

Full Length Research

Religious and Social Afterlives of Persons with Disabilities in Plateau State, Nigeria

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On January 23rd 2019 the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018 was signed into law after nine years of relentless advocacy by disability rights groups and activists. However, this group of persons still face a number of human rights violations that stems from social, religious, cultural etc. dimensions. Globally, slave trade was shelved more than a century ago. However, the old form of slavery has evolved in many ways to become the modern-day slavery because the modus operandi has not exactly been the same. The Global Slavery Index in 2016 revealed that Nigeria has more enslaved people (including persons with disabilities) than any country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Figures indicated that 875,500 people are living in slavery in Nigeria and several of them are persons with disabilities. The research design adopted for the study is the descriptive survey. The population of the study comprised persons with disabilities in North Central Nigeria. The sample is comprised of 68 persons with disabilities in 9 communities in Plateau, Kaduna and Nasarawa States, Nigeria. Four research questions were formulated to guide the study. Questionnaires and interviews were used for data collection. Results were presented using charts. The findings of the study revealed that persons with disabilities face several forms of religious and social exclusion, modern day slavery and discriminative practices. These practices include: forced street begging, sexual exploitation, labelling, segregation, oppression, marginalization, stigmatization etc. It is therefore recommended that major stakeholders special needs education should promote advocacy amongst Nigerians especially in North Central Nigeria on the need for attitude change in issues of discrimination and afterlives slavery practices.

Keywords: Disability, Slavery, Persons with Disabilities(PWDs), Religious and Social Afterlives.

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Introduction

The narrative of slavery's afterlife has indicated the persistence of slavery's cruelties even after slavery was technically abolished. This abolishment was short lived because modern slavery is evident in recent times and people at risk include women, immigrants, children and persons with disabilities (Italian Association Amicidi Raoul Follereau, 2007). The word 'slavery' has been described differently by different people. According to Ali (2010), slavery is a form of

control or dominion exercised by one person over another. As asserted by Puma (2015), slavery can be characterized to involve: (I) forcing an individual to work through mental or physical threat; (II) An individual owned or controlled by an employer; (III) An individual having restrictions on his/her freedom of movement; (IV) Treating an individual as a commodity which could be sold or bought and (V) Mental or Physical Abuse. Slavery's afterlife in Nigeria has been bedeviled with what is referred to as the "modern day slavery". There are elements of slavery in most communities in Nigeria (especially the North Central). The influence of religion, culture, and family norms, in shaping the pattern of ideas, customs and behaviours shared by a particular people or society regarding the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities is inevitable (Biradee & Ibiene, 2021). However, these beliefs, attitudes, norms and perceptions can be changed from exclusionary to more inclusive practices.

The 23rd day of August every year has been set aside by United Nations Economic Social and Cultural Organization to mark the international day for the remembrance of slave trade and its abolition. Exploitation of people especially persons with disabilities is common in North Central Nigeria and most people are denied freedom of expression, movement and incurring mental and physical abuse to others especially to the vulnerable people. According to Akinyemi (2018), the Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimated the population of persons in slavery in Nigeria is 1,384,000 more than the total of all other 16 west African countries when added together which is 1,081,000. It is evident that this figure would have doubled in 2022 due to several factors. (ThisDay Newspaper, 2020) Nigeria is one of the most populous countries, it also has the odious reputation of hosting the largest number of enslaved persons that are subjected to inhumane treatments. This is due to several factors such as: poverty, economic crises, environmental disaster, and insecurity amongst others.

Aiyeeleso (2001) defines persons with disabilities as persons, children, youths and adults with one or more forms of disability (multiple disabilities) such as, hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical impairment mental retardation or with other health and physical disorders, gifted and talented who because of the disabilities or impairments need special services in order to live a useful life in the society. Disability refers to loss of ability or inability to perform specific functions or activities (loss of function). This constraint or inability is due to an impairment and constitutes a functional limitation or activity restriction for the individual concerned. For example, an individual lack the ability to walk properly (disability) due to paralysis of the lower limb (impairment).

Modern day Slavery and Disability

Though slavery may be regarded as the notion for the past but its existence today is obvious in Nigerian communities. Modern day slavery depicts a situation whereby someone (individual or group of individuals, organization etc.) has gained control over, or ownership of another person and is using this power to exploit them. Victims of modern-day slavery are held captive, isolated, have restrictions and are also being moved against their will. As asserted by Gobir & Sani (2019), slavery is considered to be a hidden and diverse crime in which a broad array of factors (religious, political, economic etc.) has allowed modern slavery to flourish irrespective of the fact that government and non-governmental organization are on the forefront of eradicating it totally.

Persons with disability are more vulnerable to modern slavery denied their rights of independent living, being included into the mainstream of the society, general school system, employment, community life, free environmental access, active participation in sports and cultural activities etc. For example: PWDs are often discriminated against and denied a job irrespective of the fact that they hold equivalent qualification with others without disabilities. According to (Childhope, 2022) persons who are living with disability can be at even a higher risk of exploitation. More so certain rights may be denied him/her based on false beliefs which makes them face a number of human rights abuses such as stigma, discrimination, violence, lack of access to healthcare, housing and education. Therefore, they need the right to enable them enjoy the same standards of equality, rights and dignity just as everyone else.

There are various forms of modern day slavery that have been identified to include human trafficking, child abuse, forced marriage, sexual slavery, educational barriers, social barriers forced labor, architectural barriers, labelling, segregation, isolation, discrimination, vocational barriers, exclusion/segregation, oppression etc. As opined by Etieyibo and Omiegbe (2016), in a study on religion, culture and discrimination against persons with disabilities in Nigeria, revealed that discriminatory practices such as trafficking and killing of persons with disabilities, raping women and girls with disabilities etc. lend some significant weight and substance to the social model of disability.

Religious afterlives of persons with disabilities

Some forms of slavery that are common in Nigerian communities are religious based whereby the individual is considered to have no value and thus fits to be responsible for all slave like works (Gobir & Sani, 2019). These include the following:

Activities of healing centres: In some communities in Nigeria, Ghana and other developing countries in Africa psychiatric homes, healing centres and traditional homes are prevalent. According to Owoeye (2004), this is probably why in Christian religious circles; there has been an unprecedented interest in the phenomenon of healing. Many healers and prophets are springing up arrogating to themselves power to heal diseases. These homes or centres take PWDs against their will and confine them, tie them in the scorching sun, some are tied under trees with the false claim that it will chase away the evil spirits in them. Also some are made to fast for weeks and denied their medications, flogged, and denied basic care and attention for a long time with the belief that they would get well. There is need to create awareness among the populace in order to desist from harmful practices and beliefs that puts the lives of PWDs in danger. Fake doctors and healthcare givers (who have no knowledge of practice) who claim to be able to cure certain disabilities often provide treatment/services that are harmful to the health, life and dignity of PWDs eg. these harmful practices include (a) forceful ingestion (forcing the person to drink or eat) of contaminated water, foul smelling substances and contaminated food etc

Doctrinal Injunctions: Some doctrines of religious organizations are false and infringes the rights of their members. Some are given information and facts that are not true eg. every form of disability is a curse or demon possessed and has to be healed or delivered (cured) by all means. Some go as far as extorting money from members in order to carry out these rituals of healing.

Misconceptions of religious bodies: Members of the society who are not special educators do not understand who persons with special needs are and because of this they do not address issues relating to them appropriately.

Negative attitudes: Persons with special needs have always been looked down upon, not respected and not given equal opportunities. This has always leads to negative attitudes towards them. Therefore, there is need to educate people on the need for attitudinal change or reversal of attitudes towards persons with special needs from negative to positive attitudes.

Social afterlives of persons with disabilities

There are consequences that arise from the loss of the ability to do certain things in the society. There are referred to as the effects of disability and include the following:

Exclusion/Isolation: This is a situation where the child with disability faces isolation from most activities. The child enjoys no meaningful interaction with the school, family or community. Moreso, the child is denied the opportunity to interact with others, engage in activities in school and home,

Labelling: This is the use of derogatory language or words to call persons with disabilities. These include referring to them as blind, cripple, deaf, insane, idiots, moron, feeble minded etc. To label an individual gives him/her a good or bad image. In this case, this form of labeling referred to gives individual with special needs a bad image, bad name or and makes the person look incomplete or unattractive. Therefore, labeling leads to additional handicaps.

Marginalization/ Segregation: In a developing country like Nigeria, the affairs of disabled persons are controlled by non-disabled persons and this makes them not to be able to make decisions for themselves. Sometimes, they suffer untold hardships like inadequate education, lack of employment, abandonment and rejection, etc.

Discrimination and Oppression: Persons with disabilities are often forced to agree and accept the feeling that they sick, not capable, feeble or inferior. This destroys their self-esteem, self-image and self-concept. They are often treated as second class citizens that are always dependent on others for everything Discrimination may be of two types: negative and positive. negative discrimination may lead to outright rejection of the child, wicked treatment, hatred, maltreatment etc. positive discrimination may lead to overprotection of the child which is unwise.

Castration: In Nigeria as other African countries, slaves and guards in chiefs' palaces in ancient times were castrated to prevent them from sexually harassing the wives and daughters of the chiefs. It has always been an option for male slaves and house helps in royal families. This serves as a punishment or as a protective measure in avoiding cases of rape or sexual assault of female adults in the royal family. This was practiced in Kogi state and other parts of northern Nigeria. It is forcefully done coupled with inhuman treatments with no anesthesia administered during the process and they were forced to bear the pain that accompanies the castration process.

Stigmatization: Stigma is as result of the negative attitude and erroneous beliefs about disability. As a result of stigma and discrimination, persons with disabilities may face exclusion and dehumanizing treatments in all areas of their lives and this may be prevalent in workplace, healthcare centres and educational institutions. Stigma results in shame and is as a result of negative perceptions in the society and this can cause feelings of shame among families. For example, a family may hide their child with special need from public view for fear of stigmatization. A child with disability (epilepsy) may not be permitted to attend school due to stigma. Parents, siblings and also relatives of PWDs may also experience stigma.

Insecurity: Insecurity is a very devastating effect of disability in developing countries e.g. Nigeria. Persons with disabilities may not have job security (they can lose their jobs at any given time or may not be employed at all), social security (may not be paid their allowances even when employed, may not be able to live private lives because they are totally dependent on family, friends, relatives etc. Due to these reasons they sometimes resort to begging on the streets in order to earn a living.

Objectives of the study

The specific objective of the study are:

1. To identify the prevailing forms of modern slavery amongst persons with disabilities.
2. To identify the religious afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities.
3. To identify the social afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities.

Research Questions

1. What are the prevailing forms of modern slavery amongst persons with disabilities?
2. What are the religious afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities?
3. What are the social afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities?

Research Design

The study adopted the survey research design. This design is appropriate for the study because it seeks to illicit responses from sample that serves as a representative of a larger population. Simple balloting was used to select the 3 states and 9 communities used in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select persons with disabilities who formed the population of the study.

Population and Sample

The population of the study comprised persons with disabilities in North Central Nigeria. Three states and 9 communities were selected in through balloting. The sample is comprised of 68 persons with disabilities in 9 communities in Plateau, Kaduna and Nasarawa States, Nigeria. The sample of the study is further categorized below:

Table 1: Sample of Persons with Disabilities and Caregivers.

State	Plateau			Kaduna			Nasarawa		
Communities	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Farin-Gada, Sabon Tasha and Alakyo.	4	6	10	2	3	5	4	4	8
Mangu-Halle, Maraban-Rido and Bukan-Sidi	5	3	7	3	4	7	5	2	7
Gada-Biu Kujama, and Agyaragu	3	4	7	5	3	8	5	4	9
Total			24				20		
							24		

Procedure for Data Collection

A five (5) point likert scale structured questionnaire and interview schedule was used to illicit information from the respondents. The questionnaire comprises of twenty-five(25) items and has response scale that includes Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided, Strongly Disagree (SD) and Disagree (D). Visits were made to the communities to meet with leaders of disability groups/organizations 9 communities. Persons with disabilities were identified through their disability groups/organizations and contacts were made. A duration of three (3) weeks and four (4) days per week was used to administer questionnaires and conduct the interviews these communities. Three research assistants (one in each state) were involved in data collection. The use of interviews was necessary due to the homogeneity of the respondents e.g. visual impairment, hearing impairment (communication through sign language) and non-literate. More so, the use of Hausa language which was the lingua-franca in these communities was also employed.

Discussion of Results

Research Question 1: What are the prevailing forms of modern slavery amongst persons with disabilities?

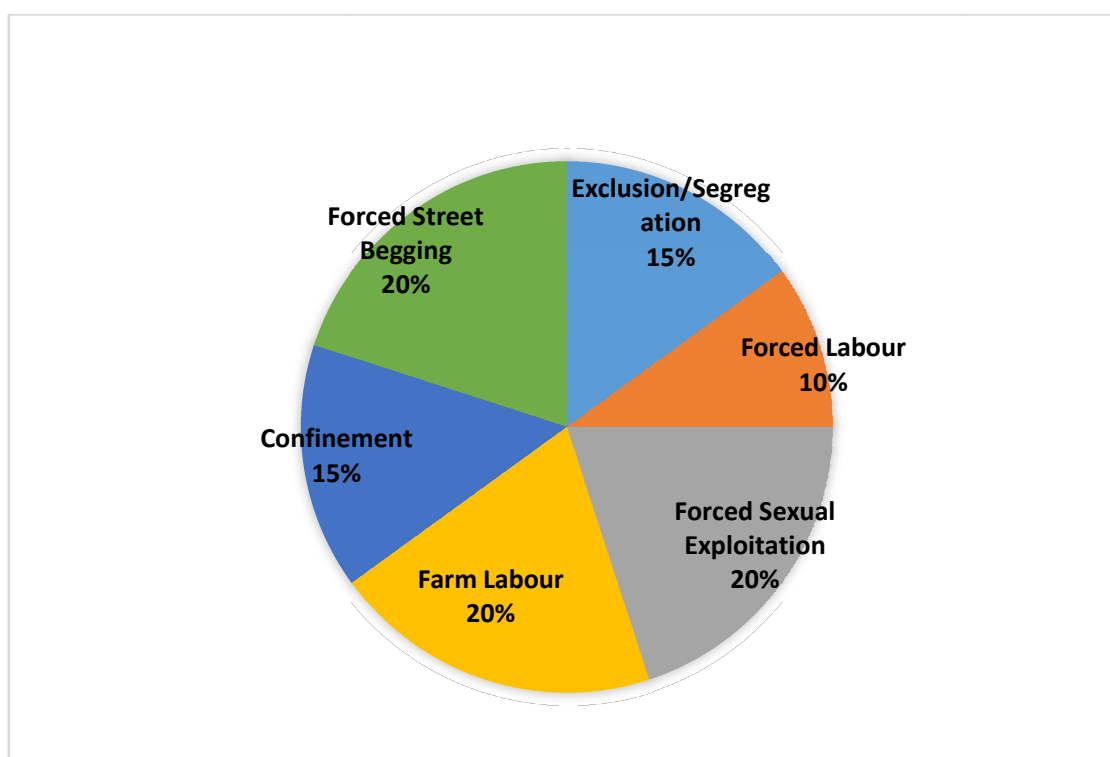


Figure 1: Prevailing Forms of Modern Slavery amongst Persons with Disabilities

As depicted in figure 1 above, the prevailing forms of modern slavery amongst persons with disabilities include forced street begging (20%), forced sexual exploitation (20%), farm labour (20%), confinement (15%), exclusion/segregation (15%) and confinement (15%). These modern forms are prevalent slavery amongst persons with disabilities are prevalent in communities in North Central Nigeria. This finding is line with Omiegbe(1995) who asserts that alms-soliciting brings monetary and material benefits and thus many parents see it as profitable to send their children with disabilities out on the streets to beg for alms in North Central Nigeria.

Research Question 2: What are the religious afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities?

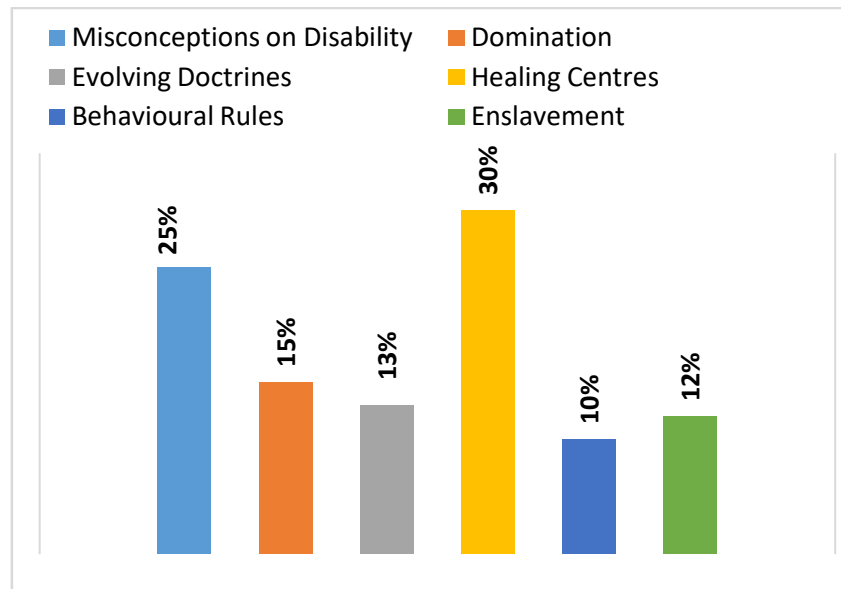


Figure 2: Religious Afterlives Practices of Slavery Amongst Persons with Disabilities

Figure 2 above shows the religious afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities in communities in North Central Nigeria. These include misconceptions (25%), domination (15%), evolving doctrines (13%), healing centres (30%), behavioural rules (10%) and enslavement (12%).

Research Question 3: What are the social afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities?

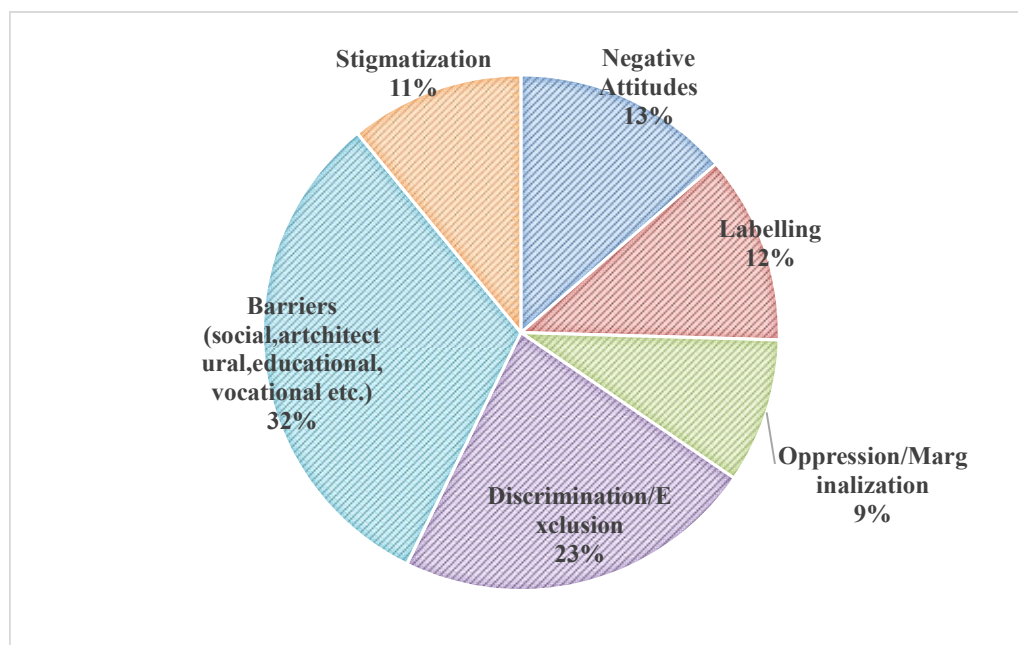


Figure 3: Social Afterlives Practices of Slavery amongst Persons with Disabilities

In figure 3 above, 32% of respondents' reveal that the barriers persons with disabilities face include social, architectural, educational, vocational, cultural, political and economic barriers are social afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities. More so, discrimination and exclusion (23%), stigmatization (11%), oppression and marginalization (9%), labelling (12%) and negative attitudes (13%) are social afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities in communities in North Central Nigeria. In line with the assertion by the Global Accessibility News (2016) in a report by the United Nations Children's Fund estimates that there is an estimated 10 million children that are out of school in Nigeria and of this number "more than 3million of them are children with disabilities".

Moreso, the unfairness and wrongness of these practices ought to be deplored and the Nigerian government needs to push through legislation that targets cultural and religious practices which are discriminatory against persons with disabilities (Etieyibo & Omiegbe, 2016).

Discussion of Findings

Persons with disabilities are generally discriminated against in the area of education in Nigeria as they are often discriminated against in the area of work and employment and also discriminated against in the area of accessibility of public facilities. Research question 1 revealed the prevailing forms of modern slavery amongst persons with disabilities include forced street begging, forced sexual exploitation, farm labour, confinement, exclusion/segregation and confinement. Research question 2 shows that the religious afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities in communities in North Central Nigeria include misconceptions, domination, evolving doctrines, activities of healing centres, behavioural rules and enslavement. According to the Global disability Fund (nd), while the general population is sensitized to disability rights, it is not aware of the specific provisions of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018. Research question 3 shows that the are social afterlives practices of slavery amongst persons with disabilities in communities in North Central Nigeria include barriers (social, architectural, educational, vocational, cultural, political and economic), discrimination and exclusion, stigmatization, oppression and marginalization, labelling and negative attitudes. More so, the absence of facilities and accessibility not only discriminates against persons with disabilities; it makes life difficult for them (Etieyibo, 2020).

Moreso, Disability stigma and discrimination is rife in Nigerian communities. This is being fueled by the religious leaders, who adopts the medical model of disability to label persons with disabilities as objects of 'miracles. Disability stigma has eaten deep into all the strata of society such that it influences the prioritization of disability by decision-makers, who are products of society (Global disability Fund, nd). Several reports by international and national organizations including the Asylas and Asylum Research Centre (ARC, 2021), have reported highlight the multiple forms and layers of discrimination, by state actors and within communities and families, and the prevailing lack of protection or access to redress, that affect children and young people with disabilities in Nigeria, severely impairing their lives and in many cases putting them at (further) risk of exploitation and harm.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the existence of the "Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018", and recent adoption of legislation by the State to comply with their obligations under the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities", persons with disabilities remain the biggest category of citizens that are discriminated against in a developing country like Nigeria. Based on the above discussion, it is necessary to promote advocacy amongst Nigerians especially in North Central Nigeria on the need for attitude change in issues of discrimination and afterlives slavery practices. This is pertinent because Nigeria has the largest number of enslaved persons (including persons with disabilities) that are subjected to inhumane treatments. As asserted by Anayochukwu & Yakusak (2023), notwithstanding the progress made so far in the area of disability legislation, there are still numerous challenges to overcome. There is need for all stakeholders to provide avenues to curb of poverty, economic crises, environmental disaster, and insecurity amongst others. It is also recommended that Organization of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) need capacity strengthening for improved organizational structure in governance, leadership, accountability, financial management and advocacy in disability rights. According to Imam and Abdulraheem-Mustapha (2016), Generally, there is limited conceptual understanding, a poor disability awareness and few disability stigma reduction programmes for the populace at large. Therefore, there is need for stakeholders to strongly encourage disability awareness as it is a crucial element in the attainment of an inclusive society. It is also recommended that the annual celebration of the International Day of Disabled Persons, observed on 3rd December each year, is one outstanding way that disability awareness can be highlighted on a global scale to promote inclusion

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