

Bridging the Gaps of Disunity among Nigerian Muslims: An Examination of Islamic Conflict Resolution to the Disunity

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Abstract

It is highly essential to examine the causes of socio-religious conflict among Nigerian Muslims especially at this twentieth century. Investigations carried out show that a number of factors facilitated the conflicts. In retrospection, Nigerian Muslims lived in peace and harmony irrespective of the nation's cultural diversities. They established a number of Islamic organisations as mechanisms to educate and unite them. These do not only inculcate the tenets of Islam into the minds of Muslims but also foster their relationship. Pioneers among these societies are the *Ansaruddeen* Society of Nigeria, *Anwarul Islam* society of Nigeria, Council of Muslim Youth now National Council of Muslim Youth (NACOMYO), *Jama'atu Izalatul Bid'ah wa Iqamatus-Sunnah*, Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Young Muslim Brothers and Sisters (YOUMBAS ANJAENA) as well as *Ahmadiyyah Muslim Jama'ah*... All these societies operated individually and collectively towards the actualisation of Nigerian Muslim *Ummah*. After a while, the trend of harmony among the Muslims turned to opposition. A situation whereby Muslims individually and in groups turned against each other. Factors that led to these intra-socio-religious conflicts and antagonism are multi-various. The root causes of this disunity are centred on the claim of superiority of each group over another and doctrinal disagreement. However, this study examines the facilitated the causes of these religious conflicts and proffer Islamic conflict resolution as mechanisms towards the actualisation of Nigerian Muslim unity. The work is historic and expository in nature. Primary and secondary methods of data collection were used. Recommendations are put forward at the end of the work as measures to unite Nigerian Muslim *Ummah*.

Keywords: Bridge, Gap, Nigerian Muslims, '*Ummah*', Islamic Conflict resolution.

Preamble

The present situations of Nigerian Muslims calls for intellectual discuss. This is due to the obvious disparities among them. Prior to this era, Muslims of the nation were united without any discrimination. As parts of measure on their *Al-Mu'amalah*, they established various religious fora to enlighten and teach themselves the tenets of Islam. This was led to formations of early Muslim organisations throughout the nation. They, through these societies were able to solve the problems of western educational barriers created by the earlier Christian missionaries and government by establishing their own schools. The schools inculcated both the religious (Quranic, Arabic and Islamic knowledge) and western education into the minds of the Muslim children.

Besides, there were periodical enlightenment programmes for the old and young ones on the tenets of Islam. By and large, their unity did not only lead to the formations of many societies but also establishment of mosques in different localities across the region. The clerics also learned from different scholars. It was reported that they (the Muslim clerics) did move from one place to another to search for knowledge of the religion and Arabic. There were Imams and council of Alfas who controlled the affairs of the *Ummah* religiously and in all other social functions. Theses scholars were accorded respects based on their services to the Muslim community. A number of them were Imams of their localities while some of them

were great Alfas. The *Ummah* was orderly and peaceful on unity. They were united to the extent that it was difficult for a non-muslim to intervene in their affairs unnecessarily.

Suddenly, the bond of unity that had been respected and emulated by the society started to dwindle. Many factors are responsible for these disunity and conflicts. There emerged new trends on the modes of practising Islam among some Muslims especially of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The era of condemnations of virtually all the practices of the early Muslims. The study therefore, explores the root causes of the disunity and conflicts among the Nigerian Muslims in the present era and examines the Islamic reconciliatory mechanisms to solve the discord in order to prevent them from being escalated to more violence.

The Dawn of Islam in Nigeria

Islam preceded the coming of Christianity in the entity now called Nigeria as a whole by 300 years (Babs Fafunwa, 1982:7). Islam was brought to Nigeria and spread through the activities of itinerant scholars. Religious archives showed that Islam had been adopted as the religion of the majority of the leading figures in the Bornu Empire during the reign of Mai (king) Idris Aloomo (1571–1603). He furthered the cause of Islam in the country by introducing Islamic courts and establishing mosques. It came to Northern Nigeria as early as the 9th century CE, and was well established in the Kanem-Bornu Empire during the reign of Humme Jilmi. It was spread to the major cities of the northern part of the country by the 16th century, and it later moved into the countryside and towards the Middle Belt uplands (Hunwick, 2008 and Babs, 1982).

The precise time Islam entered Africa is debatable. However, Adelabu (2012) argues that Islam had reached Sub-Sahara Africa, including Nigeria, as early as the 1st century of *Hijrah* through Muslim traders and expeditions during the reign of the Arab conqueror, Uqba ibn an-Nafi' (622–683) whose Islamic conquests under the Umayyad dynasty, in Amir Muawiyah and Yazid periods, spread to all Northern Africa or the *Maghrib Al-Arabi*, including present-day Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco. Islam also came to the southwest Nigeria, Yoruba-speaking areas during the time of Mansa Musa's Mali empire. This tends to be a reason why Yorubas colloquially referred to Islam as "*Esin-Mali*", which means religion that was brought from Mali. Adelabu, expatiates further that the emergence of Arabic as the text of Islam appears widely in the mode of communication in Nigerian dialects especially Yoruba and Hausa. This reflects in their names of the days such as *Atalata* which is a derivative of Arabic

interpretation of *Ath-Thulatha* (الثلاثاء) for Tuesday, *Alaruba* (*Al-Arbi'a* الأربعاء) for Wednesday, *Alamisi* (*Al-Khamis* الخميس) for Thursday, and *Jimo* (*Al-Jum'ah* الجمعة) for Friday. *Ojo Jimo* is most favourably used. It is usually preferred to Yoruba unpleasant word for Friday *Eti*, which means Failure, Laziness or Abandonment. He also asserted that nearly all technical terms and cultural usages of Hausa and Fulani were derived from Islamic heritages.

Nigerian Muslims: Past and Present

In the early history of Nigerian Muslims, there was cordial love based on the principles of unity established by the religion (Islam) itself. The Muslims of the nation irrespective of different ethnicities were cordial in their relationships with one another. Yoruba Muslim clerics learned from the Northern Muslim scholars due to their early contact with the knowledge of Islam and the impacts of the Arabs that visited some of the Northern states. Through this, there were insatiable quest for knowledge from one place to another. Besides, there were disciplines and respects as well among the people. The scholars irrespective of their fame did respect the elder scholars to the extent that they accorded them due honour at every occasion. In addition to this, there were competitions of Arabic literature especially in the Southwest and Northern Nigeria. This is a reason among others while the early history of Nigeria was written and documented in Arabic and *Al-'Ajami* (Hunwick, 2008).

Besides the cordiality, the early Muslims foster their relationship on common folds though there are cultural diversities based on the history of the nation. They were still bound as a community. Gradually, there emerged reasons for establishment of avenues for teaching and learning the young ones as Islam advocates for knowledge acquisition from the cradle to the grave. This motive thus facilitated the establishment of Arabic and Islamic learning centres. It was referred to in the early history of Nigerian education as the *Makaranta Alo* and *Makaranta Ilmi*. These are equivalent to the present primary and post primary schools. The centres were first located in the mosques, houses of the '*Ulama*'... and later metamorphosed into the Arabic and Islamic institutes as they all located in virtually all the regions of the federation. Furthermore, the early knowledgeable Muslims in Arabic literacy provided useful service to the society as scribes and judges in the traditional political institutions of places like Ibadan, Oyo, Iwo, Ogbomoso and Ede (Rafiu', 2015). The literacy capability made them the only ones capable of palace administration. Prominent among them include shaykh Muhammad Belgore of Ilorin, Abu Bakr, from northern Nigeria, Muhammed as-Sanusi Ibn

Harun in Lagos, Ahmed Abu Bakr (1870-1936) of Ilorin descent and Ahmad al-Rufai ibn Bello (1886-1971) of Oke Are, Ibadan (Waheed, 2015, Oseni, 1981).

Early Nigerian Muslims and *D'awah* Methodology

In the early history of Nigeria, the Muslims did propagate the knowledge of the religion based on their levels of understanding. They adopted many approaches to inculcate the tenets of the religion into the minds of not only the young ones but the entire populace. The schools that they established were meant to instill the teachings of Islam into the people's minds. Additionally, the *Ummah* established different religious organizations as avenues to educate themselves. The prominent among the early organisations are *Jamaatu Nasril Islam* (JNI), *Ansaruddeen* Society of Nigeria, *Ahmadiya* Muslim Community of Nigeria was the first that properly organised Islamic institution in Nigeria in 1914. Before its advent, there were only small prayer groups with loose memberships and lopsided administrative set-ups. The Muslim Juvenile Society in 1916 under Alhaji Jubril Martins. The same year, the Muslim Literary Society was formed under Alhaji Imam Muhammad Lawal Basil Augusto who played active roles in fusing the Society with the Ahmadiyah, having been impressed by the literature of the Ahmadis. There were also Muslim Association of Nigeria (MAN) (1959) and Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN). These organizations are pioneers which directly led to the establishments of other Islamic associations in the country (Oloyede, 2008).

Gradually, other Islamic societies sprang up in the nation. There emerged Young Muslim Brothers and Sisters (YOUMBAS), Council of Muslim Youths Organisation (COMYO) which later expanded through the nation and became National Council of Muslim Youth Organisations (NACOMYO), Islamic Welfare Foundation (IWF) and many others (Oloyede, 2008). These societies irrespective of their nomenclatures are of the same motives. They worked in various capacities to educate the Muslims both on the religion and western knowledge. Western schools were established by some of these societies in addition to the existing Arabic and Islamic institutes.

As parts of fostering unity among Nigerian Muslims; there emerged the establishment of umbrella societies. According to Oloyede (2008 and 2014), The umbrella Islamic organisations seek a coalition of other Muslim groups within them. They are organisations of Islamic organisations as various bodies come within their jurisdiction. Their examples include the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, (NSCIA), Federation of Muslim

Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) and National Council of Muslim Youth Organisations (NACOMYO), Muslim of Southwest Nigeria (MUSWEN). All these societies had similar or almost identical agenda. At that time, the education of Muslim children had become a major issue. Many of the schools at that time were being run by Christian missionaries and Muslims were being discriminated against. Admission of a Muslim pupil into good schools was rare and most of the schools almost made it compulsory for any Muslim child to convert to Christianity before being admitted. This created a huge gap in the education of Muslim children. This challenge was chief among the reasons why most of these organisations sprang up. Muslims were often seen as second class citizens and it became the responsibility of the groups to advocate change and find effective solutions to the educational challenges confronting Muslims at the time. These groups established schools and awarded scholarships to help educate Muslim children at home and abroad (Oloyede, 2008). There was interpersonal relationship (*Almu'amalat*) among them which promoted unity with which the Muslims community was able to approach the government on any matters that might affect them negatively.

Nowadays, there is proliferation of Muslim societies in Nigeria. The establishment of these new societies coupled with their different objectives brought about positive and negative impacts to the nation. The negative side of their establishment is the root causes of the incessant conflicts and disunity among the Muslims till this era. This is examined on the *'Aqaid* (creeds) of some of the newly established societies. While some claimed superiority over others some are of opinions that they are most pious and that others are just mere fora of people. By and large, they emerged discriminations and hatred among the Muslims of the same nation. The worst of the conflicts do come from groups of Muslim *Ummah* who tagged themselves as federation of *Ahlu-Sunnah, Wahabiyyah, Salafiyyah, Izalatul Bid'ah wa Iqamatus-Sunnah...*

Conflicts and Disunity among the Present Nigerian Muslims: the Causes and Consequences

Causes of conflict as well as disunity among Nigerian Muslims are many and diversified from region to regions. The most threatening problems centred on the different doctrines that are antithetical to the fundamental principles of Islam introduced into the religion by some of the newly established organisations. These have been succinctly classified by scholars into condemnation of the existing societies by some of the new generational organisations, claims

of superiority of an association over another, claim of national authority, individual selfish and sectional sentiments, personalised ideologies of some Muslim organisations, disunity, intolerance and negative effects of proliferation of Islamic societies in the nation (Oloyede, 2008).

Condemnation of the early Islamic societies by the new generational organisations is the most obvious criticism that facilitated other problems. A number of the newly established Islamic organizations nowadays are mostly propagating irreconcilable ideologies and working at cross-purposes. Proliferation of Islamic movements has the effects that many Muslim groups often wage ideological warfare on one another on even the most negligible of issues such as the use of prayer rosary, the length of the beards and whether a woman's *khimar* could be two pieces of cloth or must be one. These have created vices in mutual understanding and sometimes resulted into skirmishes (Abu Yusuf, 2017 and Oloyede, 2008). This is based on the notions of what the later societies perceive as orthodox Islam by practising only what the prophet did in the exact manner with which he demonstrated everything. The criticism brings about divergences of opinions on what is *Bid'ah* in Islam. For instance, while some of these new societies especially those that are affiliated to some foreign Islamic nations such as Saudi Arabia claim that all practices in Islam should be restricted to only what the prophet Muhammad demonstrated without any addition or subtraction; the early societies is of contrary motives. They maintain that Islam is not a static religion but dynamic. Hence they are of the opinions that the practices of Islam should not be restricted to only what the prophet did; instead they argue that the secondary sources of *Shari'ah* is wide and it allows applications of the contemporary issues of each culture that are not antithetical to the fundamental practices of Islam. This according to them is elaborate under the *Qiyas, Ijma'ah, Istihsan, Istidla, 'Urf, Masalih* and *Ijtihad*.

Hence, the doctrinal conflict started and it gradually escalated to un-ending socio-religious conflict and disunity among the Muslims of this generation. The facilitators of these new trends include the Muslim brothers who studied at Arab nation and belong to some schools of thought such as *Wahhabiyyah* and *Salafiyyah* movements. The adherents of the two groups and similar others thus condemn other Islamic societies and call them many un-Islamic names such as *Ahlul Bid'ah, Ahlu Kufr, Ahlu-Nar, Jahlu murakab* just to mention a few. On the other side, the former organizations also condemn all the activities of the later generations and named them abusive names such as *Alkakiti* (stone hearted persons), *Munafiq* (hypocrite)...

Another factor is caused by disunity among the Muslim students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN). There are some groups of executive members of the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria who have seceded from the society and formed their own. Thus they began to criticize the activities of the society and raised a number of blames on the administration of the society. Several quarrels have been recorded in the MSSN. At present, there are factions from different area units. Among these factions are that of Lagos area unit, University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University. The Lagos area unit has ceased to participate in the zonal and central activities of the society years ago. In lieu of participating in the societal programmes, Lagos usually organizes her own Islamic Vacation Course IVC and other Islamic activities. This is a serious hindrance in the growth and development of the society. There is also intra conflict among the seceded members. Some of them claimed to be knowledgeable than the others while some of them refer to themselves as *Salafis* (Zakariyya, 2014).

As the result of the eruption of crisis in the MSSN, till the present, the management of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, has locked up two halls housing mosques over crisis rocking the Muslim students' body of the University (Prime Times, 2017). The university has also suspended religious activities in all its halls of residence. This was due to the fact that the OAU branch of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria has two factions in the institution. There is mainstream Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria and splinter Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (Premium, 2017). The former is recognised by the national body and the Muslim community, while the other, occupying the locked mosques, is not. The splinter MSSN of the University is the one accused of extremism, disregard for established regulations and norms, and other unholy offences against the principle of Islam. The splinter group of the MSSN are using the two 'mosques' viz, Awolowo and Fajuyi Halls as bases for their anti-mainstream MSSN rhetorics and doctrinal disagreement on campus, including recruitment of students for their separate teachings (Premium, 2017). The splinter group was established and led by members of another faction of Muslims known as *Laa Jamah*. They are those that are of opinions that there should be no organization of Muslims not only on the campus but also in everywhere of the nation. This notion of '*laa jamaah* or condemnation of the establishment of *jamaah* is the principal cause of the problems of disunity in the nation. Where lies the unity now? In order to pave way for peace on the campus and prevent occurrence of escalation of the conflict beyond the school, many efforts have been taken to curb the crisis. The national executive council of the body involved in settling the conflict as

well as the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Nigeria and the Muslim of Southwest Nigeria (The Guardian, 2017).

Claiming of national authority on Islam in Nigeria has created a semblance of disorganisation, disunity and lack of defined structure among Muslims. This is among the reasons for re-establishment of some religious bodies that bear national in their titles in lieu of supporting and working hand in hands with the already established and existing ones.

Individual selfish and sectional sentiments are now highly rampant among the Muslim community. Some individuals established their societies purposely on their personal interests especially among *Alasatu* societies. The Personalised Muslim organisations are the category of Muslim organisations that are highly influenced, owned and dominated by their respective founders or their heirs. The various organisations whose existence depends substantially on the influence and charisma of their founders and/or their biological *khalifah* belong to this category. Many of the present Muslim organisations belong to this class as the founders remain the de facto heads who are only joined by others in achieving their noble goals (Zakariyya, 2014 and Oloyede, 2008). These categories of Muslim organisations receive their strength from the towering influence of their founders. Such organisations are personal property of the founder. The main characteristic of such individualised Societies or bodies is that leadership succession is by blood relationship with the founder. In the last ten years, particularly in Southern Nigeria, such organisations are no longer limited to religious sages and scholars but are now extended to founders of numerous privatised Islamic 'Foundations'.

Bridging the Gap of Disunity among Nigerian Muslims: Islamic Jurisprudence Approach

As resolutions to curb the causes of incessant disunity among Nigerian Muslims, there is a dire need to examine the mechanisms proffer by Islam in all her fundamental and secondary sources of *Shari'iah*. This will pave way for peace and solving the discords of any type among them. On the first premise, human being generally cannot do away completely without conflicts. It is part of organization of life. This is preferred by a number of sociologists and religious sociologists. According to ibn *Khaldun* who is a renowned father of sociologist not only in Islam but also in other fields of studies, “man is described as a gregarious animal”. This implies a sociable animal. An animal that cannot do alone; but by interacting with other animals. Therefore, during the interaction, there tend to be conflicts.

This also occurs to Muslims irrespective of their community. This is a reason why Islam mentions various forms of conflicts as well as their resolutions in many areas in the Qur'an and *Ahadith* of the prophet.

On the first premise, Islam offers dialogue as the just and best way of resolving conflicts. This is so, because, Islam is a faith that advocates for dialogue. A cursory look through the pages of the Scripture, the Qur'an reveals the highest form of objective, constructive and beautiful dialogue between all manners of people and at all levels of human relationship. There are examples of dialogue between Allah Himself and His creatures (angels, prophets, pious men and women etc); between prophets and their people (believers and non-believers alike); between upright men and women who struggle in the cause of truth and justice and their people who strive in falsehood and transgression, and so on (2:30-31, 12:25-28, 12:50-60; 61-69; 77-83; 84-95, 7:12). These verses are but minimal examples of the lively and constructive dialogue presented by the Qur'an to Muslims so that they may learn the culture of listening to the other's views in order to reach a conclusion and proffer solutions to any issues ahead of them. Islam accords dialogue a high position of respect. It considers the principal tool of dialogue as very important and worthy of attention (Ibn Kathir, 2014). This is clearly expressed in a number of the Quranic verses such as:

See you not how Allah sets forth a parable? A good word as a good tree, whose roots are firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the sky. Giving its fruits at all times by the leave of its Lord and Allah sets forth parables for mankind in order that they may remember. And the parable of an evil word is that of an evil tree uprooted from the surface of the earth having no stability (14:24-26).

There are intra and inter religious dialogues. It insists that all talks aimed at convincing the other must have the best of intentions and be conducted in a good manner. Hence, Nigerian Muslim 'Ummah are enjoined to imbibe the culture of *D'awah* in lieu of using it as an avenue to cause discords among themselves. Thus, the Qur'an says:

Invite (mankind) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching and argue with them in a way that is better. (16:125).

Islam also emphasises on the points of agreement among Muslim organisations on divergences of creeds and beliefs as a way of ensuring reconciliation and unity in either Islamic state or

Muslim state. This calm, fair and unbiased argument is designed to create an atmosphere of ease and trust as a mechanism to growth and development of society and securing agreement on just and equitable terms. The object of Islamic dialogue is not to dictate terms or impose views, but to achieve understanding and reach compromise and reconciliation. However, Human beings will continue to differ and hold diverse opinions (AbdulAziz, 2017). This is illustrated in the Qur'an as it says *And if your Lord has so willed, He could surely have made mankind into one nation, but they will not cease to disagree, except him on whom your Lord has bestowed His mercy* (11:118-119).

In Islam dialogue applies to all situations of life and is found at all levels of human relation. It is not restricted to conflict resolution alone. It is a principle which has been adhered to and practised throughout the history of Islam. This is a rule that conflict would not be restored to until avenues of peace are exhausted (Q.8:61). Dialogue is therefore instituted in Islam at all levels of human relationship. The purpose is to give everyone that is concerned a right to have a say in the issue at hand and for all to benefit from the wisdom, foresight and experiences of the parties involved ('Umar, 2010). This will ensure peace and stability and provide the people with a sense of worth and belonging.

Similarly, Islam recommends consultation (*as-Shura*) as the way of solving any religious conflict. A rift within a society can adversely escalate to crisis. This is so, because, conflict, as it occurs among Nigerian Muslims may set a Muslim community over another if it is not tactically resolved. The institution of *as-Shura* is however enshrined in the noble Qur'an as a guide to find solution to any disunity in the Muslim community ... and when they are angry, they forgive. And those who answer the call of their Lord and establish prayer and who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation, and who spend what we have bestowed on them (42:37-38).

Moreover, justice is another indispensable element in any successful dialogue. This is a core reason why Islam urges its followers to be just and fair to all, irrespective of whether they are friends or in difference religious bodies. Thus, justice must be applied as a means of uniting individuals in a society (AbdulAziz, 2017 and Zakariyya, 2014). This is highly needed in Nigeria by the Islamic societies especially at the national bodies as a way to carry out the other societies that are under them along.

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah even though it is against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or

poor (4:135). O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah and be just witnesses and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just, that is nearer to piety (5:8).

Sulh, or peace treaty is another avenue for peace created by Islam in order to give a chance for negotiation and dialogue for resolution of conflicts. It means an agreement reached between warring factions for peace either permanently or for a very long period. As a result of this, Islam leaves wide-open channels for negotiation and eventual peace (AbdulAziz, 2017 and Zakariyya, 2014). The entire muslim organizations in the nation are therefore implored to imbibe this culture and be peace makers among themselves. This among others is the principal role of the leaders of the societies without any biasness or discrimination.

In practice, all these mechanisms were demonstrated by the prophet who is a prototype of the '*Ummah*'. Prior the dawn of his prophetic mission, the prophet did display great diplomatic ability and capacity to resolve disputes peacefully and affect reconciliation between mutually antagonistic people. A notable example is the serious dispute which broke out between Arab chieftains when the *Quraysh* leaders rebuilt the holy sanctuary of *Ka'abah*. The dispute arose as a result of disagreement on whom among the Arab tribal leaders would have the honour of putting the black stone (*Hajar al-Aswad*) in its place. The dispute was so serious that war seemed imminent. The Prophet, who was then a young man of thirty-five years old, was able to solve this stalemate to the satisfaction of all when he placed the stone on his garment and asked each tribal leader to hold a tip of the garment and they carried it together. On reaching its designated location, he lifted the stone with his own hands and put it in place. Thus, he cleared a potentially explosive situation which could have degenerated into not only disunity but also a bloody war with devastating consequences (Ibn Kathir, 2014).

Recommendations

Islam advocates for peace and unity as mechanisms to establish unity and promote solidarity not only among Muslim but also in the society at large. A number of conflict resolutions are therefore proffered in Islam as means of promoting unity and curb any act that can hinder unity in any Islamic or Muslim society.

Islamic culture of dialogue, if properly utilized and applied to contemporary situation, will surely help to bridge the gaps of disunity among Nigerian Muslims. Mechanisms for peace devised by Islam, such as the provisions of *Sulh*, *Adl*, *Shura*, dialogue..., if allowed to work,

will put an end to doctrinal disagreements and Muslim disunity and brings unity to the Muslim community of the nation.

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