

The Biafra Story in Film: An Appraisal of Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Diverse scholarly and artistic expressions in book form and documentary films have been employed to document the story of the Nigerian Civil War by persons who were actively or peripherally involved in the events surrounding it. Attempts at telling the story have been coloured by different factors like military, political, ethno religious and egocentric considerations. This study examined the war's account through Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a filmic adaptation of Chimamanda Adichie's novel with the same title. Using qualitative content analysis method and grounded on the Trauma and Cinema Theory, the study examined the film's representation of historical facts and how such perspectives may have been received. The film's reception by the Nigerian cinema audience and government through the cinema regulatory authority were examined. The study concluded that the suppression of critical historical facts in the film through censorship represents the unwillingness of the government to allow for citizen conversation, which the film could provoke and which may lead to proper closure and possibly lay to rest, the ghost of the fratricidal war that almost ripped the country apart between July 1967 and January 1970.

Keywords: Biafra, Film, Representation of history, Suppression, Repression, Fratricidal war.

Introduction

Less than six years as an independent nation, Nigeria descended into a bloody civil war that would claim about two million lives (Okonta, 2018). Works of fiction, biographies and autobiographies of some dramatist personae in the conflict, poetry collections, and even cinematic works to tell the conflict's story are numerous. According to McLuckie (1990), 20 years after the war, about 29 literary pieces on Biafra's story had been done. Nevertheless, by 2003, the figure had climbed to more than 35 works of fiction and a dozen autobiographies (Hodges, 2010). Filmmakers, both amateur and professional, have also explored the subject matter of the Biafra War. Online platforms such as *YouTube* and *TikTok* house a large cache of full-length and short fiction and documentary films on the same subject. It is within this context that this article appraises the Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a cinematic adaptation of Chimamanda Adichie's novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It examines how the film captured/represented the facts of history around the civil war and whether the attempt may have addressed the critical issues that led to war and the film's reception by the film viewing audience and the regulatory (government) authorities.

Representation of History with the Film Medium

As a medium of mass communication, film captures and represents society as it continues to evolve. Fiction films or the documentary genre present potent tools for representing, evaluating, and preserving history (Omoera, 2020). Following the invention of the motion picture camera and cinema projection technology, human civilization was armed with an effective instrument to expand how humanity could communicate. Cinema content is built mainly around history. It could be personal or communal history. It could also be imagined history or the factual. In other words, when a film narrative is built around the experiences, challenges and struggles of an individual or group of individuals within a joint or complex context often created by the auteur (director), a slice of history is served. Equally, when an auteur creatively treats reality (Berkeley, 2019) and not imagination, collective history or the history of a known/specific geopolitical space would have been served in the form of a documentary film.

Whether we are dealing with a documentary film or fiction, it remains clear that the filmmaker handles history always. Films such as *Mandela* (1987), *Titanic* (1997), *Julius Caesar* (1953), and *Escape from Sobibor* (1987) are good examples of films based on actual life events or history.

Auteurs of these films explored the cinematic medium to represent /document historical events. Their efforts have been received and interpreted in diverse ways by scholars, critics and the general cinema audience. This presupposes that their works have impacted society one way or the other. However, this study is more concerned with specific historical events that have received cinematic treatments. The Nigerian Civil War forms a complicated stratum on the historical ladder of the country. The modern-day cinema space in Nigeria (Nollywood) registered its first film on the Biafra War in Simi Oluwa's *The Battle of Love* (2000) and Ndubuisi Okoh's *Laraba* (2000). Both films explored the themes of love centred on the challenges of safety, ethnic violence, social dislocation, estrangement, and parental opposition to intertribal marriage between couples of Igbo and Hausa extractions (Okonta and Meagher, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

The appraisal of the film, *Half of a Yellow Sun* will be grounded by the Trauma in Cinema Theory, which evolved through several scholarly essays over the years. The term trauma has its roots in the Greek word for "wound" (Pligi), which manifested in western medical practice in the late 19th century (Meek, 2014) as the description for physical injury. Subsequently, the psychological interpretation of trauma began to emerge in scholarly discourse when it was applied in respect of railroad workers who "developed neurological disorders without suffering any injury" (Meek 2014, p.484). Film theorists like Elsaesser (2001), Kaplan (2001), and Walker (2001) began to use psychological theories of trauma to expand the understanding of cinema in the early years of the 21st century. Specifically, scholars have applied the trauma concept to map and explain how films represent or fail to represent catastrophic events in the past.

The application of trauma in cinema's study promotes documentary film, especially the experimental and aesthetic approaches. However, trauma theories have been used to analyse fiction films, mainly the melodramatic genre, to showcase societal/community trauma. In his seminal work "Postmodernism as Mourning Work," Elsaesser (2001) X-rays how trauma opens new avenues for questioning the relationship between cinema spectatorship and fantasy. He argues that the exponential increase in the study of trauma and cinema indicates how modern media have impacted the global perception of historical events and memory. The psychological trauma theory has attempted to explain "the delayed mental effects of disturbing experiences" (Elsaesser, 2001, p. 484). The experiences

in question may have been forgotten because the conscious mind cannot make sense of such experiences when they occurred. Nevertheless, the recollections (memories) of such events are relieved by the victims in the form of nightmares, phobias or even "compulsive behaviours."

The development of the trauma theory can be traced to Sigmund Freud's efforts in the 1890s, as recorded in his failed proposal of the seduction theory, which posited that premature sexual experiences cause hysteria. He later amended his submission by stating that hysteria was the effect of sexual fantasies rather than real encounters. His new perspective presented trauma as the effect of either actual or imagined occurrences. During World War I, Freud's personal experiences in battle encouraged him to elaborate on his shock theory. The theory explained how human consciousness constructed a "protective shield" against the effects of excessive sensory stimuli." This postulation explained trauma as the result of an external force that shatters that protective shield and argues further that people experience trauma when their "sense of self" is destroyed. In other words, Freud's position revolves around the perception of trauma as an external event of an internal psychological process.

Subsequently, Walter Benjamin, in his work "Writer of Modern Life" (2006), adapted Sigmund Freud's theory to explain the role the mass media (newspapers, photography, and film) should play in protecting people from the unpleasant effects of urban lifestyle. This development marked the initial linkage/connection of the concept of trauma to film in which the cinematic art is expected to "block" (Benjamin, 2006, p.485) trauma instead of representing it. The works of Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin (2006) further analyzed the ways representations through films can serve as psychological protection against "external threats to the self". On the other hand, Elsaesser (2001) as cited in Meek (2014) argues that by using film narrative, personal testimony of trauma can be publicly "witnessed and validated." This implies that film mediates the void between public and private memory, eventually leading to audience identification with trauma. Similarly, Kaplan (2005), and Walker (2005), while evaluating trauma in film, state that film is either a symptom of trauma or deploys some other means to represent it.

Trauma in cinema has indeed witnessed several interpretations as scholars strive to create meaning and effectively locate it in film narratives to achieve a level of audience identification with the event(s) of the past that had catastrophic consequences. The central ideas running through the various attempts by film theorists in the application of trauma theory in

cinema could be encapsulated in: (i) how the film represents past (historical) events through characters (witnesses of traumatic events); (ii) how the film may have failed to represent facts of history surrounding the violent, catastrophic, abusive, or dehumanising event(s); and (iii) the connection the narrative achieves with the audience either leads to a closure of the traumatic event or provokes further audience (citizen) and/or government action(s). The theory, in simple terms, will mirror to what extent the facts of history may have been accurately or inaccurately represented in the film narrative. It will indicate whether the traumatic historical incidents were adequately presented and, signpost how all stakeholders received the film, leading to a possible closure.

Biyi Bandele's Half of a Yellow Sun

Half of a Yellow Sun opens with a euphoric atmosphere of Nigeria's independence in 1960 and concludes with the end of the war in 1970. Olanna and Kainene, two foreign-trained and newly returned twin daughters of Chief Ozobia (Zack Orji), a wealthy Igbo businessman in Lagos, are firmly established in the opening sequences. Kainene (Anika Noni Rose) chooses to join and run the family business. At the same time, Olanna (Thandie Newton) surprisingly opts to pick up a teaching appointment at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she lives with her "revolutionary professor" lover, Odenigbo (Chiwetel Ejiofor). Similarly, Kainene falls in love with a young shy British writer Richard Churchill (Joseph Mawle).

The film shifts focus to Nsukka, where the relationship between Odenigbo and Olanna is seriously opposed by Mama (Onyeka Onwenu), Odenigbo's mother. She sees Olanna as too educated and inappropriate for her son to marry. To actualise her objective, she gets her son drunk, and he ends up having a fling with Amala (Susan Wokoma), a village girl she prefers to the highly educated Olanna. That amorous affair produced a baby girl and a very heartbroken Olanna considers a break-up with Odenigbo but is convinced to remain in the relationship by her aunt, Ifeka (Gloria Young). Reconciliation happens between Odenigbo and Olanna, and they agree to raise Amala's girl child as theirs, named Chiamaka but fondly called "Baby." Richard and Kainene were also having their share of relationship challenges, forcing Richard to return to London. While waiting at the airport, he witnesses the gruesome killing of Igbo civilians by northern soldiers, signalling the pogrom that catalysed the civil war

outbreak. Olanna, while visiting Kano, is caught in a web of ethnic tension leading to serious violence. She narrowly escapes to the east.

With the declaration of independence by Biafra, Richard returns from London to join Kainene, who has changed her business line into a war profiteer importing arms to Biafra. The conflict compels Olanna and her family to evacuate several times from Nsukka to Aba to Umuahia. Having also reconciled with Mama, Olanna and Odenigbo decide to marry formally. In one of the film's traumatic scenes, they narrowly escape an enemy bombing raid during the wedding reception. With the bitter war dragging on and Biafra losing territory, Odenigbo and his family relocate to a refugee camp where they are joined by a repentant Kainene who offers to assist in running the camp. Ugwu (John Boyega), Odenigbo's houseboy, is conscripted into the Biafran military as a child soldier.

As events unfolded, supplies began to run out in the refugee camp, making Kainene decide to go behind enemy lines to trade with the locals. Despite Odenigbo's warnings, she proceeds with the risky mission and several days after, she was yet to return. Olanna and Richard's efforts to locate her proved abortive. However, they were relieved to learn that Ugwu survived the war as Biafra was capitulating very fast. Richard continued searching for Kainene while Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu and "Baby" rebuilt their lives. Kainene was never found from the postscript while Richard moves back to Nsukka. Olanna and Odenigbo remain married for nearly fifty years while Ugwu becomes a writer. Chiamaka (aka "Baby"), on the other hand, becomes a medical doctor.

Matters Arising: Colonial Complicity

The film's analysis is approached from the prism of the various themes treated in the film text more than the conventional film analysis technique. This route is chosen to focus on issues considered signposting the film's reception by the public and the government. The film text highlighted several issues that may have led to the armed conflict. Apart from the January 1966 coup and the counter-coup of July of the same year, the fragile foundation upon which the newly independent nation was founded came up. Issues such as corruption and distrust between the three major ethnic groups were highlighted. The arguments between Odenigbo and Miss Adebayo, as well as the conversation between the Hausa man and Olanna at the airport, coupled with Odenigbo's contentions with Richard about the ideologies of race and national identity

as introduced by the white man which makes him complicit in the entire process that birthed the conflict stand out in this regard.

The “forced coming together” (Adedipe, 2018) of over 500 distinct ethnic groups in Nigeria by the British is highly implicated in the turbulent political situation that embroiled the Nigerian nation immediately after independence. Ethnic conflicts and political greed sped up the collapse of the first republic. Similarly, citing Susan Strehle, he submits that *Half of a Yellow Sun* denotes that the Nigerian nation in historical context is “a nation created in Europe, by Europeans, for European profit, and infused with European ideological commitment to the nation as an emblem of popular unity” (Adedipe, 2018, p.3). Furthermore, while referring to Stanley Diamond's work, "Who killed Biafra," Adedipe (2018) argues that Britain remains “culpable for Nigeria’s ethnic struggles and the repression of Biafra” (p. 3) and insists that the successful establishment of the nation of Biafra was tantamount to the emancipation of Africa. In Stanley’s words as cited in Adedipe (2018)

If we fail, the white man, who has been so surprised by our movement, the white man, who has entirely miscalculated every facet of this struggle, will have garnered a new range of knowledge about the potential of the black man and prepared himself to combat us should we ever again rear our ugly head. We owe it, therefore, to Africa not to fail. Africa needs a Biafra. Biafra is the breaking of the chains. (p. 8)

Adedeji, Diamond and Strehle have seriously indicted the British. Their views seem to give credence to Odenigbo's argument/accusations in the film under examination. They agree that the colonialists are complicit in fostering the factors that led to the civil war. Beyond the British's direct and indirect actions that may have encouraged the conflict, its open alliance with Nigeria during the armed conflict through diplomatic, military and other forms of support leaves little or no room for it to extricate itself from such accusations. Odenigbo's strong argument against the British in the film finds justification in the face of such evidence against the colonialists. The British government expectedly ought to have stabilised Nigeria's young independent nation, being one of its colonies.

Pogrom

Pre-independence Nigeria had witnessed the massacre of the Igbos in northern Nigeria. The trend began in June 1945, when Igbo people were

killed in their thousands under ethno-religious circumstances in Jos and Kano in 1953. Records show that these incidents under British colonial rule were never officially investigated, and no single individual or persons were arrested for such criminality (Plotnicov, 1971). Between May and October 1966, 30,000 eastern Nigerian people, later known as Biafrans, were brutally murdered in northern Nigeria, followed by another 100,000 persons between October 1966 and June 1967. Similarly, from July 6, 1967, to January 15, 1970, over three and a half million Biafrans died in the civil war. Most civilians died out of starvation/malnutrition resulting from the Nigerian military government's strategic blockade with Britain's support (Det Udenrigspolitiske Nævn, 2013).

One controversy that has trailed the Nigerian Civil War is the issue of genocide. Writers such as Achebe (2012), Soyinka (1976) and Forsyth (2015) have pushed the narrative firmly that genocide occurred in Biafra during the war. However, international politics has not permitted a consensus on the question of genocide. The Nigerian government has often presented their case from the standpoint of "all is fair in war" as against the apparent position of most of the advocates of genocide in Biafra, which argues that the systematic and deliberate economic blockade was the height of a calculated effort at mass murder. Forsyth (2015), in his seminal work, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend*, drew attention to several acts such as the bombing of civilian targets like markets and refugees on transit, as well as the mass killing of unarmed people and non-fighting persons recorded in Asaba, Ohafia, Uzoakoli and some other locations in Biafra as examples of genocide. Whether the world recognises these events as genocidal acts, they remain sore points in the war and Nigeria's history as a nation. Therefore, these severely traumatic events should have commanded significant portions of the film's narrative. However, it remains glaring that such ingredients that made up the known facts and chronicles of the Biafra story received little prominence in Biyi Bandele's cinematic representation of the Biafra story. The shooting scene at Kano airport is perhaps the closest Bandele came at depicting the war's atrocities. The accurate presentation of the trauma associated with the conflict as recorded by other attempts, especially in literary forms, was completely abridged or altogether ignored in the film.

Refugee and Humanitarian Crises

The issues of internal displacement and refugees feature in the film as fallout of the war. Olanna, Ugwu and Odenigbo, just like other war victims in Biafra, fled from one location under imminent capture by the

enemy to the next safe place. Mama's insistence on remaining at her ancestral home in the face of apparent dangers posed by the invading Nigerian forces paints a picture of civilians' traumatic experiences in Biafra. The refugee situation is further captured when Olanna and her family link up with Richard and Kainene at a refugee camp. According to Forsyth (2015), Biafra's humanitarian and refugee situation was so enormous that it took the spirited efforts of nongovernmental organisations such as the Red Cross, churches, and benevolent nations to find some means of addressing them. He notes Britain's role in frustrating such efforts while making it appear like it had the good of the suffering people at heart.

The total blockade by the Nigerian military rulers made it almost impossible to manage the unfolding humanitarian challenges. One of the economic blockade effects was the facilitation of "attack trade", which means trading (buying and selling) behind enemy lines. Kainene, at the outbreak of the war, switched to this line of business, which eventually led to her disappearance. In Bandele's treatment of the issue, which was significant fallout of the war, he dismissed it with a few emotional cinematic brushstrokes that did not go deep enough to reveal the truth about Biafra. Films of similar subject matter like *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometimes in April* presented more vivid narratives of refugees' experiences, the ugly side of genocide and the bitter outcomes of a war. Bandele may not have stayed faithful to the novel he attempted to adapt for the screen since Adichie's treatment of the Biafra story in her novel presented lucid images, bitter emotions and deep trauma from the war.

Cinematic Aesthetics

The 2014 film directed by Nigerian-British writer and director Biyi Bandele, as earlier stated, is an adaptation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel. Film critics like Lodge (2013); Kenigsberg (2014); Dunlevy (2014) and Ebiri (2014), Ihidero (2017) insist that the film is a disservice to the novel in terms of its attempt to compress a story well narrated in a voluminous novel into a film of fewer than two hours in length. They argue that a television serial would have been more appropriate. Biyi Bandele's treatment of history in the film is less pungent as he focuses more on the family conflicts during the crisis period. If the film is an attempt at reproducing what the novel presented, it was not a successful attempt. However, Bandele attempted to manage the challenges inherent in representing historical events and locations in films by adopting real news clips, maps and signposts to denote significant events and places. A

significant difference in the film's narrative style is in the near passive role of Ugwu (John Boyega) as against the approach by the novel that used him to propel the story significantly.

The key characters of Odenigbo (Chiwetel Ejiofor), Olanna (Thandie Newton), Kainene (Anika Noni Rose) and Richard (Joseph Mawle) were essentially animated by the profound acting skills of the world-class actors cast for those roles. The set bears the touch of British cinematic expertise as Andrew McAlpine brought in experts from the United Kingdom to construct and manage the film set. This became necessary after the studio at Tinapa, Cross River State, Nigeria, could not provide the needed setting and ambience for filming *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Nevertheless, the film was shot entirely at Tinapa and Creek Town, all in Cross River State, unlike Antoine Fuqua's *Tears of the Sun* (starring Bruce Willis), which treats the same subject matter (war in Biafra) but was shot in the jungles of Hawaii.

Censorship of the Film

The National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) is vested with the statutory mandate to rate, classify, license, and approve films and video content for public consumption by the Federal Republic of Nigeria laws. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, after its final production, had to pass through the censorship parameters of the regulatory body before distribution and exhibition. This segment of the study examines the film's reception by the authorities and the general public. In September 2013, the film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival with rave reviews. The then Executive Director of NFVCB, Ms Patricia Bala, was present at the festival and was reported to have been full of praises for the film (Oluwafunminiyi, 2019). However, after it premiered in Lagos on April 12, 2014, it was scheduled for release on April 25, 2014. According to Oluwafunminiyi, this could not happen as NFVCB refused to rate and classify the film because certain portions were objectionable and needed to be rectified to align with the extant laws. The Board further enlisted the help of security agencies to decide on the "offensive" portion(s) of the film. This action generated much controversy pitching the Board against the producers, distributor(s) and the public.

A furious Biyi Bandele alleged that the Board had banned outright the film. At the same time, the distributing company, Film One, claimed that the delay in the film's release brought several unplanned financial implications and losses in revenue. In their reaction to the delayed release or suspension of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for instance, the Human Rights

Writers Association (HURIWA) argued that suspending the film was tantamount to denying the history surrounding the Nigerian Civil War, which they further described as "amounting to genocidal denial" (Olufunminiyi, 2019, p.30) similar to what occurred during the war. The consensus among the cinema audience in Nigeria, as aggregated by Olufunminiyi, reveals a deep-rooted resentment and frustration over the actions of the Board. People argued that for the head of the censorship body to have seen the film and applauded it in Toronto but returned to Nigeria to "put a knife" to the film amounted to a public display of unbridled double standards. The eventual resolution of the impasse left scares on most of the stakeholders. Perhaps, the greatest victims may be the cinema audience and the historical essence of the film, which meant so much to the producers, the audience, and society's conscience.

Repression and Suppression of History

The impact of the censorship impasse produced several opinions and further generated sentiments that are varied and critical to the Nigerian Civil War circumstances. Suppression in the context of this study means "the deliberate exclusion of certain events and an attempt to obliterate the Biafra story" (Adedipe, 2018, p.6). From the available corpus of creative works on the Biafra War, Adedipe argues that any attempt at telling the story of the war, especially in the cinematic medium, is birthed by and into political tension that may lead to repressing or tampering with the facts. He further points out another attempt at suppressing the Biafra story as recorded in the experiences of Buchi Emecheta. Her book, "Destination Biafra", suffered suppression at the hands of the British publisher. This development could be interpreted as a bold step by colonial powers to cover their roles and crimes in the war. Therefore, the issue of suppression and repressions of the Biafra story occurs both locally, internationally and in the literary and cinematic contents.

Similarly, Adedipe (2018) insists that the book, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, represents an audacious attempt to rescue the Biafra story after many years of suppression. His view is further amplified by Oluwafunminiyi (2019), who argues that the film illustrates one of the attempts at re-enacting the past in such a manner that valuable discussions regarding Nigeria's current challenges and perhaps forging ways of engendering national reconciliation could be catalysed. Even though the film was not entirely set in the war but in the love life of two sisters within the period of the conflict, the regulators believed that the film could trigger a nationwide violent reaction. Whether this position is true or not, the

cinema critics believe that the “mishandling” of the film by various agencies of the Nigerian government - NFVCB and security agencies, probably point to the unwillingness of the political class to confront and resolve the knotty issues of surrounding the war. Notably, suppression is visited on the film, as evidenced in the "cutting" of the pogrom scenes in Kano and similar scenes in the film when it premiered in Toronto. Stressing the implications of the suppression/repression on the film, Oluwafunminiyi (2019) posits that the film could "serve as a veritable tool for a collective and useful discussion on the Nigerian Civil War rather than the familiar contestations it evokes in certain divides" (p.16). He further submits that apart from adding to cinema scholarship, the film would prove a gainful tool in treating conflict and post-war trauma, which aligns with the arguments of the proponents of the theory of trauma in cinema underpinning this study. In other words, Nigeria may have lost the opportunity to pursue the path of proper closure on the tragedy of the war.

Oluwafunminiyi attributes the possible reason for the repression, suppression and hostile censorship of the film under examination to the attitude of successive governments in Nigeria from 1970 to date to issues relating to the Biafra conflict. He states that the Nigerian government's attitude has "remained retributive, suppressive, and repressive" (Oluwafunminiyi, 2019, p.17), thereby resulting in political, economic and social exclusion of the Eastern Region, which constituted defunct Biafra. The attitude of exclusion has enthroned “supra-ethnic agencies” like MASSOB and IPOB as direct responses to the government's disposition towards the Eastern Region. A closer look at the unfolding line of thought shows that politics informed the repression of *Half of a Yellow Sun's* full story more than any other artistic, budgetary or aesthetic considerations. This development and other harsh government-sponsored acts of direct and indirect censorship have cowed the Nigerian filmmaker from attempting any significant move toward telling the story of Biafra. According to Anyanwu (2021), there is a creative void and a conspiratory silence from Nollywood regarding the issue of Biafra. Anyanwu wonders why such a remarkable watershed in the history of Nigeria has received limited cinematic attention by Nollywood, which remains one of the largest film industries in the world. The answer may not be too far when one considers that Nollywood operates an informal business model. The fear of censorship induced losses may be the beginning of wisdom for the creatives in this regard.

Conclusion

The cinematic medium remains a tool for presenting and preserving events as society evolves. Over time, cinematic content has proved to be a means for handling societal trauma. In the case of the Nigerian Civil War, several efforts at telling the story of the war have been greeted with harsh reactions domestically and internationally. The cinematic adaptation of the novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* may have set out to tell the story of Biafra factually. However, the narrative approach and the eventual suppression and repression of critical issues of history in the film, through harsh censorship, seem to have robbed Nigeria of yet another chance to achieve a closure of Biafra's tragic and traumatic experiences. The suppression and repression visited on the film may be a wake-up call for a bolder and more courageous attempt at telling the story of Biafra in film form.

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