

African Traditional Education Patterns towards Youth Empowerment: Case Study of a Traditional Igbo Youth in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: This article critically shows the limitation of Western education pattern in achieving youth empowerment in Africa. Evidences will be provided through exploring African traditional education patterns of youths' empowerment, especially the traditional Igbo education pattern of youths' empowerment as described in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) via cultural theory and postcolonial criticism theory. As findings, African traditional education pattern, especially the Igbo traditional education pattern exposes youths to cultural activities that prepare them to meeting up with challenges ahead of them through initiation ceremony, informal teaching, watching and imitating grown-ups who have succeeded in a given domain. In addition, the Igbo traditional education patterns put the youths at the center of social, economic and political development and empowerment. So, it is high time modern African governments stopped copy pasting western educational system with no objective of empowering the African youth; Contemporary Africans should submit their youths to educational patterns adaptable to their needs and that of their countries so as to reduce death rates of African youths in the Mediterranean Sea every year.

Keywords: Africa, Traditional Igbo pattern, Western, youths' education,

1. INTRODUCTION

It is deplorable for modern Africa when it comes to account for number of youths who lose their lives in Mediterranean Sea every year in search of welfare. Among factors such as social, economic, political, religious, demographic, and cultural which are commonly known as causes of migration, there is no doubt that modern Africans' adoption of colonial systems as patterns of education for youth empowerment is one of the major causes of great number of youths' loss of lives in Mediterranean Sea.

It is true that some scholars have made some prospects for individual African migrants. The prospects include better employment with improve income, poverty reduction for migrants and family members, increasing household wealth and expansion of life opportunities (Tesky, 2018, p. 344). In addition, one can observe establishment of youth empowerment programme, in form of project and mostly financed by some renowned international organisations/institutions in some African countries with the aim, according to Gbenga M. Babalola and Igbinobu Chuks, of creating opportunities that will encourage and develop the youth to be morally responsible, self-reliant and financially productive citizens (2020, p. 43). However, most of the prospects and youth empowerment programmes aforementioned show their limits because the African youths are not given the right pattern of education suitable for their social, cultural, political, religious, and demographic environments. Some other reasons that have also contributed to the failure are among others: institutionalised corruption in all its ramifications, embezzlement on the parts of executors of the programme and worst of all is that the programme does not consider African traditional education patterns.

Moreover, some African scholars have identified modern Africa's adoption of Western colonial system of educational system which has no other aim than promoting capitalist system as one of the main causes of underdevelopment in Africa. For instance, Kwaku Osei-Hwedie and Yaw Agyeman-Badu (1987) concerning the political economy of Ghana confirm in their book titled *Essays on The Political Economy of Ghana* that the structure of underdevelopment in Africa as a whole stems from the

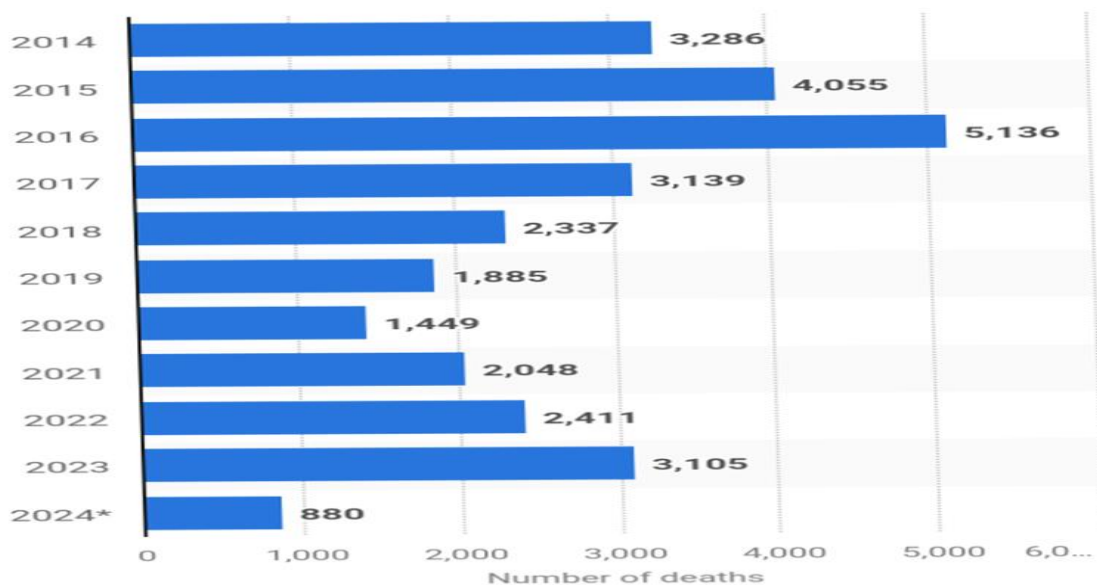
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continent's incorporation into the capitalist system, under colonialism, from which the present economic was developed (p.5). In addition, they further argue that: "The colonial relationship led to the destruction of the indigenous patterns of economic relationships and production. To some extent, it resulted in the division of the country into two sectors-traditional and modern" (p. 5).

Notably, it is important to point out that patterns are particular ways in which things are done, organised or occur. So, educational patterns of Westerners and Africans are not identical. For instance, Westerners' educational patterns are only based on formal teachings and these teachings can only be acquired in formal schooling. As a remark, the Western education consumes too much time depending on one's ambition and capacity.

At the westerners' educational level, a child goes through the following levels of education based on his/her capacity and ambition. At age of three, a child starts Nursery school and spend two years before moving to primary school. Once in primary school, he/she spends six full years. Upon completion of primary, he/she moves to secondary school and spends six more years in the British system and seven years in the French system. After A level certificate, three years' course is required to obtain a bachelor degree, two more years for a master degree and three additional years is a minimum to obtain a Doctorate degree in a specialised course. Notably, it is not excluded that one may repeat some classes during the above processes. What is regrettable enough is that going through the above processes does not guarantee a job and economic welfare.

Therefore, majority of nowadays African youths are confronted to problem of unemployment.-On the one hand, this may be due to incompatibility of their training with the need of their society. On the other hand, the youths have been trained for white collar jobs which are now saturated and there are limited enterprises/companies in some African countries where youths can easily work to earn their living. As a result, some African youths have started embarking in perilous journey in order to survive. The western school has made them develop daydreaming attitudes to the extent that despite the news reports on havoc that befalls people trying to pass through Mediterranean Sea to Europe, African youths migrating to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea never cease to be victims. Here is a demographic survey carried out by Statista 2024 on numbers of recorded deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024.



Notably, the above chart that does not point out the exact number of Africans who passed away due to the adventure. It is remarkable that the number of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea has reduced in year 2024 but the survey has not considered number of those migrants who died trying to go abroad through the Sahara desert. A news report published by the United Nations articulated on the fact that deaths of refugees and migrants in the Sahara desert presumed to be the double of those happening in the Mediterranean Sea (United Nations, 2024). So, there is a cause for alarm; that is why this research tentatively tries to draw from the past and see how African traditional education patterns have been of great help to empowering African youths. Since one has seen the limitations of Western educational

system through the increase of unemployment, lack of socio-economic welfare, high rate of school dropout of African youths, mismatch of skills, idleness, and death increase of African youths every year in the Mediterranean sea and in the Sahara desert after spending several years in Western educational system as role model for African youth empowerment have served as a premise for this article.

In so doing, this article aims to explore African traditional education patterns of youths' empowerment, especially the traditional Igbo youths pattern in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) through cultural theory and postcolonial criticism theory.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the current research is based on cultural theory and postcolonial criticism theory. Cultural theory aims to analyze and interpret the way in which culture influences and shapes various aspects of human experience, behavior and society. It explores the dynamic interplay between individuals and their cultural contexts, examining how cultural factors impact identity, power, structures, social norms and meaning making processes. In so doing, the Igbo culture has been studied so as to see how the Igbo culture and tradition pave the way for education patterns which guarantee youths' empowerment. The above education patterns lie in two ways: formal teaching in initiation ceremonies and informal teaching. As confirmed by Emmanuel Obiechina (1974): "Before the introduction of western literary education, African children were inducted into the traditional way of life into two ways: by formal teaching in initiation ceremonies and by informal teaching in seeing and following the example of grown-ups through watching and imitating" (p. 4).

Indeed, the above formal and informal teachings in traditional African societies have been examined in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* through cultural theory. Although the novel under study is a fiction, cultural theory has helped to decode how Igbo traditional education pattern has brought positive impact and empowerment socially, economically and politically to a youth named Okonkwo.

Alongside with cultural theory, we also apply postcolonial criticism theory. Postcolonial criticism aims at analyzing, questioning, deconstructing the power dynamics, as well as cultural influences and lingering effects of colonialism in literature, art and society. As Bosak Yildiz argues "Postcolonial criticism is the examination of the effects of colonialism on societies. Its purpose is to analyse the ways through which "powerful" cultures dominated the third World nations" (2015, p.20). In short, it suits to uncover and challenge Eurocentric perspectives and colonial ideologies build in text; shedding light on marginalized voices and experiences in formerly colonized regions. Also, it has helped to understand the limitation of western pattern of education adopted in modern African societies.

So, both cultural theory and postcolonial criticism theory have been used to examine Igbo traditional education patterns of empowering the youths in Achebe's novel. In the next paragraph, we briefly discuss the methodology used in carrying out the current research.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on qualitative content analysis methods. That is to say, it stems from the analysis of data from books, novels, published articles, etc. As a result, the exploration of African traditional education patterns of youths' empowerment, especially the traditional Igbo youth pattern is examined in the novel, *Things Fall Apart*. As Bosak Yildiz argues Achebe published *Things Fall Apart* as a response to novels such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Mister Johnson* by Joyce Cary, which represent Africa as a primitive and uneducated land subordinate to Europe. Achebe tried to convey a full recognition of Nigerian culture and introduce an underrepresented colonial subject to the world. The story in *Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s and issues the clash between the traditional culture of the Igbo people and Nigeria's white colonial government (2015, p.20).

So, the method of basing the analysis on Achebe's novel and the main character of the novel is purposive. Firstly, it has been motivated by the fact that Achebe is an aborigine of the Igbo community which is one the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Secondly, the representation of cultural reality is centred on the fictional depiction of African traditional education patterns of a youth, especially an Igbo young adult named Okonkwo who has been empowered through Igbo traditional education patterns in Achebe's novel.

4. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL EDUCATION PATTERNS OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*.

In traditional African societies, especially in the Igbo society, parents set many objectives in bringing up their children in order to meet up with the challenges ahead of them. By so doing, they focus more on their educational patterns. As said earlier, the educational patterns are in two folds: formal teaching through initiation ceremonies and informal teaching through watching and imitating grown people who have succeeded in a given field. In this part, the analysis of African traditional education patterns of youth empowerment in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* focuses on a youth named Okonkwo.

In the novel under study, in African traditional educational patterns, especially in the Igbo traditional educational patterns of youth empowerment, informal teaching through watching and imitating is a reality. For instance, Okonkwo informally learns how to wrestle ~~and~~ through personal achievements and he becomes a champion in it. The narrator informs the readers that "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (Achebe, 1958, p.3).

Indeed, as patterns of education of African youths, the youths are exposed to cultural activities that develop their mental resistance and endurance. For example, in Achebe's novel under study, Achebe firstly exposes his readers to a cultural activity, in the domain of sport known as wrestling. As it is argued in an article entitled "Exploring African Traditional Sports and their Cultural Roots":

Wrestling is one of the most widespread traditional sports in Africa, with various forms practiced across the continent. It's not just a test of physical strength but also a display of skill, strategy, and sportsmanship. In countries like Senegal, Nigeria, and Sudan, wrestling matches are grand events accompanied by music, dance, and rituals. They often serve as a rite of passage for young men, symbolizing their transition to adulthood and their readiness to take on responsibilities in the community (<https://socialstudieshelp.com/exploring-african-traditional-sports-and-their-cultural-roots>).

In fact, wrestling is an activity that gathers several youths, from different localities or neighbouring villages in a competition. In the competition, Okonkwo, a young adult wrestles with another youth, a great wrestler whose name is Amalinze, the cat. A wrestling competition is held between Okonkwo and Amalinze and Okonkwo has been able to win his adversary with his wrestling observation experience. The narrator rationalizes about Okonkwo that: "As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze, the cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth" (Achebe, 1958, p.3).

In the above victory of Okonkwo over his opponent, Achebe seems to support the fact that not all competences can be acquired through formal teaching or at school. In addition, the informal learning/teaching has led Okonkwo to become a warrior in his clan. That self-acquired competence has caused him to be chosen as a war emissary of Umuofia to Mbaino when Ogbuefi Udo's wife is killed in Mbaino market: "And so when Okonkwo of Umuofia arrived at Mbaino as a proud and imperious emissary of war, he was treated with great honour and respect..." (p. 9).

As it is observed in the above, Okonkwo is being treated with great honour and respect and he has got that privilege through his informal learning acquisition. Despite the fact that Okonkwo is born in a poor family, informal learning has made him work with one of the wealthiest men in Umuofia named Nwakibie. Through the following lines, the narrator describes the qualities of Nwakibie: "[...] a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives, thirty children. His name is Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan. *It was for this man that Okonkwo worked to earn first seed yam*" (pp.13-14 italics ours).

As observed in the above citation, working with Nwakibie has made Okonkwo to acquire competences in the domain of farming, especially commercial farming. As definition, commercial farming is an agricultural practice that involves the cultivation of the crops for the purpose of generating profits and engaging in trade. It is characterized by large-scale operation, advanced production techniques, and the use of modern technologies (Difference Between Subsistence and Commercial

Farming, <https://textbook.com/key-differences/difference-between-subsistence-and-commercial-farming>, may 7, 2024 at 11:23).

It is true that Achebe does not inform his readers concerning the period of time Okonkwo has spent in working with Nwakibie but he informs his readers on the Igbo manner of apprenticeship. As Nnonyelu et al, 2023; Ekesiobi & Dimnwobi, 2021; Iwara, 2021; Agu & Nwachukwu, 2020 cited in Nnonyelu et al, 2023, confirm:

Igbo apprenticeship is an informal relationship where a young person, a novice, usually a male (*nwa boyi*) is engaged by an older person (*oga*) who possesses specialised knowledge in trade or commerce or other crafts, to undergo a period of training for a specific number of years (3–10) after which, he is certified as competent, knowledgeable and trustworthy to start his own business (p.260).

Okonkwo has not only learnt commercial farming via Nwakibie but he has also discovered Igbo cultural indigenous entrepreneurship in the domain of agriculture such as share-cropping. Share-cropping is an Igbo traditional way of leasing yam seeds to young farmers with the objective of making a benefit from their harvest. At the end of the harvest, the farm products are divided into three parts and the lessor takes two parts and the borrower possesses the remaining part. In the foregoing, the narrator stipulates that: “Share-cropping was a very slow way of building up a barn of one’s own. After all the toil one only got a third of the harvest. But for a young man whose father had no yams, there was no other way” (Achebe, 1958, p.16).

As observed in the above, share-cropping is a system implemented to launch a young man who is from poor family willing to cultivate the soil. It is the case of Okonkwo and that has led him to visit Nwakibie’s compound to ask for favour of yams to sow as illustrated in the excerpt: “I [Okonkwo] have come to you [Nwakibie] for help [...] I have cleared a farm but have no yams to sow. I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work. I am not afraid of work” (p.15).

Indeed, Okonkwo has been able to start his dream of becoming commercial farmer with eight hundred yam seeds he first borrowed from Nwakibie. Along the way, he has got another four hundred from his father’s friend. It does not mean that that Okonkwo did not encounter difficulties during period of share-cropping but his informal learning experiences and determination helped him to overcome them. For instance, Okonkwo encountered problem of climate change such as absence of rainfall in that season, one can remark in the following:

Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to so with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned [...].He had tried to protect them from smouldering earth by making rings of thick sisal leaves around them. But by the end of the day the sisal leaves were burnt dry and grey. He changed them every day, and prayed that the rain might fall in the night [...]. He had one consolation. The yams he had sown before the drought were his own, the harvest of the previous year (p.17).

Analysing the above excerpt, Achebe has not only brought to surface how the traditional methods acquired by Okonkwo are sometimes limited to fighting drought but he has also tried to elucidate some drawbacks of climate that commercial farmers face. In addition, he has pointed out the quality of Okonkwo which is based on the fact that Okonkwo has started producing yams before opting for sharecrops from Nwakibie and his father’s friend. Indeed, the above quality has helped Okonkwo to reduce the damages of the drought on his affair because it is said that he has lost his own seeds and not the loaned ones. Moreover, that quality of Okonkwo, as a young commercial farmer is what is sometimes required from modern entrepreneurs by financial banks before giving out loans. So, it has helped Okonkwo to start afresh because according to the narrator “He still had the eight hundred from Nwakibie and four hundred from his father’s friend. So he would make a fresh start” (p.17).

Despite climate challenges, Okonkwo has been able to feed his household of yam plantation because he believes that the soil does not lie. So he has wanted to transfer his competences of yam plantation to

his only son Nwoye. That is why he always associates him and an adopted boy named Ikemefuna living with him whenever he is preparing his seed yams. As confirm in the following excerpt from the novel: "Okonkwo sent the next few days preparing his seed yams [...]. His eldest son, Nwoye and Ikemefuna helped him in fetching the yams in long baskets from the barn and in counting the prepared seeds in groups of four hundred. Sometimes Okonkwo gave them a few yams each to prepare" (p.23).

In the above, Achebe has tried to confirm, through Okonkwo's attitude, a Yoruba proverb saying that: the gods that people chase children away from will perish. In order to prepare his retirement whether, Okonkwo has tried to transfer his competences to his only son named Nwoye. But the son is lazy and Okonkwo has not been tolerating Nwoye's inadequacies in the domain of farming. That is the reason why he threatens his son in the following: "I [Okonkwo] will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my hands. And if you stand staring at me like that, he swore 'Amadiora [thunder] will break your head for you" (p.34).

Significantly, the cause of Okonkwo's harshness is based on the traditional African cultural belief that stipulates that a child must inherit the hand work of his parent. So, Okonkwo gradually wants to prepare his only son to inherit him through hard work and courage. The following picture by Macmillan can be a good illustration of like father like son.



Macmillan *Primary English Course, Pupil's Book 2*. Macmillan Nigeria

Publisher: Revised edition 1997, p.74

In the above picture, a man and his son are cultivating the soil. By observation, one can notice that the son has started mastering how to cultivate the soil. If it were in modern Africa, the father would be accused of child exploitation. In short, Africans' attachment to Western system, especially the Western educational system, is doing more evil to Africa than good. Today, the educational system of the whites has wiped out this cultural value from the habits of modern African parents. Even though those parents who are conscious, time schedule for children does not allow them. African children spend much hours in learning theory and not practical in the Western system of education. African children go to school basing on their classes; some from 7am to 7pm from Monday to Friday and even Saturday for those who are in exam classes. With all of that, some parents hire some teachers for home tutorials in different subjects for their children. In addition, there are some places under the sun, in Africa, where children have to go school on Sundays due to lack of classrooms or lecture rooms. In so doing, the African youths have been trained in nothing else than reading book, especially the Western book.

Western educational system has its limits. That is why a Nigerian Yoruba singer called King Sunny Ade has suggested amalgamation between schooling and farming in one of his album titled *Destiny*, side B, track four titled *Ise Agbe*, meaning farming work/agricultural work. He sings as follows in Yoruba language:

'Iwe ki ko	Going to school
I'aiyi si oko	without hoe
Ati ada	and cutlass
Ko yipe o	is not complete/fair

Ko yipe o is not complete/fair
Ise agbe, ise ile wa agriculture, the work of our land

Eni kos'ise, a ma jale (1988) he who does not farm will steal (Translation ours)

As a remark, in the above album of the singer, he has not completely gone against western school but he advocates for amalgamation between going to school and farming. That album is out after the independence of Nigeria but the call has not been held. Today, Africa, imports most of her consumable foods because the African youths have been trained to consume and not to produce what they eat. So it is high time to valorise African cultural value which resides in farming. That cannot be done without the implication of the youths in training, adaptable to the needs of their society like farming.

Significantly, farming, especially commercial farming is not something a farmer can do alone, so he/she needs the assistance of labourers such as the African youths. It is a common saying in Africa that strangers do not come with the objective of building a nation but to gain interest. It is the role of the aborigine of the nation to do that. So, in traditional African societies, especially in the Igbo traditional society, every member of a family gives a helping hand in the periods of plantation. It is the case of Okonkwo in the following excerpt from the novel: "Some days later, when the land had been moistened by two or three heavy rains, Okonkwo and his family went to the farm with baskets of seed of yams, their hoe and machetes, and the planting began. They made single mounds of the earth in the straight lines all over the field and sowed the yams in them" (p.24).

By involving family members, especially the children, the parents are indirectly inculcating values that are useful for the children. Teasing the soil is a work that does not worn out. It happens that Okonkwo commits a female crime which makes him be ostracised from his fatherland for a period of seven years. He happens to move to his motherland and he is welcome and given a plot of land on which to build his compound and two or three plots of land to farm during planting season (p.91). He uses a plot to build his hut and two or three plots to grow yams. The narrator informs the readers that "His yams grew abundantly, not only in his motherland but also in Umuofia where his friend gave them out year by year to share-croppers" (p.121).

In a nutshell, Okonkwo has succeeded in life because he has been given the right educational pattern. He has also reached the level of Nwakibie the richest man in his fatherland in the domain of commercial farming because he himself has got to the state of giving out his yam seeds for share-croppers every year. How has Okonkwo reached that level of success? It is through informal teaching which is based on watching and imitating old people who have succeeded in a given field. Okonkwo has five male children in his motherland (p.121). But he has not been able to transfer his competences to his elder son due to the arrival of the White men system which has to disrupt the African cultural system of education. It is a pity the African youths do not have models to follow because of their exposure to Western systems.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has critically examined the limitation of Western education pattern as a means of youth empowerment by exploring African traditional education patterns of youths' empowerment, especially the traditional Igbo education pattern of youths' empowerment in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) through cultural theory and postcolonial criticism theory. As findings, African traditional education pattern, especially the Igbo traditional education pattern has exposed youths to cultural activities that prepare them to meeting up with challenges ahead of them. Accordingly, the Igbo patterns of education are formal through initiation ceremony and informal through watching and imitating grown-ups who have succeeded in a domain. The informal learning dominates in Achebe's novel through the study of a youth named Okonkwo. Despite he is from a poor family, he has succeeded through watching and imitating, firstly, in the domain of wrestling, secondly, it has made him become a valiant warrior, entrusted the role of an emissary between his village and a neighbouring village and thirdly, in that of commercial farming through watching and imitating Nwakibie, the richest man in his village. In addition, the Igbo traditional education patterns put the youths at the centre of social, economic and political development and empowerment. It is true that Okonkwo immigrates from his home village to his mother's village but it is not lack of means of wellbeing that makes him leave. Not only does Okonkwo prosper in exile but he also continues to invest his yam seed in shared-cropping in his home village with the help of one his clan men named Obierika.

So, it is high time modern African governments stopped copy pasting western system with the objective of empowering the African youth. But they should submit the African youths to educational patterns adaptable to their needs and that of their countries so as to reduce death rates of African youths in the Mediterranean Sea every year.

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