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Adaptations of Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Comparative Study of *Othello* and Ahmed Yerima's *Otaelo*

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Abstract

Adaptation is one the fertile grounds of literary scholars both in criticisms and writing. And there is no doubt that series of literary figures have succeeded in this both nationally and internationally. It is also an avenue for discourses and counter-discourses thereby engendering the scope of literature. Writers like Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi among others have excelled in this regard making references to Western literary works intertextually to foreground their ideologies and the literary world in turn gives them attention. The purpose of the paper is to explore the adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy Othello by the Nigerian playwright, Ahmed Yerima and examine the intertextuality of *Othello* in the construction of Yerima's *Otaelo.* The paper gives insights into the European and African cultural backgrounds of the two playwrights and their influences on the construction of both plays. It is thus discovered that the field of adaption in literary discourse helps to unravel lots of meanings in the original text of adaption and at the same time reflecting the socio-politcal and cultural tradition of the adopted culture. Therefore, this paper posits that postcolonial writers who parody European texts should not stop at just trying to rewrite the texts but find a means of making such works fit into African realities. There is no gainsaying about the fact that Armed Yerima, through improvisation, produced a play that successfully plants a European text on African soil.

Key words: Adaptation, Shakespeare, Othello, Otaelo, Postcoloniality and Osu Caste.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of identity and representation have been the predominant themes in postcolonial discourse. Apart from having a personal identity, members of each community also have a

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sense of who they are in relation to the larger community. How the identities, both personal and national, are represented by Europeans have been the preoccupation of the postcolonial authors. Postcolonial study is then an attempt to strip off Europeans' conventional perspective and explore what national identity might be for the postcolonial subjects - erstwhile colonies and their people. In this case, we pay attention to the original or a more representative voice which can give the true information about the existence of the colonial subject. Thus the postcolonial author who wants to have a claim to this Herculean task must have been well grounded in the knowledge of the colonial records and the past of the colonial subjects he/she claims to represent. However, to do this i.e. representing the colonial subjects' voices, is a huge undertaking.

One of the ways through which the authors or representatives of the colonial subjects have responded to the European writings is by adapting previous works of western classics into the African context. This has served as one way in which the postcolonial authors 'write back' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffen 2002; Gilbert and Tompkins, 2002; Acheraiou, 2011). This intertextual approach to the reading of western classics often gives writers and readers the fictional space both to respond to the socio-political and cultural puzzles established by colonial critics. It also affords the writer to explore the postcolonial presence in their contemporary context.

This paper begins by establishing Shakespeare's *Othello* from the perspective of European interstice with Africa. The presentation of Othello as a black character and what accounted for the representation will be exhaustively examined as the African-Canadian playwright, Sears (1997), points out that "Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature" (p.41). The paper treats both the historical and cultural nuances that informed the construction of *Othello* as a race-oriented text. Also Ibo culture will be used as a point of reference since it serves as the cultural background for the conception of *Otaelo.* The cultural influences that shaped these two plays are important to establish whether there had been any intertextual link between Africa and Europe of the seventeenth century and how this has helped Ahmed Yerima in constructing his adaptation of the Shakespeare's *Othello*. This paper adopts counter-discourse as a theoretical framework.

The paper's choice of counter-discourse as theoretical framework is premised on the fact that rewriting the cannons is a form of 'writing back' to the world and the culture that produced them. Tomkins (1995) designates this device as counter-discourse that "rewrites (or re-presents) a 'classical' text (or part thereof)" (pp. 42-43). The term 'counter-discourse' was coined by Terdiman (1990) to connote the theory and practice of symbolic resistance (Ashcroft, Grifiths and Tiffen p. 56). He affirms that "confrontation between constituted reality and its subversion occurs at the point where cultural and historical change occurred" (p. 13). Terdiman's concept of counter-discourse has been adapted by postcolonial critics to describe ways in which particular post-colonial authors have challenged dominant discourses, though these critics theorise "counter-discourse" less in terms of historical processes and literary movements than

in terms of challenges posed to imperial ideologies inculcated, stabilised, and specifically maintained through texts employed in colonialist education systems (Ashcroft *et al*. p. 56). As Tiffen (1988) observed, postcolonial writing questions discourses and discursive strategies and re-reading European historical and fictional records enables scholars to pinpoint subversive maneuvers that postcolonial writers use to subvert notions of literary universality. It is believed that postcolonial authors like Ahmed Yerima are not just writing back to Othello or Shakespeare. They rather writes as a counter discourse to the culture that produced the text.

The term 'adaptation' has been under constant scrutiny in postcolonial study. It was derived from the Latin word 'adaptare', which itself is a term in Biology. It refers to a process by which organisms or species adjust themselves to become better suited to their environment to enhance their survival. It was imported into Literature as a result of the observation that texts do not exist in isolation and that new texts are created through translation. Viewing adaptation from the perspective of translation, Sager (1997) sees it as:

> a complex adaptation is seen as a complex process that may involve translation techniques that could as well lead to the change in the content of the original. If we consider the source material for translation to consist of content, linguistic form and a purpose (a writer intention and a reader expectation) we now accept that beside the obligatory change of linguistic form, the other two elements can also undergo modifications in translation (p. 32).

According to Kristeva (1984) "any text is the absorption and transformation of another." Adaptation therefore, involves a process of representing, in a new form, a previous text produced by another author in a different culture. Eigen and Weigand (2004) assert that "adaptation is revisiting a literary work that has captivated the readers and uses a creative medium of one's choice to express something new" (cited in Isama, 2024, p. 89). As Weyenberg (2013) puts it "'Adaptation', conversely, manages to convey the sense in which the pre-text is itself a changing object. This is also implied in the biological origin of the term, referring to the process by which an organism is modified to fit and survive in new conditions (p. x).

The first set of texts to enjoy adaptation to other cultures were works by Greek writers. This gives credence to the claim that western tradition is a subset of Greek tradition (Highet, 1987). Therefore, 'we' all are grandsons of the Greek tradition. Opinions such as this have valourised the belief that Greek remains the origin of most civilisations hence adaptations of her texts and values propagate her cultural superiority and promote Eurocentrism. The idea of looking at civilization as a unidimensional trajectory has been challenged by Bernal in her work (2006). She does not only question the authenticity of the claim of Highet but she also establishes that the Greek and Roman civilisations are blends of other civilisations from Asia and Africa. The implication of her theory, if proven right, is that Western civilisation is partly African in origin thus rendering the idea of whites' racial superiority untenable. She asserts:

> I think it is an important one for blacks, who have been told, "There are no – and never have been – black civilisations." The implication is that there never can be: "You blacks are inherently uncivilised, and if you want any civilisation you must become like us whites." I think recognition of Egypt as an African civilisation with a central role in the formation of Greece – the critical culture in the making of European civilisation – changes black self-perception. To put it another way, I hope to oppose this view to negritude – Léopold Senghor's notion that black Africa is feeling and Greece is intellect (p. xxxviii).

Decentering knowledge and tradition in this way helps to view them as belonging collectively to the two poles. According to Weyenberg (2013), adaptations are all about this bipolar relations where the knowledge base becomes a shared terrain. Through the double perspective, adaptations prompt readers to "complement the internal Western vision we developed of ourselves and of Classics (too often relying upon essentialism and universalism), with an external one: an appreciation coming from abroad, from intercultural and post-colonial perspectives" (p. xxii). This might amount to a beautiful exercise in informing us of our place in history and culture." (Decreus, 2007, p. 263-264). The purpose is not to discredit the canons but to preserve it (Isama, 2024) and present alternative narratives to show that humanity is one. *Othello* then becomes a multifaceted text in its origin thus submitting itself to the possibilities of being adapted to other culture as adaptation "implies a bidirectional influence between object text and pretext and between present and past" (Weyenberg 2013, p. xxv).

Shakespeare and Postcolonial Writers/Critics

A scene in Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1975) aptly depicts most postcolonial writers' attitude towards the cannons and their writings. In the scene, Walcott presents Shakespeare and other promulgators (cannons) of white Western culture to face trial and they were almost hanged before the wife of the devil, "the white witch…. The white light" is beheaded. Basil, who symbolises death in the play rolls out a list of western writers who are known to be cannons and admonished Tribes who stand as the judge "to banish them from the archives of the bo-leaf and the papyrus, from the waxen tablet and the tribal stone" (p. 312). Banishing the cannons from these media is like a call to activism by postcolonial writers. Responses to the calls appear in the form of decolonisation, adaptation and other efforts geared toward frustrating colonial remnants. Expectedly, Shakespeare is one of the cannons that are to be banished though he is not hanged. No wonder his works have been the most transposed/adapted in postcolonial contexts all over the world. The most pertinent question is: why did Shakespeare merit mentioning among the cannons who are to be hanged?

Apart from the fact that Shakespeare's plays lend themselves to a postcolonial reading, proselytisation and colonial education have helped in the circulation of Shakespeare's works throughout the world. Tompkins (1995) corroborates this fact when he asserts that Shakespeare's works figures prominently "as targets of counter-discourse because of their

circulation during the propagation of colonial education to create and maintain British hegemony throughout the history of British Empire" (p. 19).

> Given the legacy of a colonialist education which perpetuates, through literature, very specific socio-cultural values in the guise of universal truth, it is not surprising that a prominent endeavour among colonised writers/artists has been to rework the European 'classics' in order to invest them with more local relevance and to divest them of their assumed authority/authenticity Gilbert and Tompkins (2002, p. 16).

This came in the form of imposing of Shakespeare's works, especially his plays, in the education curriculum of the colonised states. In his book, *Mask of Conquest*, Viswanathan gives insights into how English language and Literature contributed immensely to the propagation of imperialism and colonialism. Though his work is focused on colonial education in India, the same method and procedure were replicated in all British colonial outposts. According to Viswanathan, Shakespeare texts, especially plays, were made compulsory for pupils and English was made the medium of instruction. Therefore Shakespeare's texts, become a mask for economic exploitation camouflaging the material activities of the colonisers and thus he became "a prime signifier of imperial cultural authority" (Tompkins, p. 15) in former British colonies.

Close to a century after the independence of most of the British colonies, Shakespeare's influence is far from diminishing as his works feature prominently in the colonies' education curriculum of humanities. It is near impossible to be a graduate in humanities without studying any of Shakespeare's texts. Major examination bodies in Nigeria and other African countries make some of his works prerequisites for candidates of their examinations. These evidences show the importance and influence of colonialism on education of the erstwhile colonies and how Shakespeare remains the face of the colonial system. Hence, the reason for Shakespeare's hatred in the postcolonial communities. He is listed among Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Galileo, Abraham Lincoln and Flourence Nightingale and the white witch, the mother of civilisation and inventor of blackness.

Trope of Blackness and Osu Caste System

The New Cambridge Edition of *Othello* fixed the year 1604 as the year in which the first performance of *Othello* took place. At this time, Africa had just been opened to Europe. It was the beginning of the European contact with Africans. It was evident in the documented history of England that the Queen Elizabeth who died in 1602 made an edict for the expulsion of the black people from England:

> Whereas the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negroes and blackamours which (as she is

> informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and king of Spain (author's emphasis); who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co (vet) (sic) the relief which these people consumer, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or His Gospel, hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realm; and to that end and purpose hath appointed Casper Van Senden, merchant of Lubeck, for their speedy transportation (qtd in Mafe,2003, p. ii).

From this passage it is deduced that there was Africans' presence in England before the construction of the Shakespeare's *Othello*. The excerpt portrays purported racism and discrimination against the blacks in England in the century under discussion. It also talks briefly on what brought the Negroes to England – slave trade, and the reasons for the edict being religion, population and economy since the queen's "natural subjects" and "liege people" were losing their reliefs to 'infidels'. The edict thus set the concept of binary oppositions as it is in postcolonial discourse.

Shakespeare without doubt, relied on his experience of "Negroes and blackamours" in their (Europeans) midst in the construction of his leading character, Othello. The available literary accounts in the early modern period show that 'Moor' was a synonym for 'Negro' (Lim, 1998, Johnson 1986). Othello himself makes reference to the budding slave trade in the play. He says:

> "Of being taken by the insolent foe
> And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
> And portance in my travel's history
> And of the Cannibals that each other eat
> The Anthropophagy and men whose heads
> Grew beneath their shoulders." (*Othello*, pp. 134 – 44)

This assertion points to the meeting point between the play and history.

While history and racism occupy a major place in Shakespeare's *Othello*, culture and discrimination do the same in Ahmed Yerima's *Otaelo*. To establish the textual link between the two texts, it is necessary to trace the Igbo history at the time *Othello* appeared in England – the culture that gave impetus to the adaptation, is also important. Ahmed Yerima clearly attempts to signify accurate Igbo customs and culture in his African version of *Othello*. The issue of the Igbo caste system occupies the central focus in the play. It is therefore, pertinent to discuss the caste system practised in Igboland before, during and probably after the colonial period.

Igbo as a people is one of the three major tribes in Nigeria. They occupy the south eastern part of the country. The people began to occupy the present Igboland five thousand years ago

(Isichei, 1976, p. 3). As a society, the people are profoundly religious. They believe in *Tshinku* as the supreme God and other lesser gods are worshipped as deities. Each of these deities has its own priest and worshipers. Like other tribes in West Africa, a man may belong to one or more cults of these gods. Since they approach their religion with a great seriousness and sacredness people, properties e.t.c. are given as offerings to the gods in order to get blessings in return for their services. They also believe in their ancestors who are represented by carved masks, images and charms (Bleeker, 1969). Each Igbo man has his Chi-a personal deity which is held in high esteem.

Though many of the sources on Igbo cultural system are silent on the Oru and Osu Caste system, there are some few ones that touch the topic. Isichei (1983) and Basden (1966) trace the origin of Oru and Osu to Igbo religious and socio-economic practices. As Barden (1967) points out, Osu is traceable to slavery in Igbo society. The term Osu connotes slavery to the gods. An Osu is the property of a god – a living sacrifice (Barden, 246). Barden suggests three ways through which a man can become the 'property of the gods'. A man could be offered to a deity to provoke blessing on the community or when seeking relief in times of distress he/she could run to the shrine (god) for protection against danger or oppression and thus became an Osu. In return for benefit of sanctuary, such a man or woman forfeited liberty and became an 'Osu', the property of the deity. The third means could be by birth - all children born under the two conditions stated above are "ipso facto" slaves of the gods.

Barden (1967) opines that for about four generations to this time, Osus were held in honourable position in Igbo society. He affirms that it was the coming of the slave trade that brought it into degradation and "caused it to its present unhappy condition". He writes:

> The system (Osu) became bound up with Slave Trade and, while some victims were sold as slaves ("Iru" = plural for "Oru") others were devoted to the local gods. Gradually, whatever respect there may have been towards them decreased, and finally disappeared, fear of malice may have prompted segregation or, again, by refraining from association, liability to injure an "Osu" was avoided. It were better for the ordinary man to keep apart from the "Osus' lest he falls into trouble. For the same reasons marriage between a free-born and an "osu" appeared unwise and may involve many risks (Barden, p. 246).

Balogun's (2013) position on the emergence of Osu caste system varies from Barden's version. According to him, the system was intended to function as a religious institution dedicated to engage in the service to the god of land. Members of the institution were to take care of the god's shrines and offer rituals to the gods on behalf of its worshippers. That had been the status quo until the manipulations to castigate Osus as abominations were brought about by Nri people who proclaimed themselves to have powers to declare other people as clean or unclean.

To this end, "Osu" caste system has brought more woes than blessings both to its victims and the community at large. Today, before a lady from Igbo selects a husband from her own

root, she has to ascertain the family background of the proposed husband because her family may reject him if he is from Osu family – it is an abomination for a free born to marry from "Osu" stalk. This practice is best captured by Achebe through Kiaga, a character in *Things Fall Apart* who describes Osu as:

> A person dedicated to the gods, a thing set apart—a taboo forever and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by a freeborn. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden cast-long, tangled dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they in turn, could not shelter him under their roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? (p. 157)

The system has ruined many communities and the joy of many families turned to sorrow. This has prompted some communities to end the practices. Though the fault is not in the system, the people who have changed it to satisfy their own end are to blame.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *OTHELLO* AND *OTAELO*

Having presented the historical and cultural backgrounds that informed the conception of the two texts, it is time to delve into the texts to explore the links. Ahmed has clearly followed the story of Othello very closely in *Otaelo*, substituting Othello, the Shakespeare leading character, with Otaelo. In both texts, the names of the leading characters serve as the title of both works. But Yerima's Otaelo takes more than the title as the playwright expresses in his author's note "Otaelo … means a man who chews and finds it difficult to swallow…"

Character anticipation is a peculiar way postcolonial authors transpose European texts. In this case, Otaelo replaces Othello, Agbo replaces lago, Ichiagu replaces Cassius and Chinyere, Desdemona. Though the leading characters suffer similar blemish, Otaelo's seems to be more pronounced. This is because the issue of colour in seventeenth century Britain is not held in disdain as the Osu caste system. It can be said that being of Osu descent is an abomination in Igboland. Although Shakespeare fails to give us report of the war and its aftermath, the feeling of the community in general portrays the level of hatred towards Otaelo. Even Igwe's gratitude to Otaelo for saving his life could not draw any iota of sympathy from the audience. No wonder while Igwe and the other warriors were dancing after winning the battle, the leading warrior, Otaelo, did not join them because he was an outcast. It is even forbidden for Igwe to have taken Otaelo to war. This is depicted in this conversation between Ebele and Odike in scene II:

Ebele: I never knew the gods would be with Igwe
Odike: Why?

Ebele: We committed an abomination by taking an Osu along with him. Ikuku warned him. I was there, but he insisted. He should have taken some slaves with him instead of an Osu.
Odiku: The earth god, Ala, smiles the Osu.
Ebele: Does he? A slave is still better than an Osu, a million times. Now it is sweet but when the gods react we shall see. (14)

In another scene, Agbo remarks that "An Osu is no man … but food for the gods … an Osu is worse than the lowest animals" (p. 38). In other words, it is believed that nothing good could have come through Osu. Even slaves were more important than Osu in the status stratification of the Igbo people.

Like Shakespeare's Othello, Otaelo is also a valiant warrior who plays no little part in bringing victory to the Igwe's army. Otaelo is also heroic and noble, loved by Chinyere as Othello is loved by Desdemona. But there is a large gap between Shakespeare's Othello and Yerima's Otaelo. Certainly, this is accounted for in the roles both characters perform or are allowed to perform by the playwrights. Shakespeare's is a hero that enjoys unlimited space to perform. He is a soldier on whose hand the command of the forces of the greatest empire of the Shakespeare's day is entrusted. He is directly involved in courting Desdemona, so eloquent and well composed, a great storyteller. When accused of bewitching Desdemona, he tells a story about how he hypnotized the girl through his stories:

"Her father loves me, often invited me, still questioned me the story of my life. From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes that I have passed" (*Otaelo,* p. 30).

While Othello himself is allowed to give the audience most of the relevant facts about himself, Otaelo is overshadowed by the author and the culture he chose. Probably Yerima intentionally employed this to foreground the Osu status that berates his hero. Unlike Othello, Yerima's Otaelo is far from being eloquent. He only believes in action. No wonder he demands wrestling combat before he finally strangles Ichiagu, his imagined betrayer.

Despite these differences, Othello and Otaelo still share some similarities. They believe all things. This is their natural inclination and they are innocent but the latter, Otaelo, is heady. He is persuaded to abandon his dream of marrying the princess and return to Ala, his god, yet he refuses, (p. 35.) the privilege Shakespeare's Othello does not have.

While time may prevent this paper from addressing Othello's numerous other characteristics, there is one literary device that must be addressed because it cannot be overlooked when considering major elements that shape the plot of Shakespeare' *Othello*. The element is the famous handkerchief that Othello gives Desdemona. It cannot be jettisoned because of its significance in Shakespeare's conception of Othello as an African. Mafe (2003) says that the handkerchief portrays a strong association between 'Africanness' and the occult (p. 21). Othello himself reveals that the handkerchief was bestowed on his mother by the Egyptian Charmer. Johnson (quoted in Mafe 2004) presents the handkerchief as Juju in his study of *Othello*. Like the African juju, the handkerchief has been ritualistically constructed:

There's magic in the web of it
A sibyl that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sowed the work;
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was died in mummy which the skillful
conserved of maidens' hearts (*Othello*, pp. 469-475).

To know the significance of the substance, it will be necessary to explore the materials used in consecrating it. These include one, 'sibyl's fluid drained from embalmed maidens' heart and the substance concocted in the sibyl's prophetic fury'. The construction of the handkerchief in prophetic fury parallels Nassan's (1969) description of fetish making.

Mafe (2003) argues that though early modern England had its own superstitions and beliefs relating to magic and sorcery, concepts like fetishism and juju are specifically tied to Africa. She adds that "The handkerchief is also prepared with specific substances that are "appropriate to the end in view". The sibyl choice of the fluids drained from embalmed maidens' hearts is clearly linked to the handkerchief to keep maidens desirable for their husbands" (Mafe 2003, p. 34). The handkerchief's importance is further foregrounded by the spiritual links it shares with Othello's lineage. Its benevolent properties are conditioned upon its retention within Othello's family. The charmer who gave it to Othello's mother warms thus: "If she lost it/ Or made a gift of it, my father's eye/ Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt/ After new fancies" (pp. 60-63). In fulfillment of this curse, Othello begins to loathe his wife. Also the handkerchief serves as the Shakespeare's opportunity to juxtapose African practice of juju or fetishism which is implicitly negative in a western context. It affords Shakespeare the perfection of the plot of this play for its spiritual and literary essence in the play.

Yerima's approach in *Otaelo* on the issue of the handkerchief is improvisational. He replaced it with jigida, an ornament tied to women's waist. In comparison, Yerima replaces substance of less import in the 'jigida' with the handkerchief. This is because the jigida possessed no spiritual essence – its importance is only seen in the place where it is tied. For any man to get there (Chinyere's waist), there must have been compromise on the part of the princess. Hence, Chinyere is accused of infidelity without any spiritual attachment. This absolutely trivialises the original plot and nullifies the measure of pity Otaelo may exemplify from the audience. The trope of the handkerchief is a key element in the plot of Othello. Dropping it may have had a great negative influence in the construction of Otaelo, though he succeeded in bringing in some other African sensibilities. Beyond such situations as above, *Otaelo* contrasts with Shakespeare's method of western theatre by introducing music and dance. As Soyinka (1976) has emphasized the importance of music and dance in African drama. According to him, both terms form an integral part of African theatre. The war dance by Igwe and his itinerant makes the work typically African. This is coupled with the extended family system and the reference accorded to the gods as done in Igbo society.

Conclusion

Forsyth's (2006) view that the success of an adaptation rests on the extent to which it succeeds in returning to the original is very important to the conclusion of this paper. Apart from following the plot of the original text, the playwright introduces some African aesthetic features. The war dance by Igwe and his itinerant and the extended family system in the play make the work typically African. Yet Yerima does not deviate from the themes of jealousy and hatred that pervade the original text. This feat is commendable. Comparing these two texts and the two worlds that produced them has given insight into the difficult task of rewriting postcolonial texts. Since the playwright's purpose was just to adapt the play "into our language, into our cultural reality, into our human, social and religion sensibilities", he did a good job. But the writers in postcolonial literature should have an eye for the least theme and occurrence in rewriting works by western writers.

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