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African Indigenous Values Identified in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart": A Socio-Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

It is the case that no human society exists without committing itself to certain unique values evidenced in the people's way of life. This paper analytically identifies and assesses some African indigenous values depicted in Chinua Achebe's novel: *Things Fall Apart*. These values are tied to the African culture and consistently define African identity, history, beliefs, and worldview. We observe that while some of these pristine indigenous values of African cultural heritage remain undiminished, others have in many and different ways, been significantly affected or vitiated mainly by the wave of globalization. In the light of modern intellectual enlightenment, we hold that the African indigenous values that respect the dignity of the human person, have to be revived, re-evaluated and made more significantly relevant in the day-to-day societal life of Africans for veritable integral development and socio-cultural progress of African states in the contemporary world.

Key Words: African, indigenous, value, culture, community

Introduction

Evidently, human values are among the very important things that make life worth living. They are what rational and enlightened minds cherish, esteem, price precious and have inclined attitude for; they are principles or standards of a society for the good or benefit of such society (Asogwa 173). Values drive our attitudes and reactions to societal issues, relationships, nature, and reality as a whole. The values of a society are understood as beliefs that are held about what is right and worthwhile, what is

special and deemed important in life. A people's values are rightly seen as integral to their culture. They derive from the historico-cultural evolution of a group or nation: certain variables of such a society like history, taste, preferences, among others are, to some extent, determinant factors and are learned in the socialization processes of the society. As non-material elements of a culture, values play the role of piloting, monitoring and humanizing culture as a whole (Chuta 24).

According to Sogolo, "African [indigenous] values...may be taken to mean a set of institutionalized ideals which guide and direct the patterns of life of Africans" (119). These values help to shape the unique African identity and worldview; for in fact "no group of people can survive without a set of values which holds them together and guarantees their continued existence" (Etuk 22). Many indigenous cultural values in the African tradition are a source of pride to Africans because these have remained resilient to change despite numerous pressures from the outside of the African continent in the modern society. These African indigenous values are interconnected or closely related with each other; social values, for instance, cannot be exactly separated from religious, moral, political, aesthetic etc. values and vice versa.

"Things Fall Apart" is one of the novels written by the African literary figure Chinua Achebe, and published in 1958. Set in *Umuofia* of South-Eastern tribe (Igbo) of Nigeria, the novel tells of the series of events by which Okonkwo (an important man in his clan in the days when "white men" were first appearing on the scene), through his pride and his fears becomes exiled from his clan and returned only to be forced into the ignominy of suicide to escape the results of his rash courage against the "white man" and the changes he (the "white man") introduced in the life of *Umuofia* community. As a master literary artist, Achebe weaved in some indigenous African values found in the way of life of the African (Igbo) people as he built his story. Our aim in this essay is to extract, analyze critically and throw more light on these African indigenous values which should not be ignored by the African people for their continued civilization and authentic socio-cultural development and progress. We shall equally make our evaluative submission at the end of the study.

African Indigenous Values Depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

A careful studied reading of "Things Fall Apart" discloses in certain parts of the novel some incontrovertible African indigenous values which Achebe skillfully weaved in as he composed the novel; these include:

(I) Respect for Age (elders)

In the text of *Things Fall Apart* we read: "Age was respected among his [Okonkwo's] people..." (p. 6). Here, Achebe makes reference to the fact that respect for age, that is, for the elderly, is one of the cherished values among the people of *Umuofia*. Respect for age is a cardinal guiding principle for good manners within the family and in the community at large. Africans generally have deep and ingrained great respect for the aged; their grey hairs earn them right to courtesy and politeness. Any infringement of the rules of etiquette towards the elderly met with severe reprisals (Basden 85). The elders in African society are respected because they are believed to be the teachers and directors of the young in the journey of life. As the Igbos say: "He who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle"; for the oracles are believed to give infallible truths on existence generally. Thus, the honest instructions of

elders from their wealth of experiences serve to direct the young in maintaining the norms and mores of the society. Part of the reason Africans recognize this particular value is due to the significant role of the elders in helping to ensure that the accepted moral standards of conduct in the society are upheld. In this connection Ezedike rightly comments:

Age is generally considered crucial in African socio-ethical relations because it is central to the African epistemological order. In this regard, the elders act as the moral eyes or moral vanguards of the society. In moral conflicts they act as mediators and are perceived as the authentic interpreters of the cosmic moral order which the supernatural beings placed in the world and in its historical reality. It is their duty to ensure that the moral code is not infringed upon by ignorant youths and careless adults. In Igbo traditional society, for example, it is viewed as an abomination for an elder to keep mute and watch the moral order of the society trampled on (205).

Corroborating this fact Olanukanmi says: “in Africa old age is honoured, celebrated. The respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the fact that they ensure the maintenance of custom and tradition” (6) of the land. Furthermore, since the elders are taken to be the repository of communal wisdom, leadership is conceded to them in community affairs. The main reason for this is the nearness of elders to the ancestors.

The respect given to elders, however, has a corresponding responsibility based on the expected reciprocal exercise of rights and duties in community’s old-young relationship. In the African worldview, while the elders provide for and protect the children, in turn the children are generally expected to reciprocate and care for their parents in their old age. Whereas in Western culture, it is common to send the aged to retirement nursing house (“old people’s home”) where they will be taken care of, Africans see it as uncaring for a person to put his/her retired aged parent(s) to such retirement house. Hence, to so abandon one’s aged parent(s) is considered deeply dishonourable in Africa, because these elders at this period of their lives need help and support from their now grown-up children. In fact, sending one’s aged parent(s) to old people’s home rather than take care of them in one’s own house is taken to be morally unacceptable in Africa (Omogbe 12). The young are always looking forward to being elders and they are often reminded that if a child respects an elder, he/she would be respected by the young when he/she becomes an elder himself/herself. It is in this connection that the Igbo people say that: “*onye na-amaghị onye tọrọ ya etobeghị*”, that is, “he who does not know his/her elder/senior is not yet mature”.

(II) Life of Industry and Diligent Hard Work

The African people cherish honest diligent hard work and enterprising spirit in societal life. In *Things Fall Apart*, we read:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements...Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father...He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles...And so although Okonkwo was still young, he

was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he could eat with kings and elders. And that was how he came to look after the doomed lad [Ikemefuna] who was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbours to avoid war and bloodshed (pp. 3, 6).

Still on this value we also read:

Looking at a king's mouth', said an old man, 'one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast'. He was talking about Okonkwo who had risen so suddenly from great poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of the clan. The old man bore no ill-will towards Okonkwo. Indeed, he respected him for his industry and success.

But it was really not true that Okonkwo's palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself. Anyone who knew his grim struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky. If ever a man deserved his success, that man was Okonkwo... At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the I[g]bo people have a proverb that when a man says yes, his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so, his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands (p. 19).

As the above citations show, it was through Okonkwo's sheer industry and hard work that he became recognized among his people as one of the lords/stakeholders of the clan.

Industriousness and diligent hard work are appreciated and revered by Africans. It is a value that engenders positive influence in the family and communal circles. One is expected to work hard to build up one's household and achieve meaningful feats in one's life even when one has to begin from the scratch; for it is always an inspiration to the members of the community, as this draws from the resilient power of the human life-force to succeed in an endeavour even in the face of limited available resources or against all odds.

Being industrious/hard-working is taking to be the tool for the banishment of poverty in traditional African society. Igboin expresses this point clearly when he said that in the consciousness of Africans, "...hard work is cure for poverty and [that] the belief is strong that one could not be poor for being [industrious or] hard working unless there were extraneous reasons" (100). In Africa, traditionally, "achieved status is [far] more honourable than inherited status" (Nwala 194); and since the social economic system is open such that allows for ascendancy in the economic ladder of the society, acquisition of wealth and greatness achieved by the strength of one's arm are very meaningful to and so much respected by the people. Industriousness bestows honour, public recognition, and social esteem to the individual in African societies.

(III) Communalistic Spirit

There are some references to the communal nature of traditional African society in *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, in the text we read:

Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because it began the season of plenty—the new year.... Yam foo-foo and vegetable soup was the chief food in the celebration. So much of it was cooked that, no matter how heavily the family ate or how many friends and relations they invited from neighbouring villages, there was always a huge quantity of food left over at the end of the day....

The New Yam Festival was thus an occasion for joy throughout Umuofia. And every man whose arm was strong, as the I[gb]bo people say, was expected to invite large numbers of guests from far and wide. Okonkwo always asked his wives' relations, and since he now had three wives his guests would make a fairly big crowd (26-27).

We see here *that* joyous communal togetherness in relationality in a typical festivity of an African community. The communalistic spirit of the traditional African society is also seen in the issue of share-cropping through which members of the community are helped to gradually establish especially their own seed-yams, and perhaps other farm crops. On this issue we read:

Share-cropping was a very slow way of building up a barn of one's own. After all the toil one only got a third of the harvest. But for a young man whose father had no yams, there was no other way. And what made it worse in Okonkwo's case was that he had to support his mother and two sisters from his meager harvest. And supporting his mother also meant supporting his father. She could not be expected to cook and eat while her husband starved. And so, at a very early age when he was striving desperately to build a barn through share-cropping Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house....

As the years of exile passed one by one it seemed to him [Okonkwo] that his *chi* might now be making amends for the past disaster. His yams grew abundantly, not only in his motherland but also in Umuofia, where his friend gave them out year by year to share-croppers (16, 121).

In addition to this, it was as a result of deep sense of empathy and fellow-feeling of African communal life that Okonkwo was well received and accommodated during his seven years' exile period in *Mbanta* (his motherland). Thus, we read:

Okonkwo was well received by his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta....[He]...was given a plot of ground on which to build his compound, and two or three pieces of land on which to farm during the coming planting season. With the help of his mother's kinsmen he built himself an *obi* and three huts for his wives.... Each of Uchendu's five sons contributed three hundred seed-yams to enable their cousin [Okonkwo] to plant a farm, for as soon as the first rain came farming would begin (p. 91).

What we glean from the above citations we have made is the fact of communal life of togetherness and solidarity which characterizes the African existential consciousness and living. Africans place high value on communal living. Communal life and sense of community characterize the day-to-day life-activities of Africans. As a value, it guides the social interaction of the people toward a common goal.

In Africa, interpersonal bonds go beyond biological affinity in expressing the ideal of communality. It manifests in the people's life of togetherness and cooperative solidarity with one another in their everyday life and in community celebrations. In the African cultural milieu, whatever happens to one happens to the community as a whole: the joys and sorrows of one extend to other members of the community in profound ways. Here, everybody is his/her brother's/sister's keeper. It is a kind of all for one, and one for all mode of living. Thus, "[for the African people]...the communal lifestyle with its responsibilities and entitlements has great meaning and value" (Cobbah 327). Each person has a role to play in the life of the community which is determined by age, gender, health, or abilities. The synergy of group solidarity and collective responsibility make for easy functioning of the community. The community gives each person belongingness and cultural identity for self-fulfilment and social security. And members of the community, according to Olasunkanmi, make effort to pursue their individual goals in a way that will lead to the overall development of the community as a whole (4). The philosophy behind African communalism guaranteed individual responsibility within the communal relationships, and societal resources fair distribution management framework. The entire African socialization process prepares members of the African society to embrace communal living and shun individualism that promotes self-centeredness.

(IV) Sense of the Sacred and of Religion

The African approaches sacred and religious matters and elements with respect. In *Things Fall Apart*, we see traditional African religious worship and sacrifices having central important place in the life of the community; the people worship and offer sacrifices to the different gods and deities in the community. For instance, in the text we read:

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth.

The feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honour the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. New yams could not be eaten until some had first been offered to these powers (p. 26).

Certain things are done because the gods of the land decreed and supported them. On this point in the text Achebe writes:

And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle—the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded *agadi-nwanyi* would never fight what the I[g]bo call *a fight of blame* (p. 9).

In the novel, we see the influence of the acceptance of deities and gods such as: *the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves* (40, 46), *Ani*, *Amadiora*, *Idemili*, *Ogwugwu*, etc. (103), in the life of the people of the

community. Thus, allegiance to these deities, divinities, gods, and ultimately the Supreme Being obviously signifies the people's sense of the sacred and of religion in traditional African society.

Africans are highly religious people. According to Idang, "religion in African societies seems to be the fulcrum around which every activity revolves" (104). Most times natural phenomena/occurrences are seen and explained as functions of the supernatural. It is interesting to note that "...in traditional [African] life there are no atheists" (Mbiti 29), because sense of the sacred and of the traditional religion permeate all aspects of African societal life. In African worldview, the social, moral, and religious values are closely linked; the social values rest on the moral values and this arguably rests on religious values. It is because of this intrinsic relationship that the spiritual element runs deep in the continent's indigenous values system. In other terms, social life and morality relate to religion; the African traditional religious ordering of the society, to a great extent, influences and reflects in the actions of members of the community. Here, the pervasive African traditional religious principles the people cling to serve as conduct control mechanism of the public; these religious operational principles police the responses of human beings in observing the established African traditional values of the community.

(V) Sense of Sacredness of Human Life

In the African worldview, life is precious and sacred. Among the various African indigenous values, this is of utmost importance. The African abhors shedding of innocent blood. Murder was not encouraged, most especially within the clan. In traditional African society, if a man conscientiously killed a clansman, most often he was killed himself. But if he killed him inadvertently, he was exiled for some long period. In *Things Fall Apart* we read:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years (87).

It is for this reason that when Okonkwo's gun inadvertently exploded and killed Ogbuefi Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son during Ogbuefi Ezeudu's burial (86), he (Okonkwo) was exiled for seven years as a punishment according to the law of the land.

Also, in the text, concerning the evil of suicide, we read:

It is against our custom', said one of the men. 'It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers?' (147).

In African cultural milieu, one does not kill himself nor does he do whatever he likes with his life; one's life belongs to the community. The idea of sanctity of life makes it an abomination for anyone, under whatever circumstances to take his own life. Suicide was never permitted, for it is a radical form of personal self-negation which impact goes beyond the action of the victim and detracts from the life of the community itself; it is "*Nso-ala*" (Igbo language expression meaning: taboo)—a great evil against

the earth and humanity. When such happens, sacrifices are made after the burial to cleanse the desecrated land which shows the severity of the abomination, as in the case of Okonkwo in the quotation above who regrettably hanged himself (147).

Igbo names such as “*Ndubuisi*”, meaning “Life is the main thing or life is first”, “*Ndyka*” meaning “Life is the greatest value”, and “*Madyka*” meaning “Human being is the highest value”, express the African (Igbo) high regard for the value of human life. Iroegbu’s comment on this particular value is apposite here:

While almost all societies have a respect for life, Africans have a deep reverential deference for life, especially human life. Its beginning is elaborately celebrated in pregnancy, birth, naming and initiation ceremonies. Its growth and continuity is feasted in adulthood, and adolescence rites, family rites and communal festivities. Its end is buoyantly celebrated in death rites, departure rituals, and funeral festivities (84).

In traditional African society, people who were killed were those whose continued lives were seen as a threat to the life of others and to the peace of the community. War was only taken to as the last resort: when all formal and normal courses of action to search for peace had failed. It is because of this deep love and profound respect for human life that the African sees any authentic development as development for-life; and all social progress as that towards full-life. From the perspective of this value, therefore, science and technology, for instance, must in consequence be for the promotion of life; their manufactured tools must be life-promoting instruments because life is of supreme value.

(VI) Traditional Method of Arbitration/Conflict Resolution

As a dispute settlement mechanism, arbitration is the submission of a disputed matter or misunderstanding between parties to an impartial third-party most often with the power to make a binding decision. In *Things Fall Apart* we see the *egwugwu* cult customary adjudication paradigm. The *egwugwu* conflict resolution mechanism functioned as the highest and final court in the land, where concerted effort is made to dispense justice without fear or favour among disputants. It was employed in the trial and settlement of the marital case/problem between Uzowulu and his wife Mgbafo, and the other great land ownership dispute case mentioned in the text immediately after the former one was settled (pp. 62-66). Actually, the people of *Umuofia* clan take this method of conflict resolution not only as an effective one but also as the last resort in many conflict resolution issues/dispute cases; for it is believed that the *egwugwu* cult masquerades (which represent the ancestral spirits of the land) make serious effort to be impartial in their verdicts and judgements. Here, judgement is normally based on *true evidence*.

The main interesting point here is the confidence Africans repose on *traditional method of arbitration* rooted in *communal reason and togetherness*, of which recorded adjudication harmony it has achieved in African societies, to a certain degree, continues to elude the Western litigation method especially in marital and landed property disputes. However, due to supposed honesty of the whole adjudication structure of the traditional method, appeal rights are limited. This type of judicial procedure is a phenomenon familiar from political and cultural anthropology. Although it arguably has some merits, it needs to be more logically modified so as to meet the challenges of life-realities in the contemporary

world of science and technology and beyond. Unlike this traditional method of adjudication, many contemporary Africans believe that litigation or adjudication in law courts does not guarantee *peaceful definitive* resolution of conflicts/disputes.

(VII) The *Ọzọ* Title Institution

There are many title-taking formations in traditional and modern African society designed for the celebration of wealth and social differentiation among the people, though the structure of these title and regulations guiding them varies from place to place. There are many references to taking of titles in *Ụmụọfịa* clan of *Things Fall Apart*; for instance, we read: “Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles...” (6). Also, we read: “The titled men and elders sat on their stools waiting for the trials to begin” (62).

In fact, title-taking institution is an important symbol of social status in the community life of the African people. Among the Igbo, there is the highly esteemed, most celebrated *Ọzọ* title system designed for males as chiefs in the community. The youths desire to rise to this high social rank of honour. Every male stakeholder in *Things Fall Apart* desired and longed to take the title as mark of an accomplished dignified life. On this point, in the text, in one of the discussions between Okonkwo and Obierika, we read: “‘I think it is good that our clan holds the *ọzọ* title in high esteem’, said Okonkwo” (48). To be sure, the deed of Obierika (an *ọzọ* titled man himself), who “managed” his friend’s (Okonkwo’s) yams while Okonkwo was in exile typifies the integrity and trust-worthy character of an *ọzọ* titled man in Igbo traditional society. Obierika neither appropriated the yams nor took the money he realized from those of them he sold, but he took the money to Okonkwo (in Mbanta) the owner of the yams. Thus, when Obierika visited Okonkwo in the second year of the latter’s exile the text reads:

When they had eaten, Obierika pointed at the two heavy bags.

That is the money from your yams’, he said. ‘I sold the big ones as soon as you left. Later on I sold some of the seed-yams and gave out others to share-croppers. I shall do that every year until you return. But I thought you would need the money now and so I brought it. Who knows what may happen tomorrow? Perhaps green men will come to our clan and shoot us (100).

The *Ọzọ* title is among the highest titles bestowed on individuals in traditional Igbo society, based on certain life-accomplishments and when one has worked for the progress of the community at large; it goes with all the rights and obligations associated with it (Agu 17). Abanuka notes that the *ọzọ* is a very prestigious socio-cultural establishment sufficiently widespread to be one of the well-known practices with great significance among the Igbo. He points out that although power and wealth play a role in determining the candidates for the *ọzọ* title conferment, traditionally, the interest of the establishment is not on wealth and power as such but on the cultivation of the human person taking note of the different circumstances which attend each person (86). Formerly, as recorded by Basden, an iron spear with a crownlike head of twisted iron, special thread/copper anklets, carrying of huge ivory horn etc., were parts of the regalia of *ọzọ* titled men in traditional Igbo society (262); however, the wave of modernity

has led to the modification of some of these regalia today. The *Ozọ* titled men are treated with utmost respect as trustworthy men of good character and truthfulness. Due to the dignity and certain privileges attached to this order, the members are undoubtedly great power in the land; the title bestows on them a measure of political authority and they really exercise widespread influence in the affairs of the community. The high level of integrity in word and deed expected from this category of elders in the community is what has continued to sustain the institution. Generally, title-taking of various types is still much alive in African societies today as one of the most significant African indigenous cultural values (of recognition) upheld by the African people.

Evaluation and Conclusion

It is important to understand that *the values of a given society are a function of its culture*. African societies have community-centered characteristics as a complex interdependent collectivity. From this perspective we understand that: "...the African worldview is tempered with the general guiding principle of the survival of the entire community and a sense of cooperation, interdependence, and collective responsibility" (Cobbah 320). It is noteworthy that the African believes in group cooperative solidarity and mutual accommodation; his society is one which emphasizes commonality rather than individuality.

African indigenous values are crucial to the very structure of the African world. These values shape the African society culturally, morally, socio-politically, economically, and religiously not only in the traditional set-up but also in the modern situation. In fact, they cannot be jettisoned without serious adverse consequences to the African perception of himself and the matrix of his interpersonal relationships in his community. An interrogation of these cultural values in the African tradition discloses that they are indispensable for African identity and are a veritably real unique guide for Africa's continued *genuine* socio-cultural developmental progress.

However, within a changing world, with the pervasive influence of westernization and globalization—historical profound experiences that have impacted much on the complexion of the traditional African society and its values—some of these African indigenous values have been affected, vitiated, or are being eroded. Thus, they need to be restored. It is the case that uncritical adoption of some elements of Western values has destabilized the African socio-politico-economic structure through the promotion of individualism instead of communitarianism on which the African society is built. Nevertheless, the basic Afrocentric core values of traditional African society still remain. It is therefore incumbent on Africans to make genuine concerted effort to re-evaluate, preserve and maintain these African indigenous values in so far as they respect the dignity of the human person. This is the way forward that would rid Africa of value crisis in certain areas of contemporary African existential living. We insist that any unhealthy activities against the ideals of the community should be eliminated wherever they exist in African society for the common good and well-being of the African people. To live authentically in the contemporary world, one must include into the equation of one's action, the effects of one's action or conduct on the community and the world at large; and the ideals and values of the community somewhat guide and assist us in doing this.

In the face of current global realities and challenges, we submit that the African indigenous values should be made more relevant in the day-to-day life of contemporary Africans; they have to be upheld for they give character to the African community and keep it together. Continued civilization, development, and socio-cultural progress of the African people lie squarely in conscious promotion of the African indigenous values and heritages of the continent some of which are depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This task is a collective responsibility of every African and of every African nation.

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