
THE CONCEPT OF IGBO SPIRITUALITY AND ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

In a techno-scientific age where conflicting views on the reality of environmental ethics as well as ethical, environmental and ideological concerns emerge continuously, there is the need to constantly reinstate the vertical-horizontal dimensions of man's peaceful co-existence with living and non-living things. Added to the above task is retrieval of indigenous beliefs and practices which are relevant to sound environmental and social development. This research focuses on what the Igbo people actually believe and practice and the values inherent in Igbo spirituality. Employing a hermeneutic approach, this study demonstrates how to interpret environmental values that are present within Igbo spirituality. A major finding in this study is that, in spite of modern developments, environmental values of Igbo spirituality are still preserved and practiced, and have practical functions within community life. Considering the nature and diversified forms of challenges to the Igbo spirituality in this age of science with some environmental devaluating attitudes of the human person, the study proposes that mankind cultivate this traditional sense of love, care and harmonious co-existence with the Mother Earth already present in Igbo spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Man is a social animal that lives in a network of relationships. In his numerous life endeavors: political, religious, cultural and economics, man is found in a deep-rooted sense of belonging and oneness with both animate and inanimate things. However, in this techno-scientific era where the world is fast becoming a global village, there is the need to constantly reinstate the vertical-horizontal dimensions of man's peaceful co-existence with living and non-living things. Thus, in recent times, there has been a clarion call for the conservation of nature. Within the African perspective, this concern goes beyond the mere care for the environment, it involves a return to the traditional African sense of value and respect for the order of created things, especially the Mother Earth. In such a deep rooted tradition, the sacredness of the earth (land, trees and other natural endowments) forms a great part of the African traditional religion, thereby showing the sources of the rich African cultural and spiritual heritage. Based on these assumptions, words of wisdom embedded in the African folklores, myths, proverbs and other traditional practices confirm a sense of reverence and respect accorded to the natural world. This paper seeks to examine man's harmonious encounter with the environmental values and his fellow men by investigating the role of environmental care and respect for the human person in the Igbo spirituality; which is capped in the commensurably-oriented attitudinal approach to life.

THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY FROM THE IGBO PERSPECTIVE

Spirituality is not a peculiar property of one religion or the other; thus, it remains eminent in several human practices. This aspect is therefore an exploration of the concepts of spirituality from the African, especially Igbo point of view, a spiritual guide and the possible roles of the spiritual guide in the attainment of spiritual excellence. Additionally, in line with the Igbo cosmology, the earth which is called *Ani* in Igbo is regarded

as the handwork of God, the Creator and Maker of all things. For F. A. Arinze, the Earth Spirit is the most important spirit after *Chukwu* and she is the Great Mother Spirit in the Igbo hierarchy of beings (Arinze, 2008, p.27.). The ancestors believed that God can be worshipped through the created natural things like trees, water bodies, and animals among others. This supposition characterizes some of the various religious rituals in traditional Igbo society in an attempt to attain spiritual growth. This implies that conservation and preservation of these sources of their spiritualities remain an essential part of the traditional practices of the Igbo people. Nonetheless, there is a need for this attitude to be upheld and promoted in the light of the current environmental pollution and crisis that is daily emanating across the globe.

However, the Igbo holistic understanding of the inter-relationship that exists in the eco-system negates the nature-culture, rural-urban polarization. Worthy of mention is the fact that the nature of the Igbo spirituality cherishes the need for the interaction of beings for efficacy. It is this understanding that helps the community of persons to develop and practice the culture of environmental preservation of existing realities which equally creates a balance in the natural world; trees, animals and other things in nature that today face extinction. Fundamentally, the Igbo approach to spirituality is built on the belief in a Supreme Being- God-*Chiukwu*, lesser deities, and ancestors and in the after-life. These are the anchors unto which spiritual orientation for the Igbo is rooted. This clue thus throws more light on the nature of the Igbo and their interaction with both temporal and non-temporal life forces within their vicinity. In the view of the Igbo traditional perception of reality, the world is made up of two main interrelated parts: the heavens (*Eluigwe*) and the earth (*Elu-Uwa*) the house of man, animals, plants and a host of other created beings. It is a place where two realms of existence: (Ala mmadu and Ala mmuo), man and deities interact (Nwala, 1985, p.30). According to Metuh: “All beings known to African worldviews belong to either worlds-the visible world (Ala mmadu), and the invisible world (Ala mmuo). The invisible world is made up of the heavenly realm, said to be the home

of the creator and deities; and the spirit land; the home of the ancestors” (Metuh, 1992, p. 51).

The ancestors in Igboland are believed to participate in all important family affairs. It is believed that there is a continuous interaction between the Supreme Being and the other beings in the universe irrespective of the realm to which each belongs and operates. They inhabit the natural phenomena and are involved in men’s daily activities. It is thus difficult to talk of a strict dichotomy between the natural and the spiritual worlds because they are in constant communion and communication (Nwala, 1985, pp.31-34). In a similar vein, in Igbo tradition, an indispensable channel through which spiritual communication, worship and atonement ensues is music. It permeates all religious and social gatherings and ceremonies meant to establish harmony with God and the community. For example, music accompanies child naming, marriages and other festivities. Prayers, invocations, and blessings are also made. Prayer is the first act of worship addressed to God to intervene in the lives and workings of the people. Formal blessings are also made and declared on all or specific people and purposes. After this comes the final greetings and salutations. There is also the belief that the spiritual worlds inform belief in the afterlife because death is not the final end of human existence in the Igbo belief system. It is believed that every person has a spiritual quality or characteristic that transforms into another form of existence after death. Hence, it is only those who live a good life that go to the world of the ancestors (the spirit land) where they continue to have influence on earthly life and family matters. The ancestral home is a perfect prototype of a good life on earth (Nwala, 1985, p.34). Living a good life in the Igbo sense means to carefully observe the customs, taboos, laws and traditions of the land called *Omenala*. *Omenala* (tradition) is the hidden point of reference in any moral discourse among the Igbo (Ekennia, 2000, p.166). In a nutshell, *Omenala* is the embodied spirituality of any existing Igbo community and is meant to provide and protect all values inherited from the ancestors.

***Chi* in the Igbo Spirituality**

Chi is a unique personal life-force and the principle that determines each individual's destiny. Each person possesses his own *Chi* believed to be the spiritual force that accompanies the life journey of the individual (Mozia, 1982, p.212). Thus in the submission of Ekennia:

Chi gives each person infinite possibilities to realize himself in the community and this personalized inner force in each individual, is always in harmony with the person. When the person acquires mastery of himself or has attained certain self-knowledge, he examines the inner force and becomes fully in control of any situation. It is at this point that the Igbo say "Onye kwe, *Chi* ya ekwe" (Ekennia, 2000, p.154).

Consequently, the Igbo person regards his *Chi* as the explanatory principle for his successes or failures in life. Even though the Igbo person can have some control over his *Chi*, there is an aspect of determinism in his life which is usually manifested when the person records failures in his life despite his determined efforts. He sees himself as ('onye *Chi* ojoo') an unlucky man while on the other hand, he is seen as ('onye *Chi* oma') a lucky one with good *Chi* (Mozia, 1982, p.184). Religiously speaking, therefore, the Igbo are united by their belief in one God (Chukwu) and in the spirits and ancestors. Their belief in God is responsible for their inseparable relationship with God and the members of the community. This relationship also extends to non-Igbo. Worthy of note is the fact that the Igbos have two notions of *Chi*-the material and the immaterial nature of *Chi*. The material part of man (*Ahu*), body (*Ahu*) is the Igbo term that stands for the material aspect in him, which is without the soul. Nevertheless, the same *ahu* can be into used in various contexts by the Igbo to mean different things like-*ahu gi kwanu* meaning 'how is your body?' This is a way of further greetings among the Igbo.

The immaterial part of man (mind and soul) which is the spiritual or invisible part of the human person is the defining principle

of his personhood and actions. With this very dimension of his being, mankind cultivates a relationship with the transcendental world. Man being a composite of soul and body, the Igbo runs into the conflict of choice of words in defining the human soul. For instance, Edeh employs three terms in identifying the soul-‘Mkpuruobi’, ‘Chi’ and ‘Mmuo’. ‘Mmuo’ is the most suitable that conveys the idea of the soul. This is so because immortality suggests that which is unseen as against that which is seen. Thus, every activity that is not of the body must be from the soul (Edeh, 1985, pp. 80-82). This view is not however conclusive as some other scholars like Metuh have other notions. These arguments notwithstanding, the respective functions played by either of the terminologies employed in describing soul or body point to the different aspects of the human person. All these considerations point to the fact that ‘Mmuo’ (spirit) refers to something immaterial (Ekennia, 2000, p.155). Fundamentally, it designates the invisible spirit world. This leading analysis points to the impact of the Igbo people and their anthropology on their approach to spirituality.

God in the Traditional Igbo Belief System

The Igbo system of belief in the Supreme Being anchors heavily on their understanding of the hierarchy of forces/being. The Igbo hold tenaciously to the interplay of forces in their life which forms their concept of a higher being that is superior to all other beings. This explains the genesis of some terminologies like ‘Chi-ukwu’, ‘Olisa-ebuluwa’, and ‘Onye-Okike’. For the Igbo, it is this Being that sustains every other being. E. Edeh argues that the existence of things in the universe coupled with the Igbo concept of ‘Chi’, life after death-reincarnation stand as reliable proofs for the reality of such a Supreme Being in whose reverence their spirituality anchors (Edeh, 1985, p.59). More so, the Igbo believe that no one equals this Supreme Being in power and he knows everything, he is altogether a good and merciful God (Arinze 2008: 18). Hence, it is widely believed among the Igbo people that ‘Chukwu’ controls and

directs everything that happens in the world of men, and indeed the entire universe. The Igbo man believes firmly in the omnipotence of 'Chukwu'. Arinze (2008, p.15) opines that 'Chukwu' has three chief names: 'Chukwu' (Chi-ukwu, the Great Spirit), 'Chineke' (the Spirit that creates) and 'Oseburuwa' (the Lord who upholds the world). These names however, portray the three dimensional functions of 'Chukwu' among the Igbo. 'Chi-ukwu' represents the Spirit that is above and beyond all other smaller spirits. 'Chineke' represents the Spirit that causes everything into being out of nothingness. Finally, 'Oseburuwa' represents the Spirit that governs, sustains, controls and guides the activities of human beings. Thus, these local names for the Supreme Being were mostly culled from the Igbo people's perceived level of relationship and activities between human beings and God; and this is their spirituality.

PEACE AND PERSONHOOD IN THE IGBO SOCIETY

This portion focuses on peace and personhood in the Igbo society by positing that a habitable environment is the key to happy living in the Igbo society. This explains the Igbo people's high sense of value for the earth and why they see nature as the ultimate in human life.

Spiritual Guide and the Human Person in a Traditional Igbo Society

Existence in every traditional Igbo society is institutions traditionally set up by the people through which law and order are kept in such a society. Therefore, the functionality of the government of Igbo society is built on the workability of institutions like age grade, *ozo* titled men, women folk-*Otu Ada*, among others. These social setups are not far from the religious aspects of the people's lives and practices (Arinze, 2008, p.18). In this same line of thought, spiritual guide and the human person in a traditional Igbo society becomes crucial. In these spiritual guides among the Igbo, strong reference is always made to traditional sage wisdom, folklore, and myth. Here, the people's historical account

provides the horizon on which moral issues regarding the conservation and distribution of resources are evaluated in juxtaposition to environmental ethics. Nature embraces a wider scope which includes history and religion which has the person at the centre of the entire drama. The human person cannot exist outside of the natural environment because environmental quality is a necessity for human life. This quality means that humans must develop a sustainable relationship with their environment (Rolston, 2003, p.515).

Peace: A Necessity in Human Society

Peace according to Mbiti “is a good relationship well lived; health, absence of pressure and conflict, being strong and prosperous. Peace is the totality of well-being, the fullness of life here and hereafter, what the Yoruba call *alafia*. This is the sum total of all that man may desire-an undisturbed harmonious life” (Mbiti, 1975, pp.162-163). This by extension explains some of the names the Igbo people answer like *Obiajulum*, *Nwaforaku*, *Udochukwuka*, among others. In addition, peace denotes the absence of bodily violence, war or conflict. Ikenga Metuh proposes peace as a beneficent adjustment of harmony between the individual and his Creator on the one side, and his fellow men on the other side all in relation to the environment in which mankind inhabits. In this, one discovers the concentric dimensions of peace between individuals, communities and nations. In the Igbo worldview, correlated to the concept of peace are justice and development (Metuh, 1992, p.55). For the Igbo, peace entails a just relation among men and with the community in whose life they share. Contrary to this, a person can fight like a wounded lion whenever his rights are trampled upon and can even call upon the gods for remedy. When on account of one’s misdeed the peace of the land is contravened by involvement in any sort of abomination or taboo, the communal dimension of peace is still seen.

Peaceful Co-existence in a Traditional Igbo Society

In no way is the Igbo society known and identified with individualistic or self-centered way of life. For instance, the Igbo family system is usually extended to clan and that is why people of the same clan cannot intermarry, but people of different clans cannot be included in the family cycle since they have their own lineage. The philosophy “We are better than animals because we have kinsmen” is so pronounced in the Igbo communalistic way of life. According to Achebe, “an animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him” (Achebe, 2008, p.132). He considers the support a family gives one another as the defining characteristic of humanity. Without family or respect for one’s family, one might as well be an animal. In Igbo society, family feast celebration is a sign of communal reunion and not only for eating and drinking since each family can afford what to eat and drink. This is properly expressed in an Igbo proverb, “*ihe e ji aputa ama bu ka ihu na ihu hukorita, o nweghi onye onwa anaghi eti na mpku ya*” Hence, “we come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so” (Achebe, 2008, p.133). This brings together both the living and the dead members of the family and kinsmen.

Traditional Igbo Approach to Conflict Resolution

Significant to Igbo life is its closely knit to culture and tradition. Traditions and customs are considered to be uniting factors in Igbo society. To be recognized and respected in Igbo land, one must follow traditions and customs. Just as the success of the individuals in the society depends on the communities’ effort as well to keep to the dictates of the gods, so does the entire community also suffer the consequences of disobeying the gods. Nevertheless, conflict resolution in any Igbo society has some peculiar approaches. The Igbo worldview holds that the purity of the land is determined by the purity of the people. In Igbo tradition, it is believed that no wise and normal human person will ask his *Chi* for a duel. Tending

to go against the wish of the gods is risking one's life. No one fights the spirits and remains the same (Achebe, 2008, p.149). Since the oracles are human beings but speak and interpret the minds of the gods and foresee the future, even on the most difficult and controversial issues, the people have to accept the words of the oracle.

From the foregoing, conflict resolutions are often given communalistic approach when they arise between a man and his fellow man, between communities or families, and towns are often given communalistic approach. From the *Okpala*, to the kindred, titled men, *Umuokpu* (for women's folk), the elders representing each town or community-*ndi Ojiani*, conflicts are addressed in every traditional Igbo society whenever they arise. These men are regarded as the upholders of the truth and justice in each community and their duty is to see that truth reigns in each case and peace restored. The practice of making sacrifices to appease the gods, for atonement and reconciliation is equally an indispensable part of conflict resolution in Igbo society. This is based on the fact that every offence in the community is of two dimensions. It affects both the living and the dead and their interactions with the community.

Traditionally, a successful conflict resolution in every traditional setting is marked by a common sharing in kola nut and drinking of palm wine often with the same cup. Respect for kola nut is one of the most important traditions in Igbo society. Igbo people show much respect to kola nuts for what it represents in Igbo culture. Kola nut is a symbol of life and life is sacred, as the common Igbo adage says '*Onye wetara oji wetara ndu* (he who brings kola brings life as well). Much significance is attached to kola nut in Igbo culture. Kola nut is a symbol of acceptance and unity. For an Igbo man to tell his neighbor, "We do not share, eat and drink in common" means that there is a great problem (Olorunsola, 1972, p.157).

This approach to conflict resolution is however informed by the Igbo notion of sin. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* defined sin as a "crime against the gods". Such transgressions occur when a member of a society violates bonds of family or insults an ancestral spirit. As the gods are

not slow in anger, sinners get quick and severe punishment from the gods, and some of these punishments are known and carried out by the community where the sin was committed. The punishments are meted out as a deterrent and also to appease the gods who are directly offended. Animal sacrifices, a heavy fine, exile from one's fatherland, or even death are instances of the punishments (Achebe, 2008, pp.8-17). If such atonement is not done, not only is the sinner subject to the wrath of the gods, the entire community suffers.

SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN IGBOLAND

The Igbo are united by ethnicity, culture and the geographic features of their location. Their location has a rainforest climate. The ecosystem is rich in rain forest reserves, rivers, etc., and this defines the livelihood of the local people as farmers, traders, food processors and local manufacturers of items linked to subsistence economies. There is a rich biodiversity of various species of plants and organism in the ecosystem. There are lots of palm trees, cassava, yam, plantain, pepper and palm kernel. Some environmental challenges in Igboland are deforestation, toxic waste dumping, soil destruction, flooding and erosion, noise pollution, lack of community participation due to failed government promises and policies, indifference and aloofness, weak or non-existent environmental policies, low agricultural production, socio-economic problems like poverty, joblessness, loss of farmlands, and low living standards. Other challenges include air pollution with poisonous chemicals and greenhouse emissions leading to increased cases of heart and lung cancer and diseases. Environmental challenges are community problems and go beyond the condition of the soil, land, water and atmosphere. The issue also touches on the quality of living conditions since human persons are "at the center of concerns for sustainable development and are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature" (UN, Rio Declaration, 1992). People make up part of the environment; therefore environmental degeneration will lead to human degeneration. Onuoha notes that:

Environmental degradation deals with the misuse or overuse of the resources of the environment which include fresh and safe water, fisheries, arable land, plants, animals, mineral resources, air, wildlife, and flora. One notable implication of environmental degradation for social existence is that it usually disrupts socio-economic life of the immediate human population that depends on natural resources for sustenance (Onuoha, 2008a, p.1027).

The Igbo face this challenge more because they are agrarians who depend more on land resources for sustenance than on government. The solution to this issue will be the effective application of environmental laws that regulate the use of resources and also sanction individuals' acts like careless waste disposal, unhygienic conditions and dirty neighborhoods, destruction of trees and plants. In line with this, the United Nations declared:

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop, and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites, the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects, and the right to the repatriation of their human remains. Indigenous people have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons (UN, 1992).

Thus, one of the many ways of preserving and promoting the Igbo ecological thought is to engage it as a rational discourse and make it part of the educational curriculum. Igbo traditional thought must dialogue with other disciplines so that it will not be rendered redundant. Dialogue makes ideas and values relevant without loss of the basic tenets. It also contributes to knowledge to show its epistemological relevance given its raw data

form. Agbakoba, who supports the transition from intuitive to a rational inquiry, opines that such a move is important as it makes no difference schooling pupils in science and technology without a corresponding attention to the cultural thought and praxis that form their socialization and outlook. Thus, it is important to engage the Igbo spirituality as it contains scientific discoveries from its observation and interaction with nature (Asiegbu and Agbakoba, 2006, pp.309-328).

CALL FOR A NEW IGBO ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

The Western denigration of Africans as a primitive people lacking rationality contributed to the neglect of their ideologies, perspectives and cultural experiences. Thus, inadequate attention to their epistemology and worldviews stems from this marginalization. African ideologies have been in quest for identity and recognition in the midst of other universal ideologies. To put this study in the right perspective, it is imperative to reflect on the cruise of the argument which questions the possibility of an African philosophy. For instance, such question as whether the “untutored African” can conceive of God raises alarm among the people of Africa. It is a question that borders on the validity or ability to have a body of knowledge that is typically African and without any Western influence or imposition. To do justice to the issue then, environmental ethics in Africa requires a dialogue with other ideas while maintaining the African concrete thoughts and experiences. The data of experiences about the African environment remains the platform for any further discussion on fashioning a new environmental ethics for Africans and by implication, the Igbo.

In addition, attention must be paid to differences in the climatic inclinations across nations as a guide when considering any ethics or indigenous thoughts. Oladipo is of the view that what is needed is not a restoration of traditional culture as such but a retrieval of the humanistic impulse already present in traditional thoughts (Oladipo, 2009, p.86). In other words, the rich elements in the tradition must be engaged with

the Western intellectual traditions. To do justice is to recognize that traditional thought plays a big role in the rational discourse even if it is not complete in itself. To be relevant, it must converse with other ideas from across its boundaries. Western ideas must not be totally absorbed without examining them because some were not developed in or for Igbo contexts. Thus, all environmental ethical theories have Western perspectives and cultural experiences signaling the need to embrace other enterprises in the world that is not Western.

Furthermore, Africa has suffered the problem of identity crisis as an effect of her involvement with colonialism and neo-colonialism but the way for the traditional-modernity relationship is not one in which they remain *incommunicado*. Nkrumah holds that it must be done in such a way that both sides are “in tune with the original humanistic principles underlying African society” (Nkrumah, 1968, p.268). The question we are asking is: what is the current and real situation in the midst of current discourse on the African environmental ethics? The real situation is that the Igbo cultural and moral values that make up the indigenous mindset of the people are challenged by the scientific and technological community and values. The latter runs counter to the former and the danger is to overrule or believe that those who subscribe to the traditional ways of relating with nature or doing things are archaic or their thoughts moribund. The Igbo are prone to borrowing from other cultures uncritically without considering the implications because of Western education and the fact that the society already operates on Western developed policies, images, ideas, values and programs (Mbon, 1991, pp.101-109). The Igbos need a re-evaluated environmental ethics since they operate neo-colonialist ideas based on land usage and ownership. The problems with this is in the erroneous conception of seeing land solely as a commodity for economic use identified with erroneous modern thoughts that consider not the intrinsic value of the human person but only by what he produces. It is such view that does not represent the indigenous understanding and values about land preservation and conserving its natural cycle which is closer to the much needed universal planetary ethics championed by the modern environmental movement.

Without the value of the Igbo thought system, life will be artificial and synthetic thereby compounding more of the environmental problems plaguing the society. This is because traditional ethics is regulated by law based on sacred sanction (Mbon, 1991, p.102). What is needed is a critical and creative synthesis of existing creative ecological values (Dirkirk, 2008, p.28), keeping in mind the peculiar nature of our struggle to create a sustained growth and development for our people. Such reconstruction is central to a culturally developed environmental ethics because no ideological principle or policy alien to the African people in its totality would last (Onunwa, 2005, p.185).

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

In sum, the focus of this study so far has been on the reality of peaceful environment as a fruit of the practices of Igbo spirituality. From the deliberations in this work, the Igbo spirituality is no doubt a spirituality of peace-making. Since definitions and deconstruction of main ideas and concepts are key ways to the in-depth comprehension of any study, this research has taken into consideration such concepts as peace, spirituality, environment, traditional Igbo society, among others and their vitality in the building of a peaceful environment. As viable *instrumenta labores* in the realization of this peace mission in the human Igbo society, the study employed the functionalities of spiritual guides, spiritual disciplines, traditional approaches to conflict resolution, to mention but a few. These views factored together drive home the truth of peaceful environment in Igbo spirituality which is the core of this study. As such, this study concludes by making a few recommendations for a better cultivation of peaceful environment in the practice of Igbo spirituality.

As a result of the current environmental challenges facing mankind today *via* deforestation, incessant bush burning and other unhealthy exploitations of the Mother Earth, it becomes crucial for the government and all other law enforcement agencies to consider providing policies that will aid man in being friendlier to the Mother Earth. Earlier inadequate

government policies have given room to the demolition of forests by the local people and allowed for the government to satisfy economic ambitions. All these policies can be revised in a way that will help promote environmental preservation.

On the side of the Igbo spiritual practices, the human person must not in the name of civilization jettison cherished traditional practices that have helped for centuries to preserve the environment. Among the Igbo, history accounts for the praiseworthy lifestyles of their ancestors and how eco-friendly they were. The same demand is today being made on mankind. To achieve this, plantation must be encouraged in sync with love for nature.

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