Assessment of pottery as a tool for expression and community reintegration in women prisons in Kenya

Research article

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Abstract
In developed countries, studies have shown that pottery as a form of visual culture encourage self-expression and prepare inmates for release and employment. However, existing studies have failed to investigate pottery in women prisons in Kenya as an effective tool for self-expression and a means to self-reliant. The study aim was to examine pottery as a tool for expression and community reintegration in women prisons in Kenya. The study areas were Lang’ata and Kisii women prisons with a population of 34 respondents. Purposive sampling technique was used to sample 4 illustrators and 30 inmates. The study utilized questionnaire, interview and observation guide to collect data. This study was guided by Vygotsky’s Art and Creativity theory. Descriptive research design guided the study. Using descriptive statistics under the qualitative and quantitative research designs, the study revealed that participants valued the process of creating pottery as a form of expression with age, education and prison confinement being some of the areas that contributed to effective application of images in pottery. The study recommended improvement of facilities in pottery section, retrain of illustrators and encouragement of inmates to intensify on the use of imagery in pottery for self-expression in preparation for successful reintegration.

Keywords: expression, inmates, Kenyan prisons, pottery, reintegration, visual culture

How to Cite
Public Interest Statement
This study examined pottery production in Kenyan prisons as a tool for self-expression and community reintegration. This is a purely academic investigation of pottery in prisons and the author do not wish to be seen to in any way contravene on the daily activities and routine of prisons in Kenya.

Introduction
Pottery products are distinctive part of the visual culture of indigenous peoples in most parts of the world. In traditional Africa, pots are widely used for many purposes and different types of pots are made in different communities for household and also for religious purposes (Asante, Adjei and Opoku, 2013). On the same note, Kasemi (2014) states that as an age old handicraft, pottery in India as an effective art form is one of the tangible creations of mankind and has become an integral part of man’s culture. From this position, one can argue that pottery is one of the oldest art forms of civilization known to the human race.

Ipek (2019) asserts that information about the lifestyles of ancient cultures, their daily activities, religious beliefs, close or long-distance trade relations, or cultural interactions come from their products. Ancient material productions can be briefly mentioned by examples such as stone stools, pottery, and secular or religious buildings. Wall paintings, motifs or scenes on pottery provide important information about the lifestyles or religious beliefs of ancient cultures. Similarly, Preety (2010) and Peterson (2011) notes that pottery has been an important element in the history of the human race, allowing for the storage and transport of a range of materials as well as acting as an artistic medium of expression for thousands of years. The concept of indigenous pottery decorative techniques is rich and varies. The reason is that the surfaces of indigenous pottery offer two different working materials (the plastic and the graphic). In these two, a potter has a substantial freedom of expression during the application of his/her decorative techniques (Adu and Yussif, 2017). Through pottery, women inmates can pick up visual clues and learn how visual images can be manipulated on vessel surfaces.

Art, a nonverbal and nonconfrontational source of expression has been historically fundamental component of prison. Inmate-painted wall murals, paintings, and even intricate tattoo designs indicate the basic human need for expression (Gussak, 2007). Johnson (2008) states that art programs like pottery may prepare prisoners for aftercare and community reintegration. Ideally, the integration process for released prisoners begins during incarceration. Therefore, rehabilitation programs could be designed to help prepare them for eventual re-entry. Similarly, Mears (2008) observes that although art is powerful and unique, and despite stories of its positive and life-changing effects, there has been little systematic research done on its use in stressful environments, such as prison. Steinhauer (2019) notes that, the practise of art in prison environment is to reassert humanity- to remind inmates of their existence. It is a way of saying
“I’m still here,” when the powers that be do not want you to be seen. It is a means of connecting with the world or some other worlds.

Pottery as one of the creative activities and effective elements for visual culture carried out in prisons is considered important for self-expression and successful re-integration of inmates to society. Pottery provides a medium of art that could be passed down to the modern day. There are two sides of the importance of pottery: its place in history of technological innovation and in culture, and its role in telling people about the past. In ancient Greek and Roman civilization, particularly pertinent was the use of geometrical designs and images to depict stories and events on pottery items. Pottery played a huge role in most societies, in economic terms as well as in culture and society. More than any other artifact, pottery tells people how ancient people interacted with their environment and with each other. Critical role that pottery plays is in helping to date other artifacts discovered in the vicinity of the pot. The decorations on pots tell much about beliefs, lifestyles and lives of people who bought them and used them (Pretty, 2010). The information assists in providing facts that can be used to inform about a particular culture, its beliefs and values and as a useful tool for understanding society even in an enclosed environment like prison.

Djurishkovic (2011) study petitioned for “quantitative evaluations of existing art programs which would contribute important information about the value of prison art programs. However, such quantitative studies have yet to be found. Nonetheless, qualitative research on the potential benefits of in-prison art education and art therapy on prisoners and ex-prisoners finds that art creation enables learners to master skills, materials and techniques, to express abstract ideas and to become visually literate (Morgan, 2014). A view shared by (Kaufman, 2013) who states that art practice in prisons can lead to reduced negative patterns of thoughts and behaviors. Gussak (2013) further notes that there seems to be a natural tendency for artistic and creative expression in prison setting, evidenced in prison craft shops, murals and intricately designed tattoos. The achievements can then lead to personal growth and increased social awareness. While these outcomes may not lead directly to fewer offenses, they may lead to less easily quantifiable outcomes which augur well for better behavior in women prisons and their successful rehabilitation and reintegration outside prison.

Benefit of many prison art programs is the opportunity for inmate-artists to reconnect with society through their art in form of auctions that support local nonprofit organizations, or community beautification projects. Displaying or selling artwork provides inmates the opportunity to engage in ‘productive exchanges with the community before and after release. These in turn help inmates improve themselves in preparation for reintegration into society (Brewster, 2012). Inmates use artworks to provide gifts or as a means to covey thoughts and feelings that may be difficult to express verbally (Johnson, 2008). Exposure to the positive and productive experience in pottery can also be enjoyed as recreation which can enable inmates to cope with unemployment.
stretches that most will face upon being released. Creating pottery gives inmates opportunity to reflect on their life, interests, and the world around them. This allows them to evaluate their character and try to be the best version of themselves. The displayed works by inmates gives them a chance to engage in productive exchanges with community. This act of expression act as signal to the community that they are part of it and an important element of rehabilitation attempt which contributes to the development of human dignity. This in turn ensure that their voices are not ignored or excluded from the community as larger social conversations.

Art therapy focuses heavily on healing process. The making of visual images generates self-insights, brings suppressed feelings to the surface, and helps participants cope with the stress of prison life; it offers prisoners a non-destructive, therapeutic release for their feelings of distress associated with the deprivation of prison life as well as states of mental health extending beyond the incarcerated experiences. Art is the ‘ultimate hidden weapon’ because of its ability to ‘hide’ the therapeutic process (Johnson, 2008). Gussak (2013) concluded that art creation is inherently validating and through its participants are able to gain mastery of self-expression and, as inmates learn to manipulate the materials to achieve their desired effect, learn cause and effect through the creative process. This knowledge became internalized leading to more responsible, aware and controlled individuals. Pottery enables an escapism from the immediate surroundings. Engaging in pottery results in self-esteem that is crucial to mental and social wellbeing of the women inmates.

Decorative techniques applied in indigenous pottery appear to have concepts that are exclusively and firmly based on cultural symbolism, which illustrates the moral fiber of the people. Indigenous pottery techniques which happen to base their concept on cultural symbolism usually have a unique way of intriguing artists’ collectors. It allows potters to showcase themselves and their culture in imaginative postures that suggest personalities and attitudes. For instance, potters in Sirigu employ the idea of macramé as a decorative technique in pottery most particularly when they are producing their multipurpose food storage system. In this case, the concept behind the use of this type of decorative technique is to scare away flying insects from entering or flying closer to the storage system (Adu and Yussif, 2017).

Figure 1 Showing Storage System with Macramé Decoration Technique, the second picture shows Storage System without Macramé Fringes by Sirigu Potters in Ghana
The Bamana pot exhibited in the Tag Technical Museum which has raised-relief animal motifs would typically indicate a ritual function, but on this example they bear no ritual significance. Instead, this domestic pot used for storing and serving water features lizard and snake motifs merely to suggest its water-related function (National adversary council, 2010). Women inmates can be assisted through pottery process, to explore the use of visual images to express themselves so that they are in a position ‘to read’ their works and the idea behind their products.

For many African cultures, ceramic vessel means more than just a “pot”. It is an object of economic and social value, a visualization of spiritual beliefs, and a compelling media for expressing and playing out various issues. By investigating the ceramic practices of several African societies, one can gain fuller understanding of the significance of visual art in Africa, and how African mold issues such as gender into artistic forms. These pots embody a multiplicity of economic, social, and spiritual meanings and uses (National adversary council, 2010). Mears (2008) observes that although art is powerful and unique, and despite stories of its positive and life-changing effects, there has been little systematic research done on its use in stressful environments, such as prison. Pottery as one of the creative activities and effective elements for visual culture carried out in prisons is considered important for self-expression and successful re-integration of inmates to society. Pottery acts as media through which inmates can express and connect with their emotions, create social connections with the outside world. Through pottery, inmates are able to feel like humans and they may behave more civilly than if treated like forces of evil. Pottery communicates or express artist’s feelings. Inmates could exploit this idea to release bent up feelings, to respond and reflect on their art products in order to adjust to prison environment.

The making of pottery in prison provides an enabling space for inmates overwhelmed by the disruption of prison life. Pottery could open more creative life for many inmates after release. Especially if they are encouraged to use it as medium of expression and for recreation purposes. The pottery work show the importance that creative expression has for enduring the conditions of prison. Pottery respond to inmates’ basic human need for creative self-development and

Figure 2 Show Bamana Pot with Raised-Relief Lizard and Snake Motifs on Display at Tag Technical Museum
expression. Through pottery, inmates can put emphasis on social and personal themes and acknowledge the use of images from various cultures in order to enrich and improve their lives even in the confines of restrictive prison environment.

Objective
The objective of the study was to assess pottery as a tool for expression and community reintegration in women prisons in Kenya.

Methodology
The study adapted descriptive design on a target population that constituted female inmates and the prison staff. Descriptive design was deemed suitable for the study because data was collected and analyzed as it existed in the field without manipulating any of the variables. A sample of 30 female inmates and 4 illustrators from 2 prisons who participated in the study were purposefully selected, this gave a total of 34 respondents. Data on the completed research instruments were cleaned, coded and entered into the computer for analysis using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 20. Data was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations. Quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis were employed in the study. The use of both methods ensures that the limitations of one type of data are balanced by the strength of another. Both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately but merged during data interpretation. Data presentation was done in form of tables, figures and frequency distribution.

Instrumentation
The desired data was collected by use of questionnaire, interview schedules and observation guides. The questionnaires were used to collect data from the key respondents; female inmates. The rationale of using questionnaire was the large number of this category of respondents and the sensitive nature of the research. The interview schedules were used to gather in depth information from staff who were relatively few. Observation method was used to supplement the information gathered from the respondents through questionnaires and interviews.

Results and Discussions
Quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis were employed in the study. The use of both methods ensures that the limitations of one type of data are balanced by the strength of another. The following are results of data analysis.
### Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Potter Inmates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Potter Inmates</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 29 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 - 49 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 - 59 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and above</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 3 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 3 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the findings in Table I, majority of the inmate potters 14 (51.9%) were aged between 30-49 years, seven (25.9%) were aged between 18-29 years while six (22.2%) were aged between 50-59 years. This shows that nearly three quarters of the inmate potters were 30 years and above. The highest number of age group was found to be between 30-49 years. This is a clear indication that majority of inmate potters fall between 30-49 years, being the most active age, inmates can be made to be more productive if offered adequate skills in visual images for enhancement of visual culture in prisons. The findings show that there were few elderly inmates among the potters, a group that is traditionally known to pass over the skills to the next generation since they are more experienced in pottery making, as confirmed by Langenkamp (2000) who argued that it is a common phenomenon among African cultures that craft skills are passed down from generation to generation. A view shared by Edusah (2011) who observed that indigenous pottery industry over the years has engaged the hands of women, who acquired the skills by learning from their parents. The elderly group in prisons was low compared to other groups yet the elderly were the ones who passed the skills to the younger generation. This could mean that soon, there might be no one to pass the traditional pottery skills such as visual image rendering to since the number of
the elderly group is reducing, yet they are the custodians of traditional pottery, a factor that may contribute to loss of a part of people’s cultural heritage. It can therefore be said that traditional pottery is diminishing in prisons in Kenya.

In terms of level of education, majority of the inmate potters 11 (40.7%) had primary education with the same proportion (40.7%) also having secondary education as their highest education qualification. However, five (18.6%) had post-secondary education. This shows that the education level of inmate potters was generally low. Majority of inmates doing pottery was rated at 40.7% who had secondary level of education. There were no holders of university degrees among the inmate potters. Post-Secondary education was at 18.6% for inmate potters. From the findings, all the inmate potters had basic form of education. The results indicate that the more educated, the smaller number of inmates in prison, this could imply that majority of people who find themselves locked in prisons have low level of education. The low education level could have contributed to a good number of inmates getting involved in crime as a measure of survival and meeting their basic needs.

Duration that inmates had been in their respective prisons shows the period the inmate potters have had contact with prison pottery. From the findings on Table 1, majority of the inmate potters 10 (37%) had been in the prison for 1 to 3 years with another 10 (37%) being in the prison for more than 3 years. Thus, 74% majority of the potter inmates had been in the prisons for over 1 year, giving them ample time to master the application of visual images for self-expression. The findings show that longer period in prison gave inmates adequate time to learn, practice and enhance their creativity in pottery and use it to communicate and subvert social issues and seeing their vessels as producing new visual and conceptual insight.

Similarly, Yellow Ribbon Program (2012) notes that art helps offenders unlock their potential in finding employment, furthering their education, and eventually reintegrating back into the society. Sikasa (2015) collaborates by asserting that the effect of vocational training on women prisoners showed that women who acquired vocational skills such as tailoring, catering, farming skills and knitting had fewer chances of reoffending compared to prisoners who did not have vocational training. Creative activities found in pottery may play a key role in directing the energies of inmates and assist them to adjust to prison life and outside prison once they are released.

Table 2: The use of Pottery as an Avenue for Self-expression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-expression</th>
<th>Strongly agree f</th>
<th>(%) (G)</th>
<th>Agree f</th>
<th>(%) (G)</th>
<th>Not sure f</th>
<th>(%) (G)</th>
<th>Disagree f</th>
<th>(%) (G)</th>
<th>Strongly disagree f</th>
<th>(%) (G)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You apply</td>
<td>3 (11.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>20 (74.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (14.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You use pottery for self-expression

| visual imagery in your work | 11 (40.7) | 8 (29.6) | 0 (0.0) | 2 (7.4) | 6 (22.2) | 3.22 | 1.12 |

Key: M-Mean STD- Standard deviation

From the findings, majority of inmates 20(74.1%) agreed that they use visual images in their vessels, while a further three (11.1%) strongly agreed that they use visual images in their vessels while a further four (14.8%) were not sure. From the findings majority of inmate potters agreed that they use visual imagery in their work, however this was not visible in most of the works produced in the two prisons. The findings is in agreement with Preety (2010) who stated that particularly pertinent was the use of geometrical designs and images to depict stories and events on pottery items. There is need for exploitation of visual imagery on inmate potters’ works for maximum benefit in terms of improved self-esteem and enhanced unique production.

In terms of use of pottery for self-expression, inmates were found to be generally average (Mean = 3.22 ± 1.121) where majority of the inmate potters 11(40.7%) strongly agreed that pottery assist them with self-expression while eight (29.6%) agreed that pottery assist them with self-expression. However, only six (22.2%) of the inmate potters strongly disagreed. Almost half of the inmates strongly agreed that pottery assist them with self-expression, in other words, majority of them were average in the use of pottery for self-expression. The findings is in line with Preety (2010) who asserts that pottery has been an important element in the history of the human race, allowing for the storage and transport of a range of materials as well as acting as an artistic medium for thousands of years. A view shared by Peterson (2011) who observed that throughout the ages, even before written history, pottery has been used as a medium of expression.

*Figure 3 Show Pottery Displayed at Lang’ata Prison Showroom*
The findings in Figure 3 show how inmates incorporate different inspirations in form, designs and styles in both functional and aesthetic appeals. This is in line with Pretty (2010) who made note that skilled artists began creating images on pots which are made for decorative rather than practical purposes (though many served both). A view shared with Gessner (2011), who opined that pottery was painted with geometric, figural and naturalistic designs. The artwork of pottery revealed insights about a culture and who they were as a people. The geometrical motifs include cross-hatching or parallel zig zag lines, diamonds, chevrons and dots. A view further shared by Gessner (2013) and Ipek (2019) who state that figural stylized motifs include bucrania (bull heads and bull horns) birds, human figures, animal and structures. Inmates could be trained further to employ the use of imagery for artistic expressions, social norms and self-acceptance in prison. Some of the inmates’ responses indicated that pottery created an enabling environment for self-expression in prison. Specifically, one of the inmates remarked that:

I can express myself through pottery and I’m able to relate well with others both in the workshop and outside. I enjoy it more when we share ideas. (Personal communication, Feb, 2020)

Another remarked that “Pottery takes my mind off things”. (Personal communication, Feb, 2020) While another remarked that “Pottery has changed me in so many ways”. (Personal communication, Feb, 2020). This is an indication of how inmates interpret imagery and being able to connect with their works on a personal level.

From the findings one can say that the pots created by inmates speak of the creative potential that exists in prisons and therefore the need to get more inmates involved in constructive creative
activities. This will help keep them busy in the confines of prison and also prepare them to engage with the community after release. Figure 4 show a pot with words such as “gopa”, which could be interpreted to mean being scared of the unknown or regrets for past mistakes made. The works show inmates’ strong desire to express themselves. Figural representation on pottery is that they convey a special meaning of religious imagery such as deities or magic, human beings or carry ritual meaning. Fine Halaf painted pottery with its figural motifs gives important information about the Halaf world such as their religious activities, their architecture (or their deity structure), animals species and plant world (Campbell, 2010). Inmates could be trained more to learn to see through their artworks to tell their stories for greater benefit from pottery.

The Figure 5 Show a Different Collections of Pottery created by Inmates

Figure 5 shows some of the pottery made by inmates that show expressive use of pottery for self-expression, aesthetic and functional attributes. A view shared by Peterson (2011) who postulates that by promoting innate drive towards self-expression, pottery allows people from different cultures to communicate with each other via images. Pottery can foster emotional growth by providing a safe space that allows inmates to discuss and confront issues affecting them and be able to interpret their works and learn the meaning attached to them. More effort needs to be put in place to encourage inmates to make meaning in their works by use of imagery, which could assist them distance themselves from the some of the issues that could have contributed to their imprisonment. This could lead to personal growth and self-gratification. It was important to find out information from illustrators on the use of pottery as a vehicle for promotion of visual culture. During the interviews, one of the illustrators commented that:

Some of the potters inscribe words about their experiences and words that suggest they are remorseful. *(Personal communication, Feb, 2020)*
From the above statement it indicates that inmates are using pottery to assist them to reform. When asked whether pottery has helped inmates in creative artistic expression, one of the illustrators said that:

> Inmates are able to express their feelings and emotions through pottery, they get so busy in the workshop, and the engagement assist them to cope in prison.” (Personal communication, Feb, 2020)

Another illustrator commented that:

> The items are displayed in the showroom for sale to the public, some of them are purchased by the staff, though the sale is low. (Personal communication, Feb, 2020)

From the above finding, it can be said that pottery not only fosters the human need for self-expression and fulfilment; it is also economically viable. During the interviews one of the illustrators observed that:

> “Potter inmates who develop high self-esteem are able to communicate well with fellow inmates and with authority. This emerges from the nature of pottery which allows them to practice freely and make products. It keeps them busy in the workshop most of the time”. (Personal communication, Feb, 2020)

The findings show that inmates with pottery skills have high self-esteem and that those who engage in pottery have easier re-entry than those without pottery knowledge as indicated by the illustrators. This is an indication of positive attributes to pottery in prison. The findings corroborate with Eames (2009) who emphasized that prison arts program evaluations that include pottery show that beyond encouraging and facilitating creativity, communication, and reflection, pottery teaches inmates how to work with focused discipline. A view shared by Morgan (2014) study carried out in Australia which found out that art creation enables learners to master skills, materials and techniques, to express abstract ideas and become visually literate. The benefits of creative activities in pottery through the use of imagery could be used to release negative emotions and enable inmates to better cope with restrictive environment.
Conclusion

While the study lends insight into pottery as an expressive tool and reintegration in prisons in Kenya, there was a limitation. All participants in the study were women, therefore, the study was not able to explore the unique perspectives of men. Pottery viewed as one of the elements which increase the cultural experiences, assist inmates through enhanced well-being, self-expression and community involvement through their pottery. There is need for inmates to learn more on meaning and cultural contexts of pottery so that they are able to creatively and artistically use pottery for self-expression, aesthetic awareness and for reintegration. Inmates revealed that participating in pottery program enhanced their self-esteem, discipline and identity as artists. Through pottery, women inmates can pick up visual clues and learn how visual images can be manipulated on vessel surfaces. To be properly implemented, pottery programs need cooperation from all the staff that work in prisons. Illustrators need proper support and more trainings. While the literature offers reasons to believe in the potential of pottery, its effectiveness as a means to visual culture in prison has rarely been researched. Pottery program provide space and avenue for inmates to come together and engage in the process of creating both functional and aesthetic items while reaping the benefits of self-expression, stress reduction and a coping mechanism in the confines of prison. Therefore, there is need for more research to judge the effectiveness of pottery as a tool for self-expression and reintegration. One particular challenge common with the women in the indigenous pottery industry is illiteracy, low levels of education and lack of training and business education. The study revealed that almost all the women in pottery have very little or no education at all and this is a handicap since it will hinder their ability to learn about modern entrepreneurial skills and technical issues related to pottery activities. The government, NGOs and women’s advocacy groups should take it up to train the inmates to acquire basic education to enable them to effectively learn, use and interpret imagery for self-expression.

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Disclaimer Statement: This is the original work of the author and has not been submitted to any institution for examination or any other journal for publication.
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