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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MORAL DECADENCE AND MULTIPLICITY OF RELIGIOUS CENTRES IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND MINISTRIES IN SOUTH-WEST AND SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

According to Karl Marx, in one of his postulations; religion is an opium of the masses. Religion has been part of Nigerians indigenous culture and tradition. In respect to this paper, titled Moral Decadence and Multiplicity of Religious Centres in Nigeria: A case study of Christian churches and ministries in South-East and South-West; the focus would be on the imported religion of Christianity. Before the coming of Christianity, there were several practices which are deemed to be dehumanising and traumatic. Christianity came into Africa, and it was as if relief had been brought; however, following the wake of 21st century, the number of churches geometrically rises with little or no effects on the morality level of the people in the society. It follows that the more the years go by, more churches and ministries are being established whereas there is moral decadence escalating in the society. Religion has a purpose to which it is meant to serve. In any form of religion, the general emphasis and theme are centred on the morality and lifestyle of her follower. If a religion cannot impact the aforesaid twin principles in her followers; such religion could be said to have lost its value and vision. Amongst all the major religions in the world: Islam, Buddha, Hindu, Judaism, Christianity; Nigeria is dominantly preoccupied with Islam and Christianity as the two main religious belief in the country as at the time of this research. Islam is popular in the Northern part of Nigeria and some parts of South-West Nigeria; while Christianity is popular in the Southern Parts of Nigeria; to wit, South-East, South-West, and South-South. The issue that needs to be ascertained is whether or not Christianity being practised in the aforementioned parts of Nigeria has fulfilled its expected value and vision. This paper tends to x-ray the issues of moral decadence and the multiplicity of religious centres. It aims to analyse the probable causes of such issues and suggest a way forward. The paper starts with an introduction, which embodies a discourse on morality and religion; followed by issues of moral decadence and multiplicity of religious centres, with exact reference to Christian churches and ministries, and finally a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Moral decadence is now a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the main fabrics of our society. The rate at which morality level has decayed is at a very great alarming rate, and thus, it is a thing that calls for urgent attention. Many things which were previously considered as taboo, abomination or an eyesore, are now the in-thing (Ezeh; 2019). People are not mere religious robots while inside the worship centres and devil incarnates immediately after (Arinze; 2012). Further argument by Obinna (2017), said that reincarnating the devil does not need to wait long till after the worship, it may even start before or during the worship at the same worship centres. According to Olori (2013), there are many things wrong in the society we found ourselves; a society where people justify their ill actions or put blames for their ill actions on something else. On the Channels television news of 17th October, 2019 was the young man who was accused of being a serial murderer, who had murdered about 10 (ten ladies) within the Port-Harcourt Metropolis.

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The young man was putting on a crucifix and had a copy of the Christian holy bible in his hand. Though he pleaded guilty, it so flared for him to say that it was the work of the devil that led him to do those acts. It seems as if there are fewer or no persons who are upright or straight forward in their conducts and actions all of the times, in all of the places and all of the circumstances (Inya; 2015). It can practically be said without mincing words that these moral decadence have prospered despite the widespread of churches and ministries in all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria (Ogoli; 2016). The import being that these religious worship centres (churches and ministries) have gradually derailed from the missionary objectives and roles it plays in building a better society. Moral lifestyles ought to be taught in the churches, and it should likely be that the more churches, the less the moral ills and decadence; but the opposite seems to be the outcome (Obinna; 2017). It follows that the multiplicity of churches is of no positive effects on the morality level of the members of the society (Oviawe, 2012). According to Oviawe, (2012); moral or morality has to do with the level of decency which one ought to have to meet up with the societal standard of an acceptable or appropriate way of living.

It has to do with how one portrays oneself in one's duties, home and society at a level that is deemed a norm or appropriate. Morality may also be seen as a life principle about whether a given actor concept is right or wrong. It is the societal accepted positive decorum (Wilfred; 2015). Morals are not one generation thing. In every given society, positive morals are passed from the ancestors to the generations to come, and each generation tenaciously handles it jealously and with a great attribute of diligence (ibid). Our ancestors in their morals were quite conscientious about their duties, obedience to rules and existing regulations. In society, living according to the norms and morals were seen as a feat and helps in gaining reputation and integrity in society. Thus, people had reasons to behave accordingly. Berkowitz, Marvin W., and Oser, Fritz, eds. (1985) observed that there is vaporisation in terms of morals today. The societal respect, value, credence and diligence are gradually eroding. The level of moral decadence is extremely high. As a result, people, irrespective of age are poised to the servitude of lifestyles and incredible acts that would end up destroying them and making them live perpetually in regrets (Onyema; 2013). It is now a very big burden for people to pause, ponder and consider their actions, its consequences before embarking on them. It could be said that people no longer care about whose ox is being bullied or care about long-run effects of their actions; all people consider, is the immediate gratification of their action and their selfish interest (Ezeh; 2019). From the preceding discourse about the multiplicity of worship centres in Nigeria, it would not be out of place for a reader to reach a hasty conclusion that Nigerians or the masses in Nigeria are very God-fearing, faithful and that the people are just and caring. However, in the case of Nigeria, the supposed effects of religion and the multiplicity of worship centres are not reflected at all in the lifestyles. Notwithstanding the multiplicity of worship centres, moral decadence has been extremely high. There are serial cases of crimes and societal ills, such as corruption, kidnapping, ritual killings, human trafficking, prostitution, armed robbery and fraud (Omonijo; 2016).

Problem Statement: In Nigeria, there are worship centres in all parts of major cities and communities (Obasi; 2014); he observed that in the city of Onitsha, Anambra state, churches are in all the major streets. Ajayi (2009) observed that the city of Lagos is gradually converting from the commercial capital of Nigeria to the spiritual capital. He opined that the churches that could not find a large acre of land within Lagos to locate their headquarters run to the nearby states of Ogun, and Oyo, to locate theirs. During worship, these churches depending on the numerical strength of the church are filled with people singing, praying, crying and preaching (ibid). The copious act these days is that due to the large scale of members often in attendance, some of the churches now hold multiple sessions to accommodate the membership while others renovated their church hall to enlarge its space in expectation of more members of worship day. Churches are being located at any available space, ranging from, warehouses, containers, public and private school premises, hotels, motor parks, street corners, stadium, events hall, etcetera. (Ezeh, 2019). The only means of transport one would follow without being met with prayers and sermons from one church, or the other is by air (Okeh; 2017). The rate of roadside preachers has increased extraordinarily, as one can unwillingly be woken by the so-called morning criers, meaning that use of alarm would soon become extinct.

Furthermore, churches have developed new skills in forcing their messages on people. These they do by mounting their public address system outside their church hall. A pastor has responded to an inquisition on this singular act by answering a lost sheep might be wandering outside the church hall (Awoniyi; 2016). Answering a lost sheep might be wandering outside the church hall (Awoniyi; 2016).

Objectives of the Study: Generally, this paper tends to discuss the issue of moral decadence and multiplicity of religious centres in Nigeria, using the Christian churches and ministries in South-East and South-West Nigeria as a case study. Other Objectives are:

- To understand the concept of religion.
- To comprehend the substance of morality.
- To ascertain the purpose of religion.
- To ascertain the level of moral decadence in the selected areas.
- To enumerate why the level of moral decadence is increasing while Christian churches multiply in the selected area.

Research Questions

- What is the meaning of religion?
- What is the meaning of morality?
- What is the purpose of religion in any given society?
- What is the level of moral decadence in the selected areas?
- Why is there an increase in the level of moral decadence while Christian churches multiply in the selected areas?

Scope of the study: This paper is meant to examine and discuss the issue of moral decadence and multiplicity of religious centres in Nigeria, using Christian churches and ministries in the south-west and south-east Nigeria as a case study. It means that the findings and observations to be made will be limited to the south-west and south-east Nigeria, though with relative comparative points from other areas.

Literature Review

Concept of Religion and Morality: Religion is a way or mode of faith or belief which a person has taken for a given period. It requires a complete emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological being of any follower (Ezeh; 2019). Some persons have argued that Africa has no religion (Ikonne; 2016), while others have attributed religion to Africa (Akunna; 2016). I will align my opinion with that of Akunna, who stated that religion should and must be distinguished from Christianity or Islamism (ibid). According to Okoro (2011); religion is a matter of belief, in a place where there is something on which the people put their belief on for supernatural aid; there is religion. Religion is a class while Christianity, Hindu, Islam, Buddha, etcetera. are sub-classes of religion. It follows that one may be religious without being a member of any of the professed religious groups. African religion is rooted in a belief in a supernatural being who oversees all aspects of life (Okoro, 2011). African traditional society was made of several autonomous communities, and these autonomous communities have, each their supernatural being termed by the colonial masters as gods (Umeadi; 2013). The traditional society swore great allegiance to these gods.

In the Igbo society, there is also a “chi” for every family, and each individual had his “chi” who intervenes in his or her affairs (ibid). People had great respect and fear of the gods and were conscious of their acts, as no one wants to invoke the wrath of the gods or offend the gods. In the case where there are any unusual events which are to the detriments of the people; it was said that the people must have offended the gods and that the gods have to be consulted and appeased to quench their anger and wrath (Nwani; 2014). When there are unknown or unascertained culprits for a crime; all the suspects are to be sworn before the shrine of the gods, and it was believed that the consequences are bored by the eventual culprit (ibid). African traditional society had a form of religion, as already stated by Akunna (2016). However, the existence of the religion was short-lived by the intrusion of the colonial forerunners into Africa. The coming of the colonial masters as they termed themselves brought along with it its religious system. As opined by (Gambo; 2017); immediately, the colonial masters entered into the region; they tend to use any sociological and psychological means available to them to brainwash Africans into accepting them to stay. With time, they were able to make some Africans think their Supernatural being to be inferior to that of the white man (ibid). According to Agbo (2017); Africans watched on while the gods are being carried away from Arochukwu, Igboukwu and Mberi as artefacts and some which the white man considered irrelevant, they burnt to ashes; to these, the gods did not react. The white man followed up by telling Africans to accept the new religion. Thus, the inception of Christianity and churches in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Morality, on the other hand, is relative. It means that what may be morally upright in a given society may be morally wrong in another locality within the same or different time and circumstance, and what a given society termed to be morally wrong today may overtime be considered otherwise; as there is dynamism (Clark; 2011). Ifenna and Dele (2011) argued that if morality is subjected to the dynamic nature of society; then, nothing should be held as being moral. They posit that morality should be a standard that passes from generation to generation. To them, morality is a rigid term. That is, what is morally wrong is morally wrong, notwithstanding the place, time and circumstance. I sincerely beg to disagree with the opinions of Ifenna and Dele. This is owing to the facts that cultural lag, immigration, and globalisation must affect the moral level of the people. Before the 19th Century, Some parts of Africa and Nigeria, in particular, deemed it morally wrong for a woman to give birth to twins; while some other parts considered that upper gum should not crop up first in a newborn baby before the lower gum. Going by the postulations of Ifenna and Dele; this belief system should still be held upright till today. I would humbly add that morality is the common acceptable manner of lifestyle and belief system in a place which, when weighed with those of other places irrespective of time and circumstance would still be looked on legitimately. Morality may be linked up to the legitimacy of given conduct or style of living in a given place. I may summarily state that globalisation has to a very large extent made attributes of morality a common phenomenon around the globe.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher would apply the method of a systematic review of peer-review journals and works of literature on the subject

matter. This study will also be descriptive and explanatory, which will be based on the findings and observations gotten from the reviews so made.

FINDINGS

The area referred to as south-west Nigeria covers six states of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, while Southeast covers five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo (Uchendu; 2013). In the recent findings made by Ajayi (2018), he observed that the numbers of churches in Lagos, Ogun and Anambra states are more than the number of churches in the entire Netherland, which is a predominantly Christian country. According to pew centre (2018), more than 80 million Nigerians are Christians with about 70% (percent) resident in South-East and South-West Nigeria. Joshua (2019) observed that Christianity has more than 51% of the Nigerian population; to this effect, there are so many churches in Nigeria likewise there are so many moral ills in the country, with a particular reference to the selected areas. Some scholars have argued that some leaders who are founders of these churches have fulfilled their mission of making people return to God (Uzoehina; 2011). He further argued that the major responsibility of instilling into the church members the right attributes and attitudes to exhibit in society. That is to say that the people are no longer being moulded into the disciples of Jesus Christ or ambassadors of the gospel as they ought to be. Jonah (2011) stated with facts that the so-called general overseers of the churches springing up everywhere in the country are much more interested in the economic benefits to be derived. Jonah succinctly said that churches are now run as a business enterprise, with the major aim of maximising profits. According to Akpa (2018); the rate of moral decadence in Nigeria conflicts with the expected outcome in the prevailing lifestyles in the country, putting into consideration the millions of worship centres in the country. Thus, Akpa stated that it calls one to boldly inquire at the theme of the gospel messages being preached daily by these churches; and is it that the messages are not making any positive impacts in the lives of the churchgoers or followers (ibid).

On this issue, it has been remarked that standard for determining what a church is or should have drastically reduced to the barest minimum and the reduction would continue unless sanctions are being put to place to checkmate the standards (Emmanuel; 2016). He posits that churches are currently a mere gathering of persons to show off new clothes, or feeling belong or for the mere objective of not feeling like an outcast since the church is now a popular idea. The situation in Nigeria is infiltrated by persons who have gone into the priesthood based on commercial gains where vulnerable worshipers are manipulated into the will of the church owners. It was rightly observed that the problem of unemployment has caused a large number of persons to resort to church business (Wale; 2014). Omonijo (2016), in his article, captured that churches being unveiled daily in the country cannot be linked to any apostolic purpose, as it is a more or less commercialised entity with unlimited liabilities. The features of these churches range from commercialisation, religiosity, extortion, formalism, and indoctrination. Preaching in churches are now done with the background aim of not offending the audience, making the church members feel at home and relaxed to draw more members to the church. Days have been retired where churches give stern rebuke on the pulpit attacking the greed and selfishness people.

The theory of socialisation stated that the church is an agent of socialisation, but this role has been defeated (Okoro; 2012). The theme of the messages being propelled today centres more on prosperity, miracles, signs and wonders. Christian virtues are not being preached, because they assume that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (The book of Romans); therefore, no need of talking about it; while some others take refuge in the book of Isaiah, that our righteousness is like a filthy rag before God; therefore, what is the need attaining to be righteous. The discourse made by (Alala; 2012) is beneficial where he postulates as follows: The scaring part of church activities is that any person can be given major roles to play in the church as knights, lay reader, deacon, elder, deaconess, usher, altar boys, etc. These roles are given arbitrary without using any yardstick. Churches mainly make use of the phrase God qualifies the call and God can use anybody (Anonymous). This simple phrase has led churches to hand over leadership roles to fornicators, adulterers, criminals, fraudsters, murderers; and when caught in the act; a sole defence that would be raised would be “if you said you have not sinned before, cast the first stone”. The effects of this lassitude in dealing with issues like this, firmly builds, though unconsciously, followers or church members who are far worse than the role leaders. The church members would mildly say if elder A can do this, who are mine not to. This phenomenon has overtime taken over the Christian folds, thus, causing the predominance of I do not care Christians or do as you like churches.

Christianity, just as the name is, means being like Christ (Adazi; 2012). He made reference to a statement attributed to the founder of Buddhism, who said: “if Christians can live up to the life their leader, Jesus Christ lived, the society would be a better place”. Christianity is meant to foster forces and enhance the level of morality in the society, ensure mutual and harmonious co-existence in the society, through the churches as an agent. The case scenario in Nigeria is a different Tiki-taka (Awoniyi; 2016). It is disheartening that the rate of moral decadence is high and surging higher in our country while worship centres are clustered across the streets of the country. According to Ayo (2015); if only 25% of churches in Nigeria can live up to the expectations; the moral decadence in the society will reduce. The researcher’s fear at his assertion is not far from the fact that what he stated is a mere assumption that lacks empiricism. Church supposed to be a watch-dog to the society, an agent to regiment and checkmate people’s conduct and to ensure that are living in accordance to the value system; instead, the society is now a watch-dog for the churches, the society regiment and checkmate churches. Churchgoers do many of the heinous crimes being committed. Church owners and church leaders are not trying to help matters in the rate at which gifts items and presents are being accepted into the church (Wale; 2014). People who are notorious for accumulating wealth through sacrilegious means come to church for thanksgiving service, where they gift out huge amounts as a thanksgiving offering. This money would be accepted, and the pastor or priest would pray and bless the person and even offer the person a seat closer to the alter and invariably an opportunity to preach or read the bible (Uloa; 2016). According to Uloa, sometimes, the same calibre of persons may personally build the church structure; thereby closing the eyes of the “man of God” from their ills and shutting the mouth of the “man of God” from speaking against their social vices.

My concern and utmost worry are for the lesson to be learnt by other church members from these streams of events. That is; to be relevant in the church or society, get the money through any means and invest it in the church. The theory of social stratification which justify the placing of people into different strata according to their social feat and achievement is now being practised in churches (Nwizu; 2017). Churches that are supposed to accept people irrespective of their social achievement and feats now stratify people into classes. Other members who eventually find themselves in a lower class develop quest to belong to the upper class and perhaps, in attempt to meet up with the requirements of being in the upper class tend to lose their moral value, thus, the increase in moral decadence (Akpa; 2018). Mfumbusa (2010) contends that the number of Churches has increased and ironically, there is a commensurate rise in corruption and other social vices. He argued that the increase in the number of Churches ought to be of a positive impact on society. He summarily observed that when Christianity was first brought to the shores of West Africa, its impacts were positively enormous than the current state of things in the Christendom where the reverse is the case.

Consequently, the rate of moral decadence in the country is truly reflected in the escalating rate of indecent activities and social vices which are being perpetrated by Nigerians. To this effect, Nigeria ranks very low in the corruption index (Ubong; 2015). So far, the Nigerian government is either not doing anything about this problem or those efforts put in place to curtail moral decadence are weak and have failed to yield the requisite results. Notwithstanding the degrading nature of the churches or Christianity in Nigeria, there has also been a significant contribution which the churches and Christianity have made to Nigeria. Since the introduction of Christianity, there were many obnoxious cultural practices which are in existence in African societies. The religion has since its inception, counter and render several obnoxious practices, customs and traditions useless (Gabriel; 2004). Some dehumanising widowhood practices, wife inheritance and human sacrifice were condemned for the first time. People began to frown at the practice of interring living people with dead monarchs as a sign of respect. According to Omonijo (2016); Churches have also been positively impacted by Nigerians in the area of education. Many Churches have established schools at all level thus, contributing to the fight against academic ignorance. The list of tertiary institutions established by the Churches is stated below:

Table 1. Universities own by Churches in Nigeria

The Christ Life Church	Precious Cornerstone University
Living faith aka winners	Covenant and Landmark
The Redeemed Christian Church of God	Redeemer University and Redeemer College of Technology
Deeper life Bible Church	Anchor
The Apostolic Faith	Crawford
Mountain of Fire	Mountain Top
Christ Apostolic Church	Joseph Ayo Babalola
Church of God mission	Ben Idahosa
Assemblies of God	Evangel
Four Square	McPherson University

Source: Compiled by the researcher via online sources.

Many charity works are being done by churches in their immediate environment (Obasi, 2018). The churches also operate media houses through which they reach an audience who may not attend church services.

According to Jonah (2011); it seems that some churches through the media houses pass messages which ordinarily they would not have passed through the pulpit. There is just a thin line between the genres of music being played in some churches and the common secular songs. Jonah stated that the difference is just in the lyrics. The twitter page of "Naija news" on the 16th day of October, 2019 captured a very popular man of God; known as "Odumejeje" who is based in the city of Onitsha in Anambra state; who in the guise of celebrating his birthday, invited professional dancers who danced along with him to the sound of a secular music. The whole church was thrilled by the day's church service (I choose to term it, "Holy clubbing").

According to Sampson (2019); it is no longer out of place to hear news of pastors who are involved in sexual immorality. In the social media and as captured in Nairaland (2019) platform; since 2018, a very renowned pastor from the church known as COZA has been accused of sexual assault against several ladies. Early this month of October, a video of pastor known as Pastor Wilson went viral while he was involved in sexual flair with an unknown lady. The BBC (2019) documentary carried out on Sex for grades caught a University of Lagos Pastor who was said to be a pastor of the four square church. These acts only subject society to a more decadent state of morality. Some pastors and priests have resorted to dubious miracles in order to increase their membership, Linda Ikeji in her blog captured the Pastor who claimed to have resurrected someone from the death; whereas it was a planned drama. There is an ongoing buzz on facebook since 23rd October 2019 about a particular woman who has received the same healing miracle from five or more different pastors. These acts are discouraging, and it makes some persons who have hoped on churches for the restoration of their hopes to be down-casted and perhaps become indifferent to whatever tenets the church may hold.

Some pastors have made themselves God on earth by becoming judges of the conducts of their members. They tend to judge their members and pass judgment on them, with punishment including but not limited to flogging, lashing, fire-burns, and inflictions of open wounds, etc. The case of Pastor Kings, who was the general overseer of a church located in Lagos, who was sentenced to death by the Supreme Court of Nigeria comes to the forehead. According to Omonijo (2016), the poor emphasis on holiness could be regarded as one of the strategies of today Churches in order to command large crowds. An attempt to enforce holiness could cause the members to leave the church for a more comfortable church, which provides a comfort zone for moral ineptitude and unrighteous living (living the way they like). Moreover, most pastors lack proper missionary training and thus, they do not see pastoral work as a spiritual calling.

Kilishi(2014) revealed about a pastor who said that God had instructed and compelled him to impregnate any lady to be chosen and revealed to him, whether or not the woman is married or not. Upon birth, the child shall be in the church ministry for life; likewise, the mother. Activities like this contradict and undermine the word and nature of God; therefore, it would not be out of place to see the members of such church behaving like their spiritual leader. Almost all existing contemporary churches believe in numerical strength, and this forms a barricade to the pastors from rebuking immorality.

Summary/Conclusion

The popular assumption is that the multiplicity of worship centres in Nigeria should have a significant effect on the attitude and lifestyles of the members and the society at large. It will also not be a bad assumption, though maybe a hasty conclusion to assert that the multiplicity of religious centres in Nigeria would lead the members to influence non-members positively; as that would yield a better moral state in the country and may result to a highly needed socio-economic and political development in the country. However, the circumstance which the multiplicity of churches have thrown the country into is glaring to blind and could make a dumb to shout. It goes to suggest that the multiplicity of churches and the attendance of the same does not reflect in the lifestyle of the people nor ensure moral probity and integrity.

Omonoji (2016) Observed that; though Nigeria is rated as the 9th most religious country in the universe, it does not have any germane impact in moral reputation and integrity of Nigerians. Good people are good because they want to be not mainly because of the moral impacts churches make. Churches should be checkmated to see that their acts do not increase the level of moral decadence in the country but yield positive changes in the behaviours or attitudes of the people. Finally, it important to note that despite the societal ills, social vices and moral decadence in the society, there are still people who worship God by the prescribed tenets and truth and spirit. These persons may be few, or of an unascertained number; it confirms the biblical passage that many are called, but few are chosen, or the one that states that narrow is the gate that leads to eternal life, but only a few persons are there.

Recommendation

From the findings, it is pertinent to recommend as follows:

- There should be legislative regulations to curb the rate at which churches are swerved into the family business empire.
- An independent agency may be established to audit the accounts of churches to see that church leaders are not misappropriating funds.
- Just like there is a commission that regulates standards for companies, there should also be one to regulate standards for churches and their owners; and churches that cannot meet that religious standard should be closed. This will curb the rate of mushroom churches.
- Religious leaders should come together and formulate a working template with which to enhance the value and vision of Christianity as a religion in the country, with a definite interest in the selected area.
- Extreme caution should be applied in appointing leaders or giving leadership roles in the churches, to be sure that only worthy role models are chosen.
- Churches should not only condemn bad behaviours, but they should also encourage the faithful ones too, as that will boost other people's moral to do and be good.
- Churches should be interested in the lifestyles of their members and not just on miracles, signs and wonders or monetary benefits; as this will restore people's hopes in the religion.

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