Contextualization of Christianity in Africa: A Dialectic

By

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Abstract

Christian Theology has often been presented as fixed and final. The grand narrative has been how the churches in Africa and other parts of Third World would conform to the western theological imaginaire. This proposition is contested and not unassailable. Deploying the tool of methodological agnosticism, the paper takes a critical look into Christian history, origin and experience and asserts that contextualization of scripture is the life blood of Christian movement. Contextualization of Christianity is therefore not a shift in paradigm but a shift in discursive site. There is therefore need for its adoption among churches in Africa now that Africa has become the heartland of Christianity.

Keywords: Theology, Contextualization, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Christianity, Dialectic, Africa

Introduction: Mission as Translation

In the foreword to the book History of the World Christian Movement (2003), Dale I. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist note that “the Christian movement has always been greater than any individual or local church community has imagined it to be” (vii). The implication or their observation
is that the history of Christianity reflects an enormous amount of unity and diversity in beliefs and practices. Narrating a faithful history of the cross—cultural diffusion of Christianity requires an accounting of these “continuities and discontinuities,” as well as differences, without undervaluing the perspectives of any one. Many of these differences are the product of the serial nature of the Christian faith which possesses the dynamic to transcend national frontiers of language, culture, and identity. As Andrew Walls put it translation is “the life blood of historic Christianity” (Walls, 1995:7). Furthermore, migration, globalization and social change have introduced new changes in meaning, expression and practice thus the Christian movement must continuously grapple with the issue of how to relate the Gospel of Christ in new contexts, otherwise. “it withers and fades” (Walls, 1995:4).

This article interrogates the meaning of contextualization as a discursive site in the history of Christian thinking. Then it takes a look at the efforts of both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches to contextualize or “translate” the Gospel in some mission fields, especially in Africa. While some of these efforts have yielded considerable success, there is still much to be done especially in view of the upside down map of Christianity, making Africa the heartland of Christianity.

Protestant Missions and the Hermeneutic of Contextualization: A Discursive Shift.

Some African scholars, theologians, missiologists, anthropologists, sociologists and others interested in the relationship between the Christianity and culture (Bosch, 2001, Idowu, 1962) have insisted that until Christianity becomes truly African, most African Christians will continue to regard Christianity as a foreign religion. In order to solve the problem of “foreignness”, these scholars have suggested various models such as translation, accommodation, adaptation, localization, indigenization, contextualization, incarnation, acculturation, interculturalization, Africanization, and so on. Some of these terminologies are highly contested
and fluid. In addition to terminological confusion there is the more important fact of the widely divergent understanding in contemporary theologies of the relationship between the gospel and culture. Such discrepancies, contestations and entanglements are all the more bewildering when the same term is used to mean different things for different people.

Contextualization as a theological discourse may be understood in many ways. The terms generally reifies the contextuality of all theologies (Hall, 1989:21; Kim 1999:227). This means that no theology could take place in a historical vacuum: it takes place in time and space and therefore ineluctably culture bound. But for the purpose of this study, the meaning of contextualization adopted is that of Andrew Orta (2004), which sees it as a missiological methodology in Protestant Mission fields to celebrate, and incorporate cultural differences within the universal frame of Christian identity.

In this sense, contextualization is pastoral theology which addresses the need of the Christian in a more penetrating and powerful way in order that the gospel comes alive and takes root in the culture of the people. It is also a step in “mobilizing the people to bring their local elements and gifts that are useful, valuable, meaningful and applicable to the evangelization of the Gospel” (Kallon, 2007:1). The term “contextualization” in Protestant circles is not neologism. There has been concern over issues of contextualization, even through the vocabulary dates back to 1972. This is a crisis Christian have had to manage each time they communicate the Gospel across language, and cultural boundaries. Arguably, Simon Kwan (2005) makes the case that contextualization is not a shift in paradigm but a discursive practice. According to Kwan, the shift to contextualization was due to the growing awareness on the part of the Third World Churches that “their theology has traditionally been dictated by the West enlightenment rationality and intentionality. The contextual theologies have emerged out of their desire to formulate their own theologies, i.e. to find their own subjecthood, in their theological thinking” (236). Thus Simon Kwan asserts
that contextualization is not a shift in paradigm. Rather, it signifies a shift of the site— from the local (indigenization) to the Third World circle (contextualization) – on which Asian and African theologies were done (243).

The historicity of contextualization in Protestant Churches can also be traced back to the Theological Education Fund (TEF), which emphasized in its Third Mandate the theme in “Ministry in context” in 1972. Shoki Coe is often remembered as a contemporary ancestor of the term in Protestant Churches (Bevans, 2002:21, Bosch. 2001:421). As the director of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Shoe Coe had explained that contextualization means:

All that is implied in the familiar term indigenization and yet seeks to press beyond. Contextualization has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of Third World contexts. Indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the gospel in terms of traditional culture. Contextualization, while not ignoring this, takes into account the process of secularity, technology and the struggle for human justice, which characterize the historical movement of the nations of the Third World” (TEF, 1972:20-21).

This definitive statement by Coe saw contextualization as the capacity to respond meaningfully to the gospel within the context of one’s situation (Flemming 1972:17). Unlike indigenization, contextualisation recognizes the changing nature of reality; it opens the way for the future rather than leading one back to the past (Bevans 2002). Stephen Bevans further elaborates that contextualization is an effort that seeks to combine four elements, which can be divided into two; on the one hand culture, social change, and on the other gospel message, Christian tradition. It involves six models: anthropological, transcendental, praxis, synthetic,
translation, and countercultural, which Bevan contends situate on a continuum and thus not exclusive (2002:29). However, Bevans tends to think that the gospel message and Christian tradition are somewhat already there, and contextualization inevitably is taken to mean “the translation of the unchanging context of the Gospel into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situation” (Nichalls, 1975:647). This cannot be because both tradition and doctrine are products of human action and thus subject to deconstruction and historicism.

Contexts in Scripture and Tradition

All theology is contextual. A cursory look at the synoptic Gospels and the Acts of Apostles, reveals the contextual shaping of theological understanding and confession. The first three Gospel – Mathew, Mark, and Luke – share a common point of view as they tell the Jesus story. Because of the common perspective the first three Gospels are called “synoptic”, they look at the story of Jesus with the same eye. What Matthew, Mark, and Luke see is the way Jesus of Nazareth teaches and relates to the people. More than anything else in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus preaches the theme of the kingdom of God in a way that is reminiscent of the great prophets of Israel’s past, and the compelling prophet of his day John the Baptist (Mk. 1:14-15). Jesus in the Gospel is known by what he does: he explicitly proclaims the kingdom, he embodies the kingdom’s presence through wonders of healing and exorcisms, and he illustrates the truths of the kingdom through proverbs and parables drawn from its Palestinian background.

Taken as a whole the synoptic Gospels offer a glimpse of the context from which and for which they were written. The synoptic Gospels portray the words and actions of Jesus to the communities from which and for which the synoptic Gospels were written, and could conclude that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the son of the living God (Matt. 16:16 cf Mk 15:39), howbeit of Jewish identity.
Again, when we look at the Acts of the Apostles, we see how Paul was able to communicate the Gospel to the Gentile audience using Greek metaphors and categories. As the Gentile converts began to outnumber the Jews in the Christian Movement, the question of the status of Gentile converts became a subject of controversy. The “Judaizing Christian” were opposed to the admission of the Gentiles into the Christian Movement unless they underwent the ritual of circumcision. On such a vital matter (as circumcision), an authoritative decision by the apostles and elders were essential to avoid a complete split within the movement. At the council held in Jerusalem (Act 15), it was decided that the Gentile converts would not be required to undergo circumcision. Gentiles would also not be bound to keep all the injunctions of the Torah, the council decided. Non-Jews were only enjoined to observe some dietary regulations and to avoid acts of unchastity. There is no doubt that the decision of the Jerusalem Council was to free the Christian Movement from its Jewish matrix, while respecting the Gentile contexts and sensibilities.

Perhaps, it is in the second century, especially in Roman North Africa, that Christian theology was articulated through Greek philosophical thought. Out of well-defined contexts theological confessions were shaped in ways that gave rise to traditions. The earliest traditions emerged out of linguistic and philosophical settings. Paul R. Spickard and Kevin M. Cragg (2003) have enthused that no church better exemplifies the theme of the Christians in non-Western Mediterranean than that of North Africa. Here, Christianity flowered most brilliantly before it was wiped out by “God’s men on horse-backs”. North Africa boated of the most brilliant Christian thinkers such as Justin Martyr, Origen, St. Augustine, Cyprian, Tertullian, and Clement. These Church Fathers were able to convince Jewish and pagan interlocutors of the truth that Jesus Christ was the messiah, prophesied in the Jewish scriptures, in “terms comprehensible within the philosophical framework of the world into which the movement was spreading” (Irvin & Sunquist, 2003:120). These early Catholic apologists
were examples of African who inform us about the part of Africa during the development of Christian doctrine.

Jaroslav Pelikan (1985:35) has examined the three areas of this cultural and philosophical dialogue, which are useful for African Christianity. According to Pelikan, Christian apologists and missionaries of the time were faced with the ideas about “non-Jewish prophecies of a Christ; Gentile anticipation of the doctrine about Christ, pagan foreshadowings or “types” of the redemption achieved by his death.” It was against this backdrop that Justin Martyr, one of the earliest Catholic Fathers tried to interpret the figure of Christ in the light of Greek philosophical thought. Justin’s apology was that the Logos was reflected in creation. Thus, hearing the message of Jesus Christ, who was the incarnation of the Logos, fulfilled what was already given to humanity in its initial creation.

The history of the Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches also provide us examples of early Christian experiences on how to relate the Gospel in local contexts. Priests of the Coptic churches translated the Bible in Coptic, the Egyptian language, and theology and practice began to diverge from Roman standards (Spickard and Cragg, 2003:132). The same was true of the Orthodox Churches of Ethiopia. As early as the fifth and sixth centuries, Syrian monks evangelized and translated the Bible into the local languages. Christianity was accepted by the Coptic because they perceived some continuity in their traditional beliefs and practices. The survival of the Coptic Churches and the Orthodox Churches of Ethiopia in spite of the tenacity of Islam testifies to the maxim that there is a correlation between the autonomy of a church to express itself and its survival to its milieu. The contextualization of the Gospel in those territories was achieved through the “Vernacular translations” of the Bible into Coptic and Nubian languages. The use of the local languages in liturgy and Bible domesticated the message and aided personal witnessing, which was the most appropriate form of evangelism in this period.

Another lasting contribution of this region to Christendom was the monastic institution that they operated. These enclaves contributed in
nurturing Christian spirituality, sense of mission and served as havens for those who got bored of the bitter politics of the day (Kalu, 2007:26). The quality of Christianity among the Copts is revealed in their high moral discipline, and near absence of divorce among them. The monasteries were also avenues to rural evangelization, serving as important centres in rooting the gospel in local contexts.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Churches remind us of a success story of inculturation of the gospel within the vernacular: the retention of Jewish traditions of the early church; liturgical innovations that utilized ingredients of traditional culture; Sabbath observances, and other salient aspects of theology. The Ethiopian Orthodox Churches contributions to Christian art, architecture, music, literacy and liturgy are enduring legacies of contextualization (Kalu, 2007:29).

And when eventually the church moved from the western Mediterranean world to the Anglo-Saxon world it “translated” into its cultural contexts. For example, Pope Gregory I in AD 601 wrote a letter to St. Millitus to respect the culture of the People and to evangelize it from within. At the time when Aramaic, Greek and Latin were obligatory in official church activities, Saints Cyril and Methodias broke with this tradition to create Slavonic Christianity (Obilor, 201:421).

By the height of the medieval period ways of thinking and acting theologically had ossified by an adjective that paid homage to a well-defined tradition, many of which were credited to a well known theologian. Thus, there were Augustinian theologians, Benedictine monks, Franciscan Friars, and so on. Each adjective served to restrict and focus the larger task of theology throughout the church.

The medieval synthesis of theology, philosophy, and orders was temporarily broken by the rise of the Reformation, but within a generation a whole new set of theological adjectives exposed the traditional bearings of the Protestants. The Roman Catholic were busy repairing the perceived damages wrought by the Calvinists, and Arminius by the Arminians, and
each group seemed oblivious to the fact that their context of protest had shaped its very identity within the larger church.

The contextualization of theology along the lines of tradition continues into the contemporary era. It is not enough these days to claim to be a Christian theologian of word and deed. The adjectives that limit theology have become important. Philosophical positions still find their way into adjectives: Process theology, Existential theology, Thomistic theology. Sectarian positions also shape the types of confessions pursued: Methodist theology, Pentecostal theology, Protestant theology, Roman Catholic theology, and so on. Even hermeneutical methods take on the power of the adjective: narrative theology, evangelical theology, theology of the oppressed, et cetera.

The foregoing panorama of theological traditions is representative rather than comprehensive. The point being made is to see that all theology is shaped by the very traditions that define and preserve it. Keeping sight of the fact that traditions shape theology as powerfully as theology shapes traditions is, in a word, a reminder that all theology is contextual. Because that is so, theologians and missiologists at least have the responsibility to be aware of the tradition - or traditions - that shapes them. To pursue theology any other way is to pursue theology naively and inadequately.

**Vatican II and the Hermeneutics of Contextualization**

With the second Vatican Council, there has occurred an epochal shift in outlook on the hermeneutics of contextualization. The churches of the Third World are moving away from a predominately Eurocentric worldview and transferring themselves into a world church characterized by cultural and religious pluralism and consequently facing a host of new theological and pastoral issues unprecedented in Christian history (Rahner 1979: 716-727). Thus the Second Vatican Council (1962) represents a watershed in an ancient enterprise of how to relate the Gospel to indigenous religious cultures in contemporary times (Bevans 2002, Phan 2003, Ejizu 1999). In several papal documents from Paul IV’s *Africæ
terram (1967) and Evangeli nuntiandi (1975) to John Paul II’s Catechesi Trandendae (1979), Slavoruin apostolic (1985), Redemptoris Missio (1993), and Fides et ratio (1998) and by official church declarations such as the synod of Bishops for Africa (1994), inculturation has assumed a special urgency in our times. It is to be noted that though not a neologism, inculturation and the ancillary term contextualization is as old as Christianity (Ejizu, 1999, Phan 2003, Obilor, 210). The reason for this is partly due to the postcolonial discovery that much of our understanding and practice of faith has been shaped by our culture and contexts (Bediako, 1999), and yet we often assumed that our culturally conditioned interpretation of the Gospel was normative. It is now being realized that the culturally conditioned versions of the Gospel is not the Gospel across time and space, and cannot be equated with the kingdom of God (Whiteman, 1999). Thus in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches there is much consciousness of the historicity and cultural conditions of Christian doctrines and practices as well as of church structures. The recent controversy in the Anglican Communion over the issues of same-sex marriages and ordination of gay bishops is rumoured to have been the result of contextualization of the gospel in the West (Akinola, 2010). Pope John Paul II had this to say in Redemptors missio: “As she carries out missionary activity among the nations, the church encounters different cultures and becomes involved in the process of inculturation, the need for such involvement has marked the church’s pilgrimage throughout her history, but today, it is particularly urgent” (quoted in Phan 2003). In Protestant circles, the Nairobi Statement affirms: “Contextualization is a necessary task for the church mission in the world, so that the Gospel is ever more deeply rooted in diverse cultures”. The World Council of Churches in a communiqué issued at the end of its conference in de Salvador, says that “the churches need to be empowered for culture-sensitive evangelism, which takes seriously people’s history and cultures. Thus will the gospel be proclaimed through people’s own cultural symbols, myths and rituals, stories and festivals” (Phan 2003:5).
From the foregoing, contextualization as a missiological methodology is concerned with how the people who received the Gospel message based on their own initiatives, worldviews, and religious notions made it their own and propagated it among their own people. Contextualization is done under local conditions and for the assertion of reclaiming dignity, asking questions about what within, say African past (history, community relations, and religion) can help African Christian understand themselves better as Africans relating to the widest possible range of African issues to Christ’s story and incarnation, which takes seriously all culture and history as a locus for revelation.

The goal of contextualization is to communicate in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to the people within their local cultural contexts, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldviews, thus allowing them to following Christ and remain within their own culture. This function of contextualization is not concerned with the “externals” or “atmospheric” elements of religion like vestments, songs and dances. Rather, it is concerned with the ideational or “depth-level” (Ejizu 1999) of the people’s through life. In Africa, issues such is the role of ancestors and the objects of powers are crucial to the African appropriation of Christianity as a lived religion. Christianity must be able to explain to the African converts such issues as health and healing, sense of community and life hereafter.

Some critics have charged that contextualization may lead to syncretism - the insertion of Christianity into some ignoble elements of African religious culture. But this is reason why one of the goals of contextualization is to offend- but only for the right reasons, and not for the wrong ones. When the Gospel is presented in word and deed, it exposes the sinfulness and the tendency towards evil, oppressive structures and behaviour patterns within a cultural setting. This is what Andrew Walls means by contrasting between the “indigenizing and pilgrim” principles, which must be held in balance. Walls notes:
Along with the indigenizing principle, which makes his faith a place to feel at home the Christian inherits the pilgrim principles which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step, with his society, for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time, or modern, and could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into his system. Jesus within his Jewish culture, Paul within Hellenistic culture, take it for granted that there will be rubs and frictions — not form the adoption of a new culture, but form the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ” (Walls, 1997:7)

Unfortunately, when Christianity is not contextualized, the people are culturally offended, they tend to view Christianity, missionaries and their converts with suspicion as culturally alienating. When the people are offended for the wrong reason, Christianity’s perceived as a foreign religion and hence irrelevant to their culture. When this happens people never experience the liberating force of the gospel. There emerges a split-level Christianity or “fragmented identities”, especially at the popular level.

The third goal of contextualization in mission is to develop contextualized expressions of the Gospel so that the Gospel itself will be understood in ways the universal church has never experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God. In this sense, contextualization is a form of mission in reverse (C Shenk 2003), where one earns from other cultures how to be authentic Christian in one’s own context. This is important because it helps to connect the particular with the universal. Peter Schineller points out in addition that every local Christian community must maintain its link with other communities in the present around the world, and with communities of the past, through an understanding of Christian tradition (1990:72). This is the
ecumenical or holistic perspective of church historiography advocated by scholars like Ogbu Kalu (2007). Cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity expands our horizon of the salvific mission of God, for no longer are we content with our own limited perception and experience. Stretching our understanding of God through contextualization will enable us to gain insights from around the world, which we need to inform each other. For example, from Asia we can learn more about the mystery and transcendence of God; from Oceania we can recover the notion of the body of Christ as community, from Africa we can discover the nature of celebration and the healing power of the church; and from Latin America we can learn of the role of the church in political liberation and social justice (Whiteman, 1997:6). The importance of this goal has become more acute in view of the shift in Christianity’s centre of gravity to the Southern hemisphere - Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific and the various forms of hyphenated Christian - African Christianity, Asian Christianity, and European Christianity.

This is perceptible in John V. Taylor’s book The Primal Vision (1963) when he notes:

The question is, rather, whether in Bunganda, and elsewhere in Africa, the church will be enabled by God’s grace to discover the new synthesis between a saving Gospel and a total, unbroken unity of society. For there are many who feel that the spiritual sickness of the West, which reveals itself in the divorce of the sacred from the secular, or the cerebral from the instinctive, and in the loneliness and homelessness of individualism, may be healed through a recovery of the wisdom which Africa has not yet thrown away! The world church awaits something new from Africa. The church of Buganda, and in many other parts of the continent, by obedient response to God’s calling, for all its
sinfulness and bewilderment, may yet become the agent through whom the Holy Spirit will teach his people everywhere how to be in Christ without ceasing to be involved in mankind” (1963:108).

John V. Taylor’s statements are germane. The African is deeply religious, He does not know how to exist without his religion. Bolaji Idowu, has noted that the African “in all things is religious” (Idowu, 1962). The African perception of the universe is not compartmentalized. The sacred and the profane interpenetrate. His ontological vision is premised on the belief of the Supreme Being, the Divinities, Spirits, Ancestors, Magic and medicine. In Africa where the emphasis is on power encounter, humankind must strike a delicate balance between the world above and the underworld otherwise he it ruined. This is what Ogbu Kalu (2001) images as the “sacred egg”. Therefore in Africa it is possible to see an individual expending his/her energy by procuring the services of medicine men herbalists and diviners to protect himself/herself from malevolent forces in the race of life — “Osondu” to borrow again Ogbu Kalu’s Igbo imagery.

Therefore, Christianity as a “transplanted” religion must take in consideration the cultural matrix pf the African if it is to be properly rooted. The exclusivism of Christianity and the dismissive attitude of early CMS missionaries are no longer excusable in this “later rain”, especially now that Africa is the next Christendom. As John Mbiti has rightly observed that gospel was a beggar, seeking food and drinks from the culture it encounters (1970:430-431). These sentiments are echoed by the Indian theologian Mathias Mundadan when he notes, “the spread of the Christian movement, that is, the process of evangelization takes place not apart form cultures, but always arrives astride the existing cultural worldviews” (2002:22-27). This incarnational nature of the gospel has provided African theologian with much food for thought. Consequently, Kwame Bediako (1995) has suggested a shift in paradigm from the old model that conceives Christianity and African primal religion as rival worldviews or different
and independent identities. On the role of religion in African Christianity, Andrew Walls have enthused that “it would be one of the anvils on which the Christianity of the future will be hammered. His argument is that when the African began to read the Bible in their local languages, they discovered that those aspects of indigenous religions culture, such as dreams, divination, mystical vision, medicine and healing, spirit possession, ancestral beliefs and practices, which the missionaries had muted, were not totally condemned by the Scripture. They knew that there were spirits in the sky, water, land, and the underworld. On the other hand, the European missionaries, who were products of Enlightenment, read the Bible through the lenses of Word over spirit, the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. The Africans discovered that the biblical worldviews resonated with theirs. This aspect of continuity with the African indigenous thought form provides the dialectics for contextualization of Christianity in Africa. Some African scholars have suggested theological issues that would form the agenda for contextual theology in Africa in the twenty-first century, such as the issues of Christological formulations, i.e. what does Jesus Christ represent for the African? Some models include Christ as king, Christ as elder brother, Christ as healer, Christ as ancestor, Christ as warrior and Liberator (Don Nwachukwu, 2000:196-187) Wotoghe-Weneka, 2009). It does not matter which term is used to describe Christ provided his unique personality is not compromised. Conversion does not imply the repudiation of the past, but a turning to- towards Christ (Walls, 1995). We agree with Chris Ejizu when he says:

The common Rule of Faith must be respected, the central doctrines of Christianity and the necessary relationship between the local and universal church must be maintained. On the part of local cultures, serious studies will help to discover the inner rhythm of the indigenous cosmologies, key ideas and values (to be incorporated without change), as well as those fundamental elements
that must be purified, those which are to be substituted and those that have to be rejected without any substitute 47).

**Conclusion**

This paper makes the case that contextualization is both ancient and modern, and a shift in discursive site. We have equally hinted the difficulties and problems associated with older models. They did not take into consideration social change. We have also discussed the goals of contextualization which is to make the Gospel message sensible to the African thought world. African culture constitutes the matrix of the Christian faith and must be taken seriously. We did not exhaust the problems associated with faith and culture in Africa, because they go beyond Christianity.

Our emphasis has been on the pastoral theology of how to relate the gospel to the African, so that he can be authentically be African and Christian. Contextualization is proposed as a missiological method to celebrate and valorize cultural difference. This is the theology at the grassroots, from “below” or the “underside” and makes it clear that Christianity is no longer a western religion but an authentic African experience. It is the spontaneous theology of the open air, market and home. This approach is important to all who had been brought up on the formalized theology that dampens freshness and weakens vitality” (Bediako 2005: xiv). We are sanguine that if our argument is taken seriously African Christians may practice their faith without a sly.

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