

Ogunde's Dance Choreography and the Quest for National Unity in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria is a culturally diverse nation-state having over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and languages and over five hundred dialects of the main languages. As a political entity, it has been beset by ethnic agitations that have made the country constantly unstable right from independence in 1960. Hubert Ogunde was a foremost Nigerian choreographer and cultural activist who during the colonial struggle, was detained on many occasions as a result of his overtly political plays that tended to challenge British rule and the impact of western civilization and culture on Nigeria. His choreographic style, which employed syncretism and an eclectic approach to production, was aimed at integrating the diverse cultures in Nigeria in a single production, in an effort at achieving cultural and political unity in the country. This paper aims to examine his choreographic style using the dance piece, *Nigeria* (1977), as example to identify the features in the work that made it a typical Nigerian dance theatre aimed at unifying the country.

Introduction: Ogunde's Philosophy and Early Beginning

Chief Hubert Adedeji Ogunde had a complex identity arising from his spirituality and professional output. He was a Christian, mystic, and an ardent believer in traditional African religious practices. His parental background, education and professional practice were succinctly reflected by these influences. Ogunde believed very strongly in predestination, especially as it relates to the Yoruba world-view. It should be pointed out that this philosophy is rooted both in Christianity and African traditional religion. For the Yorubas, the Ifa divination and traditional worship

system exemplifies this idea of predestination very clearly. Most Nigerian cultures also believe very strongly in destiny.

Ogunde had grown up in an environment deeply rooted in the tradition of the Yoruba people. Also, as he was growing up the Christian religion had been planted by western missionaries amongst his people and was spreading fast alongside western education. His own father was a pastor, working for the missionaries while his paternal grandfather was an Ifa priest. These two influences were to have significant impact on his life and practice of theatre. Ogunde himself was a Christian, having attended a missionary school, and having worked very closely with the church as a mission teacher, church organist, and making the church his initial patrons in the theatre. In fact, it was the church that encouraged and gave him the necessary support at the early stage of his theatre practice before he turned professional.

However his root in the tradition of his people was to manifest immediately he turned professional. It must be pointed out here that the churches that sponsored him encouraged the development of African dance and music and introduced this in their mode of worship. Also, the yearning at this time was for a "cultural renaissance", a return to roots in response to the overriding negative colonial influences. Hence, when Ogunde established his first theatre group, the aim was to "research deeply into African culture with a view to preserving and improving upon it" (Clark, 1980:10).

The need to preserve and improve on his culture led him to adopt syncretism as a philosophy, an attempt to marry traditional religious beliefs and practices with western Christian religion and practices. Also his early training as an Alarinjo dancer and drummer and later as a church organist was to influence his style of performance. Ogunde was bent on projecting the cultural image of his people (the Nigerian peoples) in consonance with the cultural re-awakening going on at that time as they yearned and clamoured for political independence, and he was at the forefront of this cultural engineering and propagation. Hubert Ogunde was at the forefront of the nationalist struggle using the medium of theatre as tool for political agitation. He was arrested and detained on a number of occasions because of his overtly political productions that targeted the colonialists. Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos where he staged his first production was to be both a centre of nationalist activities and the cultural renaissance that was to take hold of Nigeria at that time. It became a rallying point for both politicians and cultural activists.

The themes of his initial productions were overtly political, especially in such productions as *Worse than Crime* (1945), *Strike and Hunger* (1945), *Tiger's Empire* (1946), *Hebert Macaulay* (1946), *Human Parasites* (1946) and

Towards Liberty (1947). All these productions were tailored towards confronting the colonialists and to a large extent they helped to sharpen Ogunde's nationalist inclinations. It was not surprising therefore that at independence he was commissioned by the newly formed Federal Government to produce an independence play, *Song of Unity*, which was premiered at the Glover Memorial Hall. This gesture by Government looked like a compensation for his role in the nationalist struggle for independence and, as if pre-empting the national aspiration for unity, the play dealt with the problem of the need by the different ethnic groups in Nigeria to work together to achieve political unity.

Song of Unity (1960) was the story of a man who married three wives from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The basic theme is that of polygamy and the problems associated with it. In the final analysis, the polygamous man was able to live happily with his wives despite their cultural differences. There were songs and dances to reflect the different ethnic groups although the language of communication was Yoruba. This production was to be Ogunde's first attempt at experimenting with songs and dances from different cultures in Nigeria in a single production. Due to his nationalist inclinations, Hubert Ogunde had a passionate desire to work towards the survival and unity of this young and culturally diverse nation-state called Nigeria.

Apart from *Song of Unity* (1960), we also find the theme of unity in such productions as *Keep Nigeria One* (1968) in which he was opposed to the secessionist move of Biafra and praised the efforts of Yakubu Gowon to unite the nation, *Murtala Muhammed* (1976), in which he showed his commitment to one Nigeria, condemned the Dimka coup by extolling the sterling qualities of Muhammed (the military head-of-state of Nigeria who was assassinated in the coup), and *Nigeria* (1977) in which he also called for unity by highlighting the unity in the cultural diversity of Nigeria. As a nationalist, he was drawn to explore the theme of unity in cultural diversity; firstly, to promote the cultural heritage of Nigeria as a patriot and cultural activist, and secondly, to underscore the political objective of the young Nigerian nation, that of unity. All the productions reflected the cultural diversity of Nigeria. However, *Nigeria* was the only dance production listed above that made use of movements, costume and music from different cultures in Nigeria, all in an effort to reflect a true national identity. The other productions were dramatic performances in total theatre style.

“Unity in Diversity” as Theme in Ogunde’s Works

Nigeria is a plural society with about two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. However, the plurality of the Nigerian society does not in any way imply disharmony for as Omu (1998:1) notes, “a sense of ethnic affiliation is not inherently a threat to harmonious inter-group relations”. The 1914 amalgamation act of Lord Lugard was the point at which the seeds associated with the plural status of Nigeria were sown. It was then that, as Hugh Clifford described it, “the collection of self-contained and mutually independent native states separated from one another as many of them are, by great distances, by differences of history and tradition, and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers, [were] welded together as a single homogenous nation” (qtd.in Omu 1998,14). Also, the colonial administrators, including John Mcpherson and Hugh Clifford, tended to apply policies that accentuated the diversity rather than the promotion of national unity. This favoured their continued stay in power as it was obvious that they were not in a hurry to hand over power to the nationalists. Thus the seeds of discord were sown in the nationalist struggle from the onset, and camps were pitched against one another.

The politicians did not help matters as they played their politics along ethnic lines. The Action Group was a Yoruba Party; Northern Peoples’ Congress was a Fulani/Hausa party, while the NCNC which was a little broad-based was strongest in the Igbo area. Thus with the formation of political parties along ethnic lines, the stage was set for hostilities and politics of bitterness. Prior to this time, ethnic based groups like the Pan-Yoruba Cultural organization, Egbe-Omo Oduduwa, was formed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the West, Igbo Federation was in existence in the East and the Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa formed by Aminu Kano in the North. It could be claimed that the fear of domination and competition for political power that was carried out with passion and aggressive tendencies helped to fuel the spirit of ethnicity in Nigeria.

The consequence of this was the disintegration of the first Republic in 1966 when the military took over power. The ethnic violence that followed overwhelmed the military that came to the rescue and this eventually led to the civil war of 1967 that lasted for three years. It is sad to note that in present day Nigeria, ethnic politics exists and minority fears are still very much with us. This has given rise to militant youth groups such as Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), Arewa Peoples Congress (AP), Egbesu Movement, Bakassi Boys and Niger Delta Vanguard. The Afenifere, Ohaneze and Arewa consultative forums are other cultural organizations fuelling embers of ethnic politics. These have helped to fan embers of

disunity and threatened the survival of the Nigerian nation state as one indivisible entity. Many have called for a sovereign national conference to address the issues and settle them once and for all. But right from the military regimes to the present political dispensation, they have shied away from the issue and swept it under the carpet, so the problem remains unresolved.

Hubert Ogunde, apart from participating in the nationalist struggle, has used his works to address the problem of disunity and cultural diversity. Consequently, three of his dance works have explicitly dealt with the theme of unity in diversity. Ogunde as a nationalist and patriot took upon himself the responsibility of being the crusader for political and cultural cum ethnic unity. He saw strength in unity and cultural diversity.

Oh-Ogunde! (1969) was a showcase of Nigerian dances and the message was that of unity, especially at the time of the civil war between that Federal Government and the breakaway Biafra. The Igbos had just seceded from Nigeria and declared their independence as a nation state, as a result of the ethnic and political violence of 1966, the consequent military take over, and the pogrom against the Igbo in the North. Ogunde therefore used this production to call for peace, while at the same time exhibiting Nigeria's rich culture as we find dances from different ethnic groups in Nigeria being used to extol the theme of national unity.

In *Destiny* (1986), Ogunde felt Nigeria had been blessed as a nation with abundant natural resources. However, the problem has been that of mismanagement of her resources which has brought hardship to the people. He believed strongly that a messiah will come in the form of Osetura (Priest) to cleanse the nation and put it on the path to greatness again. So here Ogunde still believes in Nigeria's unity and the fact that its citizens can forge a common destiny to greatness.

In *Ijo-Eleja* (1967) the theme of unity is not too obvious, but what one finds is celebration as vehicle to unity. In African festival performance, the festival binds all together; it is an instrument of social cohesion. This is the choreographic principle he used in all the dances to achieve the theme of unity. The unique thing in *Ijo-Eleja*, is that here the traditional movements from the different cultures have been collapsed and re-invented into a creative dance performance to give the picture of a national dance movement style. In *Nigeria* (1977) which is the focus of this paper, the theme is also that of bringing together all the cultures and ethnic groups in a unified performance with the major character called "Nigeria" journeying round the country to try to bring together his many children in unity.

A Critical Analysis of *Nigeria* (1977)

A number of controversies had preceded the staging of *Nigeria*. Firstly as founder and president of the Nigerian Union of Dramatists and Playwrights (NUDP), Ogunde had objected to the inadequate and what he considered to be unprofessional arrangements for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77). In 1975 he also objected to the invitation of the South African Dance Troupe Ipi-Tombi, for the opening of the nation's National Theatre. He felt that an indigenous dance company should have the honour to perform at the opening ceremony (Clark, 1980: XIX).

In 1976 he also objected to the high cost of hiring the National Theatre by indigenous professional troupes. It is in the light of this that Ogunde, to mark his thirty-three years on stage in 1977 (1944-1977), staged *Nigeria* to commemorate FESTAC '77, and to formally give his support for the festival for patriotic reasons. Therefore, *Nigeria* was a production conceived for patriotic reasons and to continue his gospel of national unity which he started in *Oh-Ogunde!* (1969). The idea behind the conception of *Nigeria* was to use it on tour of the then nineteen states of the Nigerian Federation and also Europe and America to further project Nigeria's image abroad. The programme was advertised as a musical dance drama of traditional dances for international festivals.

Nigeria had its premier at the Glover Memorial Hall in January 1977, with Ogunde as artistic director and choreographer and his wife, Ibisomi Ogunde, as assistant director, Kolade Olaiya as lighting designer while Ibidun Ogunde designed the costume. The production had a cast of over forty dancers and musicians with Risikat Ogunde, Iyabo Ogunde, Kolawole Olaiya, Alaba Ogunde, Oludayo Ogunde, Adelaja Ogunde, Temitope Ogunde, Janet Ogunde and Elijah Aworinde as principal performers.

Nigeria, according to Egun Clark who wrote the introduction to the programme note, "is based on the theme of unity". It is, according to her, "an extended metaphor showing Nigeria in a journey around herself" (Clark 1976). In the process he discovers his children are ignorant of each other's culture and also not as united as he would want them to be. Nigeria therefore seeks to correct this situation by gathering all his many children together to form one united nation. According to Hubert Ogunde himself, *Nigeria* is an "improvement" on the earlier dance production of *Oh-Ogunde!* In it we see a distillation of Nigerian dances depicting vital aspects of Nigerian traditional life styles ranging from birth, marriage and death to rituals and secular ceremonies in royal courts and communal festivals such as harvests (Programme Note, *Nigeria*, 1977). It is a

production in two acts and fifteen scenes/sequences with an interval of fifteen minutes. Act one has seven scenes/sequences while act two has eight scenes/sequences.

The production opens with a piece of music and song entitled "Nigeria";

- (1) Nigeria beloved motherland
We are proud to belong to thee Nigeria
Where truth and justice all reign supreme
Nigeria is one Nigeria.
Chorus: Nigeria our own Nigeria
Nigeria is one Nigeria
To the East to the West
To the North to the South
Nigeria is one Nigeria
We pledge our love
Nigeria is one Nigeria.

- (2) All glory and honour to Nigeria
We raise our flag as we raise our head
Forever, never more shall we bow our head
God bless our own Nigeria.

Chorus: Nigeria our own Nigeria
Nigeria is one Nigeria
To the East to the West
To the North to the South
Nigeria is one Nigeria
We pledge our lives
We pledge our love
Nigeria is one Nigeria.

Immediately after the song, the character called Nigeria enters to give a brief narration as follows:

Nigeria is my name. As a traditional man I have many wives, so many

I don't know how many. Each woman bore a child for me, but all these Children live in different parts of the country.

This evening I am going on a journey to visit my children.

Ladies and gentlemen, may I invite you to come along with me on this journey

And because this is time for harvest all over the country, it is holiday time

And there will be plenty of music and dancing.

This gives room for the air of celebration as the *Ijo-Eleja* dance piece is introduced. It is the opening sequence in Act One. It is night market and fishermen have just returned from their usual fishing trip and there is plenty of fish for fish sellers to sell and buyers to buy. This sequence is interpreted with the fishermen's dance (*ijo-eleja*) and we have these songs to follow:

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| (1) <i>Omi okun alade ori</i> | (1) Sea water is the source/ head of all waters |
| <i>Omi osa olori odo</i> | Lagoon water is the source/ head of all waters |
| (2) <i>Lebute...Lebute</i> | (2) River bank, River bank |
| <i>Lebute... Illu .. u-mi</i> | The river bank is my land/ village |

Nigeria then proceeds to visit his children and the second sequence is a "commoners' love scene". It is the second day of market and there is money in everybody's pockets. It is time to love and be loved. Omotade meets her rival lovers and Nigeria admires her commoners in love. This is basically a sequence in pantomime.

Song:

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|-------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Ori ree toritori</i> | This is my head |
| <i>Lai ki Baba</i> | I greet my fathers |
| <i>Ori re e-e ...</i> | This is my head |

Sequence Three brings in the dance from the Itsekiri culture of the Delta State of Nigeria. It is a river based ritual dance in which the high priestess and her followers process to the riverside for a ritual sacrifice of fruits and fowls to the river goddess. They are promised abundance of fishes as harvest. They are all happy and there is singing and dancing as the celebration in sequences one and two is continued. This sequence is subtitled "Dance of the Mermaids". The fourth sequence is also in pantomime. Here Nigeria is seen at a palm wine seller's hut after journeying hundreds of kilometers through parts of Southern Nigeria.

In Sequence Five, Nigeria finally arrives in the heart of Northern Nigeria. Flutes, horns, drums and pageantry welcome Nigeria to a night of bachelor's eve of music and dancing. The *Atta Dabai* dance and *Sharo* courtship and marriage dances from Hausa and Fulani cultures are celebrated here. This is followed by a short sequence in which Nigeria sings songs of hope and happiness after which *Sango* dance from the Yoruba culture is introduced. Nigeria is seen being initiated into the cult

of Sango, the god of thunder. There is then a fifteen-minute musical interlude.

Act Two Sequence One is subtitled “Maloku-Agbo”. This is a ritual dance meant to induce rainfall. The priest and priestess come in and perform the necessary rites. It is a spirit possession dance as one of the devotees with her breasts exposed and wearing strands of cowries around her neck and forehead is mounted by the spirit. She dances wildly around the stage area, assisted by another devotee who guides her movements and ensures that she does not get out of control. Sequence Two of Act Two is *Igbo-Oluwo* dance in the forbidden forest. In order to visit her other children, Nigeria must pass through this demon-infested forest. Here Nigeria is confronted by terrifying spirits, dancing skeletons and dwarf-like creatures. However, he comes out of it all unhurt. The costume and music here helps to a great extent to create a weird effect.

In Sequence Three of Act Two the *Igbeyawo-Oba* dance is performed, this is the royal ceremony of the Oba. In Yoruba (African) belief, the king does not propose love to any maiden, instead he chooses from the young maidens presented to him. It is a maidens' dance. They are dressed in beautifully coloured bead strands tied around the waist as skirts with breast bands and beaded crowns having fringe of beaded cowries to cover their faces. They dance to present themselves before the Oba who inspects them and makes his choice. It is indeed a very colourful and festive sequence. Sequence Five is a war dance scene. In pantomime, we are presented with warriors attacking and retreating. Finally, the women with their horsetails dance in to celebrate victory. Sequence Six is a hunter's wives dance. Also, in pantomime and energetic dance steps we see hunters return from hunting and the women take over. It is cooking, eating, drinking and dancing till dawn.

In Sequence Seven, we are entertained with *Okachanma* and *Atilogwu* dances from the Igbo culture of Nigeria. This dance sequence in physical display of energy is meant to show that man is made to rule over the earth. This is followed by a ritual of fertility, marriage and rebirth. It is the dance of invocation of spirits of the earth and water performed only by the initiated. The grand finale is Sequence Eight in which all the dancers and drummers come together in a “dance of unity”. Nigeria brings all his children together as they dance and sing joyfully. The song of unity at the opening is then re-introduced to end the performance. The movements are also traditional dance movements brought from different cultures across Nigeria, an effort at reflecting the cultural diversity of the Nigerian nation state.

Movements in *Nigeria* are wide-ranging due to the diversity of forms and styles used in the performance, which include ritual, ceremonial,

social, creative, acrobatic and masquerade dance forms. This is supported by pedestrian movements that include everyday movements in mime, such as eating, drinking, cooking, fishing, hunting etc.; which sometimes are translated into dynamic rhythmic movements. The structure of the production can be said to be fragmented and illogical as most of the dance sequences do not cohere or flow easily from one sequence to another. There are distractions with dance sequences that do not immediately relate to the theme and subject matter. Examples include the dance of the mermaids in Act One Scene Three, *Sango* dance in Act One Scene Seven; *Moloku Agbo* dance in Act Two Scene One; royal marriage ceremony of Act Two Scene Three and the *Igbe-yawo Oba* dance in which we had masquerade displays in Act Two, Scene Four. It is the simple plot of the journeying of Nigeria that ties the sequences together, with punctuating gaps here and there.

The sources of subject matter which include myths, rituals, festivals and ceremonies tilt the production towards the spectacular. Thus the air of celebration runs through from the beginning to the end of the production. The treatment of the subject matter makes it a little difficult to decipher the theme of unity easily as the plot is thin and the sequences are played out in a cyclical non-linear manner. However, the air of celebration and festivity that anchors the production together helps to reveal the theme of unity in diversity.

Ogunde's Choreography of National Unity

Nigeria is a highly complex multi-cultural and multi-religious modern society. This nature of the society has become a problem even to our political scientists. It has resulted in the stunted growth of our political and economic life. This problem can be traced to the colonialists who even when they created homogenous societies in their nation states did the opposite in the colonial territories because of economic gains. This has posed a problem for many Third World countries that have heterogeneous societies.

Hubert Ogunde as an artist used his art to address issues of his immediate society. During the colonial period, he used his art to confront the colonialists and this earned him detention on many occasions. He was a patriot and nationalist and therefore was quite committed to the young nation that was born called Nigeria. By 1977 Nigeria had just come out of a three-year civil war and Ogunde being the patriot that he was felt the need for national unity. He believed very strongly that Nigeria's multi-cultural status should be a blessing rather than a curse; hence the need to bring all the cultures together in one performance to dialogue and

demonstrate the fact that even when there are differences, there could be points of similarities that can be exploited for the good of the nation state. In *Nigeria* therefore he tried to demonstrate the fact that there is need for understanding and unity despite obvious differences in culture. Firstly, the title of the dance production is *Nigeria*. The major character in the production is also called Nigeria. He comes forth to state that although he is a polygamous man, he is determined to bring together all his many children scattered all over the country, make them to understand and know themselves better, as he sets out to visit them. Through the vehicle of dance and celebration which is an important element of social cohesion in African traditional societies he intended to unite all of them in love.

So the mission and intention which constitute the major theme of the dance is of unity. The opening song talks of a people that are proud of their nation, pray for its progress and are committed to making it one and an indivisible entity. As he traveled round we are exposed to the rich cultures of the people as they celebrate using the medium of dance. The opening sequence begins from the south of Nigeria. It is the Delta region and the economic life of the people is brought to bear on the events that we see. The culture of the people reveals their fishing activities, rituals, and palm wine business. It is a prosperous society that we see, as they are happy in their celebrations. There is love and joy in the atmosphere. The journey takes us further to the North and the *Atta Dabai* and *Sharo* courtship dance are exhibited. The rich culture of the Fulani people as seen in their costumes, movements, props, songs and music is lavishly displayed. Whether in the South or in the North, Nigeria is welcomed and entertained showing the hospitality of the Nigerian people.

Nigeria journeys back to south western Nigeria where the rich culture of the Yoruba people is displayed. The *Sango* initiation dance and the *Igbe-Yawo* maiden's dance are performed to show full acceptance of Nigeria into the communities without discrimination. He is accepted wherever he goes. Even in the process of reconciling his many children, he is still given a wife to increase his harem. As the journey continues he passes through tests and trials even as it is in life. As a nation there must be problems which must be overcome through perseverance. The civil war was such a test for Nigeria, thank God Nigeria survived it. The Igbo sequences portrayed situations of war but in the end there is a "unity dance" in celebration to reconcile all parties. Structurally, the performance unites all the elements of dance performance such as dance, music, mime, and the plastic arts such as sculpture, props, make up and costume in total theatre form. Also despite the seemingly illogical nature of the structure, the overwhelming air of celebration brings about some form of

unity of purpose as the elements cohere to make an aesthetic whole. Thus unity is achieved at different levels of the performance.

An appraisal of Ogunde's production style reveals a trend that can rightly constitute the canons for a modern Nigerian dance theatre. Ogunde being a pioneer in this area, and having gained recognition as the foremost choreographer that established the national Troupe of Nigeria (NTN), and won many national honours, his production style commends itself as the parameter for not only forging a new approach to dance theatre production but inventing a national choreographic style. This is because of the national flavour of his production style. The Ogunde production style is deep-rooted in the traditional African festival aesthetics. This form is socially functional through the elements that it employs in its performance mode.

It is characterised by a sense of festivity and great celebrations that bring in the spirit of the ancestors in the form of masquerade performances. The festival is the life of the people in celebration and therefore provides the forum for social cohesion where their common bonds are strengthened. It is from this thrust that Ogunde seeks to unite the Nigerian nation state through this form of entertainment. The Ogunde dance theatre therefore employs diverse ethnic movement forms and styles in a medley drawn from the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria. Not only does it employ the traditional forms from the different cultures, but it mixes them with the modern in a creative approach using elaborate mime gestures to convey the message. Thus there is the eclectic and syncretic approach that is brought to bear in the production style. The movement quality is deliberately fast as he employs the acrobatic and masquerade dance movements to lift the movements to the level of being magical and spectacular, especially when combined with the glamorous costumes.

Conclusion

Nigeria was a dance production conceived for patriotic reasons. The intention of the choreographer as noted in the programme notes was to "preach the gospel of national unity" and to tour the then nineteen states of the federation with the production with a view to creating enlightenment through the message(s) and bring about understanding of our different cultures so as to unite them.

Hubert Ogunde also had the intention of taking the production outside the country to America and Europe with a view to projecting Nigeria's image abroad and telling the outside world that Nigerians had a culture to be proud of. There are other sub-themes such as, reconciliation, love, peace and economic prosperity. In all of these, Ogunde wished the

best for Nigeria. He hoped Nigeria will be a land of joy and peace where truth and justice reigned; a land where the citizens will walk with their heads raised high. He saw culture as the uniting factor and dance as the vehicle to achieving this common goal of national unity that would take the country to greatness.

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