

The Christian Dynamic in the Fictional World of Chinua Achebe

GOVIND NARAIN SHARMA

THE ROLE PLAYED by Christianity in the history of Africa and its impact on African life have been principal preoccupations of African writers and thinkers, and the subject of impassioned comment by them. In most cases, the comment has been severely critical. Writers such as Ezekiel Mphahlele, Kofi Awoonor, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have accused the church and the missionaries of conspiring with colonialism, subverting the solidarity and integrity of African society, attenuating and circumscribing African thought, destroying African humanism, and filling the African soul with pessimism and gloom. Christianity has been charged with being the chief culprit in bringing about the self-alienation of black people by inculcating in them a deep dislike of their own colour, manners, customs, traditions, and culture while stressing the superiority of those of Europeans.¹ Though Achebe has been critical of the role of Christianity in Africa, his criticism has been regarded generally as moderate and his creative work has won almost universal praise for its objectivity and detachment.² I propose to discuss the way the Christian dynamic operates in Achebe's fiction and to examine in the light of this operation whether his position is really remarkable for its moderation or whether we would be justified in placing him with critics such as Kofi Awoonor, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose indictment of Christianity is much more severe. I explore whether the role played by Christianity in Africa was a natural expression of its character as a missionary religion and whether the criticism of this role by African writers, critics, and historians³ is substantiated by the comments of leading European scholars. I also discuss to what

extent Achebe's own portrayal of the Christian dynamic is in consonance with the characterization of the nature of Christianity as a religion made by leading European historians and sociologists.

Achebe's fictional world covers a wide span in time—more than a century, from the 1870s to the 1980s. Its dynamic is determined by the historical period which the particular work of fiction depicts. In the fiction depicting the earlier period, from the 1870s to the 1920s, the dynamic is mainly social and political; in the fiction set in the years immediately before and after independence, it tends to be mainly psychological, moral, and spiritual, though social and political issues are still of great concern.

The earlier novels are enactments of the onslaught of Europe on Africa. As the title of the first—*Things Fall Apart* (1959)—indicates, they are a record of the falling apart of things, unhappy and tragic tales that portray how flourishing and organic African communities which have existed for thousands of years are disrupted and shattered by the European invasion of Africa. The invasion is mainly political and economic, backed by the military power of Europe, which is the ultimate arbiter in the contest between the black and white peoples. But Christianity plays a crucial role in this contest.

Achebe presents the first phase of the arrival of Christianity in Igboland in *Things Fall Apart*, the action of which takes place between 1870 and 1910. He shows us the arrival of Christianity in two separate villages in the Igbo country — Umuofia and Mbanta. As far as possible, he avoids direct comment, and one of the narrative strategies he adopts to compare the developments in the two communities is to send Obierika, a man of high integrity and wisdom, on periodic visits to his friend Okonkwo, living in exile in his mother's village, Mbanta. Obierika informs Okonkwo and the Mbantans about the gradual but sustained penetration of Umuofia by the missionaries and the strong presence the new religion has been establishing. The Mbantans, however, like the Umuofians, are quite complacent about this penetration and show absolutely no realization of the challenge the new religion poses to their social and political existence. For

instance, when Obierika tells them about the decimation of the Abame people by the white government as punishment for killing a missionary, Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu merely observes that the Abame ought not to have killed the missionary and that, having done so, they ought to have been more careful in protecting themselves. There is no consideration of how the intrusion by the missionaries should be stopped, no examination of whether they are strong enough to defend themselves if there is an unprovoked attack by the white government and, if they are not, what steps they ought to take to defend themselves. By the time of Obierika's second visit to Mbanta, the missionaries are well established at Umuofia, have won a handful of converts, and are already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages. The Umuofians' reaction to these developments is typical. Though they are disturbed by the inroads made by the new faith, most of them believe that "the strange faith and the white man's god [will] not last" (133). After all, none of the new converts is a man of status: the only ones who have converted are the *efulefu*, "worthless, empty men" (133). As the priestess of Agbala, Chielo ought to be more alive to the danger than the ordinary lay person but she contemptuously refers to the converts as "the excrement of the clan" and to the new faith as "the mad dog that [has] come to eat it up" (133). However, there is one development which becomes a cause of concern to Obierika: the new converts include Okonkwo's son Nwoye and his commitment to the new faith is so deep that he has no hesitation in repudiating his father. Nwoye's conversion takes place in Umuofia and this prompts Obierika's second visit to Okonkwo.

The initial attitude of the Mbantans to the arrival of the Christians is no different from that of the Umuofians. With supreme self-confidence, they treat the new arrivals with amused contempt as some kind of lunatics and, like the Umuofians, fail to appreciate the danger that lurks in the new religion. For though the manner of the missionaries—five black and one white—is humble and ingratiating, the doctrine their white leader preaches is quite uncompromising. He tells them that "they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone . . . that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went

before Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil" (134-35). In spite of this condemnation, they respond to the missionaries' request for a plot of land to build their church by inviting them to have as much land as they like in the "evil forest." The missionaries accept the offer and when no harm comes to them even after the lapse of a considerable period of time, there is a steady flow of new converts, including a woman whose eight children have all been killed because they were twins. Then come the two *osu*, the outcasts with their long, tangled, and dirty hair which they were not allowed to shave and now are afraid to. Mr. Kiaga welcomes them in spite of strong objections from the new converts and the actual defection of one of them back to the clan. Following the example of the two men, all the *osu* in Mbanta join the church. They are strongly attached to their new faith and it is one of them who in his zeal brings the church into serious conflict with the clan a year later by killing the sacred python, the emanation of the god of water (147).

The action of *Arrow of God* moves to the twenties of the present century. The work of "Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger" is now complete, and British power is firmly entrenched in the office of Captain Winterbottom, the District Commissioner. The "pacification," however, has not been brought about exclusively by the use of the gun: the church too has provided valuable assistance in the accomplishment of this task. It seems to have made considerable headway in Umuofia, though the leaders of the African community are still puzzled by the new religion and are not yet clear what attitude they should adopt towards it. Most of them remain deeply suspicious, and are therefore hostile to it. The attitude of a few others, such as Ezeulu, is ambivalent. He sends his son Oduche to the white people's church and school to learn their wisdom as well as their ritual, but his motives in taking this action are so mixed that it is almost impossible to comprehend them fully and they give us some idea of the complexity of his personality. In the opinion of his enemies like Nwaka, his sole motivation is the quest for power. Ezeulu understands power and wants it. As he tells Odu-

che: "My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known tomorrow*" (46). The white man's power is an established fact and it is better to come to terms with it.⁴

Ezeulu's action is not free of opportunism. Even his close friend Akuebe believes that the reason he accepted the hospitality of Nwodika's son John Nwodika while detained by the whites on Government Hill, Okperi, was that both of them shared a similar outlook: "I now understand why Ezeulu has taken such a sudden liking for him. Their thoughts are brothers" (170). On being asked by Akuebe why he has joined the whites' service, Nwodika's reply is that he has done it for their money. In Ezeulu's eyes, there is nothing wrong with such a desire. In fact, the correctness of Akuebe's inference is shown by Ezeulu's "glowing with justification" (170) as he listens to John Nwodika's reply to Akuebe. It would be wrong to say, however, that Ezeulu is motivated entirely by opportunism. He has the integrity to turn down the whites' offer of making him a Warrant Chief—a decision his detractors find it difficult to understand: "How could he refuse the very thing he had been planning and scheming for all these years, his enemies asked?" (176). The office of the Chief Priest he occupies is not merely religious: it is political, too. And Ezeulu realizes the obligations of this position: "Since the white man had come with great power and conquest it was necessary that some people should learn the ways of his deity" (42).

However, along with the desire to fulfill the obligations arising from his leading position, he has a curiosity for new knowledge. Ezeulu is descended from a race of reformers: his grandfather put a stop to *ichi*—the practice of carving the faces—in Umuaro (132). His father set aside the custom which made any child born to a widow a slave (133). Ezeulu himself keeps up this tradition. The image he uses in describing the world—"a dancing mask"—demonstrates that his conception of reality is dynamic, not static, and demands moving with the times. "If you want to see this dancing mask [of a world], you cannot stand in one place." In spite of all these, Ezeulu takes his own time in sending his son to learn the whites' wisdom and ritual. He had promised the whites five years ago that he would send one of his sons to church. But it

took him three years to make up his mind and he sent Oduche to them only two years ago (45). Obviously, he wanted to satisfy himself that the whites had not come for a short visit, but to build a house and live (45).

However, even after he has made this momentous decision, Ezeulu is not unmindful of the danger posed to the African way of life by the arrival of the Christian missionaries. Quite early in the novel, his response to Nwafo's explanation of what the church bell is saying may be considered a sort of premonition: "It is saying [Nwafo says, answering his own question]: Leave your yam, leave your cocoyam and come to church. That is what Oduche says." "Yes," says Ezeulu thoughtfully. "It tells them to leave their yam and cocoyam, does it? Then it is singing the song of extermination" (42-43).

If he knows all this—that the Christians' presence means no good for the community—why then does he seek accommodation with it by sending his son to their school and church? Is Ezeulu's action a fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable? Or is it simply an attempt to countenance an unpleasant reality even though this toleration may exact a heavy price? Ezeulu's answer to Akuebe's criticism of his action shows that the latter is exactly what he is prepared to do. In this answer he refers to the "strange religion" as "a disease that has never been seen before" and in seeking for a cure for this disease he is prepared to sacrifice his son just as their ancestors and sages have done (133-34).

Tension already exists between Ezeulu and the rest of the community before Ezeulu sends his son Oduche to the whites' church and school. It is the outcome of his stand on the Okperi case. However, it is the latter decision which alienates most of the community from him more markedly and provides an opportunity for his enemies such as Nwaka to exploit the situation. Ezeulu is the chief priest and, as such, he is supposed to set an example of staunch adherence to the tribal religion. Only by doing so can he stop any backsliding on the part of others. But Ezeulu's behaviour is exactly the opposite. His critics fail to appreciate that he is a man of enlightened and progressive outlook, who is proud of the liberal-reformist tradition of his family. His decision to send his son to acquire the whites'

wisdom—to the point of being able to write with his left hand as Tony Clark does—is entirely in keeping with this tradition. But even Ezeulu cannot visualize the defection of his son to another religion, much less his becoming a fanatic who will learn to despise his own religion and culture. It is Oduche's attempt to stifle the sacred python which delivers Ezeulu into the hands of his enemies and turns the whole community against him.

When he seeks the advice of this community on whether or not he should answer the District Officer's summons to Okperi, Nwaka taunts him with his own claim that the white man is his friend. He himself ought to know best how to respond to a friend's invitation. Here we see the supreme irony of a situation in which a man of integrity and unselfishness such as Ezeulu, who has the courage and highmindedness to turn down the whites' offer of Warrant Chief, is portrayed as a white man's stooge whose only quest is for power, while a self-seeking upstart such as Nwaka, who has missed no opportunity to flaunt his newly acquired wealth, can pose as the protector of the community. It is an indication of how divisive and disruptive Christianity has been to the African community. His well-meant but unfortunate action leads to the chain of events by which Ezeulu, failing to get his people's support in his confrontation with the whites' government, becomes determined to take revenge on them, refuses to eat the sacred yams and thus obliges them to embrace the whites' religion. The Christian dynamic is thus central to the final catastrophe, the disintegration and disruption of African society, in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. It makes possible not just the establishment, but the consolidation, of colonial rule.

To what extent is Achebe's dramatization of Christianity's impact on African life in consonance with its nature as defined by historians and social scientists? Arnold Toynbee is severely critical of "Christianity's sin of arrogance and intolerance" (105) and traces it back to "one vein in the Christian and Jewish tradition of conduct . . . the vein of fanaticism and intolerance which one can see if one looks back on the history of all the Judaic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism itself" (17-18). Toynbee's criticism seems to be an echo of Schopenhauer's celebrated comment that the Indian religion is superior to the Semitic

traditions. But whereas for Schopenhauer the source of “the fanatic crimes perpetrated in the name of religion” is monotheism—Judaic, Christian, and Islamic (Schwab 429)—for Toynbee the “ultimate inspiration” of this “fanatical spirit” is “one of the two Christian and Jewish conceptions of God which . . . are incompatible with one another . . . one vision of God as being self-sacrificing love—God the merciful, the compassionate according to the Islamic formula—and another vision of God as a jealous God.” These two visions of the nature of God seem to him “irreconcilable” and their presence has produced in these three religions “an inner contradiction” which has never been resolved. “This duality of vision is reflected in the duality of conduct. The jealous God’s chosen people easily fall into becoming intolerant persecutors” (19).

Robert Nisbet explains the characteristic role played by Christianity in the world by making a distinction between universal religions—faiths such as Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam—and kinship religions such as the old religion of the Romans, Hinduism, and, we might add, the religions of Africa. In universal religions, “emphasis rests on a belief or set of beliefs available to everyone without regard to nationality, race, sex, or locality” (168). When such a religion takes hold and becomes a reigning influence on human belief, its impact is not restricted to doctrinal elements alone but to social and cultural conditions surrounding these doctrinal elements (168). Christianity, for instance, played a crucial role in dissolving the ancient and powerful kinship community in Rome, which, like the African community, was—to use Burke’s great formulation—a partnership of the dead, the living, and the unborn. The Roman community was only an organized extended family, and Christianity, like all evangelizing religions, addressed its message to individuals and saw in the strong structure of the family the main obstacle to its proselytizing efforts. Its obvious strategy was, therefore, to denigrate the historic and deeply rooted kinship tie and to offer the community of Christ as itself the only real and true form of kinship. There was strong sanction for this strategy in the teachings of Jesus, who stressed the insubstantiability of the traditional kinship relation and held up the community of Chris-

tians as the true family: "He who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10.37); "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3.35); "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8.21).

Achebe's portrayal of the Christian dynamic would seem to be substantiated by the observations and analyses of Toynbee and Nisbet. The first effect of Christianity is the division of the people into two hostile camps—Christian and heathen. In the creation of the Manichaeian world of colonialism of which Frantz Fanon speaks, Christianity thus makes its own unique contribution. White and black constitute the good and evil of this Manichaeian world, but Christianity further divides the black world into its own good and evil. The Christian convert, blissfully ignorant of his own place in the colonial world, identifies himself with the colonialist, for as Fanon points out, "the Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, the master, the oppressor" (32). The natives, therefore, imbibing the arrogance and sense of superiority of their white masters, come to believe that as the children of light they are morally and spiritually superior to their heathen kinsfolk who worship gods of wood and stone. Recalling his childhood days, Achebe tells us how definite then was the line between Christian and non-Christian in his community. The Christians, being the "followers of the true religion," naturally looked down on "the others." They themselves were "the people of the church" or "the association of God"; "the others" were the heathen or even "the people of nothing" (*Morning* 65). In one of Achebe's early short stories, "Chike's School Days," Chike is brought up by his parents "'in the ways of the white man,' which meant the opposite of traditional." Not only do they sound the bell to summon their children to prayers and meals, Chike's mother Sarah teaches her children not to eat in their neighbours' houses, because they "offered their food to idols" (*Girls* 34). In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi's father Isaac Okonkwo is a man who believes "utterly and completely in the things of the white man" (126). He refuses, therefore, to

listen to the music of the singers who come to salute Obi during his visit home, because it is "heathen singing" (128).

The intensity of ideological orientation and the resulting fanaticism and intolerance can be seen from the behaviour of the new converts such as Enoch, who unmasks the *egwugwu*, in *Things Fall Apart*, and the catechist John Goodcountry in *Arrow of God*. In their fanatical zeal, they surpass the white missionaries, despise the traditional beliefs of their own people, and miss no opportunity to humiliate them by insulting everything they hold sacred. Uchendu's characterization of them is not inaccurate: they certainly behave like a "hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on its own master" (155-56).

The elder's speech at Okonkwo's dinner in Mbanta eloquently brings out the difference between the individualism of an evangelical religion such as Christianity and the kinship tie in the traditional African religions. While the Christian ethic's main stress is on the duty of each soul to work out its own salvation, the ethic of the traditional African religion stresses the primacy of the individual's duty towards the clan and the community, and the unforgivable crime of betraying them for one's own self-interest. Critics of Christianity such as Kofi Awoonor are right when they say that Christianity helped subvert the solidarity and integrity of African society by its open preaching of the abandonment of community, clan, and family responsibilities for the seeking of personal salvation.

To realize fully how destructive the Christian dynamic was in subverting the solidarity and integrity of African society, we must have some idea of the role of religion as a cementing and cohesive force in pre-industrial, traditional, or, as some would prefer to call them, "primitive" communities. Perhaps Achebe's greatest achievement in these two novels is his vivid depiction of the rich and vibrant communal life of such communities. David Carroll points to Achebe's portrayal of "the full vigour of the Ibo people's traditional way of life, unperplexed by the present and without nostalgia for the past, of how through its rituals the life of the community and the life of the individual are merged into significance" (30). Carroll further notes: "The individual seems vulnerable in his solitude and introspection; it is with relief that

we see him reabsorbed into the life of the community. There his doubts and fears can be exorcised publicly and ritualistically" (34). In destroying this communal life, the missionaries have deprived the individuals of their moorings and left them puzzled, perplexed, demoralized, and alienated. The extent of the loss suffered by the individuals who surrender themselves from this living communal reservoir by embracing an alien religion can be seen in the lives of men like Okonkwo's son Nwoye, who appears in *No Longer at Ease* as Isaac Okonkwo, and Beatrice's father in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Both of them are stern men, vain, domineering, tyrannical, and unforgiving, but these attributes are a kind of compensatory manifestation of their severe alienation. Isaac Okonkwo is unhappy that he does not yet have a son, only four daughters, but he refuses to carry the sorrow on his face because "he would not let the heathen know that he was unhappy" (7). There is a terrible irony in his contempt for heathens as persons but concern about what they may think of him, the same concern which later makes him forbid his son Obi to marry an *osu*. Okonkwo's unbending moral rigour comes from the puritanical and fanatical Christianity that the new converts almost invariably adopt.

Achebe takes up the theme of alienation again in *Anthills of the Savannah*. He shows how the new rulers of Africa have become distant from the people, seeking sanctuary in palaces and "retreats," totally unable and unwilling to appreciate their problems. This alienation is a reflection of their self-alienation, a result of their education in Western-style convent and public schools, in Western academies such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Sandhurst. Sam, for instance, the President of the Republic, is a product of Lord Lugard College, Nigeria, and of Sandhurst. He admires the English "to the point of foolishness" and "his major flaw [is] that all he ever want[s] to do what [is] expected of him especially by the English" (49), but also by the Americans, for one of his nightmares is to appear on "the cover of *Time* magazine with a big mouth and a small head" (15). The Christian dynamic in its moral and spiritual aspect, however, is best exemplified in the personal struggle of Beatrice to overcome the effects of her early upbringing and her miraculous metamor-

phosis into what Achebe calls the “priestess of the unknown god.” She deserves the title of priestess not only for her passionate love-making—an indication of her liberation from her puritanical indoctrination—but also for her jealous regard for, and her militancy in defending, the dignity and honour of her country and its culture. Beatrice’s alienation is an outcome of her Christian upbringing, which keeps her totally ignorant of the traditions and legends of her people: the schools she went to “hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with whom they had evolved. So she came to barely knowing herself” (105). The distance Beatrice travels in trying to return to her people, to reclaim her own heritage and find herself, is shown by her ability to develop a *rapport* with Ikem’s illiterate girl-friend Elewa and the traditional naming-ceremony she holds in her own apartment for his posthumous daughter.

Achebe thus seems to be quite critical of the role that Christianity has played in African life, and the criticism appears to get more severe as time passes. The impression of objectivity and detachment on the part of Achebe is the result of the superb artistic control he exercises, refraining from direct comment or authorial intrusion. The impression is also confirmed by the way he depicts the growth of Christianity in his earlier work. He clearly suggests that the spread of Christianity was facilitated by the existence of superstitious and evil practices in these villages, such as the killing of twins and of the *ogbanje* (a sort of changeling, a child who repeatedly died and returned to its mother to be born), and the inhuman treatment of their own people, like the *osu* and others whom Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, calls the excrement of the clan. Christianity displays greater humanity in rejecting the distinction between the enslaved and the free and in treating everyone alike. It may have destroyed ritually sanctioned kinship ties (as in ancestor worship, for example), but one of its merits was that it offered a new kind of kinship in Jesus, the community of Christians in which no one was treated as an Untouchable or “the excrement of the clan.” Max Weber has pointed out that fraternization and community of worship were possible only because early Christianity had shattered the ritual barriers dividing Jews and Gentiles. This principle of the com-

munity of all believers was established clearly when Paul reproached Peter with dissimulation for withdrawing from his meal with the Gentiles because the Jews had approached and Peter had feared their censure. Paul told Peter that as a Jew who lived "after the manner of the Gentiles" he had no right to compel the Gentiles to live after the manner of the Jews. "Man is not justified by the work of the law [such as those pertaining to foods and circumcision], but by the faith of Jesus Christ. . . . For if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Gal. 2.16, 21; see also 2.11-14). Weber called this destruction of the ghetto and its ritual barriers an event of tremendous significance for the history of Western Christianity, for that destruction was the indispensable pre-requisite for solidarity and collective action among people who were *not* united by kinship ties (Bendix 97n).

However, though Achebe does not hide the weaknesses of African society and criticizes them freely, he refuses to concede the right of Europeans to intervene in Africa to "civilize" the Africans. The objectivity and detachment he displays in relating the story of Okonkwo earlier in *Things Fall Apart* is unceremoniously discarded in the final sentence, which mentions the District Commissioner's choice of the title for his work—*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. This sentence represents a radical shift of point of view and Achebe, setting aside all pretence of detachment, tells us clearly and unequivocally that what has happened is a calamity. He also excoriates with cutting sarcasm the crass insensitivity of the apostles of civilization who have no realization of the havoc they have been creating in the world in their zeal to "pacify" and "civilize" it. While the sarcasm in *Things Fall Apart* has been noticed and commented upon, there has not been sufficient appreciation of the sarcasm contained in the final sentence of *Arrow of God*: "Thereafter any yam harvested in his field was harvested in the name of the son." Both novels are stories of the falling apart of things and in the latter story the role of the followers of "the son" of God, acting in the name of their deity, in bringing about the disintegration of African society is even more prominent than in the former.

The Christian dynamic is thus central to Achebe's fictional world. And though sarcasm of the kind seen above may be markedly absent from his later work, his dramatization of the Christian dynamic throughout his fiction and the graphic imagery he uses to project it show that in his assessment of the role that Christianity has played in Africa, Achebe does not differ very much from severe critics such as Mphahlele, Awoonor, Armah, Soyinka, and Thiong'o.

NOTES

- 1 See Armah, Awoonor 23-26, Beti, Mphahlele, Soyinka 3, 97-98, and Thiong'o.
- 2 See, for example, Turkington 11.
- 3 Among the historians who have documented the spread of Christianity in Africa and discussed its impact on African life, the most notable are: for East Africa, Lonsdale, Low, Ogot, Oliver, and Welbourn; for West Africa, Ajayi, Ayandele, Ilogu, Mobley, Parrinder, and Webster; for Central Africa, Rotberg. On Africa as a whole, one of the most original, fresh, and stimulating discussions of the topic is by the Cameroonian scholar Boulaga, the leading theologian of Francophone West Africa; in *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, he dismisses Western Christianity as a fetish but puts forward his own vision of an authentic African Christianity.
- 4 Lindfors in his otherwise excellent article, "Ambiguity and Intention in *Arrow of God*," does not take sufficiently into account Ezeulu's initial search for power.

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