

TRADITIONAL NIGERIAN THEATRE, IDEOLOGY AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION: IGBO MASQUERADE AND FOLKTALE PERFORMANCES AS EXAMPLES.

IFEANYI UGWU (Ph.D)
Department of Theatre and Film Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's socio-political and economic problems have largely defied scientific, technological and commercial moves towards lasting solutions. Scarcity of essential commodities is on the increase, insecurity of life and property looms high in the horizon, necessary resources for quality teaching and learning in the educational sector are still far from sight. The country's leadership is not crossing its legs, savouring the conundrum – or is it?

Although a lot has been done, and no lasting solution has been in view, all hope is not lost. This paper posits that the answer to the national question – the challenges of the nation – can be sought in the ideological manifestations of traditional Nigerian theatre, particularly the masquerade and the folk-tale performances. Ideology refers to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular class of people. Example, it can refer to the ideas which underlie the activities of particular professional groups (Storey 3) Hence, ideological manifestations of the traditional Nigerian theatre comprise the motivating factors, the essential notions and the obvious ideas that sustain it. These include the belief systems, customs and traditions that underlie the theatre, which manifest through performances. Ideologies can be called to service while discussing the national question, for purposes of clarifying the principles underlying the nation's challenges and adducing solutions.

Traditional Nigerian theatre is, therefore, a microcosm of ideologies, which this paper seeks to explore and – ultimately-collate as reference points in analyzing the country's socio-political ills and recommending solutions. Igbo masquerade and folktale performances are used as examples.

IDEOLOGY AND THE IGBO MASQUERADE THEATRE

Studies done by scholars like Simon Ottenberg (1975), Nnabuenyi Ugonna (1984), Emeka Nwabueze (1986), Ossie Enekwe (1987), David Kerr (1995), have established that the masquerade performance in Igboland is a traditional African theatre. The ideological manifestations of this theatre are inextricably connected with the traditional conceptualizations of the masquerade character, its social functions and dramatic skills, its relationship with the audience. The traditional ideating of the masquerades as spirits of ancestors, informs its connection with religious and spiritual ideologies. Its social functions and dramatizations point at its ethical, semiotic, and aesthetic ideologies, while its audience relationship portrays its patriarchal standards. The audience factor also portrays the masquerade's communalist ideology.

The religious, spiritualist, ethical, patriarchal, communalist and aesthetic ideologies are singled out here to be elaborated for purpose of this study. Viewing the religious ideology, David Kerr maintains that "masquerades (since pre-colonial Africa) were usually based on ancestor worship" (6). Supporting this position, Emeka Nwabueze states that the masquerade "is a revered Igbo ancestor" (50). These suggestions signify religious ideology which is quickly corroborated by Oseloka Osadebe's comment that the masquerade is "an essential social instrument, well founded on solid, religious basis" (45).

The conceptualization of the masquerade as spirits of the dead – '*Mmonwu*', '*Mmanwu*' or '*Mmuo*', in Igbo culture area; '*Egungun*' in Yoruba land, '*Egwu*' or '*Eguata*' in Igala area, '*Alekwu*' in Idoma, '*Ekpo*' in Efik, and '*Ekpe*' in Ibibio, portray its widespread ideology of spiritualism. Ossie Enekwe expresses that the masquerade is a manifestation of extra-human forces in the human sphere (56), while Osadebe further avers that "the masquerade is a means of instant impersonation in the embodiment of ghosts or the assuming of the role of spirits" (45). The theatrical implication of the masking tradition consists largely in its elements of impersonation or imitation, which Aristotle highlights as an essence in his definition of drama. Therefore; the extent to which the masquerade succeeds in imitating the spirits of ancestors, or any human entity that it sets out to mimic, determines its functional effectiveness.

As a god that shows benevolence, punishes where necessary and attends to the people's requests, the masquerades throughout its theatrical display, inspires awe and loyalty. It is sincerely and faithfully worshipped and revered in their performances, during which the acting space comprises village paths, village common or market square, some masquerades in Igboland enforce moral rectitude, justice and communal tasks. The category of masks well known for this function is the nocturnal masquerade whose main acting instrument is his voice. A hand prop that makes deep, grotesque sounds when it is swung round in mid air, as well as a device – '*Ize-ma*' – used to make the voice of the masquerade sound guttural, jargled and grotesque, are employed. The weird voice of the nocturnal agent and the fearful sound that accompany it lend to the darkness of the night, a sure feeling of spirit presence.

This 'night spirit' is called '*Ayaka*', '*Ajukwu*' (*Achukwu*), '*Onyekulum*' (*Onyekurunye*)' or '*Osulugwogwo*'. There are usually a large number of this mask that parade the close peripheries of people's homes, singing lampoons, calling derogatory names and exposing the deeds of criminals within the community, warning them to repent before nemesis overtakes them from the ancestral realm. Their audiences, therefore, are people lying behind their heavily locked doors. In dead silence, they listen and imagine the grotesque costume and make-up worn by the mysterious, ethereal elements.

Some lampooning masquerades operate in the day time in the presence of people they indict. In his study of '*Okumkpo*' masks of Afikpo, Simon Ottenberg notes that the masquerades fulfill satirical roles. During the performances, the masks do not mince words in calling the names of people who exhibit anti-social behaviours. The immunity of the masked actors as supernatural beings encourages them to speak without fear of litigation or attack. Outside Igbo land, satirical masks can be exemplified by the Yoruba '*Egungun*' known as '*Apidan*' and '*Onidan*' which constitute satirical troupes, ridiculing evil people. "These '*Egungun*' companies present a spectacle which is a mixture of carnival, ballet and satirical revue" (Ricard 48).

The activities of the night and satirical masks signify the ethical ideology of the theatre. In this perspective, the interests and aspirations of the performance are to sanitize the society by ridding it of evils. A similar indicator of ethical ideology is the activity of belligerent masquerades which troupe to the domains of citizens that fail in their communal

duties, break communal laws and taboos or forment interpersonal or family conflicts. These masks apprehend their victims, belabour them and sometimes impound their properties. In Unadu town of Igbo-Eze South Local Government, “the ‘*Esato*’ masquerade forces heady members of the community to comply with village regulations” (Eze, interview). Fear of this punishment deters crimes and immorality.

The theatricality of these social involvements are the humorous and mimetic movements of the masked actors at the points of action. They mimic, through dance, song and movement, the physical attributes of their victims thereby providing entertainment for the spectators who, as human beings, derive pleasure in ridiculous situations.

Masquerades that function as vigilante in the community also manifest ethical ideology due to their efficacy in warding off thieves, burglars and possibly, evil spirits, witches and wizards. The masks use their occult and spiritual endowments to act. They parade the village paths during the day, but at night they are armed with dane guns to shoot at any clandestine infiltrator. In Obollo Eke, Udenu Local Government, particular masquerades identified as ‘*Akatakpa-Obollo*’ and ‘*Omabe-Oche*’ execute these functions.

The ideology of patriarchy – ideas, beliefs and attitudes that promote male control of the society – is obvious in the masquerade performance. In the masking tradition of the Igbo, men distort, conceal, and mask the true nature of the performance machinery. The deliberate falsehood operates in the interest of the ‘ruling class’ – men – against the interest of the ruled – women. Consequently, mystery, fear and obedience are forced on the women. Describing the ‘*Okumkpo*’ masquerade performance, Kerr further points out the marginal status of women in the theatre, when he opines that “... women were not allowed to have any contact with ‘*Okumkpo*’ and so could not vent their grievance against a male – dominated society... (7). Simon Ottenberg corroborates this subjugating tendency in his opinion that when a performance is on course at the village common, “the elders and the more prominent male members of the audience occupy vantage viewing positions while women and children are edged into the sun or some other uncomfortable corners to watch the events” (96). In many other Igbo settings like Nsukka, Umuoka, Abo, Awka; parts of Imo and Abia states, the patriarchal practice also predisposes the female gender to similar situations, especially where shades and halls are not sufficient for the audiences to sit or stand and watch the play.

Writing on *Mmonwu: The Dramatic Tradition of the Igbo*, which, according to him, has basically developed in the heart of Igboland, in areas like “Owerre (Owerri) Ọkigwe (Ọkigwe), Ọlu (Orlu), and Ọka (Awka), Nnabuenyi Ugonna reports that while a performance progresses, female members of the audience are the main targets of rough and cane carrying masquerades. “The uninitiated, the women and the children run away in terror as some belligerent masks, mainly the ‘*Akakpo*’ give them the dramatic chase” (160).

In his exposition of this gender inequality, Onuora Nzekwu maintains that:

Women have been excluded from sharing in the secrets for they are weak and fickle, and are therefore not fit to take part in them. They are also mysterious and sometimes unclean (134).

This patriarchal ideology is not peculiar to Igbo masking. Discussing the cult of masquerade among the Igala of Nigeria, John Sani Illah remarks:

No woman, no matter her age (there may be rare exceptions of priestesses or those that live in priestly abstemiousness) can be an initiate. Neither are they allowed to enter a cult-house or pry into the mysteries of the masquerade (*ewoli egwu*). It is believed that women are weak and cannot keep the secrets of the masquerade. Moreover, it is also believed that they could pollute the process of communion with the ancestors at certain states, for example during their monthly periods (62).

The theatre also manifests the ideology of communalism. The performance occurs within the context of festivals, funerary rituals and other celebrative events. During the festival, for instance, friends and relations from neighbouring quarters converge at the village common, with members of the host community, making merry and being treated to the pleasure of dance, music, costume, charts, crafts and other arts. Celebrants reaffirm their communal bonds, interacting and sharing as members of one communal entity.

The aesthetic ideology of the masquerade theatre in Igboland is illustrated by its concern for what Damian Opata calls “the elegant and visually satisfying”, which “does not rest only on appearance, but perhaps on the problematic expression: mimesis (a Greek term for imitation of action) (87). A masquerade that depicts elegance, beauty and glamour is ‘*Agbogho mmonwu*’ – found in many localities of Igboland-depicting beautiful young maidens who died just before they consummated their marriage rites (Enekwe 97). Others are ‘*Ekpe*’ – translated as ‘beauty’; ‘*Ekwe*’ - glamour; ‘*ijele*’ – magnificent, royal, colorful and artistic. These masquerades do not only display their beauty and glamour, they also strive to mimic, move, dance, use gestures with artistic skill in order to approximate the exact qualities that they represent. Any shortfall in this mimetic attempt attracts grumbles and indictment from knowledgeable members of the audience. In certain circumstances, an elder or any experienced initiate corners an unskilled, masked actor into a hide-out to either admonish him, instruct him, make suggestion or even advise him to leave the arena. The masquerade, therefore, strives to satisfy the audience visually. When the actor uses his voice, he makes it pleasing to the ears of the audience. Generally, in movement, voice, costume, dramatization, the performance must satisfy the expectation of the audience or face communal sanctions.

So far, the religious, ethical, patriarchal, communalist and aesthetic ideologies of the Igbo masquerade theatre have been examined. It will also be revealing to explore Igbo folktales for ideological manifestations.

Ideological Manifestations in Igbo Folktale Performances

Folktales refer to very old and anonymous traditional stories that are passed from one generation to another in spoken form. They include myths, fables, tales of heroes (whether historical... or legendary), and fairy tales” (Abrams 125). Folktales also refer to invented stories by known narrators, many of who achieve written forms of their tales. As theatre, narrative events involve a narrator telling stories, such as animal tales, mythical and legendary achievements, and heroic deeds. According to Toni Duruaku:

The single narrator sometimes acts out the roles, switching from character to character as he tells the story. The more a story teller does this role switch well, the more proficient he is said to be (19).

Folk enactments, involve dance, mime, music and other artforms. Ozidi Saga in Ijo Village of Toro Arua, Rivers State, is a folktale relating the mythological story of the people, 'kwagh-hir' of the Tiv people in Benue State is a famous and "wide-spread" story-telling performance in Nigeria. It features a story teller, "who walks, leaps and runs round the arena, calling out the theme of the traditional legend or the newly created tale" (Harper 27). Traditionally, in Igboland, this enactment is also experienced in moonlight games.

Some Nigerian writers have invented tales based on indigenous materials, with which they crafted literary drama. Examples: Sam Ukala employed folktales to craft his plays like *Akpakaland* and *Placenta of Death*. Femi Osofisan used the myth of Moremi to build a literary drama entitled *Morountodun*. Igbo folktales articulate various ideologies which are ethical, mythical, humorous, spiritualist, occultist, class-conscious, collectivist and others. Each tale exhibits possibilities of portraying more than a single ideology. For instance, the Igbo tales of how the tortoise often outwits other animals portray humorous, collectivist and ethical ideologies. The ridiculous and funny situations weaved into the tales create a deep impact of humour, while the collective force usually organized by other animals to deal with the tortoise whenever he pulls a fast one on them, does not only convey the ideology of collectivism but also, a vengeful culture.

What the tortoise suffers as consequences of his intrigues, points at an ethical theme, stressing what is right to do and what is not. The humorous ideals of Igbo tales are also portrayed in the ridiculous stories of how smaller animals have exploited the elephant's large bulk to tackle their generally impossible tasks. It becomes humorous to imagine the elephant throwing in its large bulk stupidly and getting wounded without really achieving the set objective. This means that bulk is not always might.

There is a tale of how the powerful lion caught in a web, begs a rat – passing by – to save him. The rat does so after the lion has vowed not to devour it. But when the lion is released from the web, it gets hold of the rat for destruction. Some ethical questions are obvious, such as: is it not right to render help to a fellow being? If someone's goodness can lead to his demise, should goodness be thrown to the winds? Ethics, demands that one good turn deserves another. Goodness is promoted when it is well reciprocated. Also conveying an ethical idea is the tale of a young maiden, who rejects poor suitors and accepts a limbless creature that is disguised as a very rich and handsome person. The story conveys the idea

that many young girls fall into the same trap as the above, and should, therefore, learn how wrong it is to be inordinately materialistic in choosing life partners.

Fairy tales relating numerous encounters of men and women with ghosts of different shapes and sizes, inhabiting various mysterious trees, woods or objects, point at the Igbo sense of spiritualism and occultism. Often, these men who encounter the spirits, employ charms and other occultic powers to regain their grounds when the spirits mesmerize them. Occultic consciousness is also obvious in the tales that portray heroes using their charms to perform supernatural and magical feats, do impossible things like disappearing and re-appearing, transforming into animals and back to human.

There are ideological myths such as tales of man's origins. In these myths, efforts are made to explain nature without scientific or empirical proofs. When questions arise, as to how God created the world or why he instituted death, myths are constructed to offer explanations. Myths exist that explain why the tortoise's shell is fragmented, why women don't always grow beards, why the chameleon moves as though the ground on which it treads is too soft and about to sink. Mythic tales portray certain heroic achievements ascribed to legends like *Amadioha* in Igboland, *Ogun* and *Sango* in Yorubaland.

Myths invented by folks about national heroes like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Herbert Macaulay, and others, also demonstrate mythic ideology. Zik's abilities as a nationalist fighter, his diplomatic missions, and his skills in evading many intrigues allegedly hatched by colonial detractors, provided grounds for observers to conceptualize him as an enigma, a spirit in human flesh, who could disappear and appear at will. He was viewed as a multi-complexioned fairy, who is fair today, and dark the next day. As an ideology, the mythic ideating of a hero comes to play, but to attract this; the hero must have, like Zik, created mystery around his personality.

Anthropomorphic ideology is obvious in folk stories describing the human activities executed by inhuman forces like the sun, the moon, the star, the rainbow and the woods. One tale narrates how the moon and the sun competed for supremacy on the sky—each of them striving to outshine the other in providing light to the earth. But a judging voice—the moderator's chanting voice—sang out, urging the star to give way to the moon, who was alone on the entire sky, yet it shone more than all the stars put together. In the competition, the moon and the star were interacting verbally like human beings. In some

other stories exemplifying this ideology, the rainbow is presented as discussing with the Creator; others tell how the wood spirits or gods spoke with men or women who are requesting for one favour or another.

IDEOLOGY AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Both the masquerades and folktales manifest important ideological resources for discussing sociopolitical problems of contemporary Nigeria. Patriarchy ranks high in the ideological spectrum. In the masquerade performance, the Igbo patriarchal tradition is not contested by any visible female gender contradiction, and the silence of women over their predicament appears as a seal to the practice. But in contemporary Nigeria, the practice as a transferred culture from tradition generates serious feminist counter reactions and engenders conflict of sexes in homes, offices, business enterprises, educational settings, literary texts and critical writings. These conflicts translate to other forms of socio political set-backs in the nation. How then can gender crisis be mediated to give way for national development? One way out of the problem is to first examine the intentions of various feminists and consider their potentials for rationally impeding patriarchy. Then, an appropriate option for settling the crisis of sexes will be chosen.

The tragic marginal status of women in the masquerade performance, and the women's inertia are untenable. Hence, some contemporary feminist temperaments are admirable and full of prospects. There are diverse feminist philosophies, some of which are as objectionable as they are destructive and somewhat counter productive to the noble visions of other ideals of feminism. Three feminist perspectives identified by John Adebayo Afolabi vindicate the above stands. These are represented as 'Womb-men', 'We-men' and 'Woe-men' (126 – 127). The Womb-men and the We-men are very reasonable, but the Woe-men are extremely unreasonable and irrational. The Womb-men see themselves as men, capable of doing most of what men do, and due to their possession of womb, they believe they are better than men. Their logic is that without them, procreation would discontinue and the world will become extinct. At any rate, they concede supremacy to men in certain respects, and submit to them where and when necessary.

Looking at the temperament of the Womb – men, one may assess their group as being fascinated by the feminist slogan of "what men can do, women can do it, even better". But in truth, these feminists are still skeptical about the validity of their ideology or

temperament. Hence, they are one leg in, and less than pragmatic. Men still loom supreme in the inner recess of the women.

The Wo-men consider themselves equal to men and even better. They are never ready, for any reason, to concede supremacy to men, they are very ready to redress what they consider a long standing oppression of women. With dignity, they want to prove, and many of them have proved, that what a man can do, a woman can even do better. Most of them are highly educated; they try to eschew scandal and immorality. A close observer of We-men may be constrained to class some well known Nigerian women as having many of the attributes of this group.

The Woe-men are bitter feminists who are frustrated and ever ready to fight men, both in writing and utterances, even in action. They are extremists. Some of them are highly educated and try to render man a nullity (Afolabi 128). It may be right here to assess this group of feminists as dreamers, who are envisioning an era of matriarchy in Nigeria. But we all know that matriarchy is unimaginable in this country.

Few plays by Nigerian female playwrights present women collectively fighting for the rights of women, like Stella Oyedepo's *Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested*, Tracie Uto – Ezeajugh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (Udengwu 38). The plots, characterization, themes, and linguistic levels of these plays largely portray the above feminist perspectives. The above analysis leads to the inference that some feminist claims should be pragmatically sustained, looking at their possibilities towards curbing patriarchal hegemony. The leading advocates of patriarchy can even testify to the sociopolitical, economic and political heights so far attained by women like Mrs. F. Ransom Kuti, Mrs. D. Akunyili, Mrs. N. Iwuala and others.

This class of feminists is graded as being the type in which the “future glory of Nigerian women resides” (Afolabi 128). This paper, therefore, recommends the group as the kind of feminists to emulate and of course improve further on. If this happens, perhaps, men might relax their strangle-hold on male-supremacy, while women can see their limits even beyond the sky – all in the interest of greater national growth.

Religious ideology of the traditional Igbo theatre can be emulated in the present Nigeria to service sociopolitical exigencies. The worthy attributes of traditional religious ideology identified in the masquerade and folktale performances are: reverence, sincere

devotion and loyalty in worship. These attributes were also present in the ancient Greek adoration of their gods like Dionysus, Zeus, Apollo. For many years before the decline of Greece, these attributes fostered patriotism and national unity among the Greeks.

In order to emulate these qualities for purposes of national development, Nigeria becomes envisioned as a 'major masquerade', more divine than all the masquerades in her soil put together. Nigeria remains a general religion to all Nigerians and everybody shows sincerity and reverence to her. But if B.N. Iffih reminds us that "a society that pays lip service to religion is not serious" (166). We can decide that Nigeria, in the present context deserves sincerity and seriousness in our devotion and loyalty to her. Unfortunately, insincerity permeates all aspects of Nigeria's existence – in her leadership, work places, roads, companies, churches and educational institutions, and these have precipitated underdevelopment.

The ethical ideology of traditional theatre discussed here comprises such ideas as spirituality, sincerity, fear of the unknown, and satire. Spirituality can be exploited for addressing Nigeria's moral predicaments. Government can pry into the affairs of Nigerian churches and investigate their spiritual sincerity. This can be achieved by enforcing some limiting tags on religious freedom whereby fanaticism, proliferation of churches, clandestine modes of worship, should be checked and curtailed constitutionally and legally.

Church leaders should demonstrate more intensely, their spirituality and moral rectitude and emphasize on these qualities rather than their promises of quick wealth and prosperity. Fear of the unknown can be exploited in checking social misfits, law breakers, corrupt tendencies and immoral attitudes on our roads, in the offices, homes, streets and public places. This can be achieved through the use of secret ethical monitors and technical devices that are planted in unknown or private places to monitor and track down evil and immoral people. In Britain and the United States of America, over speeding on the roads and other driver's offences are easily monitored and checked with remote devices that can follow the movement of vehicles without the culprit being immediately conscious of any physical impact.

The masquerades as spirits, are sincere to the people, they don't accept bribe. These attributes should be emulated by character moulders and law enforcement agents in exposing evil characters. Criminals, cultists, immorality, fraudsters, and kidnappers should

not be hidden or protected by people who know them. Like the masquerades, people should speak out.

Dramatists and other artists should use their art more deftly in satirizing the evils in the society, with a view to stamping them out. Many satirical plays in Nigeria are already doing this but there is more room for more work. Ola Rotimi's *if is a satire against Nigeria's* "evil and criminal" regime of the Second Republic (Umukoro 42). Plays must satirize, with more punching intensity, the current social, political, economic and religious misconducts in the country.

More people should speak out without fear or favour, against evils in our society because, as Wole Soyinka points out, the man dies when in the face of social atrocities, he keeps silent. In a communiqué issued during the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), at Umuahia on 8th – 14th September, 2012, the important issue of "Promoting Authentic Development in Nigeria" was discussed and the bishops commended "those Muslim and Christian leaders who are raising their voices to condemn the ongoing barbarism in Nigeria" (3). In the private sectors, quality production should be the motto of manufacturers, while a standard supervisory body like NAFDAC (National Food and Drugs Administration and Control Agency) should always expose substandard materials without fear or favour (like the Igbo masquerades). Let every Nigerian, (the politician, the educationist, the medical practitioner, the security man, the student, the market woman, the parent at home) strive to attain "aesthetic excellence" which is an imperative "ideological resource that could be retrieved" from the masking tradition (Opata 92) or count himself out of the 'arena' because the eye of the audience is anxious to behold a blameless spectacle in which shoddiness is far – fetched.

Folktales, like masquerades, yield ideological resources for making suggestions towards national development. Both art forms share in the ethical, mythical, communalist and spiritualist themes that have been discussed here. However, folktales rank specifically high in portraying collectivists, spiritualist and occultic ideologies. Relating these issues to contemporary Nigerian situation, it becomes glaring that the country demands collective responsibility towards sociopolitical and economic emancipation. All hands must be on deck to scrap corrupt leadership, insecurity, poor educational standard, fraud and insincerity in national affairs.

The ideologies of spiritualism and occultism have been largely condemned as promoters of ritual atrocities in the country, and should be vehemently discouraged. The high rate of mysterious human abduction, killings and armed robbery are largely by-products of these practices. Fear of these evils has denied Nigeria of numerous development-oriented investments, such as viable foreign and indigenous companies. Even the established entrepreneurs could be constrained to relocate to other nations or pack up and return to their home communities where relative security and trust might be ensured.

CONCLUSION

This paper has identified and examined ideological resources manifested in the masquerade and folktale performances. An attempt has been made to adapt these resources to the contemporary Nigerian sociopolitical situation, employing them as yardsticks for suggesting answers to the national question. It is discovered that both the masquerade and the folktale manifest similar ideologies, though with minor distinctions in emphasis. As parameters, some of the ideologies like spiritualism, occultism, and patriarchy are found to be yearning for total extinction or major adjustments to provide room for national development. The paper, therefore, concludes that Nigerian traditional theatre's ideological resources can largely and profitably be exploited for making suggestions towards national development.

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