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# Land as the Main Cause of Inter-communal Conflicts in Africa; Key Natural Resource against Community Development of Third World Nations?

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of land in inter-communal conflicts (IC) in southwestern Nigeria. It purposefully selected eight communities with recurrent IC in the region for questionnaire administration, targeting 10% of their household heads. Study reveals that most of the residents identified land as the main cause of IC. It notes that government's grip over land in the area was weak, as most of the residents acknowledged that individual families and community leaders monitored the affairs of land in the region and that strangers have no full right to indigenous land. This could be why most past recorded conflicts erupted when people rose to fight for their rights on land. In this regards, the policy makers of Nigeria need to review the effectiveness of the country's land laws and their applications at the regional and local levels. To avoid complications, selected community leaders must be involved in the process.

**Keywords:** Land, conflict, community development, administration, settlements

## 1. Introduction

Land is a vital natural resource that hosts and sustains all living things namely; plants, animals and man. It is a fixed socio-economic asset that aids production of goods and services and hosts virtually all activities that take place on earth (Magel, 2001). The nature of land and types of its components dictate what must exist on it. Hence, savannah land hosts grasses while tropical land is characterised with hardwood forest among others. To an extent, land influences climate and dictates lifestyles of settlers on it cut across the globe. Land host houses and towns where origin of a man is traced. This is because all communities are located on land and their territories are defined by it. In another dimension, the sovereignty of a kingdom is a function of the area of land it occupies. This is an indication that territorial defence is with the purpose of securing or retaining certain piece of land.

The above mentioned arguments reveal that land is central to continuity of life, indispensable in physical development and complex in social relations of production in the economic world. In other words, to every land, there is the socio-cultural dimension to it. As a result, conflict over land is often combined with strong economic, spatial, cultural and emotional values. There are indications that man's complex socio-economic,

cultural and physical attachments to land have placed land in a sensitive and unique position.

Conflict interests among communities to secure territories, conserve socio-economic resources and carry out physical development activities and practice customs and traditions on land have given birth to untold crises over the ages (Abegunde, 2010). In another dimension, these have resulted in conflicts that have affected millions of people and resulted in lost opportunities in terms of social disorder, economic depression and destruction of housing and basic infrastructure in the physical development of communities (Gizewski and Homer-Dixon, 1995; Justino, 2004). In another dimension, all types of conflicts on land entail significant private and social costs in human environment. Conflicts as used in this study refer to disputes, disagreements, quarrels, struggles, fights and wars between individuals, groups or countries (Angaye, 2003). They may be short or long in tenure, but impact on residents and their environment in a direct or indirect way. Such conflicts may sometimes be advantageous to a group or affected parties. However, experiences in African nations have shown that the negative effects of conflicts far outweigh their merits (Colletta, Kostner and Wiederhofer, 1996; Bisnwanger, Klaus and Gershon, 1996; Shah, 2003; Salim, 2004).

Direct losses on land can be reflected in loss of farmland, waste of land based mineral resources, urban land degradation during and after conflict, inability to conserve landed properties with cultural or historical values, inaccessibility to urban land for meaningful socio-economic or physical development programmes among others (Schock 1996; Addison, 2001; Abegunde, 2010). Of significance here is that conflicts initiated by tussle over land often results in further losses on land and its related resources. In other words, land as an impetus of development can become impediment to same in the built environment. This could be disgusting where much value is attached to land by the local people without government regulations. Literature has shown that this is predominant in African communities (Oyerinde, 2005; Ayo, 2002; Asiyabola, 2008). To them, land is seen as the path to heaven for the departed relatives, the abode of ancestral and a devouring god to the defaulters and abusers of it (Ayo, 2002). That could be why Tuladhar (2004) conceived that land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, few are living and countless are yet to be born. The study therefore centred on southwestern Nigeria, the most populated and civilised region in the country. It is an attempt to understand the type conflicts in relation to land related resources and development in the study area. To achieve this, the study underscored residents' views to prevailing land management techniques, vis-à-vis past conflicts on land in the region. This is with a view to obtain information necessary on recurrent inter-community conflicts in the area to serve as a guide to policy makers to enhance effective land use and administration, harmonious physical development on land and promote peace among residents.

### *1.1 Conflict, Land and Physical Development*

Urban planning has evolved in the shadow of urban chaos and disrupted physical development caused by conflict, lack of adherence to development control, urban slum and environmental disequilibrium. For instance, the urban environmental problems during industrial revolution era in Britain affected physical development and were never solved until planning intervention. This means that war is not the only issue that opened way for urban planners to intervene in land administration and development. Of recent, the need for post conflict reconstruction has paved way for urban planning interventions in form of plan preparations, renovations and rehabilitations. This became evident immediately after the First and the

Second World Wars, leading to the rebuilding of ruined cities. In other words, conflict and physical development has ever been an important issue either during or post conflict era (Abegunde, 2010).

Similar scenario repeats itself in Africa. The difference is that urban planners in the region are yet to wake up to their duty in post conflict planning and land use administration and physical development of conflict zones. However, globally and of recent, the concept of conflict and physical development is becoming more relevant in conflict studies. This is because the increasing occurrences of conflict had led to extensive loss of life, damage to property and the environment in general. These often turn back the clock of development. These have been the major impediments to growth in many African nations (Gakunzi, 2005). Their effects on residents are reflected on destruction of community's infrastructure, trade, social interaction and physical development. As pointed out by Hettne (2002), conflicts create states of turbulence in the environments and in particular, in the minds of people. This often leads to a destruction of physical and social infrastructure including roads, electricity, schools and hospitals.

Housing is essential to the well-being and development of most societies. As a complex asset, it provides links to livelihoods, health, education, security and social and family stability. It also acts as a social centre for family and friends, a source of pride and cultural identity, and a resource of both political and economic importance (Sultan, 2003). During conflict, it is an extremely vulnerable asset, and the destruction of homes or their loss through displacement or dispossession is one of the most visible effects of conflict and natural disaster. In the same vein, infrastructural facilities which are life wires of communities are key targets during conflicts. Many difficulties are faced by infrastructure providers in post-conflict situations. Apart from making communities lively through infrastructural provision in post conflict areas, their physical development in terms of acceptable locations and meeting specific choice of the people are issues necessary to be considered in housing and infrastructural development in conflict regions.

With this background, many planners rush into conflict studies without delving into its roots. Such understanding is necessary in Africa where many things are attached to culture and tradition. This is the case of land and its management style in the area. In other words, land management in Africa is with different faces. As noted by Quisumbing et al (2001), communal tenure systems tend to grant different rights to different persons for a single plot of land, more private and individualized tenure systems concentrate exclusive and absolute rights to a plot of land to a single individual. In addition, individual land rights under the communal system are restricted. Although the usufruct right of individual members of the community is usually well established, the rights to transfer, including sales and leasing, are vested in the extended family, clan, or community. These are indications that most pieces of land in Africa area indigenously managed. For instance, about 71% of Botswana is tribal land, followed by state land at 25% and freehold land at 4%. The case is not different in Nigeria, though the government of the land claimed that it has made all land in the country to be public (UN-Habitat, 2010). This poses series of limitations to growth and development in Africa. First, land under customary system is fragmented, giving no room for intensive land use. Effective land use planning is also limited under this style. This is because master plan preparation requires that all land to be planned together, which customary land tenure system would not allowed. Every land owner wants to use his land as he desires. Then comes the issue of access to land for the poor, strangers and women (Kane et al, 2005) The worst of these is the reprisal effects of inconsistency of land tenure administration, resulting into war and strives when people want to claim rights

or have compulsory access to land. This is sometimes more complex in Africa because of the socio-cultural ties to land. There is therefore the need to understand predominant land management style in Africa to aid effective physical planning and development in post conflict communities. In relation to this study, this knowledge provides a good background to understanding communal conflict and physical development, particularly where land is central to conflict issues.

The concept of communal conflict and physical development requires the formulation of right policies that will enhance sustainable access to land for all necessary urban uses in conflict regions. It organizes and describes the most important ideas that can guide the future evolution of the physical aspect of communities that are prone to conflict and how best to monitor their land and its related resources. Where this fails, conflict areas, may be cut off from most of the development initiatives of the state and the private sector within and beyond region of its occurrence, except they are revisited and planned for. This is because until land is accorded its right position, all other developments on it would be defined as temporary by the weapons of war.

### *1.2 Statutory Land Right versus Customary Land Right in Nigeria*

In Nigeria, the bottleneck in individual, company or government right to customary land has led to statutory land tenure system. This is a system backed up by decree number 6 of 1978, tagged the Land Use Act. This Act vested right to allocate urban land under the state governor and put land management and control at rural level under the local governments councils (Omole, 1999). The need to institute statutory land tenure that gives the individual access to land anywhere in the country is obvious. Kayode (1999) noted that there was the need to have a unified land tenure system in as against the diverse land tenure system operating in the country before 1978. He also observed that there is a serious need to curtail the activities of land speculators and greedy individuals who had turn land to a market commodity. In addition, the 1978 Land Use Act also gave every Nigerian the opportunity of getting at least a plot of land in any part of the country for his developmental purpose. The Land Use Act, as a Nigerian Land Law, divorces English law (the colonial law) that operated in the Northern part of the country from indigenous but formal law that protects the general public.

The Land Use Act also merges the merit in the customary land tenure law and the English legal system to be able to face off the shortcomings and the uncertainty in the customary law. It was also realized that because of population growth, the economic growth, and advancement in technology, the traditional rulers and the customary trustees of land were unable to protect and control the use of land under their care properly. This calls for a new direction in the use and administration of land in Nigeria.

Despite all these, right to land and properties in southwestern part of the country is grossly affected by the old customary tenure of land and property holdings. A fair practice in the present land holding is the customary tenant title. Customary tenancy is defined as people who are not members of the family but have on application been given family land to occupy on payment of yearly customary tributes (Ogedengbe, 2006).

The practice of dividing land among families, allocating land in fragments and customary tenancy coupled with lack of respect to the Land Use Act in southwestern Nigeria have made land to be inadequate for the people. There seems not to be a given land without title. Conflicts over farm land, reserved zone, and inter-community boundaries are common but unexpected, since the promulgation of the Land Use Act.

In a situation where land for settlement and agriculture is in abundance in comparison to land fragmentation and hoarding, conflicts over land boundaries are not issues, and conflicts over land properties are minimal (Mudenda, 2006). However with the current rise in population it is becoming clearer that overlapping interest on land and its resources have been generating conflicts among residents. These have overtime negatively impacted the socio economic development and physical environment in affected communities.

## **2. Methodology**

The research methodology adopted for this study was through collection of primary data communities that were found of inter-communal conflict in Southwestern Nigeria. Available literature on recent communal conflicts in the study area revealed that out of the thirty one (31) locations where inter- communal conflicts were very prominent between 1990 and 2008, four of them comprising eight (8) settlements are in Southwestern Nigeria { Global Internal Displacement Profile Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council on Nigeria, (IDP) 2008}. These are Iju and Itaogbolu (Ondo State), Emure and Ise (Ekiti state) Irawo-ile and Irawo-owode (Oyo State) Ife and Modakeke (Osun state) (Ali, 1999), Irobi, 2005). These eight settlements were selected for the purpose of the study.

Information revealed that there were 52 political wards in the selected settlements (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2006). These include Iju (5), Itaogbolu(6), Emure(11), Ise(12), Irawo-Ile(2), Irawo-Owode(1), Ife(19) and Modakeke(4). The study selected 50% of the wards and 10% of household-heads across board for questionnaire administration, through systematic sampling method. Fifty percent of the wards in the study area were chosen because four out of the eight selected communities did not have more than three (3) political wards while Ife alone had 19 wards. The fifty percent (50%) selection across board would give allowance for well representation in every community and increase confidence level of the sample selected. The choice of ten percent (10%) sample size of the household-heads for this study was informed by the view of Spiegel et al (2000) who suggested 3% sample size for empirical studies that are to be conducted within homogenous or semi-homogenous population (as the case is in Southwestern Nigeria where most of the residents are Yoruba speaking people). Past related research works of Tomori (1972), Vaughan (2003) and Adesoji (2005) conducted in the same region of Nigeria where this study is based also supported the view of the above mentioned author on sample size selection.

In conducting the survey, the streets in each of the selected settlements were located and one out of every ten residential buildings in each street was selected using random sampling method, based on house numbering. Where residential buildings were not accessible by road, minor roads or paths that served them were taken as accessible roads. Where these houses were not numbered, temporary numbers were attached to them for the purpose of this study.

To ensure a random start, the first building in every street was randomly chosen out of the first ten residential buildings. Where a chosen residential building was not used for residential purpose, the next one was selected to replace it. The interval took effect from the first sample. Household heads were targets of questionnaire administration in each of the sampled building. Information collected from them were on causes of past inter-communal conflicts in the area, their opinions on strangers right to land and predominant method of land administration in the study area among others. Where there were more than one household heads, the one with longest time of stay was preferred. In all, 721 questionnaires were

administered out of which 593 (82%) were counted worthy for analysis in this study (see Table 1). This placed non-response rate at 18%. The rest 128 were either not returned or poorly attended to by sampled respondents who were either nursing the wounds of conflicts in their hearts or not willing to supply information related to past conflicts in the study area. Information obtained from the respondents were related to main causes of communal conflicts and the effects of these on children education in the socio-spatial environment. Data collected were analysed using descriptive method.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

#### *3.1 Land as Main Cause of Conflicts in Southwestern Nigeria*

Findings revealed that conflicts in southwestern Nigeria were instigated by land related issues. As seen in Table 2, attempts by the residents to claim their communities' rights over certain pieces of land (73.7%) from others have resulted in conflicts between them and other discrete communities. As seen in the table, all the respondents in Emure (100%), most in Ife (80.6%) and Modakeke (72.2%), about two-third in Ise (62.4%) and Itaogbolu (65.9%) and more than half of the people in Irawo-ile (54.3%) and Irawo-owode (56.4%) reasoned along this line.

The table further reflects that a little less than one-third (26.3%) of the respondents had a contrary opinion that past conflicts in the study area could be linked with other issues different from land matter. Similar response or less was observed across settlements, except in Irawo-ile (43.6%) where a little above two third of the respondents indicated that most of the recorded past conflicts in their area had some issues undertone than land related matters. The import of this is that past conflicts in southwestern Nigeria were instigated by tussles over land related matters.

#### *3.2 Chi-square Significance Test for Tussle over Ownership of Land as the Main Cause of Communal Conflicts among Others in Southwestern Nigeria.*

To establish with certainty the import of tussle over land as the main cause of communal conflicts in the study area, the study tested the relationship between the variable and other causes of communal conflicts enumerated in Table 3. As can be seen in the table, other variables identified by the respondents as causes of conflicts and used as dependent variables in this analysis include wrong location of joint resources, lack of basic amenities, extortion by other communities, improper sharing of joint resources, illiteracy and poverty. Others include politics, poor leadership and wrong governance, unacceptable custom or tradition, segregation or tribalism, historical antecedence, differences in believe and religion, and concern for community's growth and development. These 15 variables are seen as DF in Table 3.

Results in the table gave the chi-square values of the relationship between the tested variables and showed that all the values obtained were all significant at  $P \leq 0.05$  probability level except for 'improper sharing of joint resources'. This further confirms that nearly all the past conflicts in the study area can be directly or indirectly linked to land matters. In another dimension, communal conflicts in southwestern Nigeria can be said to be synonymous to land conflicts or vice versa.

#### *3.3 System of Land Administration in Southwestern Nigeria*

The study showed that land in southwestern Nigeria is principally managed by the residents rather than the government of the land. As revealed in Table 4, more than two-fifth of the respondents indicated that community leaders (43.2%) and families (41.5%) were in charge of land administration respectively. Only a



little above one-tenth (15.3%) of the respondents opined that government is in control of land in the study area. Across settlements, land in Oyo State is under community leaders. This is because more than two-third of their respondents in Irawo-ile (74.2%) and Irawo-owode (71.7%) opined along this line. In Emure in Ekiti State, nearly all (97.3%) the respondents indicated that their pieces of land are under the administration of families or individuals. Furthermore, about half (47.0%) of the respondents in Ife also indicated that their pieces of land were administered by individual families in the study area.

Half of the sampled respondents in Ondo State {Iju (50.0%) and about two-third in Itaogbolu (68.2%)} opined that their pieces of land were under community leaders. Opinion that government still controls land in the study area was unpopular during this study. This is because only a handful (15.3%) of respondents in most of the selected settlements had their pieces of land under the administration of the government. The situation was worst in Oyo State where there was no representation. In other words, most pieces of land that belonged to respondents in the study area were administered by community leaders and individual families.

#### *1.4 Strangers' Rights to Land in Southwestern Nigeria*

As revealed in this study, more than half (52.3%) of the respondents were not persuaded that a stranger should have full right to any piece of land in their settlements, even with certificate right of occupancy from the government. In disaggregate terms, Table 5 reflects that most of the respondents in Ife (60.5%) and Itaogbolu (77.3%), and more than half of those in Ise (56.5%) and Iju (58.7%) were of this opinion. In addition, the table shows that a little above one third of those in Modakeke (38.6%) had the same perception. Findings also revealed that about one third (34.1%) opined that partial right can be granted to strangers who seek for ownership of rights on land possession in southwestern Nigeria. Similar opinion runs across studied settlements, except in Ekiti State and Irawo-ile, where not less than two-fifth of the respondents agreed to partial ownership of land for late settlers on land possession. Only very few (13.3%) of the respondents were disposed to full ownership of rights on land to strangers in the study area. The import of this is that most of the sampled respondents were of the opinion that strangers have no equal right to land with the indigenous residents as spelt in the 1978 land use act of Nigeria. This agrees with the works of that strangers have no direct access to indigenous land in African communities.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

The analysis in this paper has important implications on land management and conflict prevention against land and its resources in the study area. First, it provided basis for understanding the causal and recipient roles of land in conflicts between discrete communities in southwestern Nigeria. It also revealed the underlying bedrock of who is in charge of land administration in the region. Here, the weakness of the government of the land is evidently but indirectly portrayed in leaving land administration into the hands of community leaders and individual families. This perhaps led to land fragmentation and administrative pluralism, making residents to claim their community's or individuals' rights over pieces of land, resulting into conflicts.

It can be deduced that countries with effective regulatory frameworks on land are likely to have less tussle over land as recorded in this study. In this regards, the policy makers of Nigeria need to review the effectiveness of their country's land laws and their applications at the regional and local levels. This would address the problem of strangers' inaccessibility to indigenous land and practically ensure

land as public property. The review have to be done with full consent of selected community leaders, who would be expected to carry their people along on the need to holistically make land available for all without prejudice. When this is in place, the desire to defend selfish interests or community's rights would be reduced and where there are encroachments, the government as potent land administrator can easily intervene with minimal crisis.

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Table 1. Sample Frame and Size in the Study Area

State	Selected settlement	Selected political wards	No of Questionnaire Administered	Total Administered	No of Questionnaires Analysed	Total Analysed				
Osun	Ife	Ilare1	17	163	10	134				
		Ilare3	13		12					
		Ilare4	13		10					
		More/ojaja	13		06					
		Akarabata	22		21					
		Okerewe	21		18					
		Iremo1	27		30					
		Iremo3	12		04					
		Iremo4	18		16					
		Iremo5	07		06					
	Modakeke	Modakeke1	71	147	67	133				
		Modakeke3	76		66					
Ekiti	Emure	Ogbontioro	15	107	10	74				
		Imola	21		16					
		Odo-emure1	17		10					
		Oke emure2	18		15					
		Ariyeisi	22		14					
		Idamadu	14		09					
		Ise	Ise		Figbo		13	124	12	85
					Oke-Odi		34		31	
					Ogbese-oko		28		16	
					oba					
Oraye	22			10						
Kajola	14			08						
Erinwa	13			08						
Oyo	Irawo ile	Irawo-Ile	49	49	35	35				
		Irawo-owode	40	40	39	39				
Ondo	Iju	Iju1	20	47	20	46				
		Iju3	27		26					
	Itaogbolu	Itaogbolu1	27	44	27	44				
		Itaogbolu3	17		17					
Total		30 Political wards	721	721	593	593				

Source: Author's field survey data, 2010.

Table 2: Land as Main Cause of Conflicts in Southwestern Nigeria

States	Osun (n = 267)		Ekiti (n = 159)		Oyo (n = 74)		Ondo (n = 93)		Total
Settlements	Ife n =134	Modakeke n =133	Emure n =77	Ise n =85	Irawo-ile n =35	Iraowo- owode n =39	Iju n =46	Itaogbolu n =44	n = 593
Reasons									
Claim of settlements' Rights over Land	108(80.6)	96(72.2)	77(100)	53(62.4)	19(54.3)	22(56.4)	33(71.7)	29(65.9)	437(73.7)
Other Issues	26(19.4)	37(27.8)	00(0.0)	32(37.6)	16(45.7)	17(43.6)	13(28.3)	15(34.1)	156(26.3)
Total	134(100)	133(100)	77(100)	85(100)	35(100)	39(100)	46(100)	44(100)	593(100)

Source: Author's field survey data, 2010.

Table 3: Chi-square Significance Test for Tussle over Ownership of Land the Main Cause of

Specific Causes of Communal Conflict	Chi-square Value	Degree of Freedom	Significance Level
Wrong Location of Joint Resources	64.4	15	0.000
Lack of Basic Amenities	66.6	15	0.000
Extortion of other Community's Rights	28.7	15	0.000
Claim of Community's Right	26.1	15	0.000
Improper sharing of Joint Resources	7.13	15	0.415
Illiteracy	80.5	15	0.000
Poverty and Economic Recession	89.9	15	0.000
Inequalities in Economic Lifestyle	34.3	15	0.000
Political Exclusion from Issues that touch the two Discrete Settlements	36.5	15	0.000
Poor Leadership and Wrong Governance	124.0	15	0.000
Bad customs and Tradition	121.0	15	0.000
Tribalism and Segregation	71.5	15	0.000
Historical Antecedences	74.1	15	0.000
Differences in Believe and Religion	45.8	15	0.000

Communal Conflicts among Others in Southwestern Nigeria.

Source: Author's field survey data, 2010.

States	Osun (n = 267)		Ekiti (n = 159)		Oyo (n = 74)		Ondo (n = 93)		Total
Settlements	Ife	Modakeke	Emure	Ise	Irawo	Iraowo	Iju	Itaogbolu	n = 593
	n =134	n =133	n =77	n =85	-ile	owode	n =46	n =44	
					n =35	n =39			
Those in Charge of Land Administration									
Government	17(12.7)	35(26.3)	4(5.2)	20(23.5)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	13(28.3)	02(4.6)	91(15.3)
Community leader	54(40.3)	61(45.8)	1(1.4)	33(38.8)	26(74.2)	28(71.7)	23(50.0)	30(68.2)	256(43.2)
Family	63(47.0)	37(27.8)	72(97.3)	32(37.7)	9(25.71)	11(28.21)	10(21.7)	12(27.2)	246(41.5)
Total	134(100)	133(100)	77(100)	85(100)	35(100)	39(100)	46(100)	44(100)	593(100)

Table 4: Predominant System of Land Administration in the Southwestern Nigeria

Source: Author's field survey data, 2010.

States	Osun (n = 267)		Ekiti (n = 159)		Oyo (n = 74)		Ondo (n = 93)		Total
Settlements	Ife	Modakeke	Emure	Ise	Irawo	Iraowo	Iju	Itaogbolu	n = 593
	n =134	n =133	n =77	n =85	-ile	owode	n =46	n =44	
					n =35	n =39			
Strangers have no Full Right over Ownership of Land	81(60.5)	51(38.3)	33(42.9)	48(56.5)	20(57.1)	18(46.2)	27(58.7)	34(77.3)	312(53.2)
Stranger can have partial Ownership Right on Land	53(39.5)	31(23.3)	40(51.9)	37(43.5)	15(42.9)	01(2.6)	15(32.6)	10(22.7)	202(34.1)
Yes, Full Right can be granted to anybody	00(0.0)	51(38.4)	04(5.2)	00(0.0)	00(0.0)	20(51.2)	04(8.7)	00(0.0)	79(13.3)
Total	134(100)	133(100)	77(100)	85(100)	35(57.1)	39(46.2)	46(56.8)	44(100)	593(100)

Table 5: Strangers' Rights to Land in Southwestern Nigeria

Source: Author's field survey data, 2010.

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