

An Ethnographic Analysis of Proverbs in Christian Films: 'The Missing Link' as a Case Study

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Abstract

Much scholarly research has been carried out on proverbs used in Yoruba traditional plays and films. However, little attention has been devoted to the use of proverbs in Christian films. This study, therefore, examines the use of proverbs in "The Missing Link", a Christian film produced by EVOM, a prominent Christian film producer in Nigeria in order to reveal their aesthetic and utilitarian values in religious discourse. Hymes' Ethnography of Communication was used as the theoretical framework. Fourteen proverbs, as employed in different contexts of the film were purposively selected for analysis. One major discovery is the fact that these proverbs were employed in the film to project the Yoruba socio-cultural ideologies and orientation. King Adegbite, the custodian of the people's custom and culture used 6 of the 14 proverbs captured in the film. This represents 42.8% of the total number of proverbs used in the film. The priests used 4 between themselves, which constitutes 28.5%. Chief Balogun used 1, which constitutes 7.1%. Alamu and Ajadi used 3 proverbs between themselves, which constitutes 21.4% of the total number of proverbs in the film. All the proverbs used in the play were used by elderly men who are typical traditionalists. None was used by children or women. All the users of the proverbs were village dwellers, the urban dwellers represented by the missionaries did not use any proverb, instead they used quotations from the Bible, characteristic of Christians. Proverbs are a veritable mine full of the collective wisdom of the elderly people in the typical traditional Yoruba society. Contemporary Christian films producers now use them abundantly in their works to capture the indigenous local settings of their plays.

Key words: Proverbs, The Missing Link, Hymes' Ethnography of Communication, Films, Religious Discourse.

Introduction

Proverb as a universal phenomenon is highly valued from the ancient times to the present age. This has made it attractive to many scholars including Crowther (1852), Vidal (1852), Taylor (1931), Ajibola (1947), Delano (1966), Bamgbose (1968), Olatunji (1984), Alaba (1986), Yusuf (1994), Raji-Oyelade (2004), Kehinde (2004), Sheba (2006), Akinyemi (2007), Adejumo (2009), Adeleke (2009) and Olujinmi (2012). Proverbs as the collective property of the society rely on the society itself to draw volumes of materials from observable relationships and experiences existing within the society; of human, animal and climate. Proverbs are used to embellish and support arguments during conversations and other oratory events. In the social and religious lives of the Yoruba people, proverb constitutes a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions and beliefs.

Development of Christian films

Theatre and religion are regarded as two inseparable variables. It is generally accepted among academics and dramatic practitioners that religion itself is one source of theatre. Scholars believe that the elements of drama had long existed in the ritual ceremonies and religious festivals of the people. Ogunba (1968), Adedeji (1971), (1973), Clark (1981) and Ogundeji (1988) affirm that rituals and religious ceremonies involve re-enactment by various worshippers and performers of the stories connected with the origin of the festivals. Echeruo (1981) opines that the European missionaries that brought Christianity to Nigeria produced and encouraged some types of theatrical entertainment and plays, which evolved from the Christian entertainment programme. During this period, they used liturgical, miracle, mystery and morality plays for the illustration of the Bible, and also strengthened the faith of members of their congregation.

Clark (1979) believes that it is within the ambience of the African Christians efforts to indigenize Christianity and get liberated from orthodox control that Ogunde discovered the extent of his dramatic potentials. The liberative purpose of the indigenous African churches allows Ogunde to draw on traditional materials for the treatment of Biblical themes in these operas (Ogundeji, 1988). Ogunde produced his first opera in 1944 under the auspices of the church of the Lord, a Cherubim and Seraphim sect. He titled the play: *The Garden of Eden and the Throne of God*. The success of this operatic production encouraged him to write more operatic plays. This launched him into the theatrical world, Clark (1979) and Olujinmi (2004). Ogunde's son, Kunle is believed to be the first Christian dramatist in Nigeria. He became a Christian after years of being a professional secular dramatist, under his father's (Hubert Ogunde) tutelage. In Nigeria today, we have many prominent Christian drama ministries, among which are: The Mount Zion Faith Ministry and

EVOM World Networks. The play which forms the basis of this paper, *The Missing Link* was produced in 2015 by EVOM.

The Emergence of EVOM World Networks from E.D.G

In December, 1988, a group of stage dramatists were invited to minister through drama in a special programme organized by a particular church. The drama ministration was supposed to be one of the side attractions of the programme. The main attraction was supposed to be the preaching of the word of God by the Pastor of the church. After the drama ministration, an altar call – inviting sinners to Christ was made. The outcome was miraculous! Tear-filled, repentant sinners raised their hands and were marvellously led to Christ. Overwhelmed by the mass conversion that followed the drama ministration, the Pastor could not preach again, parallel to the event in 1 Kings 8:11: ‘... that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord.’ The Pastor thereafter, prayed fervently for the drama ministers, pronouncing rapid growth, development and expansion on them. After this, he asked for their leader and they unanimously pointed at Bro Mike Agboola. Thus began the journey to greatness. The group began with the name: Evangelical Drama Group (E.D.G.). The movement from church to church continued unabated.

On August 1st, 1998 around 5:15am, the group was rounding up its monthly prayer for the month of July that year, Bro Mike Agboola declared that on 30th July, 1998 (the previous day) that the Lord spoke to him in a vision that the name of the group should be changed to EVOM World Network. Prior to this, the group had changed its name from Evangelical Drama Group (E.D.G.) to Evangelical Outreach Ministry (EVOM). As a result of the vision, the group now bears its current name: EVOM World Networks. According to the leader of the group, Bro Mike Agboola, God referred him to Gen. 13: 14-17:

And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever...

After this miraculous event, the group began to soar. God unexpectedly linked them with a Christian Marketer in London and a Mission Agency in Netherlands, as well as others around the world. Today, EVOM World Networks now has several arms of Christian ministries – Drama ministry, Film production, songs ministration, publications, counselling, consultancies, etc. The film which forms the basis for this work, titled: *The Missing Link* is one of the several films that God has helped the ministry to produce. It was released in 2015.

Background to the Study (The Play)

The film titled: ‘The Missing Link’ was written by Evangelist Mike Agboola of the EVOMWorld Networks in the year 2015. The film captures the story of an interior Yoruba village called Alapintan under the dominion of a god called ‘Pamolekun’. The villagers offered a yearly sacrifice to the so-called god. In that particular year, the idol requested for many items.

The villagers under the leadership of King Adegbite got all the items immediately and handed them over to the chief priest of the land who went to the shrine to offer the items. However he came back to tell the King and the chiefs that the sacrifice had been rejected by Pamolekun, giving the excuse that one of the cows had a blind eye, that is out of twenty-one cows.

The village was stricken by a plague called ‘Gbeleku’, a deadly affliction with the symptoms of sneezing coughing and vomiting. The pestilence claimed a quarter of the village, including the heir apparent to the throne of the village and five, out of seven priests of the village. The chief priest told the King that the disease was inflicted on the village as a result of their rejected sacrifice. The way out for them was to offer a new set of difficult items: the tongue of a hyena, the head of a cobra and the tail of a lion. Ten fierce hunters were sent into the forest to get the items by the King. The hunters returned with the tongue of a hyena and the head of a cobra. They claimed that they had gone through the forest and could not get any lion to kill, much less bringing the tail. The King persuaded the chief priest to go and present the two items got and plead with the ‘god’ to accept that with the assurance that they would bring the tail of a lion later.

However, the chief priest himself was afflicted with the plague and he died shortly after. As a result of the King’s desperate bid to free his land from the affliction, the King sent for a group of Christians to come and deliver the land from the grip of Pamolekun. The principality and power in charge of Alapintan had an emergency meeting with Lucifer, their master, in their bid to stop the visit of the missionaries to the village under their captivity. Lucifer instructed them to use the weapon of ‘F’ and ‘D’ – ‘Fear and Discouragement’.

In spite of this, the missionaries came to the land of Alapintan. They preached the gospel to the King, his family members and the Balogun of the land, who all accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. That night was slated for the destruction of 'Pamolekun', the fiery god.

Lucifer then instructed the principality and power in charge of Alapintan to stop the missionaries from destroying Pamolekun by breaking their 'link' with the source of their power. He called this weapon: 'BTL' – 'Break The Link'. They did this successfully by stirring up a serious argument of superiority complex between the leader of the team – Reverend Dr Olagbaju and the two other members of the team who went for the operation. As a result of this, the three ministers were stricken with 'Gbeleku' and they were led out of the shrine sneezing and coughing violently. The King was disappointed and discouraged by this turn of event. So, he rejected Jesus and ordered the Christians to be sent out of his village. However, before he could do this, a man, his wife and their lad of about ten years old came to the scene. The young boy claimed that he had a revelation of Jesus Christ, who assured him that he would give him the power to destroy Pamolekun; while the King was still contemplating on whether to allow them or not, the King himself was stricken down by Gbeleku.

The boy and his parents went into the evil forest where the shrine was located to carry out the operation of destroying Pamolekun. This they successfully did after a protracted time of confrontation with the principality and power. The Balogun of the land led them to the palace of the King so that they would go and pray for the King so that he would be free from the affliction of Gbeleku. However, the King came out to them hale and hearty. He claimed that a strange power suddenly came upon him and set him free. As they were rejoicing on this, news came that all the people that were stricken by the plague had suddenly recovered, the women that had been under protracted travails had all given birth to their babies safely and rain, which they had not had for a very long time, started dropping. Thus, the land was successfully delivered from Pamolekun, the so-called guardian idol of the village and the pestilent Gbeleku.

Theoretical Framework

The ethnography of communication (Speaking) was proposed as a framework by Dell Hymes in 1964. He is one of those scholars who believe that communicative competence takes precedence over linguistic competence. According to him, there are several contextual variables that govern our speech. Ethnography of speaking accounts for the various factors that are involved in speaking. These factors are relevant in understanding how a particular communicative event achieves its goals. For convenience, Hymes captures his proposition with the acronym: SPEAKING, vertically written, it gives us the following:

- S – Setting or scene, that is where the talk takes place e.g. at home, in the office, classroom or palace.
- P – Participants, that is, interlocutors, characteristics of those involved in conversations and their relationship – sex, age, social status and role relationship: e.g. teacher-pupil, King-subject, husband-wife, etc.
- E – Ends (purpose, function, reasons for the talk)
- A – Act sequence or ordering of speech acts e.g. greetings, turn taking rules, who speaks first, etc.
- K – Key (the tone, manner, spirit) with which what is said is said, this could be serious, jocular, sarcastic or friendly.
- I – Instrumentalities (code or channel) verbal, non-verbal, letter, email, text, etc.
- N – Norms of interaction (the common knowledge and shared understanding of the relevant cultural presuppositions)
- G – Genre or type of event: e.g. phone call, conversation, business meeting, interview, blog, etc.

Applying this framework to the proverbs analysed in this work, the setting for most of the events is the palace of King Adegbite Oyebade of Alapintan village. The proverbs used by the King 1-6 were uttered there. The one used by Chief Balogun (7) was also used in the palace, as well as three out of the four proverbs used by the priests (9-11), one (8) was used at the outskirts of Alapintan village. The three proverbs used by Alamu and Ajadi (12-14) were used at the outskirts of Alapintan village as well. The instrumentalities that is, the medium through which communication took place was verbal. The other components of the acronym SPEAKING differ with regards to how they apply to the different proverbs used. These will be specified as we analyse the data below.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Fourteen proverbs were used in the play. Six of them were used by the king, three by the priests, one by the Balogun, two by Alamu and one by Ajadi. We shall analyse these proverbs in an ethnographic approach.

1. Give me a push from the back does not mean give me a hunch back.
 - S – The setting was the palace of King Adegbite of Alapintan village.
 - P – The participants were the King and the Balogun of the land.

- E – He used the proverb to justify his decision to turn his back on Pamolekun, the guardian idol of the land. According to him, he and his people were worshipping the idol because of their false belief that the idol was helping them. Since the idol is now afflicting the land with a pestilence, he was giving them ‘hunchback’ (pains) instead of support (a push in the back).
- A – The question and answer mode. The Balogun asked the King to explain his sudden reaction.
- K – The tone was that of sudden realisation, change of mind and seriousness.
- I – The verbal method of communication was used.
- N – In the interaction between the Balogun and the King, certain cultural beliefs guided the conversation. The Yoruba believe that the King is ‘Kabiyesi’ (the one whose authority cannot be questioned), but at the same time he cannot solely make a serious decision without carrying the chiefs along. This exactly is what the King is trying to do in order to convince the Balogun of the land on the need to reject the idol and turn to Jesus.
- G – The genre is that of persuasive interaction.
2. A drowning man would clutch at anything to survive, including a serpent.
- S – The setting was the palace of the King of Alapintan.
- P – The King and the Balogun were the interlocutors.
- E – The King was trying to make the Balogun to realise the fact that since their idol – Pamolekun has refused to be appeased, the only possibility of escape is to invite ‘the Jesus people’ to come and rescue them.
- A – The acts sequence in the above was that of instruction and response. The King gave the instruction to go and bring in ‘the Jesus people’, that is, the missionaries. The Balogun asked the King why he was suddenly inviting the people he had rejected before and the King had to explain that it was very urgent to do that because, the pestilence was fast destroying the land.
- K – The tone was that of seriousness and desperation.
- I – The interaction was verbal.
- N – Decisive conversation and persuasive discussion. The King was trying to convince the Balogun on the need to act swiftly.
- G – The genre here is that of persuasive interaction. The King was trying to win Chief Balogun to his side.
3. An unborn child thinks his mother’s womb is as big as the whole world.
- S – The setting was the palace.
- P – The interlocutors were the King and the Balogun.
- E – The King justified his earlier decision to reject the Christians on the basis of his ignorance. Just as the baby in the womb ignorantly assumes that his mother’s womb is the size of the whole world, he ignorantly thought that Pamolekun, the land’s idol was sufficient for them and superior to Jesus.
- A – The Balogun asked the King why he had rejected the missionaries earlier and the King replied that he did that in ignorance, but now he could see better.
- K – The tone was that of justification.
- I – The interaction was verbal.
- N – Polite conversation and persuasion.
- G – The genre is that of persuasion.
4. Anywhere the elephant faces is the road.
- S – The palace.
- P – The King and the surviving two herbalists (priests) were the participants.
- E – The King was trying to assert his authority as the custodian of power and sovereignty in the land. The herbalists had told him that he did not have the right to ask the missionaries to destroy Pamolekun, the idol of the land. He told them as the ruler of the land he had that authority.
- A – The two surviving herbalists (priests) confronted the King that he did not have the authority to invite the Jesus people without their permission, he told them that he had that power as the King and did not need to consult them.
- K – The tone is both assertive and authoritative
- I – The interaction was verbal.
- N – The norm is that of King’s right to assert his authority over his people.
- G – The discourse was subject – ruler interrogation.
5. A fruit does not fall too far from its tree.
- S – The palace.
- P – The King and the two surviving priests.
- E – The King said this in response to the claim made by the priests that Gbeleku was a mere pestilence and was not the work of Pamolekun, the idol. The King linked the rejection of their sacrifice by Pamolekun and

- the pestilence together. In response, the priests said that the King should not blame Pamolekun because he was good to the land. The King wondered whether the pestilence was a sign of Pamolekun's goodness to the land.
- A – The priests rejected the King's claim that Pamolekun was evil and should be rejected. They claimed he was actually good to the land. The King now asked them if the affliction of Gbeleku was a sign of goodness from the god.
- K – The tone was argumentative.
- I – The medium was verbal.
- N – The norm was that of question and answer between the King and the priests.
- G – The discourse was that of hot arguments.
6. He who is already down does not need to fear a fall.
- S – The palace.
- P – The King and the Balogun.
- E – The King said this in reaction to Balogun's caution that if the missionaries were invited, Pamolekun would be angry and inflict pains on the land. The King responded that they were already afflicted so they need not fear affliction, what affliction would be more than the one that had already claimed a quarter of the land?
- A – The King instructed the Balogun to go and look for the missionaries, Balogun cautioned the King against that action as it could lead to further afflictions from the god. The King replied that they were already under affliction, so why should they fear affliction?
- K – The tone was that of finality.
- I – The interaction was verbal.
- N – The norm was that of instruction from the King and caution by the subject.
- G – The genre was that of persuasion. It was categorical.
7. If the load is too heavy for the head to carry, one would be better off to give it to the ground to carry.
- S – The palace of the King.
- P – The Balogun and the King.
- E – As a result of the missionaries' failure to destroy Pamolekun, the King refused to allow the boy who claimed that he could cast out the demon through the backing of Jesus Christ to go and carry out the operation with his parents. The Balogun was trying to persuade the King to allow them to do so, because there was no option.
- A – The King spoke first and the Balogun was reacting to his decision.
- K – The tone was persuasive.
- I – The interaction was verbal.
- N – The norm was that of a subject trying to plead with the ruler.
- G – The genre was that of persuasion and caution.
8. The day a monkey falls a prey to the hunter every tree in the forest becomes slippery.
- S – The outskirts of Alapintan village.
- P – The two surviving priests.
- E – The priests were making jest of the missionaries who had just failed to destroy Pamolekun and were afflicted with Gbeleku, the deadly pestilence.
- A – The first priest laughingly described the abortive efforts of the missionaries at the shrine of Pamolekun, then the second priest responded with the above proverb.
- K – The tone was sarcastic.
- I – The interaction was verbal.
- N – Jocular conversation.
- G – The genre was that of mockery.
9. Fire and gunpowder cannot stay together.
- S – The palace.
- P – The two surviving priests and the King.
- E – When the King informed the high priests that he had invited the missionaries to bring Christianity to Alapintan, the priests responded that Pamolekun, the village god would not allow a rival, so they captured the situation with the picture of fire and gunpowder trying to cohabit the same container, this will definitely lead to an explosive situation.
- A – The King spoke first, informing the priests of the arrival of the missionaries and the priests responded with the proverbs.
- K – The tone was serious and confrontational.

- I – The interaction was verbal.
N – It is a well-known fact among the Yoruba that the King exercises much power and his actions cannot be questioned by his subjects. So also is the fact that the priests also exercise a considerable measure of authority and they can force the King to change his mind, especially by threatening to invoke the wrath of the gods on the land. This is exactly what the priests were trying to do here, but the King remained adamant.
G – The genre was that of confrontation.
- 10.** The ear that refuses to listen will accompany the head when it is chopped off.
S – The palace.
P – The King and the priests.
E – The high priest uttered this statement to threaten the King so that he would change his mind about accommodating the missionaries. They are insinuating that their god would not only deal with the missionaries, but that the King himself would partake in the wrath of the god.
A – The King spoke first, exercising his authority as the custodian of power. In response, the high priest uttered this statement.
K – The tone was serious and confrontational.
I – The interaction was verbal.
N – The priests' ability to invoke the wrath of the gods is a well-known fact in Yoruba land and for this the traditional rulers would try as much as possible to avoid any confrontation with the priests. However, the opposite was the case with the King here.
G – The genre was that of confrontation and verbal invective.
- 11.** The ditch that swallows an elephant cannot contain another animal.
S – The palace.
P – The King and the two surviving priests.
E – The priests were trying to tell the King that Pamolekun, the village god would not tolerate a rival-god in the village. They saw Jesus Christ, whom the King had accepted as a rival-god.
A – The King spoke first explaining the fact that the land was big enough to accommodate Christianity, then the leading priest used this proverb to insinuate that this would not be possible.
K – The tone was serious and firm.
I – The interaction was verbal.
N – The priests in their ignorance saw Jesus Christ as one of the gods, so they assume that Christianity is just a rival religion. However, the King had been made to know that Jesus Christ is not an idol, but he himself is God.
G – The genre was that of confrontation.
- 12.** The tree does not move unless the wind blows.
S – The outskirts of Alapintan village.
P – Alamu and Ajadi.
E – Alamu was trying to respond to Ajadi's question on why he was running away from the village with his wife and daughter. He was trying to make Ajadi realize that the terrible wind that was blowing his family away from the village was the deadly pestilence, Gbeleku.
A – Ajadi spoke first asking Alamu what he was up to and Alamu used the proverb in response to the question.
K – Alamu's tone was serious while that of Ajadi was jocular.
I – The interaction was verbal.
N – It was a well-known fact between the two friends that the pestilence had killed many people (in fact, according to them, a quarter of the village had died as a result of Gbeleku). So also was it well-known to the two that many people had fled from the village as a result of this fact.
G – The genre was that of friendly conversation between the two friends.
- 13.** A hunter who has one arrow does not shoot carelessly.
S – The setting was at the entrance to the village of Alapintan.
P – Alamu, (one of the villagers who were trying to run away from the village) and Ajadi, his friend.
E – Alamu used the proverb to justify his decision to flee from the village. According to him, he had only one wife and only one daughter – 'Omosowon' (child is scarce). He captures himself as the hunter, while his only wife and daughter are the only arrow he has in his quiver, so, he cannot afford to remain in the village as this would be tantamount to wasting the only arrow (his wife and daughter) in his quiver.
A – The question and answer mode was observed.
K – The tone was that of desperation and determination.
I – The verbal method of communication was used.

N – Friendly conversation
G – Question and answer

14. He that shakes a stump shakes himself.

Note: This proverb was actually rendered in Yoruba as follows:

Eni mi kùkùtẹ́, ara rẹ̀ ló mi.

Gloss: 'He shake stump, body his is shake

Translation: He that shakes a stump shakes himself.

S – The outskirts of Alapintan village.

P – Alamu and Ajadi.

E – Alamu had told Ajadi to flee from the village to avoid being stricken by Gbeleku, the deadly plague, Ajadi now boasted that he could not be intimidated by Gbeleku because he had fortified himself with charms.

A – Alamu spoke first, then Ajadi responded with the proverb.

K – The tone was boastful.

I – The interaction was verbal.

N – Ajadi thought he had fortified himself with charms and so could not be afflicted by Gbeleku, but Alamu thought otherwise. However, as it eventually turned out, while Alamu was still boasting of his presumed invincibility, he started coughing and sneezing vigorously and he slumped. Instead of his friend to help him, he saw these as symptoms of Gbeleku and fled with his wife and daughter.

G – The genre was that of boastful conversation.

Discussion/Conclusion

As could be seen in the analysis above, the proverbs used in this film could be classified into five categories as follows:

- i. 6 were used by the King (1-6)
- ii. 1 was used by Chief Balogun (7)
- iii. 4 were used by the priests (8-11)
- iv. 2 were used by Alamu (12-13)
- v. 1 was used by Ajadi (14)

The proverbs used by the King were basically used by the King to assert his authority (as the ruler of the people) whose decisions could not be questioned by his subject. Apart from this, the King used these proverbs to justify his decision to invite the missionaries to the land of Alapintan. The ones used by the priests could be classified into two. Three out of the four proverbs were used to threaten the King and force him to drive the missionaries away so that they would not destroy the shrine of the village idol. One was used to make jest of the missionaries who could not destroy the village idol, but were rather stricken by Gbeleku, the deadly pestilence.

The only one used by Chief Balogun was used to persuade the King to allow the second set of missionaries (the boy and his parents) to go to the shrine and destroy the idol, so that the land would be free from captivity. The two proverbs used by Alamu were used to justify his decision to flee the village with his wife and only daughter. The last one was used by Ajadi to boast of his presumed invincibility. Unfortunately for him before concluding his boastful discussion, he was smitten with Gbeleku, the deadly plague.

First, all the proverbs were used by the villagers. None was used by the missionaries who were city dwellers. This is not surprising, because proverbs are that aspect of the culture that is associated with the local people who have a full grasp of the indigenous language, unaffected by the influence of the English language. On the other hand, city dwellers are not usually as familiar with the native language, they prefer to use English. Even when they use the local language, their expressions are lacking in proverbs, often adulterated with the use of code-mixing and code-switching.

Secondly, more proverbs were used by the King than any other individual. This implies that the King as the custodian of culture and tradition of the people is more effective in the use of the native language spiced with proverbs and adages. The fact that four out of the remaining proverbs were used by the priest also implies that the priests on their own are also custodians of the culture, religion and tradition of the people. The remaining four proverbs were used by Chief Balogun and two elderly individuals – Alamu and Ajadi. None of the proverbs was used by women and children. The implication of this is that proverbs are more common with elderly men than any other group in the society. The missionaries on their own did not use any proverb, rather, they quoted profoundly from the Bible – the symbol of their religion.

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