

Reflections on Folktales in the 21st Century: Perspectives from Bakiga Youths

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Abstract

Characterised by technological advancement, urbanisation, and cultural changes, the 21st century presents a variety of documentation, both in print and digital forms. These different media forms provide different ways of entertainment, communication, and education. Consequently, traditional forms of entertainment and education, like folklore, that were popular in previous centuries, especially in the African traditional communities are seemingly less utilised; thus, given less attention. Yet, the role they play in handing down cultural values from generation to generation cannot be overlooked. This paper, therefore, presents the reflections and perspectives of the young generation among the Bakiga on how the role of folktales can be revitalised in society. The study was carried out in Rubanda and Kabale districts, in southwestern Uganda. Data was collected through documentary review as well as the use of informal and unstructured interviews with four focus group discussions composed of ordinary youths, aged 14-20 years, both male and female. These youths were interviewed to get their perspectives on folktales, their role, their translation, and how they can be preserved and/or revived in their communities in the present times. The study reveals that although changing times have negatively affected the propagation of cultural values through folklore, the youths, working with language scholars, can do some literary work to reincorporate them in education.

Keywords: Folklore, folktale, youths, cultural values, literary work, translation

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Introduction

Overview

In African societies, folktales have always played a critical role in the realms of entertainment, informal education as well as passing on knowledge and propagating the culture from generation to generation. Traditionally, folktales were always told in the evening around fireplaces; gatherings that enhanced family ties and social cohesion. As Amali (2014, p.3) notes, folktales are an integral part of the African oral society and they perform roles ranging from “didactic to entertainment alignment and educative functions”. In many African societies, an important aspect of traditional education was inculcated through oral literature by use of different literary devices, such as folktales, legends, myths, riddles, and proverbs which all aimed at moulding character and providing children with moral values, such as unity, honesty, integrity, courage, and solidarity. Most importantly, folktales, as a form of oral literature, draw their material from the realities of society and, hence, reflect people’s values and worldviews. Thus, folktales constitute an important tool for transmitting and preserving shared values and collective experience (Enongene, 2018). Even in modern times, folktales continue to play an important role in preserving indigenous knowledge and values.

Unfortunately, this invaluable genre of oral literature and traditions

is on the verge of extinction due to the sweeping forces of globalisation and commercial entertainment (Tshering, 2010). Kizza (2010, read in Sanu, 2020, p.2) observes that urbanisation and technology, coupled with the long-term effects of colonisation, are threatening folklore and oral traditions. Thus, “there is deep concern about the speed at which stories that anchor this oral tradition and the languages that sustain them are disappearing with the passing of each generation of Africans”. It is, thus, critical that these pertinent knowledge and literature preserving “reservoirs” are revived through various forms, including their translation into various languages, which permits linguistic border-crossing.

Moreover, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) acknowledges that folktales play a critical role in bringing people closer together and “ensuring exchange and understanding among them”. In Africa and world over today, literature contained in folktales remains important because of the values embedded in the tales. Folktales, old as they may be considered, still carry important messages relating to values for “global citizenship, such as respect for diversity, human rights, and sustainable development” (Kim, 2010, p.3). Kiyimba (2001) makes a critical assertion that oral literature is still a valuable medium of entertainment

and social education. In the education realm, Kim (2010) observes that teachers today can still use folktales as a tool to educate children on how to live with integrity and peacefully with others right from a tender age. This presupposes that folklore in general and folktales in particular enhance one's thinking ability. Dundes (1965, p. 277, cited in Namulundah, 2016) notes how folklore aids, "in the education of the young, promoting a group's feeling of solidarity, providing socially sanctioned ways for individuals to act superior to or to censure other individuals, serving as a vehicle for social protest, offering an enjoyable escape from reality, and converting full work into play." Some folktales can make one wonder and laugh while others open the listeners and/or readers to new discoveries. In terms of scholarship, the myths and folktales of societies have long been studied for the insights they provide about the cultures that create and perpetuate them (Namulundah, 2016). I would say that by their literary nature, folktales are figurative and use a lot of proverbial imagery. They compare various facets of life usually expressed in form of metaphors. Not only do they identify culture which is learned and shared by all members of a particular society, but they also conceal the deeper meaning which is unambiguous in speech or writing and are truthful. As Lekau (2017, Abstract) posits, folktales "may be as old as the hill, but they contain real issues about life in general and human nature in particular which people

have observed". Folktales can be equated to a storehouse of a society's knowledge, a way of recalling and transmitting wisdom of the past through generations in an entertaining manner (Canonici, 1993).

One would wonder, why am I interested in investigating the youths' reflections on folktales. As a scholar in translation studies and a literary translator, particularly translating folktales from Runyankore-Rukiga¹ in the 21st century, it is important to hear the voices of the ordinary young generation who, back in time, would ideally be the key "consumers" of the folktales. Though folklore is an echo of the past, it is at the same time, the vigorous voice of the present (Sokolov, 2011). This is affirmed by Agatucci (2000) who observes that the oral arts of Africa are rich and varied, developing with the beginnings of African cultures, and that they remain living traditions that continue to evolve and flourish today.

In terms of performing arts, citing the African Folklore Encyclopaedia, (2009) Goatley, (2016, p. 21) indicates that the folktale is perhaps the "quintessential expression of verbal art in Africa". She further notes that although its significance may have decreased with the spread of literacy and urbanisation in Africa, the folktale is still vividly narrated in rural domestic settings. One can conclude here that, folklore whether in form of folk songs, folktales, riddles, and

¹ Runyankore-Rukiga is a Bantau language spoken in western and southwestern Uganda.

proverbs plays a big role in handing down cultural values from generation to generation. However, Utpola (2017) observes that, although the folklore materials including folktales are as old as human society, the systematic study of these materials in the spirit of modern academics is relatively recent. Therefore, the present study contributes to scholarship in this field.

Aim of the study and research questions

The objective of the study was to capture the reflections and perspectives of the young generation among the Bakiga about the popular traditional forms of education, particularly, the folktales and how they can be revitalised in society. Ordinary as they may be considered, it is important to bring their narratives and voices into scholarship amidst major shifts and changes of the present times. The research questions formulated were to capture the perspectives of the youths on folktales, the importance of folktales in society as well as their thoughts about translating folktales into different languages. The study also aimed at capturing the suggestions and views of the Bakiga youths about the revival and/or preservation of folktales for future generations and how they can be reincorporated in society as a form of education in the 21st century. Finally, the study aimed at capturing the forms of leisure and entertainment among the Bakiga youths as well as the

cultural programmes through which they access folklore. My choice for this particular group, the youths, can be justified by the observation made by Goatley (2016, p.35) that, “folktales constitute a kind of ‘catch-them-young medium’ in which certain important qualities of life are inculcated into children”. Thus, folktales present much opportunity for exploration of how values, beliefs, qualities of life, and behaviours can be mediated and instilled in young generations especially the youths.

Review of the Related Literature

Various folklorists have conducted studies on folktales (Thompson, 1994; Tshering, 2010; Namulundah, 2016) and have brought in different narratives into scholarship, either by analysing folktales as a specific literary genre, taking into account various aspects of society, ranging from gender to power relations, others by collecting different folktales and fairy tales across the globe; while others have elaborated in detail the role folktales play in society. While elucidating the importance of folklore, Tshering (2010) posits that rich oral traditions that include folktales, local myths, and legends are related to the local history, land-forms, and place-names. And that these oral traditions have been a source of value education as well as entertainment especially in traditional rural societies, and they hold the essence of a unique culture and traditions of a particular society. This insinuates that traditionally,

folktales are more popular in rural contexts than urban ones. This implies that folktales orature is a vast field of knowledge in which cultural information and messages are transmitted verbally from one generation to the next, although there is an increase in written folktales as well as other documentation forms especially in digital and audio-visual devices in modern times (Sanu 2020). Different scholars (Achebe, 1987; Thompsom, 1994; Insaideo, 2011; Owomoyela, 2002, read in Sanu, 2020) have emphasised the essentiality of folktale or storytelling as an art form in African societies, which serves as an essential tool for entertainment, documentation, and education. Thompsom (1994, p.4) gives a comprehensive overview of the folktale as:

All forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years. In this regard, the traditional nature of the material of folktales cannot be overlooked. While contrasting the traditional story teller or griot as was popularly known in West Africa, with the modern story writer, the teller of a folktale is proud of his ability to hand on that which he has received. He endeavors to impress his readers or hearers with the fact that he is bringing them something that has the stamp of good authority, that the tale was heard from some great story-teller or from some aged person who remembered it from old days.

Folktales reflect a group's cultural identity and serve as tools of education as much as entertainment in relatively isolated communities.

The supernatural and magic present in folktales, particularly fairy tales play an important socialising role. Citing Orenstein (2002, p. 10), Goatley, (2016, p.29), affirms that the supernatural is actually linked to a distinctly real-world social purpose of fairy tales, which is “among the most powerful socialising narratives” –disguised as “make-believe, they prepare us to join the real world and provide us with lessons that last a lifetime”. Tales of the present and of the mysterious past, of animals and gods and heroes, and of men and women like themselves, hold listeners in their spell or enrich the conversation of daily life (Thompson, 1994. p3). Setting folktales in a fantastic, non-human world “lifted the minds of narrator and listener to a world without limitations and blissful wish fulfillment” (Rohrich & Tokofsky 1991, p. 92). Listeners and readers tolerate the exaggerated events such as talking animals, marriage between ogres and humans, sadistic acts, and unnatural escapes without rationalistic deliberations (Namulundah, 2016, p.5). Similarly, the educational role played by folktales have been overemphasised in all the works of folklorists. Citing Bascom (1996), Namulundah (2016, p.268) notes that, as an educative tool, folktales provide a network of meanings for cultural norms and practices, “the image and

its images” of other groups; although there is a difference between folklore and culture. If we talk of modern times, Vuyokazi and Zilungile (2016) emphasise that folklore especially folktales and traditional children’s songs are a rich and perennial reservoir through which young students can acquire not only literacy skills, but also cognitive, linguistic, and social skills that can help them to become active citizens in the world and the workplace.

From the literature, it is evident that folktales constitute the “social and cultural capital” of humanity in any society (Mota, 2009, p.11). The binary phenomena always present in these stories, good versus evil, just versus unjust, strong versus weak inculcate values especially among children which are important for making choices and decision making in life. Folktales normally portray contrasting forces of good against evil, cleverness against the stupidity, heroes against villains, favoured spouses against neglected ones, all of which reflect the ambivalence in the lives of most listeners (Namulundah, 2016).

As Pegulescu (2009, p. 23) notes, there is always a narrative compactness in any fairy tale, a certain rhythm of revelation, unpredictable events, confrontation between “good” and “evil”, “fairness” and perversity”. While citing the words of Achebe, Agatucci (2000, p.12) observes that we can learn about a culture by learning its stories because, “If you look at

these stories carefully, you will find they support and reinforce the basic tenets of the culture. The storytellers worked out what is right and what is wrong, what is courageous and what is cowardly, and they translate this into stories”. This literary genre has a particular socio-cultural and didactic value for writers, as well as being shaped by enduring and specific narrative conventions and nostalgia. And folktales potentially offer storytellers and their recipients collections of “values, beliefs and attitudes, plus certain already set patterns of behaviour” (Lekau, 2015, p. 301).

It is equally important to note that folktales are not bound by time, space, geographical or social boundaries. Thus, they offer “rich residues of cultural entanglement especially those narratives that have continued in various forms over periods of time, and those that migrate across borders and continents; a story is taken from the people, recorded in a literary document, carried across continents or preserved through centuries, and then retold to a humble entertainer who adds it to his repertory” (Thompson, 1994, p. 5). And Goatley. (2016, p.19) observes that, in their form and content, folktales contain “facets of their pasts in their present versions: temporalities unfold and refold, time in the narrative is imagined, created, re-imagined and re-created by storytellers”. The teller of stories or griot has everywhere and always found eager listeners. Whether

his tale is the mere report of a recent happening, “a legend of long ago, or an elaborately contrived fiction, men and women have hung upon his words and satisfied their yearnings for information or amusement, for incitement to heroic deeds, for religious edification, or for release from the over powering monotony of their lives” (Thompson, 1994, p.3). He further notes that:

This oral art of tale telling is far older than history, and it is not bounded by one continent or one civilisation. Stories may differ in subject from place to place, the conditions and purposes of tale telling may change as we move from land to land or from century to century, and yet everywhere it ministers to the same basic social and individual needs. The call for entertainment to fill in the hours of leisure has found most people very limited in their resources, and except where modern urban civilisation has penetrated deeply they have found the telling of stories one of the most satisfying of pastimes. Curiosity about the past has always brought eager listeners to tales of the long ago which supply the simple man with all he knows of the history of his folk (p.5).

Generally, adaptations of folktales from diverse cultures, ethnicities, and languages can expose us to the widening cultural and global landscape, hence providing a bridge to the past, a link with cultures, generations and with the future (Blake & Kruger,

1994; Heckler & Birch, 1997) cited by Sanu, 2020). To conclude this part, I can say that in any society, among other things, folktales are important for entertainment and education, but also serve as a bonding ritual.

Theoretical Framework

The study is premised on the contextual theory (Abrahams, *et al.*, 1968, read in Borah, 2017). According to this theory, items of folklore, such as folktales or storytelling, singing, rituals and festivals, and conversations should not merely be seen as texts but rather as events, where contexts of their performances are regarded as important as the texts. This is important for scholars working with such folklore to note that, as they deal with texts, the context where such texts are produced and performed are equally important. This is because participation in a folkloric performance is not a mere play practice for participants, but is a social and artistic forum through which they acquire survival skills and grow connected to values of their society. This indicates that in the processes of storytelling and meaning making, the young people draw an analogical relationship between imagined situations in folklore and living realities in their local environment (Jireta, 2018). Even when a folktale is performed “largely for artistic reasons, performers and audiences hardly lose sight of its moral or meaning, whether it advocates patience, punishes greed and selfishness or merely explains the source of the crab’s fatty shell”

(Yankah, 2009, p. 269, read in Goatley, 2016, p.29) And as Agatucci (2000) notes, oral African storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience. He further notes that everyone in most traditional African societies participates in formal and informal storytelling as interactive oral performance. Such participation is an essential part of traditional African communal life; and basic training in a particular culture's oral arts and skills is an essential part of children's traditional indigenous education on their way to initiation into full humanness. To fully understand and appreciate African storytelling traditions, one needs to study them in the context of the cultures which produce the stories. This is also very important for translators of such folklore to take into consideration the cultural context of the texts which they work with in order to correctly render such texts from the source text into the target text. This is very vital while transferring folktales from one language into another, especially languages that are geographically and culturally distant, such as translating between African and European languages.

Methodology and Data Collection

The study was purely qualitative. Firstly, data was collected through documentary review of the literature related to the topic. However, in order to get more qualitative insights and reflections of the ordinary Bakiga youths on folktales, four unstructured

focus group discussions (FGDs) were organised, with the use of unstructured and informal interviews. The groups were composed of ordinary Bakiga youths, aged 14-24 years, male and females from the districts of Rubanda and Kabale. These were boys and girls selected in a purposive way, some of whom were still in school, while others were already out of school and were engaged in different economic activities, especially *boda-boda* (motorcycling) riders.

The views were recorded, transcribed and translated from Rukiga into English for better analysis. Data was analysed basing on narrative analysis as a technique in analysing qualitative data in research. As Merriam (1998, cited by Kawulich, 2015) posits, translation and reformulation of stories presented by respondents should be done while taking into account the different experiences of each respondent in order to discover repeated similarities in peoples' stories. Thus, the participants' views and experiences were captured and later on analysed as presented herein under the results and discussion section.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study. The section capitalises on the perspectives and insights given by the study participants on folktales in general and translating them into other languages, and their interpretation. Due attention is paid to the context of this 21st century,

characterised by many dynamics of the “modern” times.

According to the findings of the study, it is evident that the ordinary Bakiga youths know the role played by the folktale and their views and opinions cannot be underestimated as they are the future generation. In their narratives, the youths appreciate the role played by folktales in inculcating values and virtues among the people especially the young ones as well as getting knowledge about their cultural heritage as they listen to the tales as well as entertainment.

Unlike in the past where families would converge around the fireplaces to listen to tales from the “sage”, the study indicated that this role has been relegated to FM radios which play a great role in transmitting cultural knowledge. According to the participants in the discussions, almost all FM radio stations in Kabale have a programme on folklore where folktales, proverbs, riddles, tongue twisters are presented and listeners call in to participate. Such programmes are particularly aired on Voice of Kigezi, Radio Maria– Kabale, Freedom FM, Hills FM, Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) West. A part from the programme on Voice of Kigezi whose target audience is both children and adult, the programme on folktales on all the other radio stations target children as the names of the programmes suggest, *Puroguraamu ey’abato* (children’s programme). Although the respondents were drawn from both Rubanda and Kabale

Districts, it should be noted that all radio stations in the two districts are located in Kabale Municipality, as Rubanda District was initially part of Kabale District, before it was granted a district status in 2016.

The study also reveals the importance of translating folktales into other languages. This helps both the source and target language communities to understand different cultural aspects. In economic terms, the translation activity is also important as a source of income for translators.

The study further reveals that there is a need for language and cultural scholars to write, translate, and publish more books on language and socio-cultural aspects, where literary information, including folktales, proverbs, riddles, tongue twisters can be accessed as suggested by one participant:

If I know a folktale in Rukiga and I find it in Kiswahili paper, I can use the knowledge in my mother tongue to understand better the Kiswahili text. And if I know it in Rukiga and I know Kiswahili, if I meet Swahili speakers, then we can share knowledge. I narrate to them the story.
(Female respondent, 17 years)

And another participant emphasised the importance of learning about other cultures accessed through translation as quoted saying, “...and If I don’t know English, and a folktale is translated into my language, then I learn it, or even in many other languages.”

Therefore, the role played by folktales in intellectual development and academic achievement among school-going children cannot go unnoticed. To that regard, a participant during a focus group discussion had this to say, “some texts in English exams, at times exist in local languages as well. So, if one knows the folktale already in the local language, it helps you academically by passing such a paper highly.” This is indicative of the role of language in capturing and reinforcing meaning out of a text.

Another important finding is the shifts and dynamics in forms of leisure activities of modern times. In recent times, the forms of leisure and entertainment have changed and the youths’ interests have shifted to other activities, especially football for the boys and listening to music for the girls. Football includes both active playing in their local village football teams but also watching Premier League live matches for the few who may have access to TV or listening to the same on radios, which is a common practice. This then confirms the observation by Kizza (2010) as indicates in the literature that urbanisation and technology are threatening folklore and oral traditions and the “speed at which stories that anchor this oral tradition and the languages that sustain them are disappearing with the passing of each generation,” especially in Africa. About how the youths spend their leisure time, this is what they had to say:

“*kunuya, eky’amaani n’omupiira*”
(In our community, the biggest event is football). We only play football or listen in on the radio, especially for Premier League. (A participant referring to boys).

For us, we basically listen to music on phone or on radio. (A participant referring to girls)

This aspect particularly caught my eyes to realise that, in this community, just like in the past, leisure activities are gender-specific and the girls cannot participate in football despite the fact that football is a developed sport in Uganda and there is a full national female football team, the “She Cranes”.

I would argue that these are some of the socially constructed gender roles whereby particular societies dictate social roles and gender demarcations, a characteristic that is also common in folktales and proverbs. I would think that this is not only common among the Bakiga as it seems to be a common practice in other places in Africa, as exemplified by Namundah (2016) from one community in Kenya, cited as follows, “Indeed, my deceased grandfather, Wanami, (1979) along with younger conservative Bukusu men and women, would dismiss women’s football as *busilu* (foolishness)”.

As there are major changes and shifts in today’s modern world, especially in the technological realm, the study reveals that there are societal changes in terms of economic dynamics and subsistence.

The attention has shifted to focus more on survival, with the “Money first” mentality. “The most important thing is money. What will I eat? How do I survive?” (FDG participant). As a result, more time is accorded to socio-economic activities in quest for resources that have become scarcer. Due to these changes in the way of living, there are no more fireplaces and beer parties where people, among Bakiga communities would come together to drink *omuramba* (a traditional local alcoholic drink). It was during such moments that storytelling would happen.

Similarly, there have been changes in social roles and socialisation processes as parents have become so busy. The study particularly indicates that there is absence of male parents in homes, especially in the evenings as they are always attending to their personal social being in bars. As one participant indicated:

Ebintu bikabinduka! Abazaire shi baine obwire? (Things have changed! Parents don't have the time!) I have never seen my dad seated at home! He is never home! He is always in the bar! Where do I get him to start telling the tales? (A disappointed participant)

This is in line with Nsamenang's (2000, p. iii) observation on the role of fathers as he asserts that, “father presence matters in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development”.

From the study, it is clear that there are sessions in schools where cultural knowledge is transmitted.

This is particularly in lower primary, Primary One and Two (P1-P2) of the Ugandan education system. However, it is evident that there is thirst for more of such moments among the youths as they urge for more of such sessions as it came out from the study:

Teachers should make sure that such topics like storytelling are allocated time on the syllabus. If I were an Education Officer, I would endeavour to make sure that such topics are incorporated in the school programmes. Unfortunately, I am not, so I can't do much. (A participant)

No wonder Kim (2010, p.2) reveals that:

...folktales never cease to be relevant even today and will remain so in the future... teachers and parents need not to try to teach values explicitly, but rather just tell tales, thus maintaining folktales as a tool to educate children on how to live with integrity and peacefully with others in society.

The study also reveals that the Ugandan school system is not harmonised and there is a need for a harmonised school system which would enable all schools to have local languages with cultural content. This should be both in private and government schools and both in rural and urban schools. This is because, other than the compulsory subjects, schools at secondary level decide on which optional subjects to be offered. In the process, languages have always been relegated to the back bench. This is a major concern

as one participant in the study urged; “Introduce Runyankore-Rukiga or local languages and even make them compulsory in all schools, not having some schools with different subjects.”

According to the study, academicians, scholars, storytellers and translators are urged to do what they are good at; write, write and write. “Scholars should write, publish, and distribute books with such folklore both in local and foreign languages,” one participant recommended. And translators are urged to transfer knowledge in different languages; translate books, both from and into local languages – “Write novels in local languages and even translate them into other languages. Those who teach other languages like Kiswahili or French should also translate them,” a participant recommended.

As a reflection, on the whole, basing on the study, the youths need to approach elders to ask about the cultural knowledge contained in folklore. The study reveals that folklore materials, such as folktales are increasingly becoming less popular and the few youths who knew some folktales are beginning to forget them. There is a need for all stakeholders, particularly academicians, scholars in language and cultural studies, translators, teachers, and government to take deliberate actions to preserve the cultural heritage contained in folklore if such literary genres and the knowledge contained therein are to be conserved.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented the reflections of the ordinary Bakiga youths about folktales, their role in society, their translation and how they can be revived and incorporated into the formal education system. When all is said and done, we can say that the folktale is a special literary creation, and a presentation of life at various levels. Messages in folktales quite often, emphasise virtues of goodness, justice, peace, morality discipline, moral uprightness, respect, hard work and courage and rebuke vices of theft, rudeness, hatred, dishonesty, injustice which are all applicable to any citizen of today’s globalised world. Unfortunately, due to pressures of the modernised and technologically advanced globalised world, this special literary genre is on the verge of extinction. It is important that different protagonists from different domains: folklorists, anthropologists, cultural and literary studies scholars, translators, writers, and publishers do whatever is in their means to save this precious knowledge and culture propagation method in all possible documentation forms, both print and digital to meet the literary needs of the 21st century. This is not far from Thompsom’s thinking (1994, p.6) that “literary critics, anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and aestheticians are all needed if we are to hope to know why folktales are made, how they are invented, what art is used in their telling, how they grow and change and occasionally die”.

In other words, a systematic study and analysis of folklore, in general, and folktales, in particular, is crucial for the documentation, preservation, and conservation of cultural heritage of any society. To that end, the current modern technological trends should be exploited to popularise the folktales, especially among the youths so that they still remain attractive as

a mode of entertainment, but in a different mode of dissemination. There is a need to conceptualise and theorise folklore in general and folktales in particular, not only because this kind of knowledge is at the verge of extinction, but because this literary genre will further understanding of society, especially the African humanistic societies.

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