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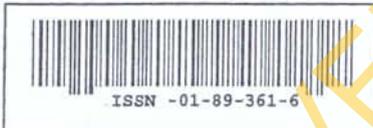
Islam and University Education In Contemporary Nigeria

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"Seek knowledge even if in China."
—Prophet Muhammad
"Higher education in Africa is an artifact of colonial policies."
—Altbach and Selvarantnam (1989)
"No other community (Ummah) has a continuous historical transmission (isnasd) like that of ours."
—Ibn Qutaybah (d.276/889)

Abstract.

This paper examines the contemporary problems confronting education in the Islamic world and critiques effort already put in place to solve them. It begins with an excursus into classical history of Islamic education and proceeds from there to discuss the politics and inherent challenges facing tertiary education particularly in Nigeria. It concludes that a pragmatic approach to solving the identified problems would be the adoption of Islamic philosophy which emphasizes a non-utilitarian approach to education as a whole.

Anamnesis

In modern European cultural history, Leonardo Da Vinci[1] some of whose rare paintings were auctioned in Europe in November 2011 is regarded as one of the most glorious figures of the renaissance period. He was not only a painter and a sculptor but also an architect, a physicist and an inventor. Scholars of European history would attest to the fact that Da Vinci was actually not a product of the renaissance era, nor was he a star which emerged from the scholasticism of Middle Ages. Rather he probably emerged from an intellectual and scholarly tradition which,

while basking in essentially European milieu, had its precedent in Arab-Islamic scholarly tradition.

In other words, Da Vinci's discovery of Latin works which served as a foundation for the sprouting of the genius in him was probably made possible by Arab translators whose contribution to the preservation of the Greek intellectual legacies has been widely acclaimed. It was the translated texts of Greek works into Arabic, later re-translated into European languages that geniuses like Da Vinci probably accessed and perused as a foundation for their individual intellectual development. According to al-Attas, it was the "Muslims (who) passed on the experimental method of science" on to the West. They stimulated European thought, reacquainted it with Greek and other classical cultures and thus helped bring about the Renaissance... They preserved Greco-Persian thought when Europe was intolerant of pagan cultures"[2].

But our interest in Da Vinci is not limited solely to how the works of Arab-Muslim writers probably served as basis for his learning and exceptional achievements. Rather, his persona is being retrieved here mainly for two reasons:

- One, his works call attention to the shared origin of scholarship between the East and the West[3].
- Two, contrary to modern conception of learning, the birth and the emergence of the intellectual, the polymath, particularly in medieval Arab-Muslim world, largely took place outside what is contemporaneously known as the academia or the University.

In other words, biographers of Muslim philosophers, scholars and polymaths such as *al-Fārābī*, Ibn *Sīnā*, Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazālī[4] have documented no known university from which these great scholars acquired their learning and erudition. Yet their contributions, in almost all fields of human endeavours, their landmarks in almost all fields of learning, remain unrivalled. Thus the following questions become highly pertinent and urgent:

- Exactly what is the philosophy of education in Islam?
- What trajectories existed in the classical or medieval period with reference to demagogy and pedagogy, such that it produced geniuses like *al-Battānī* (877–918ce), *al-Rāzī* (866–930ce) *al-tūsī* (d.851) and others for the world to behold?
- How did the university emerge in Muslim annals?

- How might we begin to assess Nigerian universities of today and to what extent might Islamic cultural heritage benefit the former?

Despite its patronage of learning and scholarship as the core of worship, the religion of Islam is often pleaded by non-Muslim critics of the Muslim world as a major factor for the hiatus in Muslims' educational fortune particularly in the contemporary period. It usually does not matter to such critics that with reference to Islam, acquisition of knowledge and learning is sine qua non not only for terrestrial success but equally for celestial glory. Non-Muslim scholars of the Muslim world who subscribe to this opinion usually find no attraction in such categorical-scriptural writs as "Allah raise in degrees those of you who believe and those whom knowledge is given"[5], nor in the tradition of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (upon him be peace) which enjoins Muslims to seek knowledge even if its locale is as distant from Madinah as China was during the 7th century. They usually use the disconnect between Islam in the text and the Islam in the contexts of Muslim realities as premise for their conclusion.

The above has led to the occlusion of the true position of education and learning in Islamic Weltanschauung. It has equally generated another fundamental problem: the assumption by non-Muslim critics of Islam that "there is no single entity known as Islam, but "Islams" of local contexts and often rapidly changing historical circumstances"[6]. But a perceptive reading of the religion, and one which is conscious of and attentive to the inner fissures and trajectories in religious practices across the world, might be inclined to consider this opinion only if the other but less popular assumption is taken together in the argument. This is that there is no single entity known as Christianity but "Christianities" of different local contexts and that, using the argument of Graham, to speak of a Christian society or civilization is "to speak of ourriad of local or regional traditions of sharply differing forms"[7].

Thus the attempt to deny the existence of an independent construct known as Islam based on the hiatus that is evidenced in Muslim existential realities would become valid once it is divested of its identities and fundamental features; once we succeed in denying the existence of the *Qurān* and the eternal socio-cultural and spiritual geographies it has mapped across centuries and climes[8]. Put differently, the tendency to focus on Islam in context and not in the text, the attempt to use Muslims to negate Islam and the temptation to use men as benchmark for the truth and not vice versa appear imperiled by its weak logic and slippery underbellies.

With particular reference to education, a more objective reading of Islam would discover and appreciate the indelible contributions of Muslims to the world's cultural history. Such an approach would likely affirm Islam's abhorrence for ignorance and illiteracy, its elevation and reification of the status of the intellectual and how education became a cardinal principle of its worldview.

In other words, education, otherwise known in Arabic as tarbiyah, operates at the core of Islamic epistemology. It refers to the means, the methods and the processes by which accumulated values, skills, experience and knowledge of a given human society or community are transmitted, both formally and informally, by human societies or its representatives, from one generation to the other. According to UNESCO, education is equally that process which works towards "awakening the enormous potential that lies within each of us, enabling all of us to develop to our fullest potential and better contribute to the societies in which we live"[9].

But the goal of education in Islamic culture goes beyond the UNESCO remit. It aims towards the production of a balanced and righteous community of humanity on earth—a community that will deploy its acquired experience, skills and knowledge to the realization of the better life on earth and assist its members attain eternal success. In other words, as far as Islam is concerned, the utilitarian purpose of education is only a means towards a higher purpose: the establishment of a sustainable harmony between humans –KhulafāAllah[10] which designates all humans as (vicegerents of Allah) on earth)- and other entities in the cosmos. The communiqué issued at the end of the First World Conference on Muslim Education which was held in Makkah in 1973 speaks to this. It says, in part, as follows:

> Education should aim at the balanced growth of the total
> personality of man through the training of man's spirit,
> intellect, rational feelings and bodily senses. Education in
> all its aspects: spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical,
> scientific and linguistic, both individually and
> collectively, and motivate all aspects towards goodness
> and the attainment of perfection[11].

The religion of Islam strives to achieve the above through its division of knowledge into two: revealed and acquired. While revealed knowledge refers to that granted unto humans by Allah through His prophets, acquired knowledge is that which is obtained by humans through the

study of the natural phenomena and human societies[12]. The Islamic epistemology is therefore, hinged on the assumption that the "better life", either the terrestrial or celestial, is attainable subject to the acquisition of both strands of knowledge. Knowledge, in Islamic hermeneutics, foregrounds the search for the Truth (al-haqq) and defines what becomes proper action (al-'amal al-sālih). It is upon its plank that a balance can be evolved, by humans, between the spiritual and the terrestrial. It is the benchmark for determining ethics and morality (al-akhlāq) in contradistinction to debauchery and immorality and, without it, wisdom (hikmah) runs the risk of becoming folly.

In other words, education in the Islamic Weltanschauung is hinged on the notion of the inseparability of the profane and the sacred, and on the idea that knowledge which is divorced from faith in the Supreme Being is not only partial knowledge but also acute ignorance. This becomes pertinent when consideration is given to trends "outside" Islam where faith in the eschatological and the preternatural is not a condition for the ascension to and recognition of an individual as scholarly. As far as Islam is concerned, the man who has no knowledge of revelation but is well apprised of the other knowledge (acquired through reason) is like the blind man who touches only the trunk of the elephant in the dark and goes on to pontificate and celebrate his erudition.

Put differently, whereas "outside" Islam, an overarching separation between naql and 'aql (revelation and reason) occupies the core of intellectualism, and in fact the very fountain of creativity, Islam sees both spheres of knowledge like the two wings of a bird. Whereas outside Islam, knowledge vouchsafed by revelation is viewed with distrust and outright rejection, the Islamic perspective to knowledge sees the two as having the same source—Allah. Whereas outside Islam, the tendency is to privilege reason over revelation, the Muslim philosophy of education would, in certain instances, give priority to the knowledge essayed by revelation.

The above discussion further calls attention to at least four features of education as far as Islam is concerned. These are:

- practicality,
- universality,
- historicity and
- comprehensiveness.

To describe Islamic philosophy of education as practical is to underscore its relevance to the contrarieties of human status and circumstances across ages and climes; to cloak education in Islam with the robe of universality is to retrieve the Prophetic axiom: "Look for knowledge even if it be in China"[13]; to foreground knowledge acquisition inside Islam in the historical is to establish the strong link that binds the whole of Muslim education in contemporary times, notwithstanding its negative trajectories, with its medieval and classical roots.

Now when reference is made to the feature of *comprehensiveness* in the Islamic philosophy of education, it is to the multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity of its disciplines. In other words, when Allah, in the very first revelation of the Qur'ān enjoins His prophet and by extension, humanity, to read —"Read in the name of your Lord who creates"[14]— there appears to be a decisive lack of referent to the thing to be read. But exegetes would argue that the referent is actually embedded in the Qur'ān; that by commanding the Prophet to read, he is actually being enjoined to read the whole of creation, to read and derive meaning from the universe in its cadence and symphony, in its chaos and order. Thus to believe in the injunction that humans should read, is to call attention to all fields of learning from the soft to the hard, from the "wet" to the "dry", from the humanities to the sciences. This explains why, according to Daud, "The Qur'ān becomes transparent only to those who have studied the sciences, which are extracted from it. For example, "who, when I am sick, gives me health" could not be properly understood without the knowledge of medicine[15].

But how did Muslims in the medieval period go about acquiring knowledge, even before the first university was established in Cordova (Spain) in 967, and long before the founding of al-Azhar in Cairo in 970?

In Islam, the acquisition of knowledge usually takes place in the mosque. This was a tradition established since the era of Prophet Muhammad. He was the first teacher of the Qur'ānic community established in the cities of Makkah and Madinah. His followers represented the archetype of the very first group of students that Islamic history record for posterity. From the latter emerged a select group known as *Ahl al-Suffah* who dedicated themselves completely to learning and diffusion of the knowledge they acquired from the apostle of Allah to the Muslim ummah. In other words, access to the teacher –the Prophet– was open to all gender and races notwithstanding their status in the city of Madinah. This system is, therefore, reminiscent of the one earlier invented by Pythagoras of Samos (around 530) BC in Southern Italy. Pythagoras's method, it should be

kept in mind, was subsequently followed by Plato's acadeour except that the latter "almost totally excluded women"[16].

The knowledge which was available during the period of Islam and one at the head of which the Prophet occupied the position of the Grand Master is understandably sui generis in its attachment to the Qur'ān. It is equally that which is hinged on the theory that knowledge cannot but be value-laden: that it is greatly influenced by the value system within which it develops, by the sources used in extracting or developing the same and by the methodology deployed to both its extraction and dissemination. This has been buttressed by Harris who says: "knowing the world, or coming to know the world, is not a matter of learning or coming to possession of a set of facts or truths about the world, which are there in the world, and which the world yields up to those who are able to see them; it is rather a matter of coming to perceive the world in particular ways, from particular perspectives and from particular viewpoints which are largely determined by and arise out of one's interaction with a particular historical and social context"[17].

Sequel to the injunctions on Muslims, both in the Qur'ān and the traditions of the Prophet of Islam, to search for and obtain knowledge wherever such may be found, the Islamic intellectual tradition has become inundated by what may be termed the borderless Muslim intellectual caravan. This refers to Muslim travelers in search of knowledge. Belonging to different tribes and races and notwithstanding the disparity in their age, experience and exposure in life, those who belong to the caravan were usually seen at the feet of renown scholars of the epoch in which they lived. Often desirous of obtaining insights into all fields of knowledge including law, philosophy, theology, language, history, exegesis and mysticism, Muslim annals are full of anecdotes of the multiple interface between such itinerant students and their—and this is quite uncanny—itinerant teachers and scholars, men of learning whose academy is spatial and borderless. Once a student is certified competent in Islamic knowledge and deemed capable of imparting same to others, his teacher gives him what is known as an *ijāzah*. This, according to Nashabi, is like a script or writ that affirms the "consciousness on his (the teacher's) part of the fact that knowledge is essentially cumulative"[18]. The receipt of the *ijāzah* by the student usually signaled not the end, but the beginning of the search for more knowledge.

In other words, before the emergence of what came to be known as the university in Muslim annals, the geography of education was mapped by the riḍlah —students in search of teachers and teachers in search of new

frontiers of knowledge. The rihlah was peopled by students seeking not just one certification in one particular field of knowledge, but those with seemingly unquenchable thirst for all knowledge, sacred and profane, soft and dry. Specialization in one field of learning often occurred after years of tutelage at the feet of a number of scholars whose pedigree, using the instrumentality of the *isnād*, is traceable to the Prophet of Islam[19]. Evidence in this direction is the establishment of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence[20].

One other important feature of Islamic concept of education is what is contemporaneously known as intellectual *freedom (hurriyat al-`aql)*. Even though Islamic tradition reifies the position of the scholar-teacher —"He who taught you a letter is your father in Islam" (man `allama-ka harfan fa-huwa *abū-ka fī al-dīn)*[21] so says an hadith"— it nonetheless recognizes and affirms the subjectivity and agency of the student. Islamic tradition demands that the teacher treats his student with respect and decorum. The teacher is expected to work with the certainty that the future of his scholarship is hinged on the success of his student. He should neither muzzle the student's opinion nor close the door against scholarly disagreements. This became evident in the famous disagreement between Shaykh al-hasan al-Basrī and his student, *Wāhil ibn `Atā'*.

The story goes that one day Imam al-hasan al-Basrī was imparting instruction to his pupils in a mosque. Before the lessons were finished someone turned up and addressed him thus:

> Now, in our own time a sect of people has made its appearance, the members of which regard the perpetrator of a grave sin as an unbeliever and consider him outside the fold of Islam. Yet another group of people have appeared who give hope of salvation to the perpetrator of a grave sin. They lay down that such a sin can do no harm to a true believer. They do not in the least regard action as a part of faith and hold that as worship is of no use to one who is an unbeliever, so also sin can do no harm to one who is a believer in God. What, in your opinion, is the truth and what creed should we adopt?[22]

Imam al-hasan al-Basrī was on the point of giving a reply to this query when a long-necked pupil of his got up and said: "The perpetrator of grave sins is neither a complete unbeliever nor a perfect believer; he is

placed midway between unbelief and faith—in an intermediate state[23] *(fī manzilatin bayn al-manzilatayn)*. Having spoken, he strode to another corner of the mosque and began to explain this belief of his to fellow students. Imam al-hasan al-Basrī was said to have contemplated his student and marveled at the confidence and audacity displayed by him. He eventually said: "I`tazala `an-na Wāhil" ("Wāhil has withdrawn from us") [24]. The incident is said to have led to the emergence of the Mu'tazilite school in Islamic jurisprudence.

Such was the trend in Muslim education before the establishment of the first university in Cordoba (Spain) in 967c.e. The above equally foregrounded the establishment of al-Azhar University in 970 c.e and the *Nizāmiyyah* University in Cairo and Baghdad respectively 1065 c.e. These were universities which developed out of the mosque and were emblazoned by Islam's architectural-spiritual template. They were established not by business men, but scholar-statesmen like Abdulrahmān III and al-hakam[25]. The curriculum these early Muslim universities ran was premised on the necessity to impart functional knowledge to students. The latter, it must be borne in mind, represented the very best that the medieval period could boast of, and featured Muslims, Christians and students of other religious persuasions.

Since the universities emerged from strictly religious (Islamic) background, the academic was populated by teachers who combined competence in ecumenical knowledge with mundane expertise, teachers and scholars whose writings were the touchstone of the panoramic world, intellectuals who were prolific and encyclopedic both in imagination and the quality and quantity of works they bequeathed to posterity.

One other important feature of early Muslim universities is the establishment of libraries. Here two elements may be mentioned: the sheer quantity and quality of books in the libraries of the era, some of which featured not less than 400,000 titles, and the quality readership it attracted. Historians would relish instances in Islamic annals when Muslim rulers not only established universities and libraries, but also patronized book-shelves like ordinary citizens, pore through pages of encyclopedic works and left marginal notes on manuscripts[26]. Thus the university, as far as the Islamic tradition is concerned, is not meant to cater only to the educational needs of the laity but equally to the intellectual development of the ornaments of the society —leaders whose vision, in its rich or poor textures, usually determine the prosperity or otherwise of the educational system of human society as a whole. Perhaps it is the absence or non-patronage of the library by contemporary leaders

of the modern nation states, particularly those of Nigeria, which has led to the comatose state of the university system today.

Diagnosis

Altbach and Selvarantnam would, however, disagree with the above. According to them, whatever ills may be assailing the university system today is traceable to the fact that "higher education in Africa is an artifact of colonial policies"[27]. This assumption is right from the perspectives of philosophy and administration of contemporary African universities. For example, an ordinary university in Nigeria is established to carry out three main functions: teaching, research and community service. But hardly is it known in the academia that this trinity upon which university is grounded owes its origin to the first trinity in Euro-American intellectual history: Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment. Specifically, the three streams of consciousness took place at different times in Germany, Britain and in the United States of America. The Germans started out in the 17th century by emphasizing teaching and research as the cardinal functions of an ordinary university. The British intervened later to promote liberal education. At the turn of the 19th century, the Americans added the third angle in the "trinity", community service. The 20th century eventually saw the adoption of the trinity as the grundnorm with reference to the *raison d'être* of the university in any given state[28].

The colonial experience later added strength to the stream and trend. Western universities established in the colony were not only based on the enlightenment philosophy of Euro-American universities, but particularly to assist in the production of the personnel that the colonial machinery gravely needed for the administration of the colony. In other words, unlike the trend in Muslim medieval history when universities were established based on the genuine interest in the dissemination and diffusion of knowledge, universities were established in Africa during the colonial period as a means by which African natives could be turned into things and tools in the hands of the colonial masters. The universities that were established during the period were therefore not meant to compete with the best in the metropolis. Tayyeb Salih, the Sudanese writer persuasively captures this when he says: "the ships at first sailed down the Nile carrying guns not bread, and the railways were originally set up to transport troops; the schools were set up to teach us how to say "yes" in their language"[29].

A critique of the contemporary malaise besetting contemporary universities in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, could be expanded to the

problematic of bias in methodology and pedagogy in favour of Western acadeour even when the reality in African societies negate the imposition or the reification of same. This relates to the spirit of the Enlightenment upon which Euro-American education is premised. Thus universities in Africa particularly those in sub-Sahara Africa were established on the philosophy of secularism, the notion of the primacy and centrality of humanism, the supremacy of reason to revelation which, by implication, implies that nothing is sacred, absolute or teleological[30].

When viewed as relics of colonialism, contemporary African universities, including those of Nigeria, have equally become exclusivist in nature, while internal politics and conflicts now take place between those in the humanities and those in the sciences. In other words, if it is true that during the colonial period access to higher education was limited —that, for example, the Belgians forbade higher education to the colonized, that the Spanish and the Portuguese deliberately kept to the minimum the spaces that were available to prospective Africans; that to be properly literate, Africans who lived under the French suzerainty had to go to France— post-independence African universities, excepting some in North-Africa, have largely travelled the same path. For example, in Nigeria admissions to universities by eligible candidates have become increasingly difficult due to limited facilities on university campuses. The situation has been worsened by the rarefaction of certain courses, particularly in the sciences. In the latter, there appears to be a policy of deliberate reduction in admission of prospective candidates as a strategy to sustain the elitist toga of members of the profession. The smaller the number of personnel in the profession goes the popular notion, the more their prestige and value in the society.

Aside from the above, and in negation of the Islamic conception of the academia, the growing trend which favours the commoditization of knowledge and the excessive patronage of the physical sciences to the detriment of the humanistic disciplines image perhaps a more fundamental malaise confronting African educational system as a whole. Nowadays, admission and funding for programmes in Nigerian universities favour the sciences to the advantage of humanistic disciplines. But this does not mean there has been an improvement in funding of education by governments across Africa. Rather, the contrary is ironically the case. According to Altbach, "the total yearly expenditure for higher education in Africa as a whole does not even come close to the endowments of some of the richest universities in the United States"[31]. In Nigeria, allocation to education in the 2012 budget proposal is less than

10%, contrary to the UNESCO standard and in complete disregard of the demand of the stakeholders in the sector.

Perhaps the greatest challenge confronting the university in Nigeria and probably others, which were established on Western libertarian philosophy, is moral perversion and their potential to inflict on humanity an intellectual class which would glory in social apostasy and spiritual bankruptcy. Evidence for the ascendancy of these nihilistic, atheistic and hedonistic ideals in the university system in Nigeria includes the emergence of cultism, examination malpractices, adoption and reification of Western cultures, such as homosexualism and lesbianism, and the consequent loss and elision of the role of the university as the bastion of humanity's loftiest ideals and the repository of greatest values and standards. Thus there is no denying the fact that "the most important single goal of a University and therefore the best measure of its excellence, (which) is the intellectual growth of its students, their initiation into a life of the mind, their commitment to the use of reason in the resolution of problems, their development of technical competence and intellectual longevity"[32] has become imperiled.

In relation to the above, at least two responses are discernible from within the Muslim segment of the Nigerian population: the rejecters and the pragmatists. The rejecters, some of whom often predicate their views on the negative histories of colonialism in Nigeria, now cite lack of good governance and the pervasive incidences of corruption in governance as evidence against university education. A combination of socio-cultural, economic and political disaffection in the Nigerian polity has only recently led to the emergence of a group known as Boko Haram. Hinging its discourse on extremely weak jurisprudential bases, the group began by declaring conventional as distinct from Qur'ānic education (often erroneously referred to as Western education), as unIslamic. It consequently declared "Western" education as ḥaram. The resultant violent interface between the group and agents of the Nigerian government has led to the birth of a state of anomie and chaos in the northern parts of the country and is presently threatening the corporate existence of the country.

The pragmatist response from a section of the Muslim populace in Nigeria to the malaise in the university system has taken, at least, two trajectories. The first consists of Muslim participation in the available university programs, notwithstanding its inherent ills and inadequacies particularly from the standpoint of the Islamic concept of education. The

plank upon which this posture is hinged is the theory of darūrah (necessity).

The second trajectory, however, consists of the establishment of private Muslim universities which, according to their founders, would combine the best which the "colonial" or conventional universities can offer its students with the Islamic Weltanschauung. The private universities strive to implement the theory of Islamization of knowledge in its operation. They purport to rescue humanity as a whole from the neo-liberalism, mercantilism and materialist monism of the Western system of education even as they endeavour to retrieve Muslims' cultural heritage from the stranglehold of western philosophers. As at 2012, the number of Muslim private universities in Nigeria is still less than ten.

Much as the emergence of private universities could be regarded as a solution to the myriad of problems currently assailing the university system in Nigeria, recent experience has underscored the need for circumspection. Private universities in Nigeria are fast becoming avenues for the children of the affluent in the society to access tertiary education which they would otherwise have been denied at the public universities because of their low academic and intellectual competence. Apart from turning the said universities into elite institutions, some of them are also known for their predilection to muzzle academic freedom and student unionism and associations. The opinion is rife that most of them have become extensions of their founders' business outfits and empires. This is contrary to the trend during the medieval period, when universities were established by genuine lovers of knowledge and intellectualism.

Prognosis

It is evident from the above that the university system in Nigeria is still far away from achieving its destiny. It is torn between the Western ideal which, on a daily basis, appears far from reach, and the Islamic option which, despite pretences to the contrary, remains distant.

The conclusion then becomes inevitable that until we witness the emergence of ornaments like Abdulraḥmān III, and until education begins to enjoy a pride of place in the scheme and plans of government, the gap between African universities and others in the West shall continue to widen.

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