

Research

AKOBE EGHIAN: THE PORTRAIT AND THEMATIC STATURE OF AN ORAL ARTIST

¹Mark IGHILE, Edomwonyi OMOROGBE

¹Benson Idahosa University, NIGERIA

Abstract. The Bini oral minstrel, Osasumwen Ehigiator, whose portrait forms the basis of this paper, clearly represents a creative phenomenon which is of immense relevance to both the past and the present, with striking implications for the future. His songs, most of which are embellished by proverbial and philosophical expressions, continuously strike the reflective and critical consciousness of not only the lovers of Benin music, but indeed the entire country and even beyond the shores of the great Benin kingdom where his music is highly appreciated. This paper examines the artistic personality of Wilson Osasumwen Ehigiator, within the conceptual framework of oral literature and cultural studies, and submits that the poet, in all ramifications is indicative of a certain level of creative uniqueness - in relevance and intensity- that makes him truly influential and iconoclastic.

Keywords: orality, music, proverbs

Introduction

This paper stems from the series of interviews, research and personal contacts made with the poet-singer for about three years. The poet, whose real name is Wilson Osasumwen Ehigiator, took the pseudonym of Akobe Eghian (the trap of the enemy). This pseudonym has often been changed to Akobe nuni ni igho (the trap that catches money) in apparent recognition of the growth in his success in life. His choice of name may not be unconnected with the deep-seated belief in Africa that there is something in a name, and that popularity comes in many ways. Akobe possesses a dominating athletic stature that is however encapsulated in humility. Apart from the ambiance of wealth that surrounds him, a cursory sight of him reveals an easy-going, simple person that is devoid of any form of pride or high – handedness. The frequent air of immodesty associated with most successful artists has little or no place in the life of the artist. For what else can be said of a man who truly stooped and conquered? At all times, he gives a sharp impression of someone who is in good command of his memory, and language. Akobe, like a troubadour, has transversed the world dazzling people with his musical performances. This paper presents a graphic picture of his professional status from the standpoint of his poetic creativity and thematic strength.

Artistic personality

He is a multi-talented artist; a musician, bard, and a dramatist of no mean repute. He has equally excelled all his artistic endeavours. Mr Wilson Osasumwen Ehigiator alias Akobe-Eghian (the trap for the enemy) was born on Saturday, May 1972 to the family of Ehigiator in Benin City, Edo State. He is the 8th child in the family. The parents of Mr Osasumwen Ehigiator already had six children before him. But due to the strong desire for a male child, the father married another woman who gave birth to a male child making it seven children before Akobe was born eight months after this child. The

father of Wilson Ehigiator is still alive and he is a notable and respected first class chief in Benin: the Oson – Olaye of Benin kingdom. The humble chief gave birth to Akobe at the age of 40. Now 85, he is healthy and very proud of the achievements of the son who has undoubtedly climbed from obscurity to greatness. Akobe takes it as a point of duty to provide for the parents despite the tortuous upbringing he had as a young man. He is happily married with five children. The simplicity of this artist is encapsulated in his choice of food. His best food is ‘Eba and ogbolo soup’. According to him, ‘if I do not take this food once a week, I will fall sick’. This may however stem from the fact that he grew up as a house boy serving his master in Benin. He was only seven years old when he was taken by his father to serve and help his father’s younger brother who became blind under very mysterious circumstances. The young Osasumwen Ehigiator was then chosen by the family to help the blind family member at a very young age. This blind family man, a civil servant, was then a craft man at Arinze primary school. And he became the house boy in 1977 where he served faithfully until the late hours of 1985. Though this uncle was blind and a bachelor, he never maltreated the young man- Akobe. But this could not be said of the man’s younger sister and others in the house. The experience he got from the other members of the house was so harrowing that he could only liken the relationship between him and the family members to that between the federal government of Nigeria and the dreaded Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria. Today, he still battles the pangs and tears of stomach ulcer gotten from the dreadful daily encounters with hunger. Even the bare skin of the artist still bears the tale-tale scars of several beatings he received from his host. On one of the few occasions, when he took off his clothes to take his bath, the mother broke down in tears on seeing the horrifying marks that authenticated the physical and emotional assaults.

He was taught the formal skills of acting and public entertainment by a notable dramatist and cultural artist- Erhatiro-sole – Sole when he came to Be-

nin early in his life. Before then, he had been initiated into acting in 1999 by a friend he simply knew then as ‘Brother Friday’, who lived about two kilometres from his village. (He never knew this person was his blood brother of the same father till several years later). Although Brother Friday was very much older than him, they were good friends. Hunger and want drove him to burial ceremonies and other parties where they acted and cracked riddles and jokes in between musical displays by musicians. According to the artist:

‘I was in secondary school then, in class one or two.
In those days, during
obituaries and other ceremonies,
If musicians play for some time, there is an
interval... He (Bro Friday) will now take me to the
backyard and rub ashes on my
head to look like an old man and teach me to talk
like an old man, gave me a
walking stick for effect.’

This was how this icon in the Nigerian movie scene cut his teeth as a musician and actor. This friend later brought him to Urokpota Hall in Benin City to watch live drama and movies and learn the craft of the business of stage acting. Later they came to the same venue to perform. This friend who took him to Benin - a great feat then, taught him the rudiments of acting. He appreciated him as a true ‘friend’. But ‘...it was last just in 2015 that I found out that we are blood brothers- born of the same father’. Strange as it was, he was the only one who did not know of this relationship between them all these while. The parents and the friend all knew about it. Though the mother knew about it, the circumstances and the situations operational at home were not conducive for such information to be made known to him. The mother of

Akobe lost the mother when she was only three days old. So in life she had virtually nobody to stand up for her or ask questions about her life. She grew under the father's guidance until the father married another wife when she was 21. It was only due to the fame of the artist that very recently some members of the mother's family were identified. Till now, anybody who claims to be related to the mother is accepted by him. 'my father was wealthy and highly respected because he had a 'white superb' bicycle and was always dressed in a pair of white knickers, which was a novelty in those days. Today the artist has achieved fame and takes very good care of the parents with what God has given to him. After his secondary school education, he was left jobless with no hope of furthering his education. As a result of this, he was advised by one of his sisters to go into music as a profession. He particularly liked Akaba man (a famous musician) because he was a great fan of the music maestro. A couple in the house where he served as a house boy had introduced him to the music of Akaba man, which he was always fond of playing. While serving his master as a house boy, he had been told that the village of Akaba man was not far from his own village. Note that during his time with the master, (1977 - 1985), he never for once, visited his father. This led to a kind of brotherly feeling for the musician and subsequently his music since he appeared to be his nearest of kin, and the only link to his past. He was later sent to Akaba man – one of the greatest musicians in the history of the people as an apprentice. While with his master, he distinguished himself in his creative abilities, good voice and willingness to learn. In fact, he was still an apprentice with his master when his first hit; Tesu ru kua (the devil is working in vain) rocked the airwaves in Benin in 2003. So today he holds Akaba man in great respect and honour. He speaks:

...in fact if he had told me he will not teach me the craft of music and was just willing to let me be his house boy or man the

gates of his house then, because of my love for him, I would still have agreed to his proposals

.... In fact I was with him some days ago when one...
of his sons married. He is happy seeing me...

Today, he sees music as a great weapon of social reconstruction. Music is for happy people and for those that are light-hearted. He concurs with William Shakespeare that anyone that is not moved by the sound of music is dangerous. He says such a person can only be likened to the infamous Adolph Hitler of Germany.

‘Somebody who does not listen to music is dangerous. He is more or less like a palm tree that does not produce; it is dangerous. You can easily find snakes on top’.

In fact, if there is reincarnation, he would want to come back to this earth as a musician. Despite his love for the glamour of the music industry, he advised all musicians to beware of women as they are the most likely source of trouble and death to musicians and other artists. As a very true, down- to- earth person, he abhors women of easy virtues.

The rise and fall of a musician will always come from women. The easiest way a super star will always fall is through women... The easiest way a musician can die quickly is through women, even though they can also add to our success. You do not call them before they answer you, especially if you are popular.

Today he is a prodigiously gifted musician with eleven full musical albums to his credit. He is a house-hold name in Benin, having acquired his fame through music and acting, since his emergence into the music industry, he has performed in nearly all the continents of the world. A very good under-

standing of those songs makes the songs more interesting and enjoyable in its aesthetics. The performer is dressed usually in a T-shirt, a gold chain with a pendant in the shape of a mouse trap on his neck, while the other members of his team and back – up singers which usually do not include any female are smartly dressed in a blend of the traditional and English attire. The performance is accompanied with state of the art musical instruments which include modern drums, keyboards and guitars, and very effective sound systems. The performer takes the podium to sing his songs and this could last for up to four hours of non-stop music and entertainment for the audience. He sings at burial, marriage, and other light hearted ceremonies. He receives so much patronage at home and abroad that he is a recipient of so many musical awards. His high demand is not unconnected with the uniqueness of his creative quality. His brand of music is peculiar to him and highly robust and sensitive love for wits, proverbs and thought – provoking language make him unique and difficult to imitate. He often ransacks the entire cultural heritage of his community for images. His depth of language is informed by his robust knowledge of the history and culture of the Binis. His sonorous voice blended with phonetic manipulations drives many youths and elders to wherever he has a public performance.

The personality of ‘Akobe’ is undoubtedly rich and without an iota of reproach. As highlighted by Okpewho (1992), the things that the artist brings to literary performance include: “personal artistic inclination, family background and personal experience as well as training received and the circumstances in which the artist has frequently worked that may be said to the formation of a personal style.”

While recognizing the complications involved in the use of “personality”, the itemization effected by Okpewho (1992) is relevant. What is pronounced in this sense is the conditioning of the popularity of the artist against the ideas expressed in his work and personality. Certainly Akobe’s popularity

is not in doubt. There is a charm in him which gives the world the impression of one who has registered his presence in the consciousness of the people. His overwhelming air of prestige gives him all the positive marks he desperately needs. For apart from building around him a flamboyant cloak of myth, such an attitude also gives an edge over his contemporaries – the air of confidence and general acceptability, so that even in informal gatherings, appreciable attendance is recorded.

No doubt, his exposure to various societies through travelling has helped him, not only in coming out with what Ruth Finnegan (1970) refers to as “rich and encouraging songs” but also to develop his philosophical disposition to life. The artist’s relationship with people of different sexes and ages and of various ethnic backgrounds has also influenced his thought and human relations. Perhaps the kind and scope of the minstrel’s career need to be articulated. His songs and use of language, creative alertness and the gains of professional discussions are the ready resources of broad experiences. And these are reflected in his works (statements and songs) most of which are rooted on a deep, cultural understanding of his environment.

Themes and functions of the proverbs of Akobe songs

The themes which feature in the music of the oral artists are characteristically the same ones that form the basis of other literary forms. So the themes are usually those of human nature, vice, hope, the value of wisdom, women, morals, etc. The music of Akobe is often spiced with proverbs which serve as veritable instruments for transmitting culture, social morality, and ideas of a people from generation to generation. The reason for this is that the proverb among the Binis is an aphorism based upon the worthy experiences of the people. Thus the significance of the music of Akobe does not lie only in what it reveals of the thoughts of the past... it is a model of compressed or forceful language. In addition to drawing on it for its words of wisdom, it takes

interest in its verbal techniques – its selection of words, its use of comparison as a method of statement.

Some of the major thematic preoccupation of the artist includes the following:

Invisibility of man

Akobe sings and gives proverbs that have to do with the inability of any enemy to get to him. True to his name - the ‘trap for the enemy’, he often reflects on how he is fully protected by all the powers in the land in his songs.

Examples:

Edo: Ese wene ede ghe gbe.

English: No charm can stop the break of day.

In the context of this proverb in the song of Akobe, just as it is not possible for anyone to stop the day from breaking forth, even with the use of charm, in this same vein, it will be difficult to harm him as long as one can not stop the day from breaking forth. So no weapon that is formed against him will prosper.

Edo: emwin no bun okhokho owe eghi gbe uhunmwun

English: Whatever harmed the leg of the chicken does not kill the chicken.

The chicken that roams the whole compound is often prone to different mishaps which often include pains on the leg. But the chicken usually survives the pains on its legs. So even if the enemy occasionally succeeds in harming the victim, they will never succeed in the attempts to kill him.

Edo: Oghio oha le ne eren to de

English: The bush does not run away from the burning fire.

This proverb is to further buttress his invisibility in the face of several attacks from his enemies. The bush part does not run away from the ravaging fire. It waits patiently for the fire to burn and exhaust itself without any harm done to it. He is like that bush part that can withstand all the assault mounted by the fire. So no problem of life can bring him down.

Edo: ero we ogha ghoren no ovbokhan ya fi iyen fua yu uwi ya sokpan iyen ruemwin nori iyen eghoe ne

English: The knife that injures a small child says that even if it is thrown into the moat, it has done what he sets out to do.

Children are fond of playing with the kitchen knife in the village. So usually when the knife cuts or injures their hands, they, out of annoyance, throw the knife away. So Akobe metaphorically refers to this incident and likened himself to the knife that is thrown away. The knife is not bothered by what is done to it because it has done what it sets out to do- cut the child's hand. So no matter what you do to the performer after he has achieved whatever aim he has, he is not bothered and does not care. In this proverb, he tells all that he is only focus on what he wants to do and nothing will affect him after he has effectively carried out his aim. No one can stop him what his objectives.

Edo: a gha rumwunda agi iyagha do oyiya, ta faili

English: If you buy a comb because of dreadlocks, it is useless

People with dreadlocks usually do not comb their hairs so it is useless to buy a comb because of them. The performer alludes to the inability of the enemies to do anything to him. Whatever is planned against him will not work

because they will not affect him. He does not need that object or precious thing that you think you will use to entrap him as he will not be enticed by them.

Edo: ifi te mu osa sokpan no do vbiore a ghavbo

English: The trap can catch the gorilla the problem is for the gorilla to remain in the trap for the night.

In this part of the world, the gorilla is highly feared by hunters for its ability to lay in wait and trap man just as we hunt it. When a trap is set for the animal, it is believed that the gorilla would often destroy the traps and wait for the owner of the trap to kill. The performer in this context says that it is possible for the trap to catch the gorilla. But the animal would surely dislodge the trap and goes on his way. So it is not catching the gorilla in the trap that is difficult it is how to make it remain there till the next morning. And if it remains there, then it is a deadly trap for the owner of the trap. So attempting to trap the performer is not difficult but how to make the trap permanent is what is near impossible. Not charm can make him remain in a disadvantaged position for a long time. he can be caught unaware but he will triumph finally.

Destiny and fate

Fate is the development of events outside a person's control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power (Ighile, 2011) The Binis are strong believers in the concept of fate and destiny (evbakhavbokun). They believe that the life of a man is determined by the strong hands of fate. Everyone on earth has a predetermined arrangement with his guardian angel and that no one can do anything on earth that is not in consonance with this arrangement. Akobe music aptly reflects this in most of the songs.

Edo: a sa agbon rio Oba, odowa na ke rio re

English: The Oba is crowned in heaven, not here on earth

It is the belief of the people that due to the royalty and honour associated with the Oba, the choice and crown of the Oba is determined by God Himself in heaven. Thus no man that has not been programmed by God to be will ever become the Oba no matter the intrigues and human conditions involved. So when the Oba is crowned, he is lifted beyond human destruction and derailment. He is thus God on earth to the people. So the respect and authority of the Oba is derived from God.

Edo: uhunmwun no gha lo odion re, erinmwun no kelu uro egbe

English: The head that will be the eldest starts visiting family members from heaven/

The first son in Benin society is face with a lot of family problems. It is a highly coveted position in the land so much that that fight and intrigues for the position often lead to the death of many people. So this proverb captures this position; the first son must be prepared for the face the intrigues and hassles of being the first son which include interest in family affairs so he visits the family members to the extent that his visits start from the world on the supernatural.

Edo: nee hi we ne ghe bo owa gha rio vbe ukhu, to mu ghien

English: If one is destined not to have a house, he will sell the one he inherited.

The belief in destiny and fate covers all aspects of the life of the individual in the society. Even the issues of wealth and other property of life are dependent on destiny. One can only be having things like houses, cars and other things only if he is destined to have them-only if he is fated to have them.

So no matter how one labours or tries to build a house, one cannot succeed unless fated to do so. If the person is not destined to own a house, even if he gets one through inheritance, he would see it because he is destined not to have a house.

Edo: o gho ofen oghi yo ofen, egui mu owas re ne

English: The rat is left to its fate; the tortoise brought its house from heaven.

Fate accounts for most things in life including the problems that one is likely to face on earth. The tortoise by fate came to this world with a shell in its back to protect it from man and other predators. The shell given to him by fate protects it from hazards of life. The tortoise has been fated to suffer from the predators so it has no hard skin like the tortoise. This proverb means that protection comes from destiny and fate. Those that will be successful will surely be and those not destined to survive the problems of life are so arranged by fate.

Edo: omwan nee hire mu dia na ore mien egui mu

English: Only the person aided by the guardian spirit finds a tortoise in the bush.

It is believed that each person on earth has a guardian spirit that controls and regulates the life of the individual in the society. This guardian spirit is programmed to carry out the dictates of fate and destiny. It is the enforcer of the rule and wishes of fate and destiny. So one can only find the tortoise or be luck in the things of life only if aided by fate. Only fate can decide the level of luck or success that one has in life.

Respect for elders/one other

Edo: Ugu we re iyen wa evbo na na gbo odion

English: The vulture says it forbids the land where elders are beaten

Edo: men oka se agbon nakh uwe, oyi irunhun gbi iyan

English: 'I came to this world before you', that is why the grasses kill the yams.

Edo: a gbo 'ghede, ekoko gha ghogho omaen ren o gha se egbe edo ovbere

English: When the plantain is harvested, the sucker is happy, not knowing its won will come.

Edo: ewe gha gbe ra odionwere, oren no re oghe vbo

English: When the goat runs passed the eldest in the village, he knows its part in it.

Edo: aighi gha erhen se omwan no gien vbu uwe erhen

English: You cannot enjoy the fire place more than the one who was burnt to death

Edo: omwan no rie evbare ghi mwen ewaen vbe egbe no ohanmwun gbe

English: The man that is well fed must be careful with the hungry.

Provision for others

Edo: Amen gbi ikpafen, iba gha ghogho; o ma ren ogha vbe se egbe edo ovbere

English: Rain beats the veranda of the house and the pavement is happy, not knowing its own turn will come

Edo: Atalakpa gha hore inu aranmwun no eregbe, oghi la lo ikpinabo nu ogie

English: When the lion thinks of all the animals it has killed, it licks its fore fingers

Edo: obo we no oghogho ghe ri iyenyen wu, iyenyenwu gha gbo oghogho, ore ona yo obo re

English: The chicken refuses to heed the advice of the native doctor until it was time for it to die

Edo: eni wu ye uwe oha, evbo hia gha ghogho, sokpan eko rienrien erhan vbe iri no de yan

English: The elephant dies in the bush and all is happy, the things that it fell on are not happy

Edo: ero no fio ovbokhan obo we re oghakhionren nay a fi uwe oha, iyen ru emwin no ri iyen ekhoe ne

English: The knife that injures a small child says that even if it is thrown into the bush, it has done what he sets out to do.

Mysteries of life

Edo: aiwan amen se omwan no wu yu we eze

English: You cannot boast of drinking water more than the one who drowned in a river.

Edo: aighi gha erhen se omwan no gien vbu uwe erhen.

English: You cannot enjoy the fire place more than the one who was burnt to death

Edo: aighi vbie se omwan no ovbie no m rio re

English: You cannot sleep more than the one who died in his sleep

Edo: ehen okpa ore ren oro no ru uwe eze

English: Only the fish knows the secret of the river

Edo: osiwu ogba oren oro no ru uwe akhara

English: Only the doctor knows the secret between the thighs

Gods and spirits

According to the Bini world view, the universe is divided into two planes of existence; the visible, tangible world of everyday life (agbon) and the invisible spirit world (erinmwin) created by osanobua and inhabited by Him and other deities and supernatural powers. These are two parallel, coexisting realms; their boundaries, however are not inviolable, as gods and spirits daily intervene in the lives of humans who often draw upon the forces of the spirits world to transform daily experience. This belief in gods and spirits is a major thematic preoccupation of Akobe in his proverbs.

Edo: ugha mue ebo gbo omwan oma na wu, ughi ren ghe osa buo ohion ne

English: When you place a curse on somebody and the person does not die, know that the ancestors have found the person guiltless

Edo: omwan no gbo omwan ru, osanobua o re vbe gbe ere ru

English: Anyone that defrauds another is defrauded by God

Edo: omwan no kpa vbe erinmwin o na tamo osanobua I ghi yen gha do rue emakaliki, o lu ghan ne omwan no ya de hammar vbe owe ek.

English: A man who told God that he will be a carpenter is different from the one that went to Lagos Street Benin City to buy tools

Edo: omwan nee hire mudia na ore mie egui mu

English: Only the person aided by the guardian spirit finds a tortoise in the bush.

Condemnation of wickedness

Edo: a yo obo okpa mu evbare ne ekita, ayo obo no kpa du ukpok-po yi

English: People give food to the dog with one hand and hold a stick with the other hand

Edo: u yo obo wevben uhunmwun, eto khion gua

English: You rubbed my head and all my hairs pulled off

Edo: u gumwen giu ukpon vbi iri, ehia solo gua

English: You helped me to remove my clothes from the line and they are all torn

Edo: u yo ibo wo mwen ewe, ewe mwen bolo rua

English: You rubbed my chest and all chest is peeled

Edo: u gie mwen eki umwen, u na vbe si amen lele mwen

English: You sent me to buy salt and you sent the rain after me

Edo: u sa amen men won, o la mwen ihue vbe gua

English: You put water in my mouth and it all came out from my nose

Issues of women

Edo: okhuo ne gua lovbie obo ma kheke no gha ye ehe vbie

English: The woman who does not know how to lie on her side is not supposed to spend the night outside her house

Edo: odamwen no okhuo no fio owe yo oha vbe ogbo okpia no ma re rio oto ghe vbe ugbo no odafonren ghian si la owa ogbon

English: It is unfortunate for a woman who commits adultery with a man who has no landed property the year the husband will go into a new house

Edo: evbo ne mwen ogie to yevbe okhuo ne vboen odo

English: A land without a king is like a woman without a husband

Edo: aiyo okhuo tiebe

English: One does not study a book while relaxing with a woman

Edo: okhuo no gada owe, itohan vben da odo

English: The bow-legged woman only pities the husband

The need to enjoy life

Edo: a werre ugbogbo re efe na gha ne erunmwun ighorhion

English: One cannot because there are problems in wealth prays for poverty.

Edo: a werre ugbogbo re efe, ni ya gha yu usonvbun ukpon vbi I vben nomose

English: One cannot because there is envy in wealth wears rags when he has good clothes to wear

Edo: ogbu ugbo ma ren ede no ghian yu ugbo kieke

English: The farmer does not know the last day he will go to his farm

Edo: omwengho ne lu igho ne egbe re, eghan ore do do vba agbon

English: A rich man who does not spend his money for himself is doing prison terms.

Poverty

Edo: ukpo na gbo oghede o re ukhunmwun fi se

English: Hunger became tougher the year plantain was planted

Edo: a gha fi ikeke ne guale avbare ede, ehope ghi ro se

English: When you ride a bicycle looking for food, wealth is no longer guaranteed

Edo: use gha vba omwan vbo ota, aro dan na agbon ghi ya gho owan

English: When poverty persists till old age, the world look at one in bad light

Edo: a suse nede ore omase a su use ogbon

English: It is better to continue in old suffering than to court new ones

Edo: use ore oyo omwan ya yu ugbo vbe ede emwinukpo

English: It is the height of poverty that makes one to go to the farm on New Year day

Edo: deghe a mwenigho, agbon ghi yi ikhorion yam u omwan azen

English: Without money, people call you a witch if you are ugly.

It is important to state here that in addition to terseness and relative fixity, most sayings termed as proverbs are also marked by some kind of poetic quality in style or sense, and are also set apart in form for more straightforward maxims. By this observation therefore, the economy of expression and the metaphoric, figurative and symbolic quality of proverbs becomes bits of the overall characteristics.

Conclusion

Apart from articulating in broad terms the art and thematic concerns of Akobe, we have also been able to situate the artist within a specific social setting. This contextualization brings to the fore the strategic interplay between the society, the artist and the art.

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✉ Dr. Mark Ighile (corresponding author)
Associate Professor of Literature, Oral Poetics and Performance
& Edomwonyi Omorogbe, Lecturer in African & Oral Literature
Department of English Studies, Benson Idahosa University
P. M. B 1100 Benin City, Nigeria.
E-Mail: mighile@gmail.com

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