



Preserving and Promoting M'Nong Cultural Values: A Community-Based Tourism Approach in Lam Dong

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Abstract

The research evaluates the current status of preserving M'Nông ethnic culture associated with community-based tourism in Lam Dong in the context of implementing national strategies (Decision 1909/QĐ-TTg and 147/QĐ-TTg). Using qualitative methods and field surveys, the article clarifies the paradox between the achievements of festival restoration and the risk of disruption in cultural transmission due to the "aging" of artisans and urbanization pressure. The highlight of the study is establishing the "digital ambassador" role of the younger generation in modernizing heritage without losing the national soul. The author proposes a system of key solutions: building village self-management mechanisms, digitizing folk knowledge, and professionalizing heritage education into livelihood skills. The research results affirm that harmonizing interests between enterprises and the host community is the key to transforming M'Nông culture into a sustainable asset in the local international integration roadmap.

Keywords: M'Nong Culture, Community-Based Tourism, Lam Dong, Sustainable Livelihood, Heritage Digitization

1. Introduction

Culture is not only the soul of a nation but also a vital endogenous resource for sustainable socio-economic development, particularly when leveraged through community-based tourism models to create livelihoods for indigenous residents. In Lam Dong, the M'Nông ethnic group preserves unique and rich heritage values, creating immense potential for tourism development. However, under the pressure of urbanization, many of these traditional values face the risk of erosion and have not been exploited in a manner commensurate with their inherent potential. This reality necessitates urgent solutions to harmonize identity preservation and economic development, in accordance with the Government's orientation in Decision No. 1909/QĐ-TTg dated November 12, 2021, on the Cultural Development Strategy to 2030, Decision No. 1719/QĐ-TTg dated October 14, 2021, approving the National Target Program for socio-economic development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas for the 2021-2030 period, and Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg dated January 22, 2020, on the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030. Originating from this context, the research "Preserving and Promoting the Cultural Values of the M'Nông Ethnic Group in Community-Based Tourism Development in Lam Dong" is conducted to advocate for strategic orientations, contributing to heritage preservation and improving the lives of the local M'Nông community.

2. Research Methodology

To contribute to the interpretation of the research content, the article is based on qualitative methods combined with policy analysis and field surveys. Accordingly, the method of synthesizing and statistically analyzing documents and articles related to cultural preservation activities of ethnic minorities worldwide and community-based tourism models in Vietnam was implemented to establish a solid theoretical foundation. The field observation method was conducted to clarify the achievements and limitations in preserving the culture of the M'Nong people in Lam Dong. Concurrently, the survey method using questionnaires was employed to objectively assess students' awareness of indigenous cultural products.

Through the analysis and synthesis of information sources and survey data, the article proposes solutions to effectively implement heritage preservation associated with sustainable tourism development both currently and in the future.

3. Research Results

3.1. The Necessity of Preserving and Promoting the Cultural Values of the M'Nông Ethnic Group in Community-Based Tourism Development in Lam Dong

"If culture remains, the nation remains; if culture is lost, the nation is lost" – the affirmation by the late General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong at the 2021^[9] National Cultural Conference has become the compass for heritage preservation in the new era. Accordingly, culture is considered the core soul and the distinct identity that distinguishes ethnic groups; simultaneously, it is the spiritual foundation and endogenous strength determining the survival of a nation. Thoroughly grasping this profound ideology, the preservation and promotion of M'Nông cultural values in Lam Dong province today is not only an intrinsic requirement of the community but also a strategic task institutionalized through the State's legal document system.

First, the preservation of M'Nông culture is the concretization of the Party's guidelines and the State's policies and laws into local practice. Currently, preservation activities are no longer isolated efforts but are placed within a complete system of legal documents. Typical examples include Decision No. 1909/QĐ-TTg dated November 12, 2021, of the Prime Minister on the Cultural Development Strategy to 2030 and Decision No. 1719/QĐ-TTg dated October 14, 2021, on the National Target Program for socio-economic development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas. Implementing this topic in Lam Dong serves as a bridge to translate these strategic decisions into practice, helping to transform heritage into actual resources, contributing to the successful implementation of Resolutions on the sustainable development of the Central Highlands region.

Second, Lam Dong possesses a team of artisans, village elders, and folk intellectuals – living human treasures holding a core role in maintaining the cultural flow. According to Truong Bi (2011)^[18], the M'Nông people in the Southern Central Highlands preserve a massive heritage system ranging from the Ot N'rong epic to customary laws for dealing with nature. This is a team with deep understanding and is the pioneering force in teaching heritage within the community. However, before the harsh rules of time, as Ngo Duc Thinh (2010)^[7] once emphasized, without a living preservation mechanism linked to economic benefits for the community, the risk of a break in intangible cultural data is inevitable. Therefore, preservation associated with tourism is a solution to honor and maximize the strengths of the indigenous community's intellectual human resources.

Third, the younger generation, especially ethnic minority pupils and students, is the Vanguard force in innovating and promoting indigenous culture. The objectives of the Law on Education (2019) clearly define the training of high-quality human resources, improving people's knowledge, and fostering talents to serve the needs of socio-economic development and international integration. According to research by Nguyen Thi Hoa (2018)^[8] on community-based tourism in Lam Dong, ethnic minority students are individuals with enthusiasm, scientific knowledge, and the ability to quickly access technology to implement heritage

digitization projects. Creating space for young people to participate in tourism development not only helps preserve identity but also creates endogenous strength for them to confidently integrate without being "dissolved."

Fourth, the residential areas of the M'Nông people in Lam Dong possess all the conditions regarding cultural space and Human resources to form specific community-based tourism ecosystems. Unlike the urban environment, M'Nông villages possess survival spaces with longhouse systems, traditional architecture, and festival areas linked to agriculture. This is an important physical foundation for deploying experiential tourism models towards modernization. Connecting available resources with folk knowledge will create tourism products with high added value, contributing to the implementation of the Vietnam Tourism Development Strategy to 2030 according to Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister.

Thus, the convergence between leadership ideology, legal basis, and Human resources has affirmed that: preserving M'Nông culture associated with community-based tourism is an objective necessity. This not only helps preserve the local distinct identity but also contributes importantly to the international integration of Lam Dong province in particular and Vietnam in general in the new era.

3.2. Current Status of Preserving and Promoting M'Nông Cultural Values Associated with Community-Based Tourism Development in Lam Dong Province

The intersection between heritage value systems and sustainable economic development orientations has placed M'Nông ethnic culture at the center of the local tourism strategy. Notably, the milestone of July 1, 2025, when Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 on the merger of provincial-level administrative units officially took effect, created a vast unified cultural space, significantly enriching ethnic identity through the convergence of local groups such as M'Nông Gar, Preh, and Rlăm. Through the lens of policy and practical operation in the research areas, this reality is depicted through specific efforts to concretize Government decisions into quantitative indicators, yet fundamental limitations remain to be resolved.

First of all, regarding the positive aspects, the work of preserving M'Nông culture has achieved impressive quantitative results thanks to the concretization of the Party's resolutions and the State's policies. Implementing Decision No. 1909/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister, the Provincial People's Committee has issued and drastically implemented specialized projects such as: The project to preserve and promote the values of cultural festivals, patterns, gongs, and folk musical instruments of the M'Nông people; The project to collect, preserve, and promote the value of historical and cultural artifacts. According to summary reports from local authorities, since 2004, the region has successfully restored 17 typical traditional festivals such as the rain prayer festival in Tuy Duc, the new rice celebration in Dak Song, while periodically organizing 5 provincial-level ethnic cultural festivals and 22 district-level programs. Simultaneously, the government has organized 68 gong teaching classes, 9 musical instrument making classes, and specialized M'Nông folk song classes. To support the community in cultural practice, the province has distributed 119 sets of gongs, 5 sets of goong, and nearly 300 sets of traditional costumes to grassroots folk art troupes. The cultural nurturing environment has also shifted flexibly from farming spaces to

community cultural houses and has been integrated into teaching in general schools, contributing to arousing ethnic pride for the younger generation.

However, through practical operation, this work is revealing fundamental limitations, where cultural values are sometimes pushed back behind short-term economic goals. One is the contradiction between static cultural management thinking and dynamic tourism development needs. Although the locality has concretized the Government's decisions on cultural development, in remote communes such as Quang Truc or Dak R'tih, preservation is still heavy on formality, freezing heritage in museums or inventory lists. Reality shows that current community-based tourism products are often forcedly "Staged authenticity"; the gong cultural space is detached from indigenous spiritual life to serve the transient tastes of tourists. The lack of a standardized product system based on the syncretic nature of M'Nông culture is causing heritage to be distorted, losing the soul that is the endogenous strength of the ethnic group.

Two is the shortage of Human resources and the break in the chain of inheritance in the villages. A harsh reality taking place in the communes of Dak Som, Dak Ha, or Nam Da is the aging of the artisan team. The Heritage practitioners knowledgeable in the Ot N'rong epic or traditional gong tuning techniques are gradually becoming scarce, while the younger generation is facing the pressure of urbanization and changing farming methods. Statistical data from the 2021 local cultural status report point to a major challenge in awareness: up to 27% of youth are not interested in folk cultural activities and 22% believe that traditional culture is no longer suitable for today's lifestyle. The invasion of modern media accounts for 9% and changes in religious beliefs account for 7% due to the impact of new religions are the main reasons why a part of the community is gradually forgetting original polytheistic beliefs. When culture does not provide a livelihood, young people tend to abandon heritage to seek jobs in urban areas, leading to a situation where community-based tourism lacks real cultural subjects to lead tourists.

Three is the inadequacy in institutional infrastructure and community benefit management mechanisms. Although M'Nông villages possess invaluable pristine survival spaces, infrastructure investment at tourism spots such as Quang Khe or Dak Sor is still patchwork. Cultural practice spaces such as longhouses and water wharves are being eroded or "concretized" due to the 15% urbanization process, losing the humanistic landscape necessary for community tourism. More worryingly, the profit-sharing mechanism between travel enterprises and indigenous people has not ensured fairness. Ethnic minority people, the creators of culture, sometimes only play the role of performers with low income, making them no longer interested in preserving their own heritage.

Four is the gap in awareness and responsibility in implementing cultural codes of conduct. The current reality notes that a segment of tourists still approaches ethnic culture with a mindset of curiosity rather than respect. Encroachment on sacred spaces and commercialization of spiritual rituals are common, harming the original value of the heritage. The lack of specialized areas to disseminate and educate culture at tourism spots makes it easy for tourists to have substandard behaviors, causing implicit cultural conflicts. This not only causes difficulties for management but also reduces the prestige of the local tourism industry in the international

integration roadmap according to the orientation in Decision 147/QĐ-TTg.

In summary, the current reality of preserving M'Nông culture associated with tourism is the result of systematic investment from the state budget and policies, achieving positive indicators in restoring intangible heritage. However, the change in community awareness and inadequacies in the benefit-sharing mechanism are practical barriers requiring more in-depth and substantive solutions to ensure that heritage is strongly revived in the heart of modern life.

3.3. Awareness and Strategic Role of Pupils and Students in Preserving M'Nông Culture Associated with Tourism Development in Lam Dong

In the structure of Human resources, pupils and students are not only beneficiaries but also play the role of the decisive link in the survival and acculturation of heritage. Based on actual survey results and theoretical bases, the role of this target group is affirmed through the following key aspects:

First, the role as subjects in the acculturation and modernization of heritage. Survey results show a positive signal when more than 74% of students support bringing ethnic minority culture into modern tourism products such as Homestays or experiential tours. This proves that the youth are the pioneering force in decoding traditional values into contemporary tourism language. According to Ngo Duc Tinh (2010)^[7], heritage only truly has vitality when it is accepted and used by the community as part of a livelihood. The fact that more than 62% of students want to learn indigenous skills such as cooking, weaving, and storytelling has affirmed their role in preventing the break in the chain of inheritance between the generation of old artisans and the practical requirements of the tourism industry today.

Second, the role as ambassadors for promotion and cultural connection on digital platforms. With 66.2% of participants expressing pride when introducing local culture to tourists, students are the most voluntary and effective cultural ambassador team. Although the level of access to information through schools is still limited (32.8% at a medium level), young people possess the capacity to use technology to digitize heritage. This role helps M'Nông culture escape local boundaries to reach international tourists. According to Nguyen Thi Hoa (2018), mobilizing youth power in tourism promotion not only saves resources for the locality but also promotes organic cultural diffusion, close to the tastes of modern tourists.

Third, the role of monitoring and criticism to preserve authenticity. An important role pointed out by the survey is the cultural monitoring capacity of the youth. Up to 46.1% of students expressed concern that excessive tourism development would distort the identity of the M'Nông people. This shows that young people do not follow economic benefits blindly; they play the role of a cognitive filter, helping to warn of tourism activities that deviate from sustainable orientations. Belief in school education (74.4% absolute trust) affirms that students are the core force in building a civilized tourism community that respects ethnic codes of conduct.

Fourth, the role of motivation for entrepreneurship and regional economic development. Career orientation associated with cultural tourism strengths, with more than 40% having clear intentions, shows that students are the most practical resource to realize socio-economic development policies. Young people deciding to link their careers with

local heritage not only solves the employment problem but also directly improves the lives of the M'Nông community. This is the concretization of the spirit of the Law on Education (2019) in training human resources associated with local characteristics to create sustainable endogenous strength.

In summary, pupils and students in Lam Dong are holding the role of potential cultural managers. The shift from awareness to professional action of the youth, proven through survey data, is the firmest guarantee that M'Nông ethnic culture will not be dissolved in the process of international tourism integration.

3.4. Challenges

Based on the heritage inventory report system and the local socio-economic development plans, the reality of preserving M'Nông culture associated with tourism in Lam Dong is facing the following specific challenges:

First is the challenge of the decline in human resources holding core heritage. According to the inventory report of the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Dak Nong province, the number of artisans knowledgeable about the Ot N'rong Epic and traditional gong tuning techniques is gradually decreasing by natural rates. Statistics in remote districts such as Tuy Duc and Dak Glong show that most elite artisans are over 70 years old. Meanwhile, the teaching of intangible heritage in villages is still spontaneous, having not yet formed a strong enough successor team to meet the requirements of professional tourism performance. The lack of concentrated teaching classes at the grassroots level is a direct barrier breaking the transmission chain between generations.

Second is the inadequacy in synchronizing tourism infrastructure and preserving survival space. According to the plan of the Dak Nong Provincial People's Committee, although the province has invested heavily in transport infrastructure and stopovers in the UNESCO Dak Nong Global Geopark, infrastructure in remote villages (such as Quang Truc or Dak Som communes) is still patchwork. Actual statistics show that the area of cultural practice space is shrinking due to the process of "concretization" and residential land planning. The lack of specific protection mechanisms for original stilt house architecture causes the humanistic landscape at community-based tourism spots to gradually lose its syncretic nature, making it difficult to position the M'Nông tourism brand in the international market.

Third is the limitation in management capacity and digital transformation in heritage promotion. The report on the status of digital transformation of the local cultural industry points out that the data system on folk knowledge and festivals of the M'Nông people has not been digitized in a synchronous and in-depth manner. This challenge makes accessing heritage resources difficult for travel agencies and tourists. The shortage of community-based tourism cooperatives managed by local people leads to passivity in market connection. People in the research areas primarily still play simple service roles, not yet participating deeply in the management value chain, leading to uneven profit distribution between travel enterprises and the host community.

Fourth is the challenge of sustainable livelihoods and retaining young labor. Statistics on labor and employment in the locality record a trend of labor shifting from villages to

industrial zones in southern provinces. The main cause stems from the fact that income from cultural activities and community tourism is unstable, not enough to become the main source of living for households. When "heritage economy" models in the locality have not proven practical efficiency through specific income figures, encouraging the local younger generation to stay and start businesses from ethnic culture remains a difficult problem for the authorities of remote communes.

In summary, actual statistics in Dak Nong reflect the gap between policy orientation and implementation capacity at the grassroots level. The biggest difficulty today is not the lack of heritage resources but the lack of a comprehensive support ecosystem regarding capital, technology, and management training so that the M'Nông community can confidently transform heritage into sustainable assets.

3.5. Some Practical Solutions for Preserving M'Nông Ethnic Cultural Values Associated with Community-Based Tourism Development in Lam Dong Province

First, local authorities and cultural management agencies need to promote propaganda and raise awareness of indigenous heritage values for the host community and stakeholders. In preservation work, raising awareness of the economic benefits and humanistic value of heritage is a prerequisite. According to UNESCO's 2003 ^[19] Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, heritage only has sustainable vitality when the community recognizes its role as a subject and voluntarily practices the heritage in daily life. For Lam Dong province, it is necessary to perform the role of disseminating indigenous knowledge, helping the M'Nông people and tourists clearly understand the value of heritage such as the Ot N'rong epic or the art of gong music. Many households currently still do not fully identify the economic value of heritage, leading to urbanization distorting the traditional village landscape. Therefore, the province needs to include M'Nông cultural content in community-based tourism training programs, helping people understand that culture is not only the heritage of ancestors but also capital for sustainable economic development in the spirit of Decision No. 1909/QĐ-TTg on the Cultural Development Strategy to 2030. This solves the root problem which is the indifference of the heritage subjects themselves before the wave of modernization.

Second, educational institutions in the area need to build heritage education mechanisms and systematic transmission for the younger generation. Through the local education program regulated in the 2018 General Education Program of the Ministry of Education and Training, schools play the role of preserving and transferring knowledge between generations. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), when local youth recognize that indigenous culture has the potential to create careers, they will tend to invest more in heritage research and promotion activities. Particularly, schools need to focus on inviting M'Nông artisans to directly participate in guiding specific skills such as brocade weaving, knitting, or performing musical instruments. Integrating these contents not only helps students clearly understand their rights and obligations in protecting cultural property but also contributes to forming responsible tourism thinking. This is the solution to heal the break in the traditional chain between the generations of old artisans and the youth in the context of integration.

Third, the Lam Dong Provincial People's Committee needs to

build mechanisms to promote the development of specific tourism products associated with the M'Nông cultural brand. The locality needs to encourage people to create new tourism products such as traditional agricultural cultivation experience tours, staying in original longhouses, and enjoying indigenous cuisine. The province needs to have support regimes for registering collective trademarks for the handicraft products of the M'Nông people to avoid risks of identity infringement according to the provisions of the Intellectual Property Law. Simultaneously, building a list of national intangible cultural heritage for the characteristic features of the M'Nông people in Lam Dong will contribute to improving the brand value of the destination on the international map. Concretizing heritage into tangible products helps the community escape static preservation thinking and keep pace with the tourism market economy.

Fourth, focus on building technology transfer and digitization mechanisms in heritage promotion. The province needs to, through the application of virtual reality technology (VR/AR) and digital platforms, digitize festivals, epics, and folk knowledge. Schools and the locality need to coordinate to establish startup support models, helping students and people connect heritage with the market through electronic trading floors. Building clear regulations on benefit rights between travel units and villages according to the orientation in Decree No. 01/2023/ND-CP on defining the functions and tasks of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism is an important step for culture to become a bridge creating direct income for the community. Digitization is not only storage but also a modern method to reach young customer files and international tourists, creating a sustainable competitive advantage.

Fifth, build a multi-party linkage mechanism and synchronously invest in technical infrastructure to optimize economic benefits for the M'Nông community. Community-based tourism is only sustainable when local people are co-owners and direct beneficiaries of the service value chain. The province needs to issue policies to encourage tourism enterprises to sign service supply contracts directly with community-based tourism management boards in the villages, ensuring a percentage of revenue is reinvested for preservation. Simultaneously, upgrading transport infrastructure into remote areas, installing wifi hotspots at cultural experience points, and supporting the renovation of traditional houses into standard homestays are necessary conditions to increase the attractiveness of the destination according to Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister. This solution helps eliminate the unfair profit distribution often seen when travel enterprises hold dominant power.

Sixth, standardize the heritage education model through the establishment of specific vocational training systems. This solution aims to transform folk knowledge such as brocade weaving or musical instrument making into vocational training programs with certificates, helping to professionalize the young artisan team. According to the spirit of the Law on Education (2019), training human resources associated with local cultural characteristics will help learners consolidate national pride based on scientific understanding. The expected result is to create a high-skilled workforce capable of providing accurate tourism services, ensuring sustainability for community-based tourism areas. When heritage is recognized as a real profession, it will create a strong attraction to keep labor in place, preventing the flow

of people migrating to urban areas.

Seventh, establish a mechanism for periodic talent festivals and heritage practice to stimulate creativity. Regularly organizing competitions for telling epics, performing gongs, or designing applied products from M'Nông patterns plays the role of an experimental stage helping to nurture elite nuclei among the youth. These events are not only a method of preservation but also an effective destination marketing tool, creating continuous attention from tourists. The development here lies in transforming the results of the competitions into actual tourism products, helping to create a dynamic cultural environment where young people can affirm their self-worth in the integration process. Periodic festivals create positive pressure forcing the community to practice heritage regularly, avoiding the state of "dead heritage" in archives.

Eighth, establish an official coordination mechanism between the Commune People's Committee and the Community-Based Tourism Management Board according to a self-management model to ensure consistency between state management and the self-determination rights of the host community. In this mechanism, the commune-level government plays the role of orientation, legal patronage, administrative procedure support, ensuring security and order, and investing in basic infrastructure. Simultaneously, the Community-Based Tourism Management Board, with the core being village elders, artisans, and prestigious people among the M'Nông people, directly operates experiential activities, manages common spaces, and protects cultural heritage based on customary laws and internal regulations. Transparent coordination through operational regulations and periodic meetings will help the government and people promptly resolve conflicting interests arising between travel enterprises and indigenous residents. This solution not only limits imposed administrative intervention from the top down but also maximizes the initiative of the M'Nông people in protecting survival space, ensuring the sustainable development of the tourism model based on the self-management capacity and internal strength of the community itself. This mechanism serves as a shield protecting authenticity against the negative impacts of marketization.

4. Conclusions

Through the process of research and situation analysis, it can be affirmed that preserving and promoting M'Nông cultural values associated with community-based tourism development in Lam Dong is not only a purely cultural task but also a highly potential sustainable economic strategy. M'Nông culture, with its long history and massive intangible heritage system such as the Ot N'rong epic, gong art, and humanistic customary laws for dealing with nature, is an important endogenous resource for the locality to create differentiation in the Central Highlands tourism value chain. The research has clarified that the success of this tourism model depends closely on the ability to preserve the syncretic nature of the heritage within a modern ecosystem.

However, the research results also point to serious challenges threatening the survival of the heritage. The decline of the artisan team - Heritage practitioners - along with the trend of young labor abandoning villages is creating a transmission gap that is difficult to fill. Besides, excessive commercialization and the "stage-management" of spiritual rituals are reducing the evidential value of M'Nông culture. Without timely policy interventions to solve the livelihood

problem, heritage will gradually be pushed into a "frozen" state in report lists instead of being a living entity in the heart of the community.

The most important highlight recorded by the research is the awareness and potential of the younger generation, especially ethnic minority pupils and students. With high national pride and the ability to access technology quickly, this is the core cultural ambassador force. The shift from awareness to professional action of the youth, through creative startup ideas and heritage digitization, is the key to modernizing identity without losing the national soul. This requires the education sector and local authorities to have specialized vocational training programs, transforming folk knowledge into professional skills with real economic value.

Regarding solutions, the research proposes a multi-dimensional approach, placing M'Nông people in the central subject position of all tourism activities. The government needs to play the role of mechanism creator, prioritizing investment in soft infrastructure and digitization of cultural resources, while making the benefit-sharing mechanism between enterprises and villages transparent. Building specific tourism products based on a systematic heritage education foundation and support from digital platforms will help M'Nông culture escape geographical boundaries to reach the international market sustainably.

In summary, preserving M'Nông culture in tourism development is a long-term roadmap requiring the perseverance and close coordination of the "The Quadruple Helix model": the State, Scientists, Schools, and Farmers (Host Community). If and only if cultural heritage brings real livelihood value and professional pride to the youth, then M'Nông identity will be truly protected firmly against the storms of urbanization. The results of this research hope to contribute further theoretical and practical bases for Lam Dong province to realize strategic goals in Decision No. 1909/QĐ-TTg and Decision No. 147/QĐ-TTg, making cultural heritage a strong driver for the comprehensive development of the locality in the era of international integration.

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