



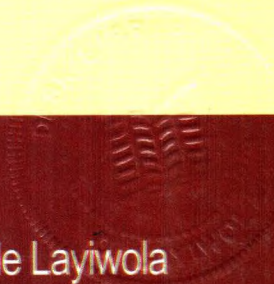
NIGERIAN ACADEMY OF LETTERS

A
HANDBOOK
FOR
NIGERIAN CREATIVE
WRITERS

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Edited by:

- Dan Izevbaye
- Festus Adesanoye
- Dele Layiwola



A Handbook
for
Nigerian Creative Writers

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*** Dan Izevbaye * Festus Adesanoye * Dele Layiwola**

A publication of

NIGERIAN ACADEMY OF LETTERS

Published by
Nigerian Academy of Letters

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First published 2013

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ISBN: 978 - 978 - 934 - 099 - 6

Produced in Nigeria
by International Publishers Limited, 08033901617
for the Nigerian Academy of Letters

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9

The Writer's Imagination, Talent and Inherited Traditions

Dele Layiwola

9.1 THE MAKING OF ART

The “writing” or the making of literature, the composition of orature or poetry is both a process and a product. It is also a medium of language, thought and culture for the purposes of narration, representation, performance or contemplation. It is, therefore, a craft as well as an art. For the study of the process or the art itself to be comprehensive or meaningful it is often presumed to be representative of the society, culture or context that produces the writer and the background to his work. The art of writing is, for this reason, an intervention in the process of a tradition or history of creativity. No art is complete unless it is standing on the shoulders of those systems of art that produce it or that give birth to its original concept. To put it plainly, it has a complexion, a taste, a peculiar smell or sound by which

it may seek to be identified or recognized; it has a genealogy. It is not as quiescent as its material medium because it seeks to "say" something; it represents something concrete or abstract in the pursuit of its human subjects. In the very best of its ability, it is human-centred; it does not exist in a vacuum because it relates with living beings. It thus means that the study of literature, language, or other forms of representation is the framework by which knowledge and ideas communicate themselves to or unite human beings, groups, nationalities or societies with mutually intelligible codes, mores and laws. In representing this magical power of language, Martin Heidegger declares that language calls things into existence, gives them a meaning and a home. In his own words,

Language speaks. Its speaking bids the difference to come which expropriates world and things into the simple onefold of their intimacy. Language speaks (210).

If language does this, then literature, an end product of language must have a greater impetus than its primary medium. This, therefore, means that from the onset of this discourse, we must allow ourselves to contend with issues which may help us to delimit scope and meaning. Two of them immediately come to mind. The first goes thus: How do we recognize literature since everything in print or speech that articulates the letters of the alphabet constitutes a form of literature: medical literature, statistical literature, legal literature, Christian or Islamic literature, etc. By literature *qua* literature, that is literature as literature, we mean imaginative literature or what Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (1998:22) refer to as "the art of literature". This is because literary or cultural communication is always an art designated in genres or styles such as drama, epic, narrative, fiction and poetry, depending on their internal or external appearance, organization, form or style. These, in themselves, constitute patterns or ways of expressing the beautiful or the extraordinary. That is why literature is an art set apart for its beauty in both its method and appearance.

A second contention will be the distinction between the terms *literature* and *orature*. From its very basic etymology, *litera*, literature refers to that which is written as opposed to that which is spoken. The term “oral literature” or “orature” would therefore seem to be more acceptable than written literature in cultures where, though writing exists as a tool of communication, the spoken or the spontaneous is a revered and instructive art. In addition to having been written, literature emphasizes speech, declamation or other para-literary criteria. Usually many African, Asian, Irish or Polynesian languages communicate, not only through the appearance, articulation or succession of alphabets but also through the tonal or musical manipulation of the alphabets or their sounds. These become generative and instructional mediums not only from their melliflence but also from reconstructions of auditory power and rhythmic counter-pointing. George Thomson, in his classic monograph, *Marxism and Poetry* makes a distinction between traditional and modern poetry. In ancient Greece, poetry was wedded to music. There was no purely instrumental music, that is, music without words. He notes that among the Irish too, poetry was often written to be performed with music. He further observes:

To most English people English poetry is a closed book ... Among the Irish peasantry it is quite different. For them poetry has nothing to do with books at all. Most of them are illiterate. It lives on their lips. It is common property. Everybody knows it ... Whenever a notable event occurs, a song is composed to celebrate it ... they are improvised (1946:7).

This is most roundly confirmed in the third volume of Plutarch’s *Complete Works* where, in his scientific essay on music he advises poets and musicians:

Therefore if it be the aim of any person to practise music with skill and judgment, let him imitate the ancient manner;

let him also adorn it with those other sciences, and make philosophy his tutor, which is sufficient to judge what is in music decent and useful. For music being generally divided into three parts, diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic, it behoves one who takes up music to understand poetry, which uses these three parts, and to know how to interpret poetical selections in appropriate musical form. (1909: 590).

He further underscores this point that any person endowed with judgment and skill will most likely be an accomplished musician. He finally links all these up with literature by saying that,

Learn, says Homer, from hence the true use of music. For it became Achilles, the son of Peleus the Just, to sing the famous acts and achievements of great and valiant men. Also in teaching the most proper time to make use of it, Homer found out a profitable and pleasing pastime for an inactive person. For Achilles, being both valiant and active, by reason of the disgust he had taken against Agamemnon withdrew from the war. Homer therefore thought he could not do better than the laudable incitements of music and poetry to inflame the hero's courage for those achievements which he afterwards performed. **And this he did calling to mind the great actions of former ages.** [Emphasis mine] (1909: 595).

Thomson could not but wonder whether ancient Greek poets like Aeschylus or Pindar composed their poetry on pieces of paper or whether they got inspired as if they were entranced like traditional Irish poets. We often realize that in describing poets in traditional societies like those of the Greek and the Irish often leads to an irresistible comparison with those of traditional Africa like the *Imbongi*, *Ijala* or *udje* poets who derive their compositions partly from long training and apprenticeship and partly from patron deities or transcendental agencies.

There will always recur that nagging overlap between tradition and the individual talent as has been instructively enunciated by T.S. Eliot (1988). What I am trying to emphasize here is that much as poetry or art is a product of the imagination, it is also a product of learning. The origins are found both in the individual artists and in their traditions of apprenticeship and learning. These characteristics give the drama of Wole Soyinka, the prose fiction of Chinua Achebe and the poetry of Derek Walcott and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, among others, their unusual resource and memorability. It is also clear that at moments of great internal crisis and decisiveness, the heroes of Shakespeare's dramas invoke the power of words as "writing" and as articulated sounds and images. Therefore, of the "written" and the "spoken", I fully agree with Wellek and Warren's representation that "The German term *Werkunst* and the Russian *slovesnost* have the advantage over their English equivalent" (22).

English approximation is written only as literature whereas these terms incorporate the idea of the written as well as that which is heard or spoken. In fact, for the art of drama, the written word is constructed in order that it may be spoken, declaimed and heard. The verbal, the visual and the auditory thereby complement each other for an enduring engagement.

If words are to be ultimately heard and comprehended, the medium of poetry and radio drama build their validity largely on the pattern and coordination of sound and syllables. "Orature", which predates "literature", is therefore as important today as writing which succeeded it after man had perfected the art of speech. A writer, a critic or their audience must cultivate that sensitivity to the art which organizes or perfects language as a tool for representation, contemplation and entertainment. Chinua Achebe, in perfecting the use of proverbs for exquisite indigenous expressions affirms that "a proverb is the oil with

which words are eaten". For him, the oratorical strength of proverbs brings out the beauty and the strength of both auditory and elocutionary powers.

There is a sense, then, in which literature becomes the medium of a whole body of knowledge – the history and the heritage – of a people because it not only adopts their linguistic assets, it uses same to carry and modify all the sung, spoken and declaimed experience of the people. It is the bank of memory, of culture and of self-apprehension or collective self-knowledge in any one tradition or culture.

In defining literature or orature as work, as a *métier* or the business or subject of creativity, it becomes a major craft that transforms itself in the hands of a creative group, a guild of artists or an individual author or inspirational agency or authority. It is the conscious creation of a trained mind, an informed attitude or a disciplined, subjective outlook. It is a skill, a pattern, or a rule that is imparted on to a structure of language, devised by language in any of its expressive symbols for signifying things. In it, the aesthetic function, the creation of beauty, the adornment of art or the deployment of craft is the dominant aim. It is similar or analogous to a trunk of wood, which is then defined or carved by a sculptor. Before he or she sets hand on or to it, it appears shapeless yet it has a given form. He then gives life to it; he "speaks" to it, "writes" it or "carves" it. This gives it the "fire" that enlivens it in its new form or state; itself, in turn, becoming a medium for other ideas.

In works of literature, that original form is the convention or tradition over which the poet builds, inscribes, each time he/she creates a new work without erasing that which had been on the cultural canvass before he/she writes and rewrites on it.

What the art or the craft does is to impose an order, an arrangement on the works, images or expressions of a linguistic corpus that had always

been in existence. Whilst that language or world provides the basis for that work of art, the genius of the truly creative enterprise, in turn, improves the status or the present condition of that language or world. In their various cultures, this has been the preoccupation of poets and dramatists like: Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Dante, Yeats, Soyinka, Achebe and Clark-Bekederemo. That is why Ezra Pound writes of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that,

We are governed by words, the laws are graven in words,
and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living
and accurate (Cited in Steiner, 1969:230).

In keeping language alive and vibrant, literature and art impose order, form and organization on their medium or varied media. By so doing, they make them memorable and worthy of recognition and classification. This is why we have the emergence of what is referred to as **genres** of literature.

9.2 DEFINITIONS, DISTINCTIONS AND GENRES

There is the lyric, the epic, the drama, and more recently the novel or narrative otherwise referred to as prose fiction. We often refer to all these forms or genres as works which are not true in an everyday sense, but fictive or imaginative. The works of imagination, be they poetry or drama cannot be fully *denotative* without being *connotative* as well. In them we will find the profound use of figures of speech, imagery, allusion and the extreme or specialized tendencies of the language in which they have been created, written or performed. I shall like to offer definitions of these genres followed by discussions of selected examples.

- (i) **The Lyric** is a brief subjective poem composed from the imagination and which has melody. It usually has a simple story line. There is a distinction between lyric and choric poetry. Lyric

poetry is the emotional expression of a single or lone singer and is usually accompanied by the lyre or a similar instrument whilst choric poetry is the musical expression of a group sung by a chorus. Whilst the distinction is outdated, the lyric remains an inspirational expression of a lone imagination usually dwelling on a subject of passionate or subjective interest. A ready example is J.P. Clark's poem, 'Olokun' which runs thus:

I love to pass my fingers
(As tide thro' weeds of the sea
And wind the tall fern-fronds)
Thro the strands of your hair
Dark as night that screens the naked moon:

I am jealous and passionate
Like Jehovah, God of the Jews,
And I would that you realise
No greater love had woman
From man than the one I have for you!

But what wakeful eyes of man,
Made of the mud of this earth,
Can stare at the touch of sleep

The sable vehicle of dream
Which indeed is the look of your eyes?
So drunken, like ancient walls
We crumble in heaps at your feet;
And as the good maid of the sea,
Full of rich bounties for men,
You lift us all beggars to your breast.

Though “Olokun” is not meant to be sung and has no outward rhyming patterns, it has a profound rhythmic structure in the regularity of its beat and cadence such that a musical or melodic pattern can be constructed on it. It can also be seen that “Olokun” is marked by a deeply subjective tone because it expresses an emotional attachment to a certain heroine, a goddess and the permeating spirit of an environment or the natural milieu in which it is set. It is a love poem even if the subject being addressed is somewhat intangible and dissolves as soon as she is evoked. The medium does not stand to critique the subject or the situation but reveres her and stands in awe of her. The poet narrator concludes with a dreamy, drunken image and brings the image of mendicancy where all men lie for solace and succour on the bosom of this all-powerful lady of sustenance.

It is useful to compare another poem,

“The Passage”, was written about the same period, but by another poet and lyricist, Christopher Okigbo. Its central organizing principle is again a body of water or life source, as in the case of “Olokun”; the only difference is that, this time, it is more localized. It is, unlike “Olokun” of the mighty sea, the spirit of a village stream called Idoto. It runs thus:

Before you, mother Idoto,
 Naked I stand;
 Before your watery presence,
 A prodigal
 Leaning on an oilbean,
 Lost in your legend.
 Under your power wait I
 On barefoot,
 Watchman for the watchword

At Heavensgate;
Out of the depths my cry:
Give ear and hearken...

We notice that in both poems and lyrics, the poet or singer is constantly under a spell. He recounts his pleas and supplications under the mesmerizing power of sleep and dreams. The poet and singer of tales and visions reveals that prophecy and proclamations are part-sleep, part-waking experience and that he is at the best of his prophetic moments, a Somnambulist, a sleep walker, drowned by inspiration. This is the reason that subjectivity becomes an important element of the lyric. It is deeply imbued with personal feelings and emotion and it is intensely imaginative. At times it is also deeply ecstatic. Lyric was the earliest form of poetizing in the literatures of most cultures and had been adapted in wide ranging forms. There are sub-classifications of the lyric like hymns, odes, ballads and elegies.

(ii) **The Epic** is a long narrative poem or story written in very elegant style. It portrays well-drawn or well-delineated characters that are all connected to a principal or national hero. Consequently the various episodes and scenes often reveal the evolution or history of a nation or race. The origins of the early epics are not known but they are thought to be folk stories collected and welded together. These kinds are known as "folk epics" whilst those with proven authorship are sometimes called "art epics". But whether they are art or folk epics, they generally have the following characteristics:

- (a) The hero is often larger than life and of great and imposing stature. An example is Sundiata in D.T. Niane's epic, *Sundiata*, and *Shaka* in Masizi Kunene's or Thomas Mofolo's *Shaka the Zulu*, etc.

- (b) The scope or setting is often very vast. It covers a great geographical mass as well as historical period.
- (c) The action is often grandiose, teaching lessons of heroism and great courage or perseverance. An Example is D.O. Fagunwa's hunters' saga, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* or its dramatic adaptation by Wale Ogunyemi titled *Langbodo*.
- (d) Supernatural forces feature a lot with goblins, gnomes, trolls and fairies often playing human-like roles.
- (e) The style, though lofty and grand, often reflects a measure of detached subjectivity.

Examples of national epics from the rest of world literature are:

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; the Indian *Mahabharata*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Old English *Beowulf*, the Finnish *Kalevala*; the German *Nibelungenlied* and the Spanish *Le Cid*.

- (iii) **Drama** is, according to Aristotle, the imitation of human action. It may be a single presentation of a story line by actors who act or speak and use gestures and dance. There may be music and mime or the imitation of action. Across the ages, Greek, Roman, African and Oriental dramas arose from religious rites and ceremonies.

There are three broad types in drama namely: Tragedy, Comedy and Tragi-comedy.

Tragedy depicts "serious" plays with a sad ending. The word seems to mean a "goat-song" and refers to Dionysian death and resurrection ceremonies in which the goat was the sacrificial animal. A leader supported or cued by a chorus leads the ceremonial song. It gradually developed with more characters

added and a story line visible and the chorus in the background. The famous authors of Greek tragedy were Aeschylus (525-456 BC), Sophocles (496-406 B.C.) and Euripides (480-406 B.C.).

Comedy is a lighter form of drama, which primarily sets out to amuse and has a happy ending. Comedy differs from its two sub-genres of *farce* and *burlesque* in that its plot is better sustained, the dialogue is tighter and it is not slapstick as the two sub-genres. Wit and humour are deliberately promoted in Comedy so as to evoke laughter and comic relief. Whilst tragedy deals with man in his ideals or god-like state, comedy sees man in his weakness or failure. It places side by side the apparent and the real and draws judgment based on the perceived discovery. The Athenian playwright, Aristophanes (c.450-385 B.C.) is a classic example. Later, Roman playwrights carried forward the development of comedy. An example is Plautus (c.254-184 B.C.) who adapted Greek comedies for the Roman Stage.

Tragicomedy, from its etymology, is a mark or balance between both Tragedy and Comedy. The action would seem to be leading in the direction of tragedy but a sudden twist of events brings the opposite. Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is an oft-cited example.

The three sub-genres of drama are fairly represented in most cultures and have their own internal styles and organization. In traditional cultures, the practitioners and dramatists have guilds and associations to which they are loyal and which regulate the extent of their performance. There is also a carry-over of this to contemporary times when actors, writers and musicians form influential organisations.

- (iv) **The fictional or prose narrative** or story constitutes a type, an extended version of which is the novel. As in the dramas, these are stories told with plots and extended characterization. There is always a message, a moral or a philosophy enunciated at the end of each story or narrative. Besides, it may fit into a storytelling or prosaic tradition whereby it emphasizes some type of ideology. There are storytelling traditions in the whole of Africa and in all of the world's traditions and cultures. The English novel, as we know it in modern times, was begun in the 18th century by such British writers as Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett. In Africa, some of the pioneer biographers, diarists or prose stylists in the cosmopolitan languages are Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Coguano; and subsequently, novelists like Chinua Achebe, Sembene Ousmane, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Naguib Mahfouz and a host of less prominent others.

Having outlined the evolution and development of literary genres, let us examine the function of literature in society as an index of culture, cultural development, an art for cultural diffusion and a medium of communication and correspondence.

When we talk of a people's culture or their civilization (as both terms are synonymous, one being an index of the other), we always imply two facets of the same thing – their material, visible culture and the immaterial or intangible heritage. When I relate that culture and civilization are mutually referential, I mean that there can be no civilization without a culture and that the fact that a people have a culture is also an indication of the fact that they possess a civilization that would have grown from the culture. For instance one material aspect of a culture is the language of exchange; the language that the

people speak; the words, the phrases and the sentences of that language. In fact, the phonemes, the morphemes and the various concepts in the language are bound to reveal particular patterns. Language is extremely important and usually has been with a people for as long as they have possessed the land on which they live. It is the instrument of organized states or government. It is the advanced property of a settled community with a historical genealogy.

An aspect of the language of exchange is the material commerce and the currency of exchange; their money and how they accord value to it and to their means of production and their products. In this regard all that they possess in terms of their material culture and artifacts; their tools and work implements; the means of making music – membranophones, aerophones, chordophones, etc. Their forms of costume, regalia, ornaments and dress patterns all constitute their material culture.

There are also more sublime aspects of culture, which generate themselves as temperament, attitude, mores, outlook or our psychological, even psychical make-up. In other words, religion and modes of worship or ways of perceiving the world also constitute parts of our intangible heritage or culture.

In his introduction to the book *Culture and Civilization* (1991:9), Lloyd Thompson was at pains to emphasize that culture and customs have their rigid concepts and peculiarities – no amount of arguments can justify or condemn them as better, or worse, than another because they are often subjective phenomena. By the same token, arbitrary cultural factors can be found in our language, literatures, artifacts, mores and lore. No value judgments can be made about them. The applications are relative and each culture is a *raison d'être* for its own value systems. A man or woman who understands and can apply the rules and etiquette of his/her own culture exquisitely is termed “cultured” but he or she

who is unable to grasp the rudiments of his/her own culture is untutored. Even then, he/she is not an outcast since there is always the potential to learn and understand it.

In this regard, the more adaptive, more flexible and the more humane a culture is, the more tolerant it is likely to be and the greater likelihood for its survival in a modern, pluralist world (Beier 2002: 146-48). This fact has always been cited for the survivalist tendencies of African culture in the midst of new world relics. All cultures, to survive, must adapt to change, improvement and improvisation or even abuse otherwise it will wither and die. It is convenient here to quote J.F. Ade Ajayi (1977:37) when he writes that,

In the same way literatures, for all the famed memories of traditional diviners and troubadours, must be seen as ever changing phenomena that respond to use and contemporary needs, or wither and die.

In like manner, Chinua Achebe narrates that traditional Igbo society allows itself this breathing space and opportunity even with its own divinities. No condition is absolute for if a god fails to live up to expectation and the collective aspirations of its own devotees, the community would discard its sculptural image and carve another one in its stead. As we therefore talk about the preservation of our culture, our civilization and our heritage we realize that we are not preserving them as fossils but as something creative, dynamic and truly edifying. It is only in this creative relationship with our culture that we make evolutionary progress.

9.3 THE WRITER AND IMAGINATIVE LICENSE

One final point of artistic interest I had discussed in an earlier publication is the special privilege that the writer or the artist has in the exercise of his imagination. It is assumed that apart from the fact that empirical

reality is coerced to “cooperate” with the artist and his/her whims and caprices, the survival potential of art depends on the ease with which the artist can rely on his audience to trust him. Besides, he also can take his material for granted to be able to recreate it. I shall describe one such example in Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The novelist, and storyteller, was at pains to describe the prosperity and self-sufficiency of an African community before the arrival of colonialists and purveyors of missionary civilization. He therefore told the story of how Umuofia society would annually celebrate the new yam festival by the extraordinary preparation of pounded yam the size of a hill. All the surrounding communities would assemble to eat from their approach. It was only in the evening that kith and kin would exchange pleasantries and handshakes over the remnants and left-overs.

I shall like to quote my earlier observation on this narrative:

Achebe performs an artistic feat in creating a larger-than-life situation meant to illustrate a simple point or notion on the probabilities of human accomplishment. But if we were to subject the idea to empiricist analysis then we might ask whether it is the same labour that produced the yam which now pounded it or were there some machines and some robots employed? If individuals from diverse groups would come from the various distant communities on foot, at what point of the pounding did they arrive given that the pounded yam didn’t grow cold and unappetizing? If indeed the communal feast involved the total participation of the various provinces, how long did each person stay as to enable him exchange handshakes over the left-over of the day? (1999: 82-83).

The truth here is that the artist has chosen to tell the story of bounty or prosperity in a way that would make it most memorable so that it would represent his world as a reality, yet untrue. From time to time, it is the

prerogative of the writer to use this resource with freedom but with discipline. It is thus a good representation of what Biodun Jeyifo has called “the truthful lie” or what Achebe himself has termed “the truth of fiction”. Art, imaginative literature and some of the kinds of literary writings which we have represented above thus convey invaluable truths represented as “a figment of the author’s imagination”. This is a peculiar license of the author. Like Achebe’s story, all the fictional realist stories of Fagunwa, Tutuola and Elechi Amadi are realities in art but without a correlative basis in the real world.

9.4 CONCLUSION

I shall like to conclude this paper by drawing attention to the fact that literature, the performing, plastic or expressive arts, represent culture as a living form. It is by their evocative and expressive properties that they communicate with our outer and inner natures and thereby create a unique sense of identity. It is that which distinguishes us as a people of a particular civilization living and interacting with the civilization of others.

Abiola Irele has written, definitively, that the arts perform three basic functions: the **phatic**, the **ludic** and the **ideological**. Here, he avers that the phatic is the use of language or an expressive form to communicate feelings rather than ideas; to merely relate with other beings and society. The normative pleasantries and greetings which we exchange in the morning or afternoon serve this kind of purpose. It just greets but does not convey information. The ludic is the entertainment or the pleasurable functions derived from art and the imaginative use of culture. The entertainment and pleasure we get from the aesthetic value of the arts. The ideological is the expressions of ideas, worldviews and opinions that are not necessarily uniform because each opinion represents a value judgment (1991: 55056).

The most important thing to remember is that all these functions are to emphasize a sense of identity and social cohesion within particular or distinct societies and social groupings. This is the highest aspiration of the human sciences or the humanities as we learn and practise them. This then demands some major sacrifice of the writer as an artificer and a pathfinder. Soyinka once put it succinctly: "The writer is the voice and vision in his own time". The writer not only entertains, he represents, he cajoles, he bullies, he convinces, he criticizes and flays and he philosophizes. He remains an oracle in the context of mankind and society. His place and his impact will always be felt.

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