

An Overview of Culture and Conflict in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is culture conflicts in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. It is an attempt to reveal how the characters in the work sail through conflict between the White man's culture represented by Christianity and the patriarchal culture in Africa. The different characters go through mental and physical conflict in trying to cope with the contemporary realities presented by conflict of culture in their different socio-political settings. This study interrogates what role culture and conflict play in the societies represented in Adichie's fiction and in the African novel as a whole.

Introduction

Colonialism strongly interfered with the culture of Africans which in effect created conflicts in their cultural values. Christianity relegated the African culture to the background, took away African religion and replaced them with foreign religious culture. This created a lot of conflicts in the way Africans think and other social habits. In a bid to regain their freedoms, African literary or fictional authors sent different literary signals to the colonial masters leading to conflict of interests. The struggle through literature and other means created a lot of conflicts which eventually led to some African states regaining their partial freedom called Independence. Of course the legacy left by the colonial masters, span through Education, Economic, Religious,

Political, Social etc. which has eaten deep into the life of the so called independent countries. In effect, the colonial master gave independence and came back with neo-colonialism which of course is as worse as colonialism. This in effect is still locating a conflict of interest in Africa today.

The first definition of culture was by Tyler (1924) who defined it as that complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society. Expanding on this, Kayode (2007) sees culture as the totality of the ways of life of a society, what it believes and does, its economic, social and religious activities, its marriage system and burial or funeral ceremonies, education, philosophy, policy and practice, political and customary. Culture according to him is the result of collective response of people to their social needs. He further explained that culture is the fabric of ideas, beliefs, skills, tools, aesthetic objects, methods of thinking, customs and institutions into which each member of the society is born. This include the way each individual makes a living, the music he plays, festivals, mode of dressing, communication, transport etc. On his own part, Uche (1982) explained that culture is the sum total of what man has learned and passes on to his children which include the way man thinks and acts, ideas, values, norms, goals, symbols and status rankings. It depicts the past and present experiences of a people; it is the sum total of the complex social heritage of the group which is created and transmitted from one generation to another.

Kayode (2007) stressed that generally a group of people in a society lives within the confinement of culture and therefore we can say that culture create people and people have to live within the confinement of culture. Today, according to him, all over the world, culture is an agent of communication. People speak either verbally or through non-verbal means. He explained that the language we speak are what we can call social expressions of culture. Furthermore, it performs social relations functions; it

sets standards of values; it provides for economic needs and educates people. In relation to the above discussion, Longman (2005) stated that culture in a society is the beliefs, ways of life, arts and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a particular society. It is also defined as the attitudes and beliefs about something that are shared by a particular group of people in a particular organization. There are a number of approaches that define culture in part by differentiating it from other sociological concepts. Thus some sociologists speak of the differences between culture and society. Other approaches offer internal differentiation of culture – “high” culture versus “mass” or “popular” culture for example, and “material” versus “symbolic” culture.

Culture clash is a process whereby at least two cultures come together; it is more like when two opposite cultures collide with one another. For instance, as represented in the African novel, the western culture collides with the traditional African culture. Culture dislocation on the other hand, refers to the fact that something is being where it should not be. It refers to when something is totally removed from where it was. Some, totally lose focus of how he/she is meant to be. Even when the person is an adherent believer in their culture, the person may do things that show that he/she does not value their culture. The coming of the white man also brought about complexities of indigenous cultures: one of the ways in which the white man denigrated indigenous culture was to dismiss them as simplistic and therefore inferior.

Conflicts

Perhaps the best way to start a write up on conflicts is to briefly state Isaac (2004) statement on conflicts. According to him, the more a group is ignored, avoided, or denied attention, the more it becomes confrontational, issuing threats, getting verbally aggressive, resorting to litigation or even physical violence, with

a view to get a win-lose outcome. According to Otite (2004), conflicts arise from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and or groups in defined social and physical environment. Changes in the social environment such as contestable access to new political positions, or perceptions of new resources arising from development in the physical environment, are fertile grounds for conflicts involving individuals and groups who are interested in using these new resources to achieve their goals. By thus recognizing the inherent nature of conflicts in heterogenous and competitive situations; people more or less compelling, sustain their societies as ongoing social systems through the resolution, transformation and management of conflicts.

According to Coser (1956), the most quoted traditional definition of conflicts regards it as a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. Similarly, Park and Burgess (1921) earlier stressed that conflict is designed to resolve divergent dualism, and achieve, some kind of unity even if it be through the annihilation of one of the conflict parties. Conflict according to Otite (2004) may therefore not be regarded only in a negative light of dysfunctional or disjunctive process, and a breakdown of communication as some scholars tend to suggest. He further stated that conflict is a conscious act of involving personal or group contact and communication together with, through distinct from competition, struggle, and contest etc. Conflict is a normal process of interaction particularly in complex societies in which resources are usually scarce. Although conflicts may generally exist incompatible activities occur and may result in a “win-lose” character, the resolution, transformation and management of conflicts may produce a “win-win” situation.

Writing on response to conflicts, Isaac (2004) stated that conflicts are responded to in three possible ways in any society-

by avoidance, confrontation and problem solving. Avoidance means a situation where a group alleging injustice or discrimination is literally ignored or denied recognition by those being accused and those who have the capacity for helping to redress the injustice done to the group. The disadvantages of avoidance according to Wilmot and Hocker (1998) includes allowing conflict to simmer and heat up unnecessarily rather than providing an avenue for improving it; gives the notion that conflict is tangible and allows partners to each follow their own course and pretend there is no mutual influence, when in fact, each influence the other. On confrontation, violence hardly resolves a conflict, it rather compounds the conflict situation. Problem solving refers to the situation in which the parties to a conflict by themselves or through the assistance of a third party find solutions to their problems in a cordial environment.

According to Emerson (2013), internal conflicts and terrorist attacks demonstrate that the presence of peace can never be taken for granted. As an ongoing process of political, economic and cultural negotiation, peace requires constant engineering, vigilance and active participation. It implies commitment and a long-term vision, and this entails a blend of traditional and contemporary ways of understanding the roots of conflicts, ways of mitigating violence, and paths towards reconciliation and healing. In this context according to him, culture emerges as an essential factor for both sustainable development and lasting peace. In fact, neither equitable progress nor social cohesion is truly possible if culture is left to one side. On the contrary, the road to inclusive social and economic development, environmental sustainability, peace and security is firmly *grounded in* culture, understood in its spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional dimensions and encompassing diverse value systems, traditions and beliefs. Culture informs and influences people's relation to sustainable development, conflicts, and reconciliation in a distinct, but direct manner. It determines

and creates paths for lasting conflict-resolution and healing. Thus, as “a repository of knowledge, meaning and values that permeate all aspects of our lives, culture also defines the way human beings live and interact with each other and their environment.”

Language, Culture and Conflict

Tidwell (1998) defined language as an external behavior that allows the identification of a speaker as a member of some group. For example a native speaker of English will identify Nigerians as foreigners by their ways of speech. Livine and Adelman (1993) defined culture as a shared organization of ideas that include the intellectual, moral and aesthetic standard prevalent in a community and the meaning of communicative actions. Triands (1995) declared that the process of enculturation, lays the foundation for shaping our minds frame and defining what is appropriate, what is inappropriate, what is good; what is rude or polite, and what is right or wrong. This is very important in determining the policy for conflict resolution and its process. Thus cultural values can narrow or broaden one's perceptions of an event, focus and diffuse ones sense of logic or discard certain information as irrelevant. Conflict on the other hand is defined here as contentions involving real or apparent fears, interest and values, in which goals of the opposing group must be opposed, or at least neutralized to protect one's own interest –prestige employment and political power etc- [Huntinghton (1996)]. This paper posits that ignoring or denying linguistic and cultural diversity in global conflict resolution and implementation is not only a problematic issue but could also perpetuate a system imbalance. This needs to be addressed and considered. Thus in National conflict resolution the idea of using English as the international language could be a form of power given to the English speaking countries.

Masculinity in African Cultural Set up

There are different definitions of what it meant, to be a man. For Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus*, being a tyrannical father and making life a hell for his wife and children in the name of religion. Eugene's understanding of masculinity was at variance with his own culture which he refused to accept. He was a male chauvinist as well as an ethnic chauvinist. Eugene instilled fear in the lives of his wife and children. In everything they did, they were afraid of him, they wanted him to approve of them, and of all they did. They always had it in mind that if their father, "papa" as they called him disagreed with what they did they were in trouble.

Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, Igbo? Have you no words in your mouth? "he asked, entirely in Igbo. A bad sign he hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public, he told us; we had to speak English. Papa's Sister, Aunty Ifeoma, said once that papa was too much of a colonial product" (21)

It can be seen from what the heroine of the novel is saying above that Eugene has been totally dislocated from his culture. He only waits for times like this when he is angry to speak his language. He uses excuses of when he is angry to speak his language. He waits for moments when he wants to vent his anger on his family members to remember home, to remember where he is truly from. He often forgets that he is not a white man. He often forgets that he is a black man. He has adapted the western culture that he approves so much, that same western culture that he had turned into his own culture, had also given women voices. In the traditional African society women had no voice, but with the coming of colonialists, women started to find their own voice.

Research Questions

For the objectives of this theory to be well understood, the following research questions will guide the study:

- What is the importance of conflict as a major theme in African fiction?
- What is the importance of culture as a major theme in African fiction?
- How is conflict and culture portrayed in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Background

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on 15th September 1977 at Enugu, Nigeria, the fifth of six children to Igbo parents, Grace Ifeoma and James Nwoye Adichie. While the family's ancestral home is in Aba in Anambra state, Chimamanda grew up in Nsukka, in the house formerly occupied by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Chimamanda completed her secondary school, receiving several academic prizes. She went on to pursue a degree in communication and political science at Eastern Connecticut State University. While in Connecticut, she stayed with her sister Ifeoma, who runs a medical practice close to the University. Chimamanda graduated *Summa cum laude* from Eastern in 2001, and then completed a master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. It was during her senior year at Eastern that she started working on her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which was released in October, 2003. The book has received wide critical acclaim, and was shortlisted for the orange fiction prize in (2004). It was awarded the commonwealth writer's prize for the best first book (2005).

Her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set before and during the Biafran war. It was published in August 2006 in the United Kingdom and in September 2006 in the United States. Like *Purple Hibiscus* it has also been released in Nigeria. Chimamanda

was a Holder fellow at Princeton University during the 2005-2006 academic years, and earned an MA in African studies from Yale University in 2008. Her collection of short stories *The things around Your Neck* was published in 2009, Chimamanda says that her next major literary project would focus on the Nigerian immigrant experience in the United states.

The Portrayal of Culture and Conflict in *Purple Hibiscus*

“Purple Hibiscus”, a novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shows the ills in a matrimonial home, that is headed by a tyrannical father; a male chauvinist as well as an ethnic chauvinist. Kambili, the main character, moved from being weak and controlled, to being strong and in control of herself. Kambili is a sensitive character; she does not talk too much about things that happen to her, affect her more than another individual’s mind could comprehend. She is also extremely observant. “The Purple Hibiscus Flower” symbolizes the royalty in being a young growing girl growing in a hostile environment. Kambili sprouted and experiences change. The growth was found in love, which was an emotional growth. “Purple Hibiscus” symbolizes change and transformation, and also the tenacity to grow. Kambili grew from being a quiet person to being outspoken. Kambili grows a flower; she grows emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and physically.

Kambili’s emotional growth is the direct result of an increasing awareness of the world around her. When we first meet her in the novel, she is an emotional infant whose dependence on her tyrannical father is total: she cannot imagine existence without him and continuously seeks his approval as the only guide to the living. Her father, to her is infallible, but what makes Kambili’s emotional dependence even worse, is her belief in her own inability to meet up with her father’s high expectations of her. He is always right; she is always wrong.

Kambili’s emotional development begins when she finds that there are too many discrepancies in her father’s attitude to

life. She wonders why her father finds it so hard to love his own father; she wonders why his love always comes with pain; try as she might, she can no longer ignore the undercurrent of violence that characterized her family life. When Kambili goes to stay with Auntie Ifeoma and her family, she realizes the emotional inadequacies of her own family. She discovers a group of people who do not need a set of rules to relate with one another. Love is not “burnt” into family members; individuals are treated like human beings and given due respect, no matter how young they are. In *Purple Hibiscus*, religious extremism has been explored as cultural hostility in the Africa a novel. The reading of ‘*Purple Hibiscus*’ may help us further conclude that the economically dependent, the aged and, African women particularly, are constantly at the receiving and of the evil perpetrated by over-zealous male converts. Eugene is but a successful character, this affects the way he went about in the course of the novel.

“*Purple Hibiscus*” explores the religion prejudice, as well as cultural hostility in the African fiction. The female heroine gave us a precise timing of when things started going wrong in her family. Things had always been fine; things had remained together and not fallen apart, as long as nobody disobeyed their father, as long as everything was done exactly how he wanted it to be done.

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not got to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurine on the etageres.....so when papa did not see Jaja go to the altar that palm Sunday when everything changed, he banged his leather-bound missal, with the red and green ribbon peeking out, down on the dining table when we got home. The table was glass, heavy glass. It shook, as did the palm fronds on it...”You cannot stop receiving the

body of our lord. It is death, you know that".
Then I will die Papa (11, 14)

This activity signified the moment where thing started falling apart obviously. Jaja took his first step in trying to stop his father's oppression and forceful leadership by not going to church. Even when he knew that after standing up to his father, he was going to get punished for it, he spoke. Another thing that showed poured her pain into the cleaning of the étagère signified hope for her. The breaking of the stages signifies the dashing of hopes for Beatrice.

When they went to their Aunt's house and saw a different thing, they questioned what they thought were normal. They began to see a difference between the luxurious but lifeless prison, which they called home, and their well lived-in home. Kambili described Aunty Ifeoma's house as a place where laughter always rang out. It's a home where people were allowed to voice out their opinions and not die in silence and fear.

Laughter always rang out in Aunty Ifeoma's house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around the walls, all the rooms. Arguments rose and quickly and fell just as quickly. Morning and night prayers were always peppered with songs, Igbo praise songs that piece the width of two fingers pressed together and the length of half a finger. The flat always sparkled... (148)

Aunt Ifeoma's family is a very loquacious family. They talk, they shout, they argue, they explained. Kambili and her brother were used to silence of terror imposed by their father. They find themselves completely out their depth in this family. They are unable to easily join conversation; they talk only when spoken to and remain silent for most of the time. Aunt Ifeoma continuously

encourages them to offer opinions and to make comments. Everything that was done in this family was the total opposite of what was done in her own family, in her own house, she and Jaja suffered for any opinion given that was not their father. He was the only one that had the right to command what he wants everybody to do, including his wife. Jaja enters into the spirit of his hosts, and beings, to talk with more free will, but Kambili is too unenthusiastic to change habits that she has known for long time. It was even difficult for her to laugh, or even smile, but once she tried it, it becomes customary.

I wanted to smile, but I could not. My lips and cheeks were frozen, unthawed by the sweat running down the sides of my nose. He knew I had tried to wear lipstick for the time today. I smiled. I smiled again. (184)

However, Kambili's silence is directly challenged by two individual; Amaka has the mistaken notion that Kambili's silence emerges from the arrogance of being a rich girl, who does not want to speak to people she feels her beneath her. She therefore constantly challenges Kambili, leading eventually to a direct confrontation over the preparation of a meal. In reply to Amaka, Kambili does not just speak in the sense of projecting her shy personality but advances another step in her encounter with a handsome, charming and empathetic father Amadi.

Father Amadi overturns Kambili's notion of what it is, to be a man. Previously, her father was the ideal man, but Amadi shows her, how it is, to love and respect one another. He understands the reason for her shyness and he is perceptive enough to know that it concedes an interesting personality; such is his understanding and awareness of her own human being. Kambili finds herself drawn to him. Father Amadi teaches her to trust herself more and judge herself less. He tells her that she is

valuable in herself; therefore she does not need to depend on anyone's approval, most especially her father. When they go to the stadium, Kambili's emotional development is apparent in her discovery of her ability to laugh.

Kambili's emotional development ultimately becomes self sustained. Even though she needs people like Auntie Ifeoma, Father Amadi, Amaka, and Papa Nnukwu to help, she is able to follow Father Amadi to the United States and Germany. Kambili's psychological development is closely related to her emotional development, and it is basically seen in her ability to change certain established attitude based on the emotional progress. We find out that the manifestations of her psychological development is predicated on the realistic vision of her father and her family, when Kambili and Jaja return home from Nsukka, she is struck by the waste on emptiness that characterizes the homes; the parlor is too large, the ceilings are too high, the carpets are too deep, her father is no longer the saint he used to be: Kambili begins to compare him to Father Amadi and finds him wanting. Kambili began to see shortcoming in the family life, which she had never thought of, before she realized that the dominant emotion in the family was fear and not love.

Kambili takes her emotional development to another level, by learning to do that, she returned with a portrait of Papa Nnukwu and concealed it from him, he discovered it, and tried to destroy it, Kambili tries to prevent him, and he turns on her, beating her to a state of unconsciousness. When she recovered, she refused to have anything to do with him and demand to return to Nsukka. She did not understand why her father hated his father so much. They had the opportunity of seeing their grandfather that they were separated from closely. Kambili saw the way Amaka loved him and cared for him; she saw that everybody in the family adored him. She could not comprehend why her father would feel differently. At a point, while in Auntie Ifeoma's house, she saw that she felt like her father had deprived

them of a good relationship with their grandfather because of his own Christian beliefs, she envied the relationship that Amaka had built with her grandfather overtime.

Kambili's ability to oppose her father demonstrates her increasing maturity and self confidence. Kambili's emotional and psychological growth signifies the place of change in the total existence of ma. Change is inevitable. It is her psychological growth, which enables her to cope with the trauma of her father's death and her brother's incarceration. Her mother who was responsible for her father's death is an emotional wreck, Kambili then tried to bring order to the family's disrupted life. It is she, who was attending to the disposal of her father's estate, to free Jaja and provides emotion support for her mother. By the novel's end, the extremely shy Kambili has become a tough minded woman who is well aware of the harsh, reality of the Nigerian situation, but also discovered the gift of laughter.

The novel shows the ills in a matrimonial home that was headed by a tyrannical father, a male chauvinist as well as an ethnic chauvinist. Kambili is a sensitive character; she does not talk too much, things that happen to her, affects her more than another individual's mind could comprehend. She is also extremely observant. Kambili is a new say-so, crying out to be heard because of the agony and grief in the impediments of power and civilization around her. She reveals in a somewhat childlike silence the painful realities of her society. She talked about her troubles and viewed them with the eyes of a blameless observer. One observes this clearly when Kambili says that:

I lay in bed after mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and mama and I spoke more with our spirits rather than with our lips ... Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of

freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one
the crowd waving green leaves chanted.... A
freedom to be, to do. (16)

According to Oha “the need for an African people to experience true freedom becomes Kambili’s preoccupation. This reveals the expected thoughts of the people about the way forward in their political trauma. While this narration flows from a child who is battling with religious and domestic problems in her time, one still observes the sincere reference to the macro oddities in the society.” He further says that the novel “tries to question rigidity in religion and wrong upbringing of children in a modern world that should allow room for dynamism and freedom.” (200)

Kambili uses the wicked ruling example of her father, Chief Eugene, to reveal the issues in the social order. The unnecessary conflicts blamed on religion that makes Kambili’s father to hate his father papa Nnukwu, reveals the way some African people use the pretext of religion to stir up disagreement in their families, thereby causing troubles for their children. This part of the story serves as a bother on leaders in African countries who permit religion to cause numerous issues in their countries; an example of this is the issue of the Boko Haram in the northern part of Nigeria today. At a point, Kambili wanted to see reasons with her father, she wanted to understand what her father was saying, she wanted to agree with what her father felt against his father, but she couldn’t. She started longing for the kind of relationship he had with Amaka her cousin.

I had examined him that day, too looking away
when his eyes met mine, for signs if indifference,
of Godlessness. I didn’t see any, but I was sure they
were there somewhere. They had to be. (63)

Kambili as a child questions the kind of nurture that denies her and her brother love from their father. She compares it to the manner of love and freedom Auntie's Ifeoma's children benefit from. They enjoyed freedom each day, they had freedom to be friend to Eugene, and he had too many rules guiding their very survival. They were like an animal in a cage. There was no freedom of association; there was no freedom of decision. They had no right to decide their faith. Everything they did was what he wanted them to do. His children must meet their terms of doctrine of Catholicism. They must not blend with the "health" nation. They must always comply with the time table he fashioned for them. He decides how they lived their lives day in day out.

Kambili was written in bold letters on top of the white sheet of paper, just as Jaja was written on the schedule above Jaja's deck in his room. I wondered why papa would draw up a schedule for the baby, my new brother, if he would do it right after the baby was born or wait until he was a toddler. Papa liked order. (22)

Amaka is a tough voice in the novel. She seems to be one of the most powerful female voices in contemporary novel. Amaka refuses to take an English name for her baptismal name. She wanted to take an Igbo name. She is unbending and not even father Amadi a friend of family could influence her

"I told you I am not taking an English name, father," she said "And I have asked why? "Why do I have to? "Because it is the way it's done. Let's forget if it is right or wrong for now," father Amadi said. (271-272)

Oha described Amaka as someone that “represents the new hope of the coming generation of women, unlike the acclaimed hopes of African women as seen in Ihuoma and Nnu Ego, Amaka seems to be the most vocal of these characters: young, resilient, outspoken, and unbending in the things that touch her African pride. Kambili describes her thus: “she walked and talked with purpose than Auntie Ifeoma did”. She is a rare breed of the new generation of youths. She is creative, accommodating, honest, and outspoken and a dogged fighter.” (205). Oha further says

Kambili’s silence represents the restless silence of the African people in their inability at challenging those things that trample on the personality of African people. Even when Amaka left the country with her mother, she never stops her protests against those things she finds unpalatable in the Nigerian society. (205).

Conclusion

This study examines some elements of culture and conflict in the fictions of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. There is no doubt that culture is dynamic and that change occurs often, that people change, culture changes, and so does, the society. Sometimes, it is positive, for the benefit of the people it is meant to affect, and sometimes negatively. The same applies to the African culture. Certain conclusions can be drawn from this essay on culture and conflict in the fiction of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. First, it can be observed that change has had its effects on the African society in general. It talks about change, conflict, culture and its effects such as social inequality, gender, masculinity and so on, as themes in the African novel.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s fiction can be seen from another perspective. It can be said that Adichie was probably frowning at the idea of Africans’ adaptation of the western

ideology, as seen in Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus* and in many other characters in her short stories. Through Kambili and other characters like Amaka, for instance, she portrays the African culture as that which should not be forgotten by its people. Kambili, like any other sensitive child, tries as much as possible to see what her father had against his tradition that made him hate his father so much, but she could not see anything wrong. Instead, she wanted to feel what Amaka felt and even see through Amaka's eyes.

The African culture to most people is quite decadent, westernisation has been super-imposed on the traditional culture so that the two co-exist, and a person accepts the part of each culture that suits them best, when it is more advantageous to be modern or westernised. This is the case with most Africans. Adichie seeks to change this, with her fiction. The African fiction gives African writers the opportunity to write about their ways of life themselves and not the way outsiders see them, but the way they perceive them.

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