

## FAITH-BASED SOCIAL WORK SERVICES: THE ANALYSIS OF THE MOSQUE CONTRIBUTION IN SRI LANKA

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**Abstract:** *The mosque is a prime Islamic institution to articulate its vision and carry the engagement in the holistic development of the community as a community development Centre. The social service works are much highlighted and encouraged in Islam. The purpose of the study to investigate the mosque engagement in social works in two areas namely the welfare programmes and human services. This paper is mainly relied on the analysis of the data collected from the interview survey administered among the randomly selected mosque island-wide and field observation along with the review of the records and documents. The findings reveal that the mosque engagement in social services is up to the mark in both areas under the investigation. Moreover, the mosque people most likely pay attention to the social activities specially during the difficult time caused by the natural or communal disasters. This paper may provide the concerned people the idea and information to design the mosque programme in social works.*

**Keywords:** *Mosque, Community Development, Social activities, programme.*

### 1. Introduction

Muslims constitute the second largest religious minority community and are found widely distributed among various other ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka. It is said Islam and its presence go back to a millennium year in Sri Lanka. However, the majority of Muslims remain conservative orthodox. Hence, the practice of Islam in its fullness most likely is hampered by many factors, as it seems to be confined mostly to *ibadah*, rituals, customs, traditions, and personal law. In this Muslim minority context, there is rising discourse inviting to extend the prime Islamic institution, mosque's play in shaping Muslim life by its multi-functional and complex role at once of religion, social, culture, and politics in its community. It is noteworthy that the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has a tendency to establish and organize its life along with around mosques. Those are renowned for their great role in Muslim lives notably Muslim identity over the past history. The history of mosque in Sri Lanka is longstanding in the country. Necholas, and Parnavitana (1961) stated "The modern definitive history of Sri Lanka noted that by the end of the 8th century there were communities of Muslims at seaports including Colombo, now the metropolis". During the last few decades, a considerable number of mosques have been established in each city where Muslims live. Today there are about 2000 registered

mosques in Sri Lanka including all categories of mosques. It is customary in Sri Lanka to categorize mosques into two main types: simple and *jum'ah* mosques in terms of their functions and status. Moreover, the larger proportion of mosques affiliated with any of the many Islamic organizations and *da'wah* movements as well as of prominent schools of jurisprudence found in Sri Lanka (Zulkiple, & Jazeel, 2013).

The conception of the mosque that provides meaning and purpose, is derived through a reinterpretation of the textual sources of Islam. The established practices of prophet clearly proved that the mosque is a center for the total development of the Muslim community in all aspects of life. The prophetic concept of mosque further describes it as a place where the prophet could organize, administer, educate the Muslims to construct a pioneering community (Jazeel and Ghani, 2012). These Muslim intellectuals and activists argue for the mosque programme should aim at building a better society, to ensure it to be true in its mission. They have persuasive argument supported by early Islamic history. The migration of prophet from makkah to madinah in achieving his plan to establish a Muslim community had signaled a great change in the character. For this plan, the first task was to build a mosque within a short period of time. It is the mosque that emerged with the appearance of the Muslim community. This historical evidence is a crystal-clear indication to the far-reaching role of the mosque in moulding the shape of the community, as it leads in all aspects of life, moral, social, and political.

Furthermore, the spiritual orientation of the mosque is inseparably connected to its community works. The theological foundation for societal works is elaborately described in Islamic textual sources. In the Islamic religious social context, the term '*huquq al- 'ibad*' (duty towards mankind) is rendering services to creatures. Many qur'anic verses correlate the social works with the basic pillars of faith in Islam such as the concept of tawhid, life hereafter and other main Islamic compulsory obligations such as prayers, fasting, zakat and hajj (al-Qur'an: Al-Maun 107: 1-7 ; al-Hakkah 69: 30-34; Al-Balad 90: 11-18). This was based on an explicit philosophy of considering these Islamic forms are not sort of mystic ritual exercises. On the contrary, they link each Muslim with his way of life. Otherwise, he or she performs useless regular duties and meaningless movements. The imparted wisdom behind these forms of worship is to raise the standard of society, ensure collective life and create social capital. Therefore, the mosque has the responsibility to work for the betterment of the whole community.

Those who view the mosque as a community development center seem to be prominently influenced by the qur'anic teachings exemplified by its prophet. The practice of social service at its various forms has been instructed and encouraged in qur'anic verses (2:217,273;107:1-3; 14:31;1726-27) Hadith literature states the poverty in conjunction with disbelief and guide each Muslim to perform regular praying to safeguard him or her from the both because the former may lead to the later (Abu- Dawud, 2008; Ibn-Hanbal 2012). This clearly indicates that social problems cause the community to get engulfed with vices, ills, and evils. Essentially, the social service is to end social problems. There is no doubt that the ills and evils are prime matters of religious as well as a social concern, particularly of the mosque people. Their concern then is to be converted into social-oriented actions. Social service is thus a natural outcome of a particular social situation that threatens the life and of potential dangers that bring down social values and that situation can be altered only by collective action. It is also important to note that collective social action is an established feature of Islamic society. To implement many Islamic obligations particularly

pertaining to social and political aspects, a regular and active social institution is necessary as it is derived from the Qur'an which has empathetically instructed repeatedly inviting the Muslims to the collective work in its plural term and from the early Islamic period experience. The mosque must provide the mechanism to fulfill this requirement in practicing Islamic injunction, especially in compromising with minority context and protecting against negative effects of its environment.

In a practical term, the mosque is the essential institution around which the lives of Muslims revolve. Next to the home and the workplace, it is the most frequently gathering place. Muslims meet their Muslim brethren and renew their sense of belonging. Potentially, mosques are establishing these connections in two ways. First, institutional participation builds social capital or a network of communal engagement. Second, norms and trust enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue common goals and shared objectives. Further, the mosques can take the role in community development because they have the potential to act as intermediaries between the individuals, local community and the private and state, which makes them important locations of empowerment. The Friday sermon usually serves as an arena to make awareness or generate criticism of many important social issues. In this capacity, the mosques create opportunities to influence the public life of the community. The mosques exercise this influence because they are the sites of frequent visits and regular social interactions, where *jama'at* (congregation) members exert considerable pressure to conform to behavioural and social norms.

It is appropriate to define and discuss the concept of Social service which is also called welfare service or social work, any of numerous publicly or privately provided services intended to aid disadvantaged, distressed, or vulnerable persons or groups. The term social service also denotes the profession engaged in rendering such services. By which, a social group enters into the following deliberate efforts: addressing the needs and occurring in a given area and then making a change in the conditions affecting the quality of their lives, as they have defined it for themselves. Furthermore, in order to do social works, the mosque must to step forward shouldering the responsibilities and a variety of roles. Some of the roles examined here also are discussed in modern literatures on social works and welfare Programmes (Farley, 2006; Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2009; Pawlak, & Vinter, 2004; Zastrow, 2008). The mosques have to play the role of an enabler to help *jama'at* members to articulate their needs, to clarify and identify their problems, to explore resolution strategies, to select and apply a strategy, and to develop their capacities to deal with their own problems more effectively. As a broker, the mosques are to link individuals and groups who need helps and to facilitate between them and the resources. Further, mosques play an active role by advocating for the *jama'at* in providing services. The mosques teach the *jama'at* to prepare them with knowledge and skills (for instance daily living skills such as the use of public transportation, personal care, and hygiene, effective communication, etc.) to prevent the problem or to enhance social functioning by providing relevant information, offering advice and suggestions, identifying alternatives and consequences.

## 2. Research Method

The purpose of this study is to investigate the social work services of the mosque in promoting the wellbeing of the individuals and Muslim community. The study is mainly relied on analysis of data obtained through various instruments: interview survey administered among the mosques island-wide

analysis of the field notes of the observation, and review of related records and documents found in the mosques.

### 3. Results and Discussion 3.1. The Welfare Programs

This section encompasses the mosque's activities that are striving to promote the basic well-being of individuals and groups in need. Seven activities are examined under this area namely: 1) poverty alleviation, 2) provision of welfare assistance, 3) welfare project for children, youth, and women, 4) career training and guidance 5) adult classes and 6) information and referral service 7) *ribāt* shelter for travelers. The survey reveals that averagely 37.5% of the mosques offer the listed activities, some of them (average 11.2) involve on a regular basis as shown in table 1. The considerable number of mosques holds no activity, even occasionally. Table1 illustrates the percentage of the mosques engaged in each activity pertaining to the welfare programs regularly and occasionally.

Table 1 Welfare programs of the mosques

Activity	Percentage doing each activity		
	Regularly	occasionally	Not at all
Poverty Alleviation (N=210)	13.3%	45.2%	41.4%
Providing Welfare Assistance (N=214)	12.6%	59.8%	27.6%
Welfare Project for children, youths & Women (N=209)	8.6%	25.4%	66.0%
Career training and guidance	2.9%	13.3%	83.7%
Adult classes (N=208)	4.8%	8.7%	86.5%
Information service and referrals	5.8%	15.5%	78.7%
Shelter for Travelers (N=209)	30.1%	15.8%	54.1%
<b>Average</b>	<b>11.2%</b>	<b>26.3%</b>	<b>62.6%</b>

Source: Survey

Poverty is a condition of lacking necessities needed in order to live a reasonable life, including food, water, clothing, health, shelter, and education. Poverty alleviation is a process, aiming to reduce the level of poverty in a group of people or countries. There are many measures to alleviate poverty. Charity is an important way that has played the potential role to overcome the poverty as Sadeq (2002) argues "... (charity is) an effective mean to overcome the poverty problem. Charity has again many forms, but a long-lasting form of charity is one that has the characteristic of perpetuity". Many Muslims live in low income and suffer from absolute poverty. Islam highly emphasizes on poverty as the main obstacle and provides a comprehensive framework to eradicate it from the community (Sadeq, 1997). However, some of the sampled mosques (13.3%) have regular activity for poverty alleviation. Less than half of the

mosques (45.2%) trend to look into the matter occasionally. Out of these, the *jum'ah* mosques that are larger in size and financially independent take the leading role in this activity (82.85%). It can be observed that the mosques likely provide short-term immediate assistance to individuals and families. This includes emergency food, financial, clothing, and cash assistance.

Some mosques (12.6%) reported that they tend to provide regular welfare assistance. However, the majority of the mosques (59.8%) respond to the welfare needs of the community occasionally. Of which 83.98% the *jum'ah* mosques fall in this category. The welfare assistance is offered in various forms such as monetary payment, medical treatment, blood donation campaigns, and volunteer service. The mosques, were questioned on the welfare projects, which focus on needs and problems of the children, youths, and women, and that are developed and implemented by them. Comparatively, these sections of the community experience unique problems for many reasons. Effective intervention and prevention programs can capitalize on equipping them with the resilience they need to survive in non-Muslim environment, as they are vital towards building a better community. The response indicates that few mosques (8.6%) have regular projects while around one in four (25.4%) occasionally conduct some of the assistance packages for these prescribed people. It is observed that there are separate wings in very few mosques for children, youth, and women's welfare development.

Career training and guidance are pivotal in terms of sustaining economic, social, and personal development. The need for this type of service is great among Muslims in Sri Lanka, where a comparatively higher percentage of unemployment is recorded during the last two decades (Department of Census and Statistics, 20098). In its minority context, Muslim youths face challenges and high competition in getting a job. They always require career skills and experience in addition to their educational qualification. Therefore, the mosques can contribute by accessing a range of support services to increase their employability such as career development and career guidance. However, they seldom encompass this service, that very few mosques (2.9%) regularly rendering this activity, and some mosques (13.5%) pay concern on it occasionally. The nature and scope of the program naturally provide the *jum'ah* mosques a leading role, thus mostly (77.98%) arrange this session. However, it is not obvious due to the unavailability of documents and it is not commonly practiced.

Adult education means any purposeful activity for mature people towards their self-development usually on a part-time basis (Morgan, Holmes, and Bundy, 1976). Islam encourages the learning process for a lifelong as education is a key component for a higher standard of living, and it promotes socio-economic cultural well-being. The mosque as a community centre can facilitate adult classes towards a good Muslim living and healthy growth of the community through many related activities. For instance, mosque-based adult classes can aim to make mature people familiar with new technological development. That may give them necessary adjustment in the rapidly changing world. However, adult education is not a common activity among the mosques in Sri Lanka. Very few mosques (4.8%) integrate it into their regular program and some mosques (8.6%) create an opportunity for occasional activities of education for adults.

Information and referral service are parts of socio-economic development programs. Gathering and providing information are vital concerns on the community as well as referring them to bodies that will

best serve their specific problems or needs. Moreover, this includes giving relevant information to community members in order to help them in their needs. The mosques were reported to have lesser engagement in this practice since the vast majority of mosques (78.7%) do not provide this service even occasionally. There is an argument that the mosque does not need to carry it in this present time marked with highly developed information technology.<sup>1</sup> A few mosques (5.8%) state their involvement regularly and some mosques (15.5%) conduct it occasionally, realizing the growing complexities of present-day society and the increasing demands for information. Out of these mosques, *jum'ah* mosques play the largest role (85.9%)

From the prophetic period and the story of *Ashāb aṣ-ṣuffah*, it can be assumed that the mosque plays a role in providing lodging and shelter to poor and travelers. There was a trend in Muslim history, the poor, travelers, students, and *ṣūfis* used to stay in the mosque or '*ribāt*'<sup>2</sup> that was established in its surrounding. One of the historical notes clearly indicates it as "when Ibn Jubayr visited Mosul, in the early 1180s, he stayed in a '*ribāt*' for needy, which has chambers, rooms, ablution and drinking places" (Constable, 2003). In Sri Lanka, the mosque still maintains this tradition and the verandahs are constructed for this purpose. From the sample, presently less than half of the mosques (45.9) continue this tradition and 30.1% of them on regular basis. Some of the mosques seem to make a special arrangement for those who want to stay overnight, by charging a certain amount of payment as income, and maintenance. The mosques in towns and major cities particularly in the capital are very strict in not allowing Muslims to stay there, for various reasons such as security threats and state regulations.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1. The Human Services

Generally, human services deal with the personal and social development of individuals, families, and community. The purpose of these services is to bring behaviour change, which will enhance all people to live a quality and productive life (Collins, 2007). The activities of the mosque to improve the quality of life of *jamā'at* members are examined under this section. This involves: 1) counseling and conflict resolution, 2) promotion of health and hygiene, 3) first aid, 4) disaster management, 5) literacy and educational programs 6) day-care or pre-school. The 55.8 average of mosques involvement in this section is reported and it indicates that more than half of mosques provide human services for the *jamā'at* at an average. Nevertheless, nearly one in five mosques (18.7%) has regular activities as displayed in table 2. It also presents the percentage of the mosques that execute each activity regularly and occasionally.

Counseling and conflict resolution is an important program of human services. It is found in recent researches that factors such as culture and religion are more influential is on counseling and its outcomes (Fuertes and Gretchen, 2001). The interview survey shows nearly one in four mosques (23.5%) regularly assists *jamā'at* members in need of counseling or crisis intervention. A considerable number of mosques (43.2%) report to make it occasionally. Even though counseling is a professional work with a great deal of field experience, it can be assumed through observation, mosque programs are mostly related to certain issues, particularly marital and family problems. When *jamā'at* members approach mosque for

<sup>1</sup> Field note, May 19, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Ribat* is a verbal noun derived from *rābata*, meaning "to station and stay in place".

<sup>3</sup> Field note, April 24, 2018.

counsel on these issues, religious scholars, usually the *imām* of the mosque advises them on the reference and interpretation of Islamic textual resources and fiqh literatures in relation to their problem. Giving constructive advice by persons who have no or little formal training in the field, is likely based on the practice of ‘*nasīhat*’ an Arabic term which means sincere advice to fellow Muslims as it is encouraged by prophetic teachings. Therefore, this practice raises a question that while this *imām* or other officials, in facilitating some sort of problem resolution, whether they act in a role comparable to that of a counselor. In problem resolution, instead, they take on a specific role as an advisor (Abdullah, 2007).

In some of the mosques exclusive counseling units are established which comprises of senior members ranging from professionals to *ulamās*. The counseling unit under the federation for all mosques in Kattankudy is an example of such a unit. This unit provides counseling sessions particularly to disturbed marriage couples in confidential using the *Qur’ān* and the *sunnah* as guidance. However, it is not obvious, whether the mosques are practicing or well prepared to treat *jamā’at* members with emotional, psychosocial problems and provide psychiatric service, when necessary, in war-torn Sri Lanka, where war and violence with its concomitant traumas are escalating in the Muslim community. *ṭarīqah* mosques view their spiritual endeavor and attainment symbolized by the integration of the person to reflect divine unity and aspects of its practice, especially *dhikr* has therapeutic outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

Table 2 Human services of the mosques  
Percentage doing each activity

Activity	Regularly	Occasionally	Not at all
Counseling and conflict resolution (N=213)	23.5%	43.2%	33.3%
Promotion of Health and hygiene (N=210)	13.3%	45.2%	41.4%
First aid (N=207)	8.2%	30.9%	60.9%
Disaster management (N=211)	8.5%	55.0%	36.5%
Literacy and educational program (N=211)	18.5%	36.5%	45.0%
Day care/pre- school (N=211)	40.3%	11.4%	48.3%
<b>Average</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>37.0%</b>	<b>44.2%</b>

Source: Survey

Health and hygiene are important aspects of human life and receives also much Islamic care and concern.<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1978). Therefore, Islam takes

<sup>4</sup> Field note, May 18, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> From an Islamic perspective, health is viewed as one of the greatest blessings that Allah has bestowed on mankind. Furthermore, many Islamic texts outline the teachings that advise every Muslim to uphold high standards of physical hygiene and show him how to protect his health and live life in a state of purity. For instance, “Allah is pure and He loves purity” (Al-quran: ) “Cleanliness is part of faith” Bukhari, Sahīh, kitab (k) tahārā.

various measures to preserve individual and social health. It guides Muslims in the use of the toilet as well. In addition to health benefits derived from Islamic practices of obligation like prayer, it is found that the mosques in Sri Lanka moderately play a role in health and hygiene promotion among the Muslim community when the majority of mosques (58.85%) report their involvement in this activity. However, some of them (13.3%) are regularly working towards the promotion of health and hygiene. Measurements taken by Mosques seem to be traditional as they mostly provide awareness among Muslims through discourses to discuss Islamic hygiene, nutrition, and the way to keep in good health from the perspective of the *Qur'ān*, the *Sunnah*. The vast majority of these mosques (80.8%) cooperate with health organizations in their relevant programs.

First aid is the immediate care given to persons who are injured or gets ill. The immediate, temporary treatment is carried out in cases of emergency, sudden illness or accident prior to definitive medical treatment or the transportation of the patient to the hospital. Certain self-limiting illnesses or minor injuries may not require further medical care past the first aid intervention. The main objective is to save the life of the patient or prevent illness or injury from getting worse. This activity requires the necessary knowledge, sympathy, understanding, initiative, and a sense of leadership. Most of the sampled mosques (60.9%) report that they are not prepared to give first aid to the needed people. The reason is simple as they view that there are plenty of public and private hospitals in a particular area. However, few mosques (8.2%) are continuously ready with necessities. But a considerable number of mosques (30.9) gives first aid in special circumstances when sudden major incidents occur or disasters are experienced.

Both natural and human-made disasters and their consequent damages are challenges faced by human beings. Usually, they bring widespread death and destruction. Disaster management is dealing with and avoiding risks and the process involves four phases: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Each phase consists of necessary measurements to reduce the effects and rebuild the community (Cuny, 1983). Responses from the mosques show that the large majority of them (63.5%) encompassed in disaster management in Sri Lanka. Which is one of the most vulnerable under-developed countries that suffer from armed-ethnic conflict for the last three decades, as well as it often suffers from natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, tsunamis, etc. Out of these mosques, some (8.5%) are in regular effort to manage the impacts resulting from the hazards.

In fact, mosque managements or trustees are compelled to take actions to ameliorate the bad situation, when affected Muslims gather in the mosques. The damage due to disaster varies from place to place depending on the vulnerability of the affected area, nature, and the extent of the disaster. The mosques engage in providing essential support and especially in imperative to rescue feed, shelter, etc. directly or in collaboration with other organizations. It was witnessed in various incidents in Sri Lanka, noticeably after the tsunami disaster in 2004, when some of the *jum'ah* mosques set up an executive steering committee to execute the action plan and to establish effective communication with government institutions, national and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs and NGOs). However, some of the mosques avoid to continue support in the next recovery phase and to cooperate with other



organizations in their long-term project.<sup>6</sup> The Islamic organizations also extend their relief works through their mosques in the regions.

Risk management by the mosques is commendable in reducing the effects of the disaster. It can be categorized into the phase of responding to the disaster in its management, mostly pertaining to short-term projects. However, very few mosques in tsunami-hit area were involved largely in disaster management, from immediate relief to livelihood projects. For instance, a *jum'ah* mosque affiliated to *tawhīd jamā'at*, in Kalmunai municipal vicinity, established a sub-unit for disaster management namely 'Center for Tsunami disaster Risk management'. The center covered the larger areas with the planning of activities: water supply, providing dry rations, cleaning and reopening the internal roads, rescue efforts, cash assistance, setting up temporary shelters, medical camps, livelihood projects, educational programs, etc. The center executed all these activities through the mobilization of *jamā'at* members in volunteer involvement and working with INGOs, NGOs, and Muslim embassies in Sri Lanka.

In addition to the Islamic educational program discussed in the previous chapter, mosques were questioned on their strategies to develop literacy and general education among the Muslim community, which lacks facilities, opportunities, and resources in its minority context. Recent researches (Muslim Majlis, 1994) reveal that Muslim education is riddled with various problems and thus, Muslims continue to remain backward, compared to other communities in a country where education is free. The percentage of 'drop-out' from schools is higher among Muslims. The children of the large poor family, which live in the two-roomed house particularly in the capital, face more difficulties to cope with increasing tuition culture and curriculum that demand lot of home activities. In this scenario, the majority of the mosques (55%) claim that they organize programs (18.5% regular and 36.5% occasional programs) to develop public education among Muslims. Nevertheless, it was unable to find any records or obvious practices except some of the minor practices such as preparatory seminars for students who sit for Government Certificate of Education (ordinary level or advanced level) examinations.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of Islamic pre-school is much discussed among Muslim scholars to ensure the balanced growth of total personality that is infused from childhood in an Islamic environment. The mosques were questioned on their role in providing the day-care or pre-school. In Sri Lanka, day-care service is not a common tradition among Muslims due to the small percentage of working couples. Grandmothers are usually looking after children in a situation of both parents are away from the home. Pre-school education is offered between the ages of three and five. According to responses, a considerable number of mosques (40.8%) also provide pre-schools directly or in collaboration with others. The program commonly includes basic Islamic elements such as Arabic alphabets, words, *duā* (supplications) *qur'ānic* recitation, Islamic greeting, Islamic stories, etc. This is to embody Islamic principles in nurturing the children spiritually and emotionally. The pre-school education of the mosques is not free. However, they claim that their fee is cheap and is used to serve the community. It is interesting to note that the answer

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<sup>6</sup> Field note, April 19, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Government certificate of education (G.C.E) examinations are conducted for school students and they are admitted to university according to their top ranking and the best performance in advance level examination.

given by some mosques that they are offering day-care or pre-school services occasionally seem to be far from realistic.

## 2. Conclusion

This paper discusses the mosques engagement in social service works. In providing the welfare programmes, few mosques report their involvement. There is the considerable number of mosques that do not even occasionally hold any of activity listed under the welfare programs namely poverty alleviation; provision of welfare assistance; welfare project for children, youth, and women; career training and guidance; adult classes; information and referral service and *ribat* shelter for travelers. However, the first two activities gain relatively higher consideration of the mosques until they execute them at least occasionally. In comparison, the mosques emphasize human services as the majority of them responded to encompass the social activities but mostly during special occasions. Although there is criticism in the nature and scope of counseling activities of the mosques, the vast majority of mosques reported their engagement. Similarly running a pre-school is a service in a considerable number of mosques. It is quite the natural majority of mosques paid concern occasionally on disaster management works.

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