

Conflict in the neighborhood: Street and working children in the public space

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#### Introduction

In many places in the world, street and working children have been assassinated for no more than petty crimes and haughty behaviour (Boydon, 1991; Swart, 1990a). Almost every study of street children in various cultures concludes that the children's worst fear is not of going hungry or missing the security of their families, but of hostility from the public and police (Aptekar & Stocklin, 1997; Richter, 1989b; Swart, 1990a). In fact, the number of street children killed in Brazil supersedes the total casualties in the civil war in Lebanon (Leite & Esteves, 1991).

In the middle of August, 1994 Simon, a Kenyan child of 15 years of age, was murdered by a police reservist. So many poor unkempt children had already been mistreated that his demise would not have aroused much concern except that he was shot five times at point blank range, kicked into the gutter, and then spat upon. Evidently, Simon had stolen a signal lens from a parked car. There were no other complaints about Simon. No one said that he was belligerent or assaultive. How was it that Simon's relatively minor crime aroused such anger in the police officer?

In order to answer this question we will first need to make some comments about the definition of street children. These comments will illustrate that the way street children are defined contributes to the hostility they receive. Then we will present a taxonomy for the hostility toward street children. We conclude by illustrating how the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child can be used to help street and working children in the public space.

#### **How defining street children leads to hostile reactions**

There is not, and perhaps cannot be, a clear definition of street children, but the way they are depicted contributes to their problems. There are several reasons for this. First, definitions often have political purposes. When international organisations cite large numbers of street children they are, even if inadvertently, also making a claim to a larger financial allotment. Thus when one reads a UNICEF report claiming that world wide the number of children in the streets is over 300 million (UNICEF, 1990) one is struck by the huge size of the problem, and the need to act immediately and with fervour. This can be damaging to the children because inflated numbers (professional written studies numbers of homeless street children worldwide indicate less than a tenth of this figure [Aptekar, 1994]) tend to inflame the public's fear.

The public, in addition to having to deal with exaggerated numbers, is further intimidated by the press who dramatise the “bad boy” image of street children. This image emphasises worse case scenarios, such as the youngest children on the streets, the severely intoxicated, and the most delinquent. While this approach sells newspapers (and raises money) it does not contribute to an accurate assessment of the problem. Recently, the Kenyan press reported that children in the centre of Nairobi were carrying syringes filled with contaminated HIV positive blood. The children allegedly were threatening anyone who refused to give them money with lethal injection. Not one case of this alleged behaviour was actually ever authenticated, yet the public’s perception of this as a common occurrence reached as faraway as Swaziland when an ex-patriot Kenyan repeated the story to one of the authors as if it were fact.

The second reason for the lack of a clear definition of street children and which contributes to the problems they face is related to cultural ethnocentrism. The problem stems from defining street children by comparing them to children from a fictitious ideal middle-class family in the developed world. This family consists of a two parent home, while the female headed home common among poor families is blamed for abusing or neglecting its children and their coping strategies and capacity is ignored (Agnelli, 1986; Baizerman, 1988; Barker & Knaul, 1991; Ennew, 1994; Suda, 1993). Because the children are on the streets at a much earlier age than is common in communities which support western middle class values the children are also blamed for what might also be viewed as positive coping strategies (Aptekar, 1990; Aptekar, et., al., 1995; Clark, 1984; Kabeberi, 1990).

In fact, the evidence for the assumption that poor children on the streets because they are abused or neglected is lacking. In most studies, less than a tenth of the children on the streets either working or living without their families have been abandoned (Dallape, 1987; International Catholic Child’s Bureau, 1985; Richter, 1991; Rosa, de Sousa, & Borba, 1992; Veale, 1992). Ninety percent of all the children who work on the streets return to their homes at night (Barker & Knaul, 1991; Cosgrove, 1999; de Carrizosa & Poertner, 1992; Donald & Swart-Kruger, 1994; Williams, 1993). It is also rare for a street children, once on the streets, to abandon their families. Instead many periodically return home and contribute what little they can to the family welfare (Aptekar, 1994; Dallape, 1987; Rosa, de Sousa, & Borba, 1992). These are not signs of familiar discord, yet defining street children as if their presence in the public space is the result of aberrant adults leads to inflamed ethnocentric rhetoric and castigation. By casting blame on parents and step parents (both absent and present), and on the children, the fact that these poor children are in the public space out of economic necessity, which is far more difficult of an issue to tackle, is ignored.

Contrary to popular opinion the vast majority of poor working children in the public space are not psychopathological, or otherwise delinquent and drug abusing. Studies indicate that these children have developed adequate coping strategies, which allow many of them to function at least as well as their poor counterparts who pass less time in public view (Aptekar, 1988; Aptekar & Stocklin, 1997; Ennew, 1994). Even for the small percentage who do not live with their families of origin, most have found adequate coping techniques including finding a niche in

the economic market which gives them sufficient income to eat and clothe themselves, finding and taking advantage of programmes that serve them, being sufficiently informed about their physical health to stay reasonably healthy, forming close friendships with peers, and maintaining some form of connection to their family or origin.

### **The essential difference between street and working children**

For a long time a misleading dichotomy has been presented between children “on” the streets and children “of” the streets. The two groups were presented as if they were distinct from one another, had their own personality characteristics, and found in all cultures. In fact, in most societies only a small percentage of working children are children living of the streets, and even the great majority of children “of” the streets fluctuate between home, the streets, and the variety of programs that exist to help them (Aptekar, 1988; Visano, 1990). A variety of factors precipitate the movement between the streets and their homes, including bad weather, periods of intense police attention, the closing of a program that the child was satisfied with, or a change in the home environment (such as the removal a step-parent). In most cases the difference between working and street children has less to do with their personalities than with the circumstances they face (Aptekar, 1992; Lucchinni, 1993). Thus, it is more accurate to think of children on and of the street as falling on a continuum of environmental differences, than on personal characteristics.

In some societies, like Ethiopia, there are differences between working and street children. In these cases it is also evident that the definition of street children lies more in the eyes of the beholder than in the personality of the child. In Addis Ababa working children are seen to be engaged in a wide variety of activities, such as shoe polishing, working with taxi drivers to help passengers being picked up and dropped off, selling lottery numbers, cigarettes, candies, ground nuts, etc. At nights (if they are not working a night shift) it is assumed they are at home with their families. These children are usually of the Guarge ethnic group. The public believes that Guarge families are cohesive, and that it is rare to have Guarge children being delinquent, drug abusing, or neglected or abandoned by their family (Veal, 1993). These children are not looked upon by Ethiopians as street children, meaning in large part that they are not considered deviant or obnoxious.

In contrast to working children, street children in Addis Ababa are most often observed collecting alms. They are perceived as being psychopathological, being drug dependent, or criminal, or having a variety of deviant behaviors like hitching rides on the back of trucks. Their ethnic origins are not held in esteem. The Amharic term “berende adari” which means those who sleep on verandas, is a pejorative label used exclusively for children who break local norms for appropriate child behavior. Guarge children, even through they are on the street working at an early age, are not referred to as “berendi adari”. In contrast, veranda children are only the children found on the streets who are offensive to the public.

What one learns in Ethiopia, where working and street children are defined separately is that working children are defined by their behavioral activity while street children are defined by a descriptive, yet vague pejorative way of life. Incorporated into the core concept of street children is the public's fear, a fear fuelled by the expansion of the problem based on the press's desire to sell copy, by the international organisations need to compete for resources, and by the ethnocentricity of the populace who have adopted a global concept of childhood based on fictitious western standards. This has led many people to claim there is a separate sub-culture of street children, when in fact if a culture of street children exists at all, it is more likely to be a creation of the public's fear than of the reality of the children's lives.

### **A taxonomy of hostility toward street children**

We present three different explanations, not necessarily mutually exclusive from one another, which account for most of the hostility toward street children. First, there is what we refer to as a penal-instructive hostility. This hostility comes from the public perception that poor children in the streets commit violent, criminal or offensive acts. This raises the public's level of fear, and increases its desire to thwart these behaviors. Penal-instructive hostility follows. This is measured, and is used as a retribution of justice for violating the law, or a set of assumptions about appropriate child behaviors.

Much of the discipline administered in detention centers can be explained as penal-instructive. On the street it is not uncommon to see children physically abused by police, less out of immediate anger, than (from the perspective of the abuser) to teach the child a lesson. Adults administering this form of hostility do so because they think it is their duty. They act in loco parentis, because in most societies withholding physical punishment to aberrant children is considered neglectful of parental responsibilities.

Penal-instructive hostility can be seen in the alleged connection of poor children to drug use. Poor children under the influence of drugs are potentially out of control, and therefore they must be taught that drug use is verboten. In fact, drug use does not always lead to crime or psychopathology. It can even have culturally important values. We have witnessed so many children inhaling glue yet still maintaining their ability to cope with the demands of working on the streets in poor crowded conditions we believe there is more to their use of inhalants than the explanations most commonly given, such as to self medicate fear and depression, to kill hunger, to provide strength to live in difficult circumstances, or as indications of a pathological need for immediate gratification. All of these assumptions permit the use of penal-instructive hostility.

More and more the streets of Nairobi have become filled with children inhaling glue in full public view. The most impressive phenomenon about this is not that a few have obviously overdosed, even though these will be the most likely to leave a lasting impression on most observers, but that this behavior is public. Knowing that the boys very adept at manipulating public opinion, it cannot be an accident that their behavior is in full public view. In fact, if they had wanted to advertise their consumption, they could not have developed a better strategy.

Most Kenyan working boys still have strong connections to their traditional cultures where initiation into adult roles is an important experience, and one held in full public view of all the elders in the community. Staring down the pain of circumcision in front of one's parents and elders is needed to become a successful initiate. Similarly, part of the wide use of inhalants in public can be seen as a means of declaring their adult status to the community. One aspect of having an adult status means that a person is allowed more liberty in their behavior in the public space.

The combination of social, psychological, and cultural factors related to the use of inhalants by these boys is not fully considered by those eager to call for penal-instructive hostility. If all the reasons for the use of inhalants are considered, and the emphasis is placed on observing the children's in their cultural context, we would find that most of the boys who use drugs do not fall to them. Indeed, the alleged inevitable connection between poor children and drug abuse is more of an accusation that comes from the fear of working children taking over the public place, than it is an accurate portrayal of their drug use (Aptekar, 1995; Baizerman, 1988).

The second form of hostility, collective frustrated hostility, is based on collective attitudes. Rather than being a controlled outburst as the penal-instructive mode (even if inappropriately reasoned), collective frustration erupts. In many societies where there is excessive hostility toward poor children in the streets the divisions of social class have become larger, more apparent, and the holder of wealth has begun to feel more precarious in status. Working and street children's dirty appearance, their flaunting mischief, and in many cases their obvious public display of poverty further weakens the already fragile daily peace between social classes. The children become scapegoats for something larger in the society but more difficult to cure. Collective frustrated hostility explains some of the excessive violence toward street children in Colombia and Brazil (Aptekar, 1989a, 1989b).

As a protective reaction against fear the public lashes out against the children whose public behavior challenges their way of life. From the viewpoint of middle class citizens in societies where the middle class is always precariously close to falling below its station, all working children begin to look ragged and unkempt, and they are perceived as doing the same inappropriate things like begging or making work through inappropriate theatrical performances like stopping cars to insist on cleaning them. As long as working children are seen by the public as a monolithic menace, there will be adverse practical consequences.

One evening not long ago both authors were sitting in a cafe in the center of Addis Ababa having tea. A poor working boy about 12 years of age came in and sat in an unoccupied seat. A waiter approached him sceptically. The boy presented some coins and asked for tea. The waiter told him there was no tea and asked him to leave. Not longer afterward a similar looking unkempt boy came in, and also presented his money after asking for tea. This boy was given tea in a special place, on the floor under the noses of the waiters. These children were treated as examples, examples based on fear that the two boys were the beginning of a possible onslaught of many working children. Frustrated by being unable to deal with a massive problem, the easiest way to deal with individuals is to treat them with aggression, which in this case was

minor, but when seen from the perspective of the excess that resulted in Simon's death it can be brutal and lethal.

The third form of hostility, cultural hostility, toward poor children comes from an old and basic division of labor, which is based on differences of family life and concepts of home. It is this form of hostility which needs further understanding in large part because it is so ingrained across cultures, and because it has not yet received much attention.

To explain how cultural hostility affects poor children in the streets we present a fairly typical workday of two such Colombian children. Every morning in Cali, Colombia, Roberto and Antonio, two eleven years old street children went to the El Paradiso restaurant where they washed the front sidewalk with a hose, in exchange for left over food, *sobres*. On one particular day Antonio put the plastic bag of *sobres* over his shoulder, and the two of them went to a quiet side street, sat down in the shade and emptied the food which was lumped together in a mass about the size of a small pillow. They ate some of it and took the rest to a blind man who they traded with for a few *pesos*, and a couple of cigarettes.

Getting on the bus that was going to the cemetery they asked the driver to let them ride for free so they might ask for food, since they said, they were starving. On the bus Roberto put on a pitiful expression and began to sing soulfully about the difficulties of having a sick mother whom he was trying to support. The song concluded with, "could you give me mother a few *pesos* so she could go to the doctor?" He got a few *pesos*, enough to pay for their ride to the cemetery. Meanwhile, Antonio lodged himself in the exit well, standing in the way of exiting passengers, offering them his hand so they might climb down more easily. Most of the passengers ignored him, some were indignant and made comments to the bus driver, a few found his performance amusing and gave him a coin.

Once at the cemetery the two boys met a few older friends and exchanged some of the bus money with them for a ladder which they carried over to an area where relatives were visiting a loved one's grave. As it was nearly impossible to place wreaths on the higher graves sites Roberto and Antonio rented out the use of the ladder.

In the evening they went to the *sexta* (sixth avenue, an avenue of fashionable shops and restaurants in the fashionable side of town) where because of their disordered and dishevelled appearance, the boys were perceived as a menace. After receiving some malignant looks and rude comments from people, they stopped on a side street where a young and rather affluent couple were dining. When the boys asked them for food, the couple tried to ignore them. The two boys, sensing that they were intruding on a special occasion were insistent, thinking that they were likely to be paid to leave the diners alone. Finally, the man who was dining told them in a loud voice to leave, which only indicated to the boys they were winning the battle of nerves. The diner called the waiter for help, who half heartedly told the boys to go. They were back in a few moments. Roberto approached the table from one side asking once more for something to eat, while Antonio came from the other side and grabbed a piece of meat off the woman's plate. Running and laughing they receded into the darkened street (Aptekar, 1988)

These two boys have a peripatetic way of life in that they stalk different places to find something that can be sold dearer in another place, that they rotate between routines and places known for their lucrative possibilities, that they live in a group where they have emotional ties only among themselves, and that they travel among the sedentary. One study of the Qalander, (Berland, 1982), a peripatetic group of entertainers in Pakistan who travelled from village to village having animals perform and illustrating magic tricks for their audiences illustrates what happens in this situation. Like these two boys, the Qalander children developed routines while roaming through a series of several sedentary communities, and both groups of children were treated very pejoratively during these encounters.

The Qalander children were trained from an early age to study the reactions of their potential audiences. As they travelled through different areas they practised the appropriate regional accents and adjusted their clothes and methods of presentation to take advantage of each subculture's expectations. By the time the children were the age of Roberto and Antonio, they had learned to dance in front of potential patrons, to control their performing bears and monkeys in order to arouse the public's interest, to juggle and do magical tricks, and to do sexually suggestive impersonations.

Each time the nomadic Qalander came to a local village, community members discussed among themselves, often with great alarm and anger, what could be done to keep them from performing. These citizens tried to keep them out of public view where their theatrical way of life, they feared, would create too much curiosity and interest among their children.

As Roberto and Antonio roamed through the streets of Cali, performing various acts of bold orchestrated performances, they, like the Qalander children peripatetic entertainers (indeed there are many other peripatetic entertainers including the "gypsies"), found a way to live off the sedentary groups they "entertained" by their varied antics.

The very term street child, a name given by the sedentary middle class hides its own paradox. Streets are a public environment, whose degree of safety depends upon the civic political control, but children belong to the family, a private environment considered off bounds to public scrutiny. The term "street children" is thus an oxymoronic moniker that reveals the origins of this form of exaggerated hostility toward them. What endangers street children, more than their poverty or the lack of adult supervision, is the degree to which they are treated hostilely, and this can only be understood in the context of the unique environment in which they need to make a living.

All children have a "developmental niche", that is a physical place which contributes to their psychological development (Super & Harkness, 1986). The public space is what characterises poor working children's developmental niche. Beginning from a very young age these children learn to expand their intimacies beyond their private houses to the public streets (Mintz, 1984; Aptekar, 1989b). By the time they are eight or so, they are moving through the streets looking for opportunities, creating friendships, and enjoying themselves. By the time they are pubescent they have made the public space their home.



In certain cultures having ones home in the streets is particularly painful. In Addis Ababa, the culturally dominant Amhara have a word, “bet”, which contain two concepts. One refers to the physical structure that is ones house, the other refers to a morally appropriate life. There is a old Amharic song performed after a house is burnt. The minstrel sings “Bete! Bete! Gebena Ketach”, “My home, my home, a cover for shameful things”. It is impossible to live a morally correct life without having a physical structure to hide from the public what is shameful. This often includes some rather common behaviors like breaking the fast or eating improper foods, or not showing adequate respect for ones elders. This makes it particularly difficult for the poor children on the streets of Addis who have nothing that is defined by Amharic culture as a house. The “Yegodana Tedariwoch”, those who make a living on the streets, must be exposing things which should be concealed. (Like the beggar who sits on the side of the busy street showing his open stomach wound). When the person with a sedentary home has to confront this he becomes angry, and thus the cultural context of the hostility toward the poor children of Addis Ababa.

### **How the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child help reduce hostility toward street children**

In 1989 the United Nations (UN) passed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This document not only upholds the rights of all children, but also obliges by international law the countries that have ratified it to follow it. The Convention is comprehensive in its approach to children’s welfare, calling not only for rights associated with a child’s nurturance, education, religion, and culture but also of a child’s right to “personhood” including a child’s right to participate in decisions which will effect his or her life (Article 12), freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought and conscious (Article 14), freedom of association (Article 15), freedom of privacy (Article 16), and freedom to access of information (Article 17).

The Convention can serve poor children by leading in the difficult task of deciding which behaviours toward children are universally reprehensible, and where to draw the line between cultural relativism and child neglect or abuse. For example, although the Convention states that all children should have the benefit of their childhood, and not be forced into premature adult responsibilities the question remains, at what point can a child be considered an adult? Many 12 and 13 year old children, like the two boys we saw ordering tea in Addis Ababa, are expected and are quite capable of, earning a living, taking care of their own basic needs and contributing to the general welfare of their family. Yet they are not (and perhaps should not be) given the privileges and responsibilities of adults. However, the poor working Kenyan children who become intoxicated are guilty of a misbehavior that is commonplace among the adults in their society, but the repercussions for them are far more severe. Is this fair and appropriate to their circumstances?

When we discussed above the escapades of Roberto and Antonio, we suggested that street children, rather than being passive recipients of abuse or neglect, often use their knowledge of

human behavior to survive. Instead of perceiving the children as the pathological result of abuse or neglect, they can also be seen as adaptive in turning impoverished conditions into economic opportunities.

What has made life so difficult for poor children in the public space is the stigmatisation their behaviours create. In vernacular terms many poor children are too much “in our faces”, and thus they should be pushed back. An education program that teaches sedentary children about the differences between their child rearing and that of many poor children who are accustomed to being in the public space might begin to break the cycle of cultural hostility. This program would deal directly with the contrast of children of means who attend school, live at home and are admonished if they enter the public space with poor children who learn to become nomadic urban entertainers in order to cope with their poverty. Later, when the school attending children become adults and meet nomadic entertaining children they might be able to refrain from acting with such rage. We must remember that given the context of many poor countries, where nomadic and sedentary people are vying for the same public space, it becomes far easier to raise the level of anger and hostility against parents who allegedly abuse or neglect, or who are otherwise irresponsible toward their children than it is to accept the difficulties of diversity in the public space.

By assuming the right to live as they choose, (either attending or not attending school, entering public restaurants for something to drink or eat, by becoming intoxicated when and where they desire, and by working to support themselves) poor children have taken on many of the qualities associated with adulthood. They have done this in full public view. As a result they have received sanctions, in many cases of immense proportion.

Although the Convention has incorporated into international law what has been described as the child’s right to personhood (i.e. certain inalienable rights) in the case of poor children this will be difficult to apply unless we educate the public about young children assuming personhood earlier than certain cultural expectations allow. If we can do this we might be able to negotiate a peace in the troubled space where the children assume adult roles, and where the public views and responds to them with such fear and anger.

Many poor working children put to test the question of cultural relativism in child rearing. Some studies have shown how miserable their child rearing is, others point to the children’s resilience in the face of adversity. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between, and brings up the questions, are the lives of poor working and street children abusive, or do they live in an appropriate, but culturally different set of circumstances? Coming to terms with the apparent dichotomy between cultural relativism and universalism, which is at the heart of helping poor street and working children, is one central problem and task of the Convention.

One task ought to be redirecting public concern. In spite of the fact that numerous studies have concluded that the difficulties endured by street children come less from the hard conditions of the street, than from societal reactions to them (Lusk, 1989; Pereira, 1985; Richter, 1989a; Swart, 1990a; 1990b; Wright, Kaminsky, & Wittig, 1993), all but a handful of the tens of

thousands of people devoted to helping street children work directly with poor children to change their behaviour, leaving the important work of changing society's attitudes toward poor children almost completely neglected. Whether the result of the Convention is direct care, rather than community development, or because direct care is easier to administer and evaluate than community development is not clear, but whatever the reason, the difficulty of changing the public's perception is not easy.

An example of how societal misperceptions that hinders assistance came to our attention while we were working on a project training teachers to teach children of the streets (Aptekar & Maphalala, 1995). These student teachers were from sedentary backgrounds, and they were trying to teach children whose life styles were peripatetic. They understood that teaching takes place within the physical dimensions of an enclosed and "appropriate" building. This meant a classroom with a chalkboard, desks, chairs and an assortment of visual aids adorning the walls. When they encountered our venue, which was an abandoned garage with an open parking space in front for a classroom, they were overwhelmed.

The teachers' reaction was reminiscent of an incident in Zambia when a priest told a community group demanding a building to educate their children, that the children could have an education without a building. He made his point by marching over the sandy dirt in a measured step, tracing the dimensions of a classroom, and pointing to the crowd each time sufficient space for a group of children to sit was marked. He proceeded in this fashion to mark three classrooms, but still the people did not understand. In their minds it was impossible to understand that schooling could take place without a building

By relaying this anecdote it was hoped that the fears of the Swazi student teachers could be eased, but it was not successful. The problem was that coming from different cultural backgrounds than the children they had different concepts of what was acceptable. Not only was the issue one of acceptable space, these teachers felt that their own status as professional educators would be diminished if they were teaching in less than a culturally acceptable space.

Aptekar (1988) has written about what happens to street children as they grow older. He describes a street boy of about 12 years of age who he knew from his work in Bogota. The boy was observed perched on two large boxes next to an elderly man dressed in a long, well-used black overcoat, who was driving a single horse drawn wagon. This man's work consisted of driving the horse through well-to-do neighbourhoods offering to take "junk" from people, which he later sold in less well-to-do neighbourhoods for "goods". During the long stretches, as the horse methodically paced through its routines, the street boy learned to read and do sums.

Because of the options that will ultimately be open to them, poor children learn less from the sedentary routine imposed by classroom life, than they do by the dynamic interchange of people engaged in activities relevant to their lives. By expecting poor children to conform to the standards applied to sedentary cultures is to take the children from their natural environment and make them compete in foreign territory. How well would the average school attending youth perform while travelling with junk men?

This type of culturally sensitive work is not easily achieved by applying the Convention. It is not always clear that certain behaviours toward children which are outlawed by the Convention can be judged abusive from all cultural perspectives. It can, for example, be quite difficult to judge mental harm or neglect outside of a cultural context, particularly when children have less than an ideal western childhood. If poor working children are growing up in poor but for the most part functional families, and they are not being abused or neglected in their cultural context (or on universal standards), then the Convention can not help them by making them conform to an ideal western childhood. This begs the question of diverse forms of childhood. Should all children in all cultures be expected (let alone be practically capable of getting) an ideal western childhood?

The Convention offers a promising opportunity for poor children. By bringing in all that is diverse among cultural variations of children's lives, the Convention can contribute to defining what is universal about children's rights, and therefore help to link the rights of poor children to the reality of all children's rights, including those out of western cultural contexts.

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