Church Proliferation and Increase in Social Vices in Rivers State: A Political Economy Perspective

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Abstract

Religious practice is one of the unregulated areas of "business" in Nigeria. Despite the averment to the secularity of the Nigerian State, the people are deeply religious. This study is an attempt to find a nexus between church proliferation and increase in social vices through the lenses of political economy. Church proliferation makes reference to the rapid growth and expansion of churches both in terms of number and diversity of denomination. The research objective was mainly to find a relationship between the geometric increase in church denomination and the rise in social vices. Significantly, the study aimed to arm policy makers with the real reason for church proliferation in Nigeria. Despite the establishment of most churches being imaged on God's calling and the need to propagate the gospel, this study found that, the core reasons for church proliferation is more of economics than religious. The study therefore concluded that the flaunting of wealth by the General Overseers of the big church

denominations, prosperity and hyper grace preaching, over population and unemployment are some of the reason for church proliferations and increase in social vices. The study therefore recommended the proper regulation of religious organization by the government, including the auditing of accounts and the licensing of preachers.

Key words: Church, Church Proliferation, Social Vices and Political Economy.

Introduction

Long before Africans (Nigerian) made contact with European traders, they had their own religion and ways of worship. The African traditional religion was the means and ways through which the indigenous African people communicate and commune with the unseen God.

Despite the antiquated history of African traditional religious practices, the invading European merchants/missionaries, were able to convince the people on the need to jettison their age long practice and embrace the God of the European missionaries and the new ways of worship. The early merchants/missionaries who regarded African worshippers as heathens took up the responsibilities of Christianizing them through indoctrination, education and colonialism. Historically, Christianity first came into Nigeria in the 15th century by the hands of two Portuguese monks, Augustinian and Capuchin. The duo were also credited with the establishment of a school in the Palace of the Oba of Benin to reeducate the children of the Oba and that of his chief in line with the tenets of the new "peaceful" religion.

The first English speaking church in Nigeria was established by Henry Townsend in 1842. The Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, formally Church of England is today the second largest province of the Anglican Church worldwide (Mckinnon, 2020). Despite the numerous ills of colonialism which was brought to bare on the people by the merchants/missionaries, the people have come to accept the new religion as a way of life. This was greatly aided by the provisions of freedom of worship and association in the Constitution of the new independent Nigeria.

Christians, especially the missionaries and clergy are of the belief and propagate same, that the most effective way to reach the world is by starting new churches. Every group and community needs a church. The church today is the only hope of the world, therefore the need does arise for the building of missionary minded transformational churches amongst every people, groups and community in the world (Adetoyese, 2017).

Adetoyese, (2017) lamented the rate at which churches now sprout and proliferate at an alarming rate, occupying every available space, including ware-houses, hotels, cinema buildings, studios, schools, uncompleted buildings and so on. Churches now seem to be the new business in town, as it is common to see a minimum of fifty different churches on a street of less than four kilometers. In the same instance four or more churches are situate in one building, taking up space that could have be utilized for other profitable ventures (Tokumbo, 2020). Nigeria today can easily be referred to as the country with the highest number of church per capita in the world. Could this be in obedience to the word of Jesus Christ as recorded in the book of Mark 16:15 "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature". This same position was aptly supported by the Chief Apostle (Paul) in the book of Philippians 1:15-18 were he supported church planting and proliferation for the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

The genesis of church proliferation in Nigeria is easily traceable to the paradigm shift as a counter to the Eurocentric disposition of the mainline churches across Africa. The birth of African independent churches which are "free" from any missionary and colonial entanglement came with it the rapid increase and multiplication of church denominations and branches as a result of the self-supporting, self-governing and self-extending posture of these new churches (Okezi, 2016). As a mark of the departure from the "strangle hold" of the mainline church, the last three decades witnessed the switch to either charismatic or Pentecostalism, a situation which have witnessed the mushrooming of new churches to an alarming number of over one hundred and twenty different denominations with some though legally named international church have only one branch in only one city or village (Susan, 2016).

With every passing day, more churches, new parishes and new religious movements continue to spring up across Nigeria and the city of Port Harcourt have its fair share of this daily growth of church denominations. One very notable effect of this continues birth and daily expansion of independent African churches is the exodus of member from the mainstream churches like the Roman Catholic and Anglican, especially the youth population.

The global society today is rapidly undergoing significant constant proliferation of churches which is intended not only to bring about changing values, but also a greater source of solution to people's problem. However the church which supposedly is a pillar and ground of truth (1 Timothy 3:15) has certainly failed to live up to its billing as the panacea for peace, morality and holiness. However, the daily increase in the number of church denominations and branches does not seem to equate or result in the decrease in crime rate and social vices despite having a wide appeal for young people.

Theoretically, the political economy of religion theory and the church growth theory propounded by McGavran & Hunter (1980) is considered to be suitable for a work of this nature. The church development theory is described as the discipline that examines the establishment, expansion, operation, and vitality of churches in relation to the efficient execution of God's mandate to disciple all nations. The idea aims to integrate theological tenets of divine scripture on church growth with the most valuable perspectives from modern social and behavioral sciences. The church development hypothesis aims for success in outreach and expansion, but it does not assert itself as an ecclesia. Theology, as defined, selectively relates biblical truth to social scientific concepts based on the interests of church development. Centralized pastoral leadership is, according to the notion, essential for vision and motivation in the assignment. The church development theorist offered a concept of leadership conducive to growth. This army has a one commander-in-chief, Jesus Christ. The local church functions like to an organization led by a single authority figure, the pastor, who receives directives from the supreme leader. The company commander has lieutenants and sergeants for advisory and execution purposes; nonetheless, the ultimate responsibility for decisions rests with the company commander, who must report to the commander in chief" (p. 6).

The military paradigm employed in this theory requires no interpretation, it goes to show the powers the pastor has in a growing church and often set the example which the people follows.

The political economy of religion Theory by Weber (1904) on the other hand, explore the interplay between religious believes, practice, institution and the economic and political system of the state. It further examined how religion can influence the states economic development, labour dynamics and political institutions, conversely, how these factors can shape religious belief and practice.

The political economy of religion theory explore how certain religious beliefs, especially those of the Protestantism influenced the development of capitalism and economic system. The central argument of Max Webber was that the protestant work ethic, characterized by hard work, discipline and a focus on worldly success played a pivotal role in fostering the rise of capitalism. Webber emphasized that the religious belief on the idea of God's chosen encourages individuals to pursue worldly success as a sign of their salvation.

Many of the pastors planting these new churches often ride on the back of God's calling to establish a "new" church rather than economic determinism, unhealthy rivalry leadership tussle, doctrinal disagreement and the likes. The increase in deviant behaviors such as illicit sex, drug abuse, examination malpractice, prostitution, indecent dressing, cultism, pick pocket, hooliganism, gambling, smoking and so on among young Christian members despite the rapid growth of churches and church membership has necessitated this study with a view of finding the nexus between church proliferation and social vices.

The question now therefore is: Why are there so many church denominations in Nigeria?
Does the increase in church denomination have any effect on social vices?

Secondly, it does appear that not enough scholarly attention has been devoted towards understanding the causes of this high moral depravity in the face of geometrical increase in the number of churches and church attendance. Therefore

the study aim to profer workable solution to stem the rising tide of church proliferation and social vices in Nigeria.

Nigeria today can rightly claim to be in the fore front of world ranking as a major Christian country. This claim is firmly anchored on the fact that Nigeria have some of the biggest church auditoriums in the world, and most likely the country with the highest number of Christians and church denominations in Africa. This study therefore is deemed very significant to the extent that it will expose the real reason for the continued proliferations of church denominations in Nigeria, the relationship between the increase in church denomination, church attendance and social vices. The study will proffer solutions that will equip policy makers and the Christian Association of Nigeria with vital information on the reason for the concomitant growth of church denominations and social vices.

The research methodology for this study is the descriptive narrative approach. This method concerns itself with the indices on hand, making use of such indices to describe the phenomenon and also according to the available data of the subject matter of the study to speak for itself. Data for the study are from secondary sources, and participant observer method.

Concept of Church Proliferation

Church proliferation is a process that results in a new Christian church being established or planted in a new area. These local churches have a separate life of its own and are able to function with minimal interference from the parent body despite it continued stay in relationship and contact with the parent body denominationally or as a part of a network of churches. According to Adeyese (2017) a quick look at Christianity from the early time to the present day, one will not fail to notice many stages of development that have taken place over the years, culminating in the establishment and planting of new churches. The Christian fold today Adetoyese (2017) noted have misunderstood the purpose of the church, leading to the establishment of churches here and there, and not all are with good motives.

Onah et al. (2022) observed that the growth of churches in Nigeria has resulted in the establishment of several denominations, yet moral degeneration persists.

Despite the exponential rise in the number of churches, other vices persist in the nation due to the inadequate practice of authentic Christian worship. Onah and Ugwu (2008) said that, for followers of Christ, one would anticipate a geometric growth in the number of churches in Nigeria to be mirrored in the lives of the Nigerian public; nevertheless, this does not seem to be the case. Corruption and moral decay persist unabated in a land where churches proliferate everyday. Mfumbusa (2010) observed that, in sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a significant proliferation of churches with a corresponding escalation in corruption and other social vices. Mfiambusa posited that the increase in churches should provide a corresponding good effect on the lives of individuals compared to when there were fewer churches. He therefore inquired sarcastically if the proliferation of churches and the escalation of corruption are contemporaneous in these countries. Omonyo et al. (2016) observed that earlier studies concurred that the introduction of Christianity in Nigeria initially fostered holiness; however, the current situation reflects a contrary trend (Gbote & Kgatle, 2014). Other scholars, including Achunike (2004), contend that minimal progress has been observed in the attitudes, behaviors, and conduct of Nigerians, despite a significant increase in the number of churches. Thus, this must have contributed to the corrupt practices that have perpetually positioned the country low on the corruption index (Diara & Onah, 2014). The proliferation of churches among the indigenous people of Nigeria arose from their perception that missionaries no longer fulfilled their religious needs, resulting in the creation and expansion of the independent church movement (Obiefuna et al, 2016).

Mbefo (2002) delineated the concerns as follows:
The missionaries of the traditional churches neglected to confront the inquiries posed by the African context. Witchcraft, demonic possession, malevolent spirit hunting, ancestor cults; the utilization of protective charms, talismans, sorcery, and traditional dance as a form of worship at shrines were often dismissed by missionaries as manifestations of ignorance stemming from a pre-scientific mindset (p. 29).

Contemporary Christianity in Nigeria has seen significant transition compared to the period when Christianity was originally introduced to the country. Numerous Pentecostal congregations have emerged in Nigeria today. Pentecostalism,

motivated by Acts 2:1-13, which describes God pouring forth His spirit in the end days, has its origins in the 19th-century Revivalist Movement in Topeka, Kansas, United States (Melton, 2020). The movement has evolved into a global missionary endeavor, extending from North America to Europe and sub-Saharan Africa (Melton, 2020).

Diara and Onah (2014) assert that hundreds of Pentecostal churches have emerged in Nigeria since the early 1970s. The rapidly expanding independent churches, mostly of the contemporary Pentecostal kind, started to acquire prominence in Nigeria with the establishment of the Church of God Mission by Archbishop Benson Idahosa in 1986. Huruna (2018) observed the presence of more than 300,000 newly established Pentecostal Apostolic Churches in Nigeria, comprising over 4.2 million adherents. This includes denominations such as the Christ Apostolic Church, the Apostolic Church, Celestial Church of Christ, Cherubim and Seraphim Church, New Apostolic Christians in Nigeria, as well as the Redeemed Christian Church, Deeper Christian Life Ministries, Overcomers Ministries, Believers Love World (Christ Embassy), and Winners Chapel.
These new apostolic churches include around 6.5 million adherents. Fatokun (2016) observed that several Pentecostal churches originated as Christian fellowship centers before evolving into formal churches. He provided examples including the Redeemed Christian Church, Deeper Life Church, Living Faith Church, Rhema Church, New Testament Church, Church of God Mission, Zoe Ministries, Christ Embassy, Latter Rain Assembly, and Dominion Life Bible Church. He asserted that the founders of these churches endeavor to fulfill Christ's directive as articulated in the Gospel of Mark, 16:15, which mandates the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

Omonyo *et al* (2016) is of the opinion that though God is interested in church growth, He is also interested in the reverence and devotion of every Christian. Therefore, Christians are expected to be an embodiment of godliness, expressing the Christlikeness in you at all times, therefore the increase in the number of churches in any given society should correspond with a visible reverential fear of God to such an extent that it will impact the societal development. Christian who the Bible described as the salt and light of the earth (Matthew 5:13; John 1:5) are expected to live such an exemplary live style, but from all indications, the reverse

seem to be the case in Africa and this is increasingly becoming worrisome to scholars across the continent (Omonyo *et al*, 2016).

Reasons for the Proliferation of Churches in Nigeria and increase in Social Vices

There are multiple reasons for the proliferation of churches in Nigeria, most of which are tired to economic freedom. These same reasons had worked together to water down the efficiency of the churchs, leading to an upsurge in social vices amidst the corresponding increment in churches.

1. God's Calling

Nearly every pastor who established a new church asserts that they were divinely summoned or had a revelation to disseminate the gospel. Some individuals resign from their employment or commercial endeavors to establish a church, while others start a church due to their inability to get satisfactory employment. For this group, pastoring a church is a vocational chance to achieve economic equilibrium. The failure to manifest spiritual gifts: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the impoverished; He has sent me to announce liberation for the captives, restoration of sight for the blind, to free the oppressed, and to declare the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) has become their burden; hence, the pursuit of authority to exhibit the "gift" of God has resulted in a proliferation of charlatans posing as pastors.

2. Man's Doctrine and Contradictory Bible Interpretation

Doctrinal differences has it origin in the 18th century church when Martin Luther wrote his ninety nine theses which criticized the established church at that time. The issues of differences in doctrine in churches are still dividing churches even today, thereby constituting a major factor in the plurality of churches in Nigeria. The mode of worship and religious teaching of a church is based on its doctrine, so many churches today tries to adjust their doctrine to suit the members or would be members in other to attract more membership thereby deviating from the original teachings of the gospel. These adjustments which are mostly economically motivated has a lot to do with rate of social vices in the society (Rev. 2. 20).

Trade Rebranding and Diversification

Upon taking cognizance of the display of religiosity of Nigerian in favour of the Christian religion with over 46% of the total population (PRC, 2020), most practitioners of African religion who are driven by the economic prosperity of the modern churchs transformed and rebranded their worship system, disguising them in the similitude of Christian worship to attract membership, because in their thinking, more members means more money. The performance of magic, sorcery and necromancy with a shout of "Amen" readily confuses the members to believe that these are miracles from God.

Endemic Unemployment

The ever increasing unemployment rate in Nigeria in the face of growing population has made many to see the establishment of a church an employment opportunity. Aside the founding of a new church, resident pastors are now hired and paid for preaching. This neo religious industry offers employment opportunity not only for preachers (pastors) but also for many who are designated as church workers, many of whom are working in the marketing department of the church (Evangelism). Others includes, instrumentalists and gospel artists. These set of people need not be "born again" but are employed based on their zeal, skill, charisma and the ability to convince others to attend their church.

These paid pastors and church worker do not necessarily believe in the commission, vision and mission of the lead pastor or of the church, rather they see themselves as employees who work for the organization and can leave at any time if they find a better opportunity elsewhere.

Social Media and the Advertisement of Miracles

The social media era has helped to boost the proliferation of churches. many churches now use the social media to advertise "miracles" and deliverances thereby luring people (believers or not) to attend their churches in search of miracles and solutions to their numerous /often economic problem. This strategy works perfectly because, the churches (new age African churches) had ab-initio portrayed Africa as the continent of demons where every single African has a faulty foundation or is demon possessed and therefore in needs of deliverance. These advertisements therefore become very alluring to many who are of the belief

that they are either demon possessed or that their "foundation" is responsible for their economic failures in life.

Prosperity and Hyper Grace Teachings

The church today has left the massage of salvation to the massage of prosperity. Many who come to church today are there not because they want eternal life, but because of what they can get from God while on earth. As part of church growth strategy, pastors and churches would rather dwell on prosperity and hyper grace rather than repentance to retain membership. These kind of massages which does not encourage true repentance only helps to flood the church with "ignorant" "Christians" who though they are in church, but are on their way to hell and the society with social vices.

> According to Onah and Ugwu (2008), pastors prioritized lectures on worldly wealth and material comfort above teaching purity, righteousness, temperance, and virtue. These doctrines contradict the word of God (p. 66).
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> The evident deficiency of Christian instruction from pastors, priests, and church founders has plagued Christianity in Nigeria, as Agbo (2010) observed: It is lamentable that, despite the clear necessity for discipleship, the majority of teachings prevalent in Christendom today focus on materialism, self-aggrandizement, self-creation, and greed. This instruction fails to yield the caliber of Christians that Christ envisioned when he instructed us to … Go and make disciples of all countries (p. 5).

Display of Wealth and Affluence

Pastors in Nigeria are among the wealthiest in the world. To the chagrin of many, these pastors flaunt these wealth despite the apparent lack of evidence to show any other source of income apart from the church. These fragrant display of wealth and affluence has caught the attention of many young people who wishes to be like them, thereby joining the band wagon of preachers only to increase the already blotted number of churches only to fail in the duty of making disciples for Christ(Sutton, 2023, Ayobase 2013).

Impacts of Church Proliferation:

Over Population

Over population is one of the major reasons for church proliferation in Nigeria. Apart from the growing number of Nigerian population, some church's through evangelism are able to increase the number of members and attendees rapidly, this often than not lead to the opening of new branches of the same church.

In other cases, some junior pastor who feels that, he/she had done more in the recruitment of new members and is not getting the deserved reward may decide to pull out of the church to start a new church with the believe that, he has the ability to increase the number of members within the shortest possible time having done it in his previous church.

Over Population and Social Vices

Despite the leader or pastor of a church being called, ordained, filled with anointing, the population of the church can affect the moral conduct of the members. When a church is too big, the lead pastor finds it increasingly difficult to solely manage the affairs of the church, therefore he/she delegates duties to subordinates. These sub-ordinates may misunderstand the leader, misinterpret his massages and instructions or may out rightly disobey the leader thereby misleading those directly under his charge to the extent that rather than living a Christian life as a convert, they continue to retain their old ways which is a societal vice.

Heresies Preachers and Heretic followers

The rapid increase in churches and pastors in Nigeria have also witnessed the distortion in the preaching of the gospel. So many pastors today pick and choose what to preach from the bible, while the members (Christians) also pick and choose what to believe from the preaching. Some pastor no longer, believes that the Bible is the word of God, they sees the Bible as a tool for merchandizing their church members. This situation though having kept many in the church, have equally reduced drastically the morals of these "Christians" to the extent that social vices is viewed as a norm in the society.

Ordain to Retain:
As a way of retaining members in a particular church, pastors no ordain people without regards to their spiritual growth. Most ordination across many churches today is not done based on sound doctrinal discipleship, rather on the need to ensure that the ordained member continued to worship in that same church. This is especially where the one to be ordained is deemed useful to the church. For example a member who is a talented singer, drummer or financially stable will easily be ordained a Deacon, youth pastor or choir minister in other to give the member a sense of elevation and importance in the church in other to retain them within the services of the church.

These spiritually bankrupt members and church leaders are more often than not morally bankrupt and a menace to the society despite their daily visit to the church building. Some of these erroneously ordained church leaders are quick to break away to start a new church, especially if and when they are rebuked for wrong doings. The only plausible outcome of such churches will be the repeat of the circle of ordain to retain, spiritual and moral bankruptcy, and a breakaway to form new church and all forms of social vices (Ngwu, 2014, Ogunnaike, 2020).

Leadership tussle and unhealthy rivalry:
Disagreement between church leaders is responsible for the tearing and breaking of some churches, leading to the emergence of a new church. A good example of leadership tussle induced church proliferation is the Assemblies of God Church that has been engrossed in crisis for over decade, leading to factional leadership and breakaway (The Sun News, 2016).

The eviction of Paul Emeka the General Superintendent of Assemblies of God Church in March 2017, by his former deputy Chidi Okoroafor on the allegations of gross misconduct and financial impropriety had led to the factionalization of the church and the pulling out of the South-South Zone of the church (Punch, 2016). Other members and junior ministers in the church have also pulled out to found a new church of their own (The Independent, 2019).

Emphasis on Seed Sowing

One of the very sore point in the relationship between church proliferation and increase in social vices is the emphasis place on seed sowing and raping. Most pastors, especially of the new generation movement are in the business of interpreting the bible in such a ways that its sooths their economic purpose. The gospel of seed sow is preached in such a way that it does not encourage hard work; preacher presents it in such a manner that as long as you keep sowing you shall reap divinely without having to work.

This situation has bred the culture of laziness among believers who are always waiting for "Manner" from Heaven. When this miracle fail to show up within a reasonable time, most of them are drawn to all forms of social vice in frustration.

Unaccountability

Religious organization in Nigeria especially the church are not accountable to anyone. Their finances are never audited by the authorities, neither do they make tax returns. This state of affairs had prompted some criminal minded people within the population to collaborate with church authorities to use the church account to launder illegal money. Pastors accept donations, seeds, tithes from "members" without asking for the source of the fund. Church account has become the easiest avenue to launder illegally acquired financial wealth without trace (Verdian, 2025).

Most pastors rather see their members as customers, who must pay for every serve rendered, ranging from preaching, praying, fasting etc. At the beginning of every year, pastors make a careful calculation of the years income through the receipt of first fruit. First fruit which is the total first income of a church member is used to project and calculate the 10% monthly tithe for the entire year. Where the pastor felt inadequate, the marketing (evangelism) depart of the church is often mobilize and despatched to go-a-fishing for members (Price, 2025).

Conclusion

This work on church proliferation and social vices concluded that, there are myriads of reasons for the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. These hydra headed monster may not abate in the near future, rather there are signs that church

proliferations will increase with time given the prevailing economic situation in the country.

Majority of the reason for church proliferation is purely economical by nature than religious. Therefore except if and when the economy of Nigeria as a nation changes for the better, churches will continue to spring up at every turn. While pastors and preacher sees church planting as an employment opportunity and a convenient way for quick money making without working so hard. Some members also sees the church as a place to cure their economic problems through miracle money without having to work hard.

The closing down and buying over of business areas, warehouses, factories to establish churches only help to swell the number of unemployed people, who in turn rely on the church to pray for employment opportunity. Without employment for an elongated period of time, this vast army of unemployed people are susceptible to social vices especially without sound doctrine and Christian teachings.

The emphasis on seed sowing as the only avenue through which to access God's mega financial blessing without working is an open invitation to social vices at a catastrophic level. When an unemployed or partially employed person is aggressively persuaded to sow and keep sowing to attain greater harvest, while the reaper makes merchandize of him, the sower will inevitably resort to unethical means to raise the needed fund to keep sowing so as to protect his initial "investment" especially when the slogan is "if you stop sowing you stop reaping". Again, pastor's emphasis on tithe as the only sure means of preserving wealth or growing wealth is another method of ensuring they (pastors) partake in the work reward of church members without having to labour directly by themselves.

Finally the absence of sound doctrine and teaching in the church have denied church members all the needed defense against the whirls of the devil, therefore despite the geometric increase in the number of churches, social vices have continued to grow in leaps and bounds.

Recommendations

Haven established the nexus between church proliferation and increase in social vices, this study makes the following recommendations.

1. That the opening of new churches should be properly regulated by the Christian Association of Nigeria and the Nigerian Government aside the mandatory registration with Corporate Affairs Commission.
2. That every aspects of church activities should be taxed, including also church properties (moveable and none moveable).
3. That the finances of the church like that of every other businesses should be opened to audit, scrutiny and probe by the government.
4. That church activities should be property regulated, including its establishment, expansion, and modus operandi.
5. That churches should be banned from buying up other business areas like clubs, factories, warehouses etc for religious gathering.
6. That the advertisement of "miracles" on television and social media be banned. Where any "miracle" is found to be fallacious, stage managed, the pastor must be arrested and the church closed down.
7. That the sales of "spiritual" items like, spiritual, soap, oil, fish, stone sand, lion of Judah, perfume etc by pastors should be out rightly prohibited.
8. That the raising of fund in church through the sale of miracle items like, hankichefs branded stickers, bangles and T-shirts and other such items should be prohibited.

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