken word was the only form of history in pre-literate societies.

According to Agubosim (1990:60) oral evidence, generally means evidence that is given by word of mouth and that in historical writing is categorized into two distinct forms. He quotes Biobaku (1956:43) that “the evidence an informant gives can be a body of knowledge or information handed down from many generations before him, in which case his duty is to preserve it and hand it down to posterity”. This is believed to be oral tradition. However, the evidence an informant gives can also be one that originates from him. This means that the

informant is a participant in the event or an observer of the events he describes. But Henige (1982:106) refers to such evidence as “oral history” or “life history” while Ryder (N.Y: 32) refers to such information first hand oral evidence. The most important thing is that no matter the type of oral evidences collected, the information have been used to correct or reconstruct non-literate societies all over the world. Even though most historians believe or have the notion that oral historical information are not reliable and cannot be validated. But they should also know that, the written documents believed to be so thorough and reliable are excerpts from oral interviews/information. They may be subjective or objective transcription of the interviewer.

East Midlands oral history Archive and Agubosim 1990 acquitted us with many written sources that are actually based on oral testimony. For example in the fifth century BC, the Greek historian, Herodotus, the father of History and Thucydides combined the use of oral tradition with information collected from participants or eye-witnesses of the Peloponnesian wars which they believed, they have checked thoroughly. Herodotus also travelled as far as Asia Minor and the Near East to get information about the past. Other Greek and Roman historians followed suite. We also believed that both the old and new testaments of the Bible are collection of oral tradition. It is common knowledge that all historical sources have their peculiar problems. It is important or necessary to subject oral history to other validity tests to make it more authentic like other sources. This could be comparing different oral evidences of different people for the same events at different time with written document or archeological findings especially relating to artistic objects or artifacts. Nonetheless, oral history is known to be both the oldest type of historical inquiry predating written word, and one of the most modern initiated source of data collection or gathering of information for project/research report.

Many past events or experiences are revealed to us through our fore-fathers, parents, herbalists, babalawos and during interviews when researching and finding out solutions to solving some social, religious, economical, physical and health human problems. Some historical events, sounds and mysterious tales or stories are also revealed through the recent borrowed religious-Christianity and Islam. It is obvious that the culture of a people is the total way of the people’s life and that art, religion and culture are inseparable and interwoven. Therefore the following factual or incidences are going to be used and examined to see how they can be validated and adopted for creative arts. The incidences are discussed under the following sub-headings.

1. Traditional religion
2. Historical type – e.g. lists of kings, chronology of each religion
3. Literary types – proverbs and sayings, songs, drama procession of festivals.
4. Philosophical tradition e.g. sacred chants, liturgies and limns, divination poems, praises of the gods
5. Taboos

TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Religion is generally regarded as a manner or a way the individual worship his/her creator. It means the way the individual have faith in his supernatural being, whom he believes governs, directs, controls and manipulates the mannerism and socio-cultural relationship between one and others in their environment and to the outer world in general. Religion according to Awolalu (1976), is the fundamental, perhaps the most important, influence in the life of most Africans; yet its essential principles are often unknown to foreigners who thus make

themselves constantly liable to misunderstood the African world view and belief. Awolalu believes that religion enters into every aspect of life of the African and it cannot be studied in isolation. And so when we talk about African traditional religion, we mean the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. Hence Lateju and Inyang (2012:1) stressed that from time immemorial, man has worshipped God according to his conscience and capability. They, Lateju and Inyang went further to state that Africa with its diverse culture has religion as a factor that helps people to live in harmony and work towards corporate development of the environment and the people. Awolalu totally agrees that the traditional religion is based on oral transmission. It is not written on paper but in peoples' hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions. He clearly stated that it has no founders or reformers like Gantama the Buddha, Asoka, Christ or Mohammad and it is not a religion of one hero.

As already stated, the traditional religion is practiced in all parts of Africa, in which Nigeria is not an exception. Different cultural areas have their various ways of consultation and they have various names for their mediators. The Isoko people (Delta state) calls it Obo, Benin people (Edo state) calls it Obo and the Yoruba (south western states) calls it Babalawos, all in Nigeria. It is so widely spread in Yoruba land because most traditional religious activities are geared towards Ifa worshipping. According to Bogumbe (1995. Xxxvi) "it is absolutely impossible for the Yoruba of whatever neo-religious persuasion to attempt anything at all without consulting Orunmila or his disciples, the Babalawos. Ifa throughout the history of the Yorubas, has always been essential part of life. The real key to the life of the Yoruba is the Ifa religion" It is believed that there is hardly any folklore traditional drama, stories, parables, poems, praise songs and others that do not take its origin from Ifa. Ifa is seen as a store house of the Yoruba culture. However, Bakare (2014:5) confirms the celebration of Ifa in traditional African medicine in Santeria or Lukumi of the Latin Americans and Caribbean islands in the Candomble of some west African countries, in the Efa of the Togolese in the Diaspora voodoo and also in the Orisa Ifa lineages all over the globe.

HISTORICAL STORIES/NARATIVES

History is the study of past events of the ancient people and their ways of life. It is the total activities of the people of the past, encompassing their political, social economic, cultural and religious manners, views and their philosophy of life. Through the narratives of the living, we are able to know the different lineages of kingships, chronology of each reign, other official officers and other political and administrative rulers in different kingdoms and culture areas. Most of the information are derived from both oral history and oral tradition.

LITERARY EXPERIENCES/PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Literary experiences are derived mostly from proverbs and sayings, songs, drama, while philosophical tradition are regarded as scared chants, liturgies and hymns, divination poems and praises to their gods, the two are interwoven into each other depending on the circumstances and the philosophy behind the drama, poems and divination involved in the literary performance. Most African performances especially the Yoruba performing theatres have sacred chants or incantations (magical poetry) used for spiritual or magical healings that are embedded in their display. Most indigenous Ghanaian films also promote these magical healings/powers also.

"But, perhaps people believe that those who are vast in incantations, the magical powers or words can remove hand cuffs from an individual" (Bogumbe, 1995). He went further to state

that “to be a great babalawo, one has to master 256 odus and understand that there are 1,680 stories that are attached to each odu. While Odeyemi (2014: 4) stresses that the priest uses Ikin, Opele, Opon-Ifa, Iroke, Iyerosun and Ibo only to access divine esoteric information and not as objects of worship. That Ifa is coded in an 8-bit digital (computer-compatible) format and output in parable format. Bogumbe further emphasized that we should “think about the mental powers of the priest when you look at what he brings to the interpretation of life”.

Ellwood (2009) believes that magic (sorcery) is the art of attaining objective, acquiring knowledge or performing works of wonder through supernatural or non-rational means. The techniques normally used include chants and spells, gestures or actions that often have a symbolic relation to the desired result. But Christopher (2009) opines that magic (conjuring), is the art of entertaining with tricks that are with apparent violation of natural law. He further stated that the principles of deception that magicians use are psychological which are manipulative and mechanical. It is like “the more you look, the less you see”.

VALIDATION OF ORAL HISTORY

Validation of oral history is really difficult but to some reasonable extent, it can be validated with other written documents in relation to the particular events, persons, kingdoms and other human activities. It can also be validated with archeological, anthropological and other people’s oral opinions or views in relation to the research problem to be solved. No matter what the problems are in the use of oral history, it also has its advantages and it is still being employed in this modern period of twenty first (21st) century.

Many scholars or European writers do not believe in our traditional religion and their activities. But nevertheless, Ifa traditional religion has gone beyond that conception. Wade Nobies (1999:4) stated categorically that “Ifa style of writing is as old as the race (symbol notations) which is in mathematic binary base”. Ifa divination has its own paraphernalia. It is usually done with the sixteen (16) sacred palm nuts (Ikin), the divining powder (Iyerosun) which is normally spread on the face of the divining tray (Opon-Ifa) in readiness for making marks with the fingers, in the powder. At this moment, according to Longe Olu (1983:18) “an attempt is made to scoop the palm nuts at one try with the right hand; and that if the number x , of unscooped nuts remaining in the left is greater than 2, then the try is ignored. If $x=1$, then 1 vertical stroke is marked. If $x = 2$, then 2 vertical strokes are marked. This is repeated until the required two columns together representing the signature of odu is completed as shown below.



Plate 1a: Opon-Ifa



Plate 1b: Opele

Ifa divination is completed with the recitation of a poem relevant to the signature obtained and interpreting the poem in relation to the situation being divined. These divinations are made more concrete and mathematically oriented what is more validating than this, and especially when the predictions come true.

More interestingly, Ifa is based on the binary system, each of the eight half-nuts comprising the Opele has two faces. The face presented by a half-nut when the Opele is cast is read as binary digit. A concave denotes binary 0 and a convex binary 1. This also applies on the marks inscribed in the powder on the divination tray (Opon-Ifa). “The more convenient hexadecimal (base 16) number system is more widely used in the divination, which is similar to current practices in computer science” (Longe Olu 1983:4-26). Most amazing is that their divinations are coded and presently are stored in the computers for easy recall.

Oral history also has it that in our indigenous religion, some deceased spirits or persons known in Yoruba as Abiku and Igbo as Ogbanje. They are regarded as children “born to die”. They are specialized for sadistic mischief. They find their ways into wombs of women to be born in order to die. It is believed that such spirits or children may be detected through divinations. Most of the time, attempts are made to deprive such reoccurrence or prevent it never again attempting the prank on the woman” (Bolaji Idowu, 1991: 174-176). Even in some towns in Isoko land of Delta State, a goal-post is made in front of such a compound, with a traditional mat and a particular type of fishing trap (Uge) tied at the centre on the top of the horizontal stick crossing the two vertical sticks stuck to the ground, as shown below;

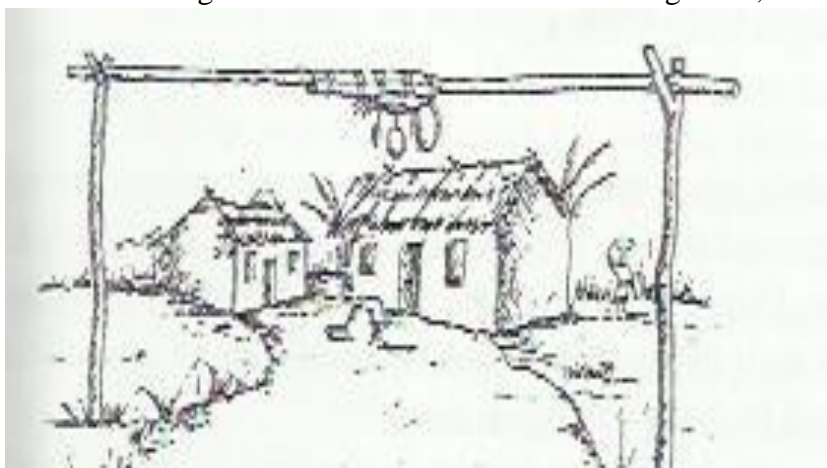


Plate 2: Researcher’s sketch of Ogbanje’s deprivation into a compound

It is believed that any evil spirit or child is trapped in and cannot get into the compound. The effectiveness of this philosophy is confirmed by the inhabitants.

Africans in general and Nigeria in particular believe in witchcraft and that such an individual with the spirit can be sent out of the body on errands of doing havoc to other persons or their enemies. It is also believed that these witches or wizards have guilds or operate singly and that the spirit out of the human being can operate in a lower form of animals or become invisible.

It is believed that they usually have their meetings or ceremonies in the forests or in open places in the middle of the night. Such wicked acts or evil powers or behaviours of people having these spirits can be validated by the powers of words coming out by force of, and backed by, the personality of the one who utters the word. After all, people go to any length

to obtain powers, so as, to impose upon others psychologically or by words of their ideas, suggestions and tales. Many of their activities are confirmed especially by people who have higher spiritual powers from God. Some of these evil spirits possessing human beings are casted out in churches. Many of them confess their activities in our immediate cultural environments which make these stories very valid.

TABOOS

There are many traditional beliefs that one cannot just overlook. Taboos are everywhere in most African cultures. These are believed to be harmful and can result to very serious ill health or death if their laws are flouted. Although, Christianity has relegated some to the background, yet others still flourish successfully even with the new faith –Christianity. Historically, it is believed that the Iguana, a particular specie of reptiles is highly venerated as they are regarded as part of their ancestors and are worshipped as one of the treasured and revered animals among the Orogun people from Ughelli South local government area and Emevor people from Isoko North government area; both from Delta State of Nigeria. These animals are allowed to parade the communities and nobody is allowed to do any evil or harm to them. A priest, named Olotu Akagbaredo revealed to Egwali and Ononeme (2013:98) that “in the past, any body found to have knowingly killed or inflicted pains on the body of an Iguana, inflicts pain or death on his/her own body as the repercussions often come back to the offender either secretly or openly. Egwali and Ononeme were also informed of numerous cases of people dying mysteriously as a result of their either killing or inflicting injuries on the Iguana. The offender can only survive after much incantations, divinations and purification have been performed for the culprit. The cleansing is done with kolanuts, white chalks, piece of cloth and collection of cowries. Definitely the offender must pay some amount of money for the traditional rites. It is also noteworthy to say that, the researcher was informed by a teacher in Obodoeti in Orogun community, Oghenekevwe Epetuku (2014 in oral interview) that the Iguanas are allowed to come to the market, where traders, sellers of different food items throw food to them. The indigenes shower praises on them as they move majestically and gracefully around the environment.

The most painful aspect is that these animals are sources of meat to other people outside Emevor and Orogun communities. So it is very frustrating when such easy way of killing the animals to make a good proteinous meals are prevented by a group of people. If the animal is killed mistakenly, you would be told to bury it like a human being after some sacrifices have been carried out. However, if this event has not been validated, Chief Ugheberio from Emevor in Delta State Television programme on “Culture and Taboos” on the 19th day of November 1999 cannot diligently challenge any Emevor indigene to eat Iguana in the public.

It is also a fact that the Ozoro people in Isoko North local government cannot attempt to eat snail because of its consequences. A landlord in Ozoro community can pursue or quit a tenant from his/her house or compound if found preparing snails. The researcher was also an eye-witness to this incidence while teaching in the community in 1978.

JUSTICE

Justice is another aspect of our culture that people do not believe it works. The *Ọvọ* principles works in many Isoko communities, especially in Isoko South and few communities in Isoko North. The *Ọvọ* covenant is used to solidify peace, happiness and joy among communities when there were a lot of community disputes resulting to wars and killing of

people and destruction of landed properties. The elders of the two or three communities will come together and take an oath using their blood as covenant. Any of the party who does harm to the other will die, and so it is till this 21st century. Nobody can revert it. Erivwo (2003:60) calls it “law of retribution” in which any person found committing sin, wickedness, stealing someone’s properties, committing adultery, removing landmarks and killing (either by shooting, cutting or bewitching) and found guilty must face the laws of the ancestors. Your hidden atrocities would be exposed whether you are a witch or not. Until the individual confesses, he/she would have swollen tendencies which could send him to early grave. The symbol of justice, known as Aghwarode is used in Awirhe community of Agbarha-Otor, Ughelli North local government area of Delta State to detect thieves, adulterers, and land dispute cases. Failure to tell the truth, will result in the immediate visitation of the spirits of Aghwarode, with the calabash of fire, spear of death and the whip of mental torture (Tagar 2014:23). When such a person dies, he will be deposited at the shrine of Aghwarode, as Tagar believes that justice must take its full course.

The Oṃṃ covenant carried out between villages in Isoko land cannot be overlooked, as many who ventured its powers have died. The researcher used the Oṃṃ covenant principles on those who stole the plastic cups used during my grandmother’s burial in 1993. Surprisingly, all the cups were returned in the night, thrown into the compound at different positions, for fear of death. “Seeing is believing, “what can be more concrete than this experience.

Today, people have the belief that if we go back to our traditional ways of life, some of these social ills and atrocities could be prevented. Hence Yasheed Fawehimin – a retired Justice of the Federal High Court, former chairman of the pro-panel to recover looted government properties, on a programme organized by Ondo Radio Corporation, 25th day of October 1999 opined that our people should be made to take oath-swearing in the traditional ways relating to the cultural environment. He went further to say that a Yoruba man fears to swear by Ogun because he is aware of the relative swiftness with which the god, Ogun acts. But they feel more comfortable to swear with the Bible or Koran because they are aware of the symbol of borrowed faith. They merely use the borrowed faith for their official positions in the society. In times of trouble, they usually run home to the indigenous faith which shows that they believe more on the faith. That is why the wide spread of Ifa among several groups and nations cannot be ascertained. William Bascon (1991:9), presents pictures and different names given to the divination claim of Ifa in some of the culture areas; Yoruba- Oṃṃ, Jukun-Noko, Yagba (Kogi) – Agbigba, and Nupe-Eba.

APPLICATION OF ORAL HISTORY TO VISUAL ARTS

From all the analysis, traditional religion in most culture areas have working tools or paraphernalia attached to their activities which the visual artists can explore for their artistic representations. Luckily enough, most of the Ifa oral divination techniques are illustrated in books as references for visual aids. Most of the tools used for divination are ikin, the sixteen sacred palm nuts, Oṃṃ-Ifa; the divination tray, Iyerosun; the divining powder for spreading on the face of the tray and Oṃṃ the divining chain on which eight half-nuts are strung.

All these Ifa paraphernalia, staff of office, stools are artifacts or relics for aesthetic appreciation and objects for visual arts designing in all the specialization areas. Adeseye (2011: 52) described the Ifa signature of Eji Ogbe and Oyeku meji on Oṃṃ-Ifa (divination tray) as portraying two complementary phenomena of positive and negative forces of light and darkness. Adeseye believes that these are essential indices in the development of arts and

sciences. However, to the researcher, the Opon-Ifa (divination tray) is a conglomeration of artistic elements and principles of designs that could be developed into concrete artworks for aesthetic appreciation. The signs and symbols on the tray are liken to those found in trays, calabashes and some domestic utensils in south eastern Nigeria before the coming of the missionary/colonial masters. The signs and symbols (Nsibidi) the pathomic gestural language of Ekpe society in Cross River and Akwa Ibom states of Nigeria are translated into elements of design as promoted in their Ukara Ekpe ceremonial cloth, specifically for initiate. The tritik technique of resist method is used as shown below



Plate 3: Ukara cloth for EKPE society in Abontakon, Ikom
Source: National Museum, Oron, Akwa Ibom State.

The researcher opines that the binary connotation made by each mark on the Opon-Ifa which is regarded as binary digit by Adeseye, could be examined as principles of design, as the varied forms are well organized and arranged in a manner that gives the formation of a systematic progressive rhythm as it diminishes towards the edges of the Ifa tray. The divination tray is surrounded with a complex, unified decorated border design, that can be explored by the artist.

Poems, praise songs, folktales, taboos, legends and rhymes can be developed and translated into visual arts or pictures or drama for appreciation. In the presentation of such a drama, a lot of props are created to represent the period of the events or when the incidence happened, the type of clothing and dresswear in vogue, the type of architectural building, and the cultural life style are visually depicted. The objects of worship, royal paraphernalia and the different artworks in that period are created to represent that time. Some of these projections and promotions are found in our traditional indigenous films such as Igodo, Idemili, the oracle and others. Adeseye (2011:231) advocates the development of nursery rhymes from Ifa narratives to be used for musics, dialogues for indigenous use.

It is interesting to note that some visual artists have used folklore, taboos, myths or legends ideologies to create concrete artistic impressions that can be visualized and appreciated in different environments and other documented in various art books or journals. Today, the Olokun of Benin believed to be water goddess that has magical or spiritual powers to kill, heal and protect its worshippers and followers is visually sculptured in ring road, centrally positioned, painted white and brown under an umbrella, majestically sitted with her servants. There is another sculpted work by Igben Blessing situated in University of Benin, Ekehuan campus in which the ruggedly and different positioned Iguanas (three of them) on an anthill is created for aesthetic appeal and remembrance of these animals as taboos in Orogun community in Delta State. The elements of sacrifices are also visually represented in a bowl.

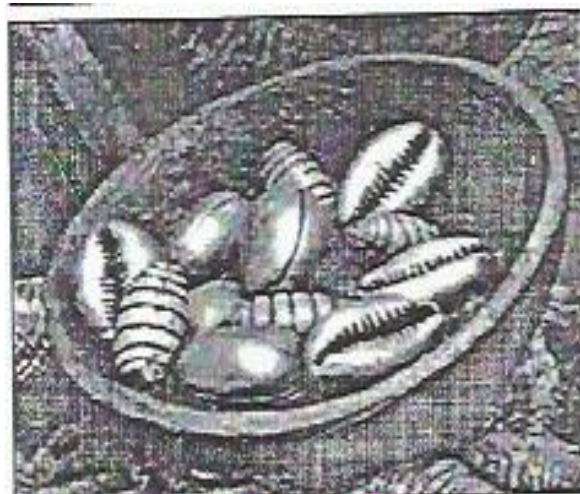


Plate 4: Blessing Igben's Iguana Sculpture in University of Benin, 2011

Source: Egwali and Ononeme, 2013.

In the same vain Tagar Linda idealize and concretised the symbol of Justice, Aghwarode of Awirhe community in Agbarha-Otor, Ughelli north local government Area of Delta State in her masters in Fine Art (M.F.A Textiles) artwork titled "the spirits of Aghwarode" Tagar (2014) believes that any incantations and liberation poured on the artwork can invoke Aghwarode spirits to act when necessary.



Plate 5: The Spirits of Aghwarode by Tagar Linda, 2014

Source: MFA Project, 2014.

Folktales and myths are also another areas of application of oral history that has generated artistic impressions, creativity and innovations, for example, the Mbari Mbayo workshop of Oshogbo and other individual artists of the natural synthesis productions. Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya have really projected their cultural heritage.



Plate 6: Bruce Onobrakpeya
Dance in the Forest of Ghosts
Additive Plastograph
101cm x 79.5cm
Source: Agbarha-Otor 98 and 99 Harmattan Workshop



Uche Okeke
Match of Masquerades
Source: Nigeria Magazine, 1975.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to discuss in detail, oral history, its method of validation and the application of it to visual artistic creation. Although it has been discovered that oral history has its own disadvantages as a research method of gathering information, it is still being used by present modern technique, because all sources of information have their inherent problems and so oral history is not left out. It is only important that visual artists should be encouraged to use folklore, mythological events, traditional poems and songs to formulate visual designs and scenery for aesthetic appreciation. Even though, they are interested in western themes, their cultural experiences and ideology should not be abandoned. There are so many interesting innovative, creative and traditional signs, symbols, motifs and designs to derive their artworks or artistic impressions.

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