ED 453 773   HE 034 102

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TITLE   Higher Education: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Educational
                  Experiences of Seven African Women.
PUB DATE   2001-07-00
NOTE   19p.
PUB TYPE   Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Differences; *Educational
                  Experience; *Females; Foreign Students; Gender Issues;
                  *Graduate Students; Graduate Study; Higher Education;
                  Qualitative Research
IDENTIFIERS   *Africans

ABSTRACT
       This study was a qualitative inquiry that focused on the
educational experiences of seven African women students' attempt to pursue
higher education in their home countries. It identified the problems they
encountered, and how they overcame them, and explored their educational
experiences in the United States. Data came from systematic interviews and
field observations and informal surveys. Informants were asked to read notes
from their interviews and add to or clarify them. Six of the seven informants
had done their undergraduate studies in their own countries. They had come to
the United States to pursue master's degrees, and six had been "wooed" to
pursue doctoral degrees. They had work experience in various fields, and had
successful careers. The data analysis identified four categories of interest;
motivational factors, barriers, strategies, and studies in the United States.
All of the informants agreed that education in most African countries does
not favor the upward mobility of women, and they talked about African
cultural elements that the schools perpetuate that tend to discourage girls
and women. They made several suggestions to encourage women to stay in the
educational systems of their own countries. Most of these recommendations
will require substantive societal changes. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

Topic: Higher Education: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Educational Experiences of Seven African Women.

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Paper Submitted to the Higher Education Clearing House for
Publication

July, 2001

Higher Education: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Educational Experiences of Seven African Women.

Introduction

According to the late Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey of Ghana, educate a man you have educated an individual, educate a woman then you have educated a nation. More than half of the population of Africa is made up of women. While this statement is true, female education in Africa has not developed at the same pace as that of males. There are many recent studies that examine problems African women encounter while attempting to pursue higher education (Yeboah, 1997, 2000; Namuddu, 1992; Lindsay, 1980; Bappa, 1985; and Eshwani, 1983). Most African countries have identified education as a key element in economic development. The linkage between female education and development in general cannot be overemphasized. Moreover, research has found that female education is highly correlated with better usage of family planning, low fertility rates, and low infant mortality (Yeboah, 1997,2000). The recognition by educators in the international community of the fact that female education is essential to national and global development is perhaps one reason why the education of women and girls is now a popular topic for many researchers. Returns on education are significant both for the individual and for society. Education is a particularly powerful achievement for women as it opens up the potential for wider participation in the economy. This increased awareness has raised questions as to what problems the female population face, what factors hold them back, and how these factors can be overcome to enable the majority of women obtain higher education. It is through full inclusion in the process of obtaining higher education that women can participate fully in the process of the continent's development.

Statement of purpose

This article is a report of a qualitative inquiry which focuses on educational experiences of seven African women students' attempt to pursue higher education in their respective home countries, problems they have encountered and how they have overcome them, their educational

experiences in the United States and their advice to their educators back home on how educational opportunities for females should be improved. It begins with a brief review of literature relevant to the research methodology adopted in this investigation. Later discussions can be categorized into presentations of women's educational experiences. At the end of this article, implications are drawn from the study on how females can overcome obstacles. Recommendations are made from experiences of these women on how African educational systems can be improved to increase girls' and women's participation in economic development of the continent.

Literature Review

African women's education lags behind that of men for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, the underlying cultural imperative for most girls to stop schooling prematurely to marry and have children limits relevance of formal education. No society that restricts women's role options so completely will ever accord a high priority to education for women. Until recently, education for girls was considered detrimental to the fulfillment of their future roles. Families feared that it would be harder to find a husband for an educated daughter, and many men did not believe that educated women made good wives. It is generally assumed that prolonged schooling takes girls away from the home environment where learning to be wives and mothers take place. Moreover, the pursuit of education necessitated giving a girl far more freedom and also brought increased exposure to non-familial influences. It also frequently involved delaying marriage beyond the age considered proper for assuring the sexual purity of women. Kaggia (1983); Cassam (1987); and Yeboah (1997) mentioned that one impact of colonial education in Africa was to widen the stereotypes between boys and girls. Missionaries emphasized education, and although missionaries were interested in educating girls as well as boys, formal instruction was oriented towards helping girls become better mothers and housewives (Yeboah, 1997). Technical or agricultural training, even in Africa south of the Sahara where the women had the major responsibilities in farming, heavily favored boys. Thus,

as a tradition built into male-dominated society, women were forced to see their own lives in terms of self-sacrifice. For example, it is a mother's habit to feed the husband first, then the children and finally herself (Otieno, 1995).

Hay (1986) stated that from time immemorial girls and women in Africa were not viewed as people of great importance when compared with men. Women in most ethnic groups were given only a subordinate place to the men and had little time themselves. When formal education was introduced, there was some reluctance on the part of families to send their daughters to school because girls could be put to "better" use at home and in the fields. In addition, there was always suspicion that they might become too independent, formal, and immoral (Adams, 1986; Otieno,1995).

Studies on equal educational opportunities have generally concerned themselves with association between school opportunities and parental socio-economic status. No matter how the latter is defined, studies like those of Mutai (1992) and Otieno (1995) have shown that most of the women enrolled at higher education institutions tend to come from families with higher socio-economic status when compared with their male counterparts at the same level. For instance, Smock (1981) reports that a disproportionate number of women enrolled in Ghanaian degree programs were products of elite families, some with several generations of education behind them. Asayehgn (1979) found the same result for Tanzanian universities. He stated that most women enrolled at the university of Dar es Salaam were not only from higher socio-economic status but they also came from the more developed regions of Kilimanjaro and Mwanza. Clignet (1988) also reports that Cameroonian and Ivorian university women were predominantly drawn from a more modernized family environment than their male counterparts at the same stage of education.

Dodd (1973) concluded that higher education constitutes the most potent force stimulating reassessment of women's roles. Secondary and university education affects women in a variety of ways: it expands an individual woman's opportunities so that she seeks fulfillment through activities outside the home as well as through the roles of a wife and mother; it equips

women with the skills needed for employment; and it reduces a woman's child bearing period, thus saving the government the resources of coping with a large population.

Methodology

The research methods adopted in this qualitative inquiry were systematic interviews and field observations as well as informal surveys. This method is suitable over other research methods that tend to emphasize complex statistics and "objective" approaches. As stated by Merriam (1988) qualitative research involves fieldwork during which researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site, or institution to observe or record behavior in its natural setting. Ethnography enables the researcher, as much as possible, to share some of the experiences of the participants (Bell, 1993) The informants were a group of African women from various countries of Africa studying at Ohio University in various schools. Most of the informants were quite open to me and were willing to share their experiences, feelings, and perspectives with me in detail. Informants' willingness and openness greatly facilitated gaining entree and collecting detailed data.

The interviews were done individually in an informal way under natural situations so that the informants felt comfortable. I chatted with three of my informants in one of the languages spoken in Eastern Africa, Kiswahili. For most of the time during the interview, I just listened carefully and took notes as each informant eloquently and candidly told her story. Immediately after each interview, I sat down in front of my computer and typed my informant's story. Often, I was emotionally involved while I was typing the story because I myself had experiences and feelings very similar to theirs. In turn, I became excited, sad, worried, depressed and relaxed.

When the notes from the interview were printed out, I gave them to the informants. I asked them to go over the notes again and add some details here and there and clarify some points of view according to the informants' opinions so that the notes were an accurate representation of what the informants said. Finally, I read the whole text to the informant again to get their approval. In this way, the data I collected became more validated.

While my informants were going over the notes, I asked more questions. These questions emerged when I was typing the original notes and reflecting on the data to gain insight into the informants' experiences, feelings, perspectives and how these correlated to their behaviors so that the data would make more sense. It was interesting that my informants also reflected on their experiences again and again by reading my notes. They became more thoughtful and tried to get their own insights from the notes.

Human experiences and behaviors are continuous. In order to understand the experiences, feelings, and behaviors of my informants, my questions for the interview were not limited to their life histories. I also asked for information about what obstacles other women encountered, what they thought their local educators should do to improve educational opportunities for females in general, and what their personal contributions could be towards this end. I believe that this information is very helpful to understanding their feelings and experiences, for if they truly want to leave a "footprint" in this area, they must make personal contributions to improve girls' and women's education.

The field observations were done in my daily encounters with these women in classes and other areas of social interactions. I wrote summaries of my observations in my diary for the purpose of this research. Another approach to collecting data was to record little pieces of information relevant to this study, which I obtained through my daily interactions with other African women who were not selected as informants for my systematic interviews. These data were not reflected in the field report, but were informative. In addition, I am an African woman who has had similar experiences in the process of pursuing higher education. While analyzing and interpreting the data for a timely topic of this great interest to me, it is natural that I have drawn some inferences from my personal experiences.

Backgrounds of the Informants

Four of my informants came to the United States on their governments' sponsorship and the other three benefited from Ohio University's financial assistance through graduate associateships and tuition wavers. Six of the seven informants did their undergraduate studies in

their respective countries. These women came to the United States to pursue masters' degrees. In the process, they were "wooed" to pursue Ph.D. degree because opportunities were easily available and they managed to get financial assistance. These women had several years of work experience in various fields prior to their coming to the United States for further studies. Experiences in such areas as researching, radio broadcasting, teaching at various levels, and counseling. They were quite successful in their careers and had high prospects of promotion. They lived a comfortable and well-to-do life in their respective African countries..

Anna is from Kenya. She obtained her undergraduate degree in Sociology from the University of Nairobi in Kenya. She is currently a graduate student in the college of education at Ohio University. Anna came to the United States in 1991 for a master's degree in Development Studies. After she completed her program, she decided to pursue a Ph.D degree in Curriculum and Instruction because she had the opportunity and means of financial assistance. She explained, " I just could not let the opportunity go; I will be in a better position to look for another job afterwards with a Ph.D degree at hand."

Beth graduated from the University of Swaziland and worked with the University of Swaziland in Southern Africa before coming to the United States. She came to the United States in 1987 for a master's degree in the College of Education. While she was still at Ohio University, she made plans for the possibility of pursuing a Ph.D degree in the future. When she returned to her country, she decided to come back after two years to fulfill her wish. She had this to say: " I felt as if I was compensating for the opportunities I lost earlier in my learning. The highest educational level was my target, and I can say I have made it."

Cathy obtained her undergraduate degree from the University of Science and Technology in Ghana and worked as a teaching assistant in the department of History at the same University. She came to the United States in 1990 to pursue a master's degree in African Studies. On completion of her program, she pursued a second master's degree in counselor education and then later joined the Department of Curriculum and Instruction for a Ph.D. degree in Social Science.

Dee obtained her undergraduate degree from the University of Lesotho and worked in the Department of Research at the same university. She came to the United States in 1992 to pursue a master's degree in tests and measurements. At the moment, she is contemplating staying longer in order to pursue a Ph.D. degree in Research and Technology. She had this to say, "Since I am already here with my three children all settled, I better venture into a Ph.D. program and be done with studies once and for all, so that when I return home I will not disturb my children again to change schools."

Eva joined a two-year teacher training college after graduating from high school. She then worked with the Teachers Service Commission in Kenya, teaching in elementary school. She came to the United States to pursue an undergraduate degree in Business Administration with an understanding that she would return to Kenya upon completion. But she has not. When I asked her why she did not return she had this to say, " No way, I would not let the opportunity of further studies go by." A Ph.D. is the goal in her educational pursuit.

Fanta graduated from the University of Burundi and worked as a teaching assistant at the same University and part time with the Ministry of Broadcasting on a special program for women. She came to the United States on a government scholarship to pursue a master's degree in English literature. She was "tempted" to stay and pursue a Ph.D. degree in Telecommunications. She said, " I do not mind loosing my teaching position at the University in Burundi provided I pursue a Ph.D degree in an area that interests me most."

Gladys obtained her undergraduate degree in Secondary Education from the University of Botswana. She came to the United States from Botswana to pursue a master's degree in Counselor Education. She was a high school teacher and later worked with career services in Botswana. She had this to say: " For now a master's degree is all I need. In the future, I might consider pursuing a Ph.D degree in the same field, but now there are not many people competing with me in my area of specialization in my country."

In this group of seven women that I interviewed, Gladys was the only one who was satisfied with a master's degree and willingly ready to go home and establish her career. The rest

of the women have an ambition of obtaining a Ph.D. degree before returning to their countries because chances of pursuing higher degrees in their home countries are very much limited. Besides, a Ph.D. degree holder stands a better chance of getting a better paying job.

Results and Discussions of Results

In analyzing the data, four categories emerged as results: motivational factors, barriers, strategies, and studies in the United States.

Motivating factors

The women named factors in their schooling experiences that they felt motivated their higher educational pursuit. These elements include their good performance, high self-esteem, self-determination, and self-confidence. Five women mentioned additional factors such as parents' high socio-economic status, the high cost of urban schools they attended that had good educational facilities and trained teachers, and wider exposure to different areas.

These women have great determination and great educational aspirations. This is evident in the way they have persisted and persevered during the long absence from their families to pursue Ph.D. degrees, which were not in their original plans. As Anna said, " I had high self-esteem and self-confidence. I set my goals and worked to achieve them no matter what."

Beth worked at the University in Swaziland as curriculum developer in mathematics education and has written many mathematics books for elementary schools in her country. When asked why she sought higher education in the United States, she replied:

> I had strong determination to learn, earn a living that would be different from the poverty I grew up in, and above all, I would be able to provide for my children. The fact that I dropped out of school during my second year in secondary school made my desire for higher education more "wild" because I wanted to prove that I was capable of performing well, given the opportunity.

Not all these women had financial problems during their undergraduate studies in their home countries. Anna, who went to school in some best schools in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital city, said firmly:

> My mother, a widow with six children and without formal employment put it into us that we must work hard to earn a living. I got financial assistance from various

organizations right from elementary through high school. At the university level, the government gave loans. Financially, I had no problem. This gave me opportunities to study without difficulties. I was also lucky that my home was in the capital city where most schools have good learning facilities. Students from various parts of the country with the best grades created academic competition for excellence. It was this conducive learning atmosphere that encouraged me to aim higher in educational pursuits.

Beth and Eva's educational histories had unique but encouraging experiences. Both of these women dropped out of secondary schools, but due to their strong determination, they worked their way back to educational systems and all the way to the top. Beth had this to say:

My husband encouraged me to study after our five children were born. Under normal circumstances, most married African men do not expect their wives to continue with education. But my case was one of the exceptional ones. So, since I reentered the educational system, I have not quenched the "thirst" of moving ahead.

Eva's case is unique but different from Beth's educational experience. Whereas Beth's education was affected by her parents' low socio-economic status, Eva was "ejected" from the system by institutional barriers particularly strict national examination system. She was stimulated to pursue higher education in spite of the barriers.

I was trying to establish a career that I always despised because it was not challenging enough, so I desired to continue with higher education. When an opportunity arose, I took it readily and since then I have not let it go. The most encouraging factor in my educational pursuit has been the desire to have a good job and reasonable income.

The themes that run through the seven women's educational experiences is self-determination, self-control, high self-esteem and the idea of "closing their ears" to discouraging remarks. Additionally, parents played a major role in encouraging these women to stay in school. All the seven women in this study have succeeded to the highest level of learning in spite of discouraging factors along the way, and managed to jump the hurdles.

Barriers

Common barriers that all seven women cited included: attempts made by relatives to persuade the women to stop schooling and marry before they complete their studies;

discouragement because there were few or no female role models who would inspire them;

boring and unchallenging teaching methods; and inadequate career services. Two of the women

cited marriage, raising a family, and studying at the same time as being discouraging factors.

Institutional barriers as a result of cultural attitudes also affected three women. Both professors

and her colleagues teased Anna, while a student in the sociology department at the University of

Nairobi. She said:

> Only 22 out of a total of 85 students were women. This alone made us a minority.
> Then followed the remarks from the professors, "This is not a department for
> women. Women should be doing social work. That is the work suitable for
> women."

While in secondary school in Botswana, Gladys was not allowed to choose courses that

she wanted because she was a female. Culture dictated what is boy's and girl's stuff. She narrated

her experience with bitterness as if it happened just yesterday:

> I wanted to be an architect, but because I was born a girl in an African community
> that alone was limiting. In secondary school, I was not allowed to take technical
> drawing, which was necessary in order to take architecture. Likewise, the boys
> who wanted to take home economics were discouraged since society has set it
> aside for girls and because school reflected society, it has to guide students
> accordingly.

Gladys ended up becoming a teacher, a career she did not want but which society forced on her.

However, she is trying to make the best of it by guiding young women in choosing careers of

their interest and not merely what their teachers and the community recommend. Gladys says,

> "That is why I am pursuing counselor education to guide young girls accordingly.
> I do not want them to be shut out of their areas of interest as I was."

Strategies

Some of these women confronted major obstacles whereas others faced minor ones. They

all managed, through different means, to overcome obstacles and continue to higher levels.

Common means used by these women included self-determination, high self-esteem, high

standards of school performance, and strong family support and encouragement. Anna, had this

to say:

> I had to develop self-determination and high self-esteem. I had support from my

mother, my older sisters, and my teachers due to my good class performance. This made me develop self-confidence that helped me sail through the hurdles.

Cathy expressed similar experiences. Though, her father was deceased, her mother had a good job and she is the only child. Asked how she overcame obstacles that came her way, Cathy expressed herself strongly in these words:

> I received a lot of encouragement from my mother and those friends that had made it through the system. I also persevered by closing my ears and sticking my neck up. Most importantly, being a Christian gave me a lot of comfort by reading the Bible and praying. As an Asante woman, I have strong self-determination in that I do whatever I think is good for me even if others do not like it. I do not know whether that is a weakness or not but it has helped me to "survive" through the educational system.

Beth and Eva, though from different countries (Swaziland and Kenya respectively), were both school dropouts for various reasons, but managed to work their way back into the system and to attain the highest level of education. When I asked them what means they used to overcome the obstacles, Beth remarked:

> I learned to be patient that has been my weapon for fighting obstacles. When one door is shut in my face, I have learned to wait patiently behind it, until I get another opening to the same place. When I had to quit school at a very early stage because of school fees, I waited for another opportunity to open up and later joined a primary teachers' college. I re-entered the system through correspondence courses, a long route to follow. Yet, with patience, it has led me to the highest level of learning.

Eva had an alternative route back to the system. Unlike Beth, she was able to go abroad to study for her undergraduate degree. Eva describes her alternative route of overcoming her obstacles through the assistance of other people. She recalls the incidents as if it had just happened:

> After getting frustrated by the national examination and being branded a secondary school dropout, I took up elementary school teaching as a career, the occupation I despised most. My father connected me to an American family who found a sponsorship that enabled me to study in the U.S. That is what I refer to as alternative means of overcoming obstacles, what I call using other people's ladder to build mine. In other words, I am trying to utilize every opportunity available to reach the highest level of learning.

In order to reach the highest educational level, these women have used various means. Some women had rougher times than others but now they have one thing in common - they have all reached the highest level of learning they wish to attain, which is very encouraging. In addition,

they have the opportunity of studying in a prestigious and highly coveted country among international students. The women find it natural to compare studies in the United States with those in their home countries.

Studies in the United States

All seven women compared their studies in the US to those in their respective countries. Even though these women came from different countries, they tended to make the same conclusions. They all agreed that teaching methods/styles in the United States are many, tend to be student centered, and encourage student participation and creativity. They pointed out that in their respective countries, class sizes are large. Therefore, teachers tend to favor lecture methods. Dee said:

> Here, professors give students a chance to express themselves and thus contribute to the learning process. In addition, students choose topics of their interest to do research. This helps the students to think and work out a plan on their own. Students initiate their learning and are motivated to contribute toward the end project. The learning environment is conducive to learning in that attention is given to students, which makes them feel that their contribution is welcome and their presence valued.

The women agreed that individual professors are willing to help students to cope with the Quarter system at Ohio University by allowing them to take incomplete grades at the end of the Quarter. This allows them to complete their assignments at their own pace during the breaks. Most of United States' institutions are well equipped with a variety of learning and teaching resources that lack in most institutions in developing countries. This in itself acts as a motivating factor to the students.

However, as good as the system sounds, it is not without its dark spots. The women pointed out that the Quarter system is too fast for them to fulfill most of the requirements. They prefer their home countries' semester system, because it allowed them more time to cover the content adequately. Three women mentioned cases of discrimination from a few professors, particularly those who have not traveled outside the United States and have not interacted with

people from other cultures. Cathy cited an incidence in one of her classes where a professor made an unfortunate remark about international students. She angrily recalls the professor's words, " I do not expect international students to do well in this course." Cathy feels that these professors underestimate the capabilities of international students and doubt the quality of these students' papers. But these are rare incidents on this campus. These women have gained a lot of experience, a broad exposure to other cultures and educational systems, which they like to recommend to their educators.

Recommendations of the Informants for Improving Female Education

All the informants were in agreement that education in most African countries does not favor female upward mobility. They also talked about certain African cultural elements that the schools perpetuate which tend to discourage girls and women. For example, the "omnipresence" of home economics specifically for girls as the best career for women limits their choices from a wider variety of courses available. The seven women agreed that African educators in general should try to minimize obstacles that tend to hold girls back and free them to pursue higher education. They named the following as suggestions that could help to encourage the majority of women to stay in the educational system.

1. Sex education should be introduced in schools right from the upper primary level, so that girls as well as boys know how their bodies function. This will raise students' level of awareness in this area, and assist them to realize the importance of morality in society because immorality brings about social instability.

2. Girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy should be allowed to re-enter the system as is being done in Botswana schools. Provisions should be made for counseling to help the young mothers readjust into the system.

3. School counselors should guide girls to choose careers of their own interest and within their capabilities, instead of guiding them into careers that society has identified and set aside as women's careers.

4. Countries with national examinations should localize the tests to cater for regional differences, or alternative ways of evaluation should be devised which will take into account other factors such as talents. The women identified continuous assessment as one of the ways a child's progress can be evaluated adequately throughout the school years.

5. Grassroots awareness on the part of parents should be developed, awareness that girls are a precious category of the population that deserve an education equal to that of males. Females form a sizable human resource if adequately prepared. In addition, males should accept the fact that society is changing and some of the cultural beliefs that tied women down can no longer apply.

6. Information should be disseminated on availability of bursaries for those girls who are capable but whose parents are not able to pay school fees.

7. There should be more women administrators and college professors so that their presence will inspire more girls to pursue higher education. More importantly, they will be in a position to advocate for policy changes in favor of women.

8. If women are to improve their quality of life in most African countries, attitudes of parents towards schooling must change. First, the school and the home must develop a closer bond in their effort to raise the educational standards of women.

9. The school curriculum must be changed and broadened to become more realistic in meeting women's needs and their roles in changing society.

10. The government and non-government organizations should establish day-care centers for student mothers. At present, university women with babies are forced to leave them with their mothers or mother's in-law in the rural areas where the children are deprived of the mother's milk, loving-care, and warmth. This separation makes students anxious while in college.

Conclusion

In the process of conducting this qualitative study and in reading the literature related to this topic, I have kept on asking myself questions such as "why do African women and women

in other developing countries persist in their struggle for higher education with all the challenges and discouragement they encounter?" "How could they overcome these obstacles? " How can their needs be best met by society and individual governments?" I want to state here that through my personal observations based on this investigation, I have finally realized that these problems are beyond the scope and depth of this study as well as, the limitations of my capability. I hope these cases presented can serve as eye openers for African women and men alike to understand the struggles women go through in trying to pursue higher education, and point out that "where there is a will, there is a way." These women's life histories have demonstrated this fact.

Most African women studying in the US will return to their respective countries to join their respective country's elites in nation building. The more researchers engage in research related to women's issues, the more aware the rest of the population becomes, and the more solutions will be found for improving female educational opportunities in Africa. This area is worthwhile for further inquiry, not only by those who have gone through the educational system, but also by those who have not, since their perspectives might add new insights.

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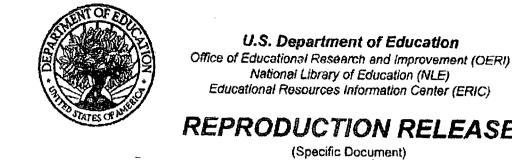
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