

Journal of Philosophy and Culture,  
Volume 5. No.1, March 2014

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**Plutarch's Essay on Superstition as a Socio-Religious  
Perspective on Street Begging**

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**Abstract**

Plutarch (c.46AD), in his work, *Peri Deisidaimonia* (On Superstition), presents a striking portrayal of superstition in the First Century. The Philosopher who also served for decades as a priest of Apollo portrays the pernicious effects of some supposed religious practices as worse than the outcome of atheism. His position constitutes a forceful explanation to ostensibly controversial socio-religious behaviours. This article discusses some of the priest's concerns as well as his rebuff of religious attitudes that are borne out of what he describes as misrepresentation of the gods or superstition. Plutarch's essay is seen as illustrating a reason for a socio-religious situation in Africa, a continent that shares a similar religious background with the world of the writer. Specifically, with the example of the hard fight against street begging in some parts of Nigeria, the article shows how social reform programmes could fail when effects of traditional African beliefs and cultural practices remain potent.

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**Key words:** Plutarch; Socio-religious; Perspective;  
Street Begging

## **Introduction**

Plutarch lived for a long time with his wife and family in the little Greek town of Chaeronea, yet with indisputable exposure to the trends in the world around him. He had a good knowledge of Athens and also made visits to prominent ancient places such as Egypt and Italy. Although he was known for teaching and lecturing in Rome, it is noteworthy that he devoted the last thirty years of his life to priesthood. This author of *Peri Deisidaimonia*, had served as one of the two priests at the temple of Apollo at Delphi (the site of the famous Delphic Oracle), twenty miles from his home, for many years. By his writings and lectures, Plutarch became a celebrity in the Roman Empire.

An evidence of his scholastic influence may be seen in the number of guests from all over the empire at his country estate congregating for serious conversations that he presided over. Many of his dialogues were recorded and published, and the seventy-eight essays and other works that have survived are now known collectively as *Moralia*. The essays and lectures of the priest of Apollo established him as a leading thinker in the Roman Empire's golden age of the the reigns of

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Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian. His works unmistakably show that he perceived his role to be that of a moralist, philosopher, priest and theologian. This background would sufficiently place him at a vantage position to talk about what he considered a distorted view of religion, superstition. The treatise, *Peri Deisidaimonia* (On Superstition), a part of the collection called *Moralia*, with some polemical use of the word superstition, represents the negative concept of superstition among Classical authors.

## ***Peri Deisidaimonia* and Perception of the Gods**

In the context of ancient religious system, *Peri Deisidaimonia* concludes that superstition can alienate its victims from the rest of the society because a superstitious person is seen as deficient in the use of intelligence to think about the gods. He is portrayed as being fond of creating fearful images and horrible apparitions which lead to weird and extreme behaviours. This is presented as a form of fanaticism, an anomaly that is constantly associated with religious excesses. The superstitious man's exaggerated feelings toward the gods and their worship fills him with undue awe. The individual believes that his lot in life is not dependent at all on what he does - human responsibility- but on the decrees of fate and fortune, over which he has no control. With the foregoing representation, Plutarch as it were, draws a bizarre picture of a man who has nothing

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in the world in common with the rest of humankind (Plutarch, 166c). While this may appear exaggerated, it conveys the message of a social disorder stemming from an absurd religious state. The priest of Apollo repeatedly disparages the posture of fear, which makes the gods appear ‘rash, faithless, fickle, cruel and easily offended,’ dealing capriciously and arbitrarily with humans.<sup>1</sup> Plutarch is all out to challenge a fatalistic view of life.

The Philosopher expresses his mission, noting the manifestly twofold purpose of his work, *Peri Deisidaimonia*: ‘to vindicate the honour of the gods besmirched by the insulting worship of those afflicted with *deisidaimonia*[superstition] ...to recall those suffering from the malady of superstition to a sober and sane piety...’ (Moellering, 1962: iii) Superstition here could be termed a false judgment arising from the misconception that the gods are responsible for all the harms that man suffers. This is equally linked to intellectual delusion accompanied by emotional or psychological disorders. According to the philosopher, while atheism resorts to denying the existence of the gods in order to root out unhealthy fear about them, by the notion that the gods exist but frighten man, superstition induces paralysing fear that worsens situation. In relation to religion, Plutarch clearly positions εὐσεβεία (piety) between *deisidaimonia*

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, Op. cit. 170e

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(superstition) and *atheotes* (atheism). His stand is evidently a product of the Greek intellectuals' sensitivity to sane and sober balance of his time. Generally, in a fashion similar to the Greeks', the Romans located *religio* (religion) between indifference and false religiosity. Therefore, *deisidaimonia*, which is borne out of fretful fear that makes man inclined to reaching false conclusions or employing outrageous means of avoiding supposedly imminent dangers or handling situations, is what Plutarch categorises as false religiosity that is worse than nonchalance. He reasons:

What then? Does it not seem to you that the feeling of the atheists compared with the superstitious presents just such a difference? The former do not see the gods at all, the latter think that they do exist and are evil. The former disregard them, the latter conceive their kindness to be frightful, p471their fatherly solicitude to be despotic, their loving care to be injurious, their slowness to anger to be savage and brutal. (Plutarch, 167d)

On the whole, Plutarch insists on divine-human relationship built on proper understanding of the divine as he attributes superstition to lack of knowledge or rather more expressly, baffled amazement in the face of certain natural phenomena originating from lack of knowledge or ignorance of natural law. The philosopher

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also believes that a better understanding of laws governing various physical phenomena will dispel craven superstition. Plutarch observes that when a superstitious fear of the gods, which results from instilling in man the repressive fear of terrors, is absent, man is liberated from emotional crisis. Although such fear may serve a useful purpose of deterring the unruly that errs with all audacity and trembles when repenting, it scarcely achieves the desired effect of true piety. Even when ‘the threat of the hangman’s noose may keep some people in line, but this hardly means that the noose should be dangled in front of their eyes’(Moellering, 1962, p64). Plutarch takes a hard stance against a worship inspired by a morbid fear.

*Peri Deisidaimonia*, additionally, draws attention to what superstition does that the priest would hardly attribute to the gods: robbing the superstitious man of a reward for a hard-work day- sleep (Plutarch, 166c). Similar to Theophrastus’ superstitious man (Theophrastus, XVI), the man displays feverish restlessness that destroys the peace supposedly coming as a divine gift. The undue anxiety emanating from dismal concern for expiation may inform repeated and weighty charge in Plutarch that superstition cripples or even paralyses the will that drives to taking decisive actions.

Superstition is likewise seen as inimical to meaningful intellectual activities as well as the well-

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being of the state. Plutarch is upset to see superstitious people condemning philosophers and political leaders who try to rid them of their distressing misconception concerning the gods and instil in them the awareness that the deity is magnanimous (Plutarch, 167e). Rather than turning to a philosopher or a sage, when experiencing pangs of guilt feeling, the tendency of a superstitious individual is hastily heading for theological quacks that prescribe outrageous rituals (Plutarch, 166F) While Cicero's work, *De Divinatione*, sees superstition largely as an issue over the credibility of divination techniques, Plutarch's main concern is over why 'awe' should deteriorate into dread, and why pious religious festivals should degenerate into quivering scrupulosity.

As man assigns all his destinies to unseen powers, Plutarch believes he may slip from conscientious performance of inoffensive ritual into silly scrupulosity, weird and repulsive rites. Unreasonable concern for taboos and rituals betrays restiveness and it is derived from the consciousness that sin may cause the superstitious to be haunted by fear, so that he is overly addicted to sacrifice. Plutarch would argue that a believer must be able to discern when no sacrifice is required and have some other practical steps considered rather than always opting for sacrifice. When a believer fails in this regard, he provides the basis for Plutarch's judgment that the deity delights in threatening and executing evil on man; a view, according to the priest,

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which inflicts a gross insult on the gods, hence, worse than atheism (Plutarch, 166F) To Plutarch, atheism is an error of judgment, whereas, *δεισιδαιμονία* (superstition) is worse as it evokes the thought of both error and *πάθος* (emotional disturbance). This *πάθος* results from *φόβος* (fear). In this instance, concerning the divine, a whole picture of a cruel master that hampers action and a precursor of inactivity emerges. The philosopher then is indignant about such an emotional state that precipitates an utter misrepresentation of the supernatural:

Why, for my part, I should prefer that men should say about me that I have never been born at all, and there is no Plutarch, 170 rather than that they should say “Plutarch is an inconstant fickle person, quick-tempered, vindictive over little accidents, pained at trifles. If you invite others to dinner and leave him out, or if you haven’t the time and don’t go to call on him, or fail to speak to him when you see him, he will set his teeth into your body and bite it through, or he will get hold of your little child and beat him to death, or he will turn the beast that he owns into your crops and spoil your harvest (Plutarch, 169f–170a).

Plutarch’s position differs from what was popular in the ancient world when the gods were perceived as fickle

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and vindictive, as expressed in works of writers such as Homer and Euripides. Nevertheless, the philosopher as an advocate of a contrary opinion that he considers practical for his people, exemplifies the role religion could play as a social phenomenon. The treatise on superstition on the whole was an attempt to prove that superstition in Plutarch's days was worse than atheism, yet, it has a marked relevance to a modern society.

With a reflection over a modern Africa socio-religious system, the tone of the work was clearly full of an urgent message from the priest for the public of his day, which still echoes in modern Africa. Especially in view of the growing recognition of the resilience of 'social ills' as owing to the religious views that keep propping them up. While the role of religion in unifying, integrating, maintaining or reducing anxiety is often extolled, beliefs associated with it are involved in the controversy over social values. In fact, Plutarch suggests that religious practices could originate societal ills; a lateral thinking, perhaps to someone who may not readily see the link between this conclusion and Plutarch's position. However this line of reasoning is employed in reviewing some efforts made in Nigeria to handle a social situation. Hence, what follows is veering from Plutarch's contention over superstition to ridding Nigerian streets of beggars becomes.

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**Divine Will and the Fight against Street Beggars**

Street begging is an age-old problem in Nigeria which the government often fights with the use of Law Enforcement Agents. Efforts directed towards ridding the streets of the destitute are not unconnected with the aesthetic effects of the ubiquitous presence of alms' seekers in virtually all public places. 'We are yet to finish our compilation, but at the moment we have over ten million child beggars roaming our streets, and that's a conservative estimate'(Nigerian Curiosity, December 2009), said the Nigeria's Minister of State for Education, Aishatu Jibrin Dukku. The ever-increasing number of beggars in major Nigerian streets has been appear very distressing to governmental agencies. The authorities of the Nigerian Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, made some frantic efforts to end begging in the streets of the city by removing the all-pervading beggars from the public view. Similarly considering the alarming growth of beggars in the open as a social menace, the Lagos state government deported fifteen foreign beggars to their countries and thousands more were relocated to their states of origin (Odumene, 2010, p.1). When interviewed, the Special Adviser to the Governor on Youth, Sport and Social Development, Lagos state, expressed the government's determination to succeed:

Somebody will get tired but not us. So let the beggars come, we will continue to raid, at the end of the day, if and when

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their resources is better than that of government, we will see. It is going to take some time but at the same time, we will continue to smoke them from their holes until they know that you can only come to Lagos to do genuine business and proper work and not to put pressure on our infrastructure by becoming destitute at odd places or begging and harassing innocent citizens who are going about their legitimate businesses (Odumene, 2010, p.1).

Although additional efforts could still be made, the Lagos state government has endeavoured to do more than chasing beggars out of the streets. Provision of facilities to help in turning the lives of the destitute and beggars around have been made. Vocational/ Rehabilitation centres are built and medical services are rendered to keep the destitute mentally and physical fit for re-integration into the society. Yet, this effort has failed to stem the influx of beggars, some of whom have become even aggressive, into the streets. The approach at eliminating street begging has often proved to be a short term solution (Olowoopejo, 2014, p.1).

Generally, street beggars often plead poverty when given the opportunity to explain why they persist in the activity perceivable as lowering their self-esteem and creating a public eye-sore. Some reason that the bad

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economic situation in the country and the consequent high level of unemployment led many people to the practice. However, there are many people who have not taken to street begging even in the face of grave economic hardship. Various people with limitations, including those who suffer forms of physical disabilities, have coped with their circumstances and economic challenges by taking up jobs that seem to be below their dignity. On the contrary, when individuals believe that they have ‘received the commission to beg from the deities’ by virtue of their ‘special’ circumstances in life, no hard work or adapting to different becomes necessary. Beggars who make use of twin children to elicit sympathy from potential givers, among others, are now used to illustrate how the notion of having divine authority to engage in ‘begging business’ could frustrate the efforts made at eliminating street begging.

In Lagos city, where begging is a thriving business, for instance, below is a trend in begging with twins:

a ‘mother of twins is begging for alms because the responsibility of providing for her twins fell on her when her husband was thrown out of work...Beggars who employ the use of their twin children or wards regard begging as the only way to make money to survive. One of the beggars... said the twin babies in her care

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weren't hers. According to her, she 'rents' them from one of the homes for N1, 000 per day... According to her, she makes more money when she uses the babies to beg because people will be more sympathetic to her. "I was begging on my own but people were not giving me money. Some say I should go and look for work. But I am not educated and I am very poor. A friend then recommended the place where they can 'lend' a child to use to beg. My friend collected twin babies (Nigerian News Service, December 2010).

Begging with twins is a religiously based practice among the Yoruba people of West Africa. There are other forms of begging, as well as various explanations given for them, but this article focuses on street begging in relation to a Yoruba belief. Before Plutarch is made to speak to the issue, it is necessary to consider a background to this category of street begging.

Giving birth to twins was conceivably a strange phenomenon in the traditional Yoruba society. The birth of twins was viewed as mysterious and as a result, twins are treated as deities (*Òrìsà*). A story has it that somewhere in Ondo State (Nigeria), the natives so much dreaded twins as mysterious children that they believed they should be killed at birth in order to avoid bad publicity that allegedly would result from their birth

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(Daramola & Jeje, 1995, pp 279-280). While the foregoing practice was not universal among the Yoruba, the belief that twins were special children from the deities that deserve reverent treatment is well known.

Traditionally, rites are performed on every eighth day allegedly to appease the deities. Palm oil and beans are considered to be the favourite foods of the children of the deities, as the following song shows:

*epo n be, ewa n be o* (palm oil is abundant, beans are abundant)

*epo n be, ewa nbe o* (palm oil is abundant, beans are abundant)

*aya mi o ja* (I am not afraid)

*o yee* (at all)

*aya mi o ja lati bi beji* (to give birth to twins)

*epo n be, ewa n be o* (palm oil is abundant, beans are abundant) (Daramola & Jeje, 1995, p.280).

By this belief, even in their early ages, twins enjoy the status of adults and are consulted as such for advice on the kind of trade their parents should practice if the parents are to prosper. Whatever the apparently innocent voices utter has a legal force. A mother of twins, irrespective of what had hitherto been her social status, may become a beggar at the request or command of the children of 'the deities'.

While modern science seems to have demystified

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the mystery surrounding the birth of twins, some of the practices associated with the belief endure. Twins may tell their mother to become dancers who would dance around the city with the service of a paid drummer to make a living as beggars. The belief persists that twins are special children, and holding them in high esteem is the veritable path to divine blessings or success in life, hence, the saying: *e ke meji ki Olorun ki o ke yin* (treasure the twins for God to bless you). Even when the mystery attributed to the birth of twins, as well as the activities associated with them have a subjective premise; it seems as if no ‘Plutarch’ has spoken to the issue.

The patronage of the beliefs and practices originating from the idea of mysterious birth endures. It is not strange to come across a woman in the street, with this age old belief, carrying one twin on her back and the other in her hands or walking with two of them in sweltering heat at motor parks, in marketplaces and other public areas. They beg for alms in the name of the twins as unusual children or allegedly because these ‘deities’ have apportioned them this lot. The public still responds to their cry: *e ke meji ...*(treasure the twins...) because the belief is still rife that twins are unusual children and divine blessings are contingent on what is meted out to them. Innocent twin children have this impact even when ‘rented’ for the ‘trade’.

Observably, the living standard of such parents of

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twins who engage in this ‘trade’ is not necessarily more enviable than that of others with a single childbirth; the situation that is just described above rather makes it often pitiable. Children are exposed not only to bad weathers but also to unhygienic conditions and a life of cringing dependence on others. Giving thought to this situation may bring in the issue raised by Plutarch’s treatise on how wrong perception of the influence of the supernatural may bequeath a terrible value system to a society. When belief in the gods or the supernatural results in man’s unwittingly inflicting harms on himself or on others, and no thoughts exist that sets him free from the bondage, Plutarch concludes that he is a victim of what is worse than atheism- superstition.

Although Plutarch’s work focuses on the personal harm a *deisidaimon* (superstitious person) suffers, it is the public that often ultimately bears the brunt. The fight against street begging might be considered lost in a society where individuals believe that if a person has a problem that causes him anxiety, the solution comes from giving alms to beggars, especially to those who are ‘ordained’ as beggars. Consequently, it has been a situation of some believing they were fated to beg for alms, while others believe that their divine obligation to help the needy or relieve themselves of afflictions could be as simple as handing out, oftentimes, ‘peanuts’ to the ever present beggars in the street. Since a market continues to thrive as long as there are buyers for

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products that are for sale, the ‘market’ for street beggars closes only when the seekers of alms no longer enjoys patronage from street almsgivers.

Clearly, a religious atmosphere such as the one described here is most conducive to the activity of beggars in Nigeria and could be a primary source of frustration in the fight against street begging. As is expressed below, it is in this light that some might see a person who considers himself very religious as rather worse than an atheist:

The atheist seeks the cause of his difficulty in some error of judgment. If he becomes sick, he thinks back to see whether he has been indiscreet in eating or drinking. If he is in political embarrassment, he critically examines himself to determine his errors. But for the superstitious person any bodily indisposition, any financial loss, the death of his children, political disappointments and repulses, all are punishments of the gods (Moellering, 1962, pp.33-34).

The verdict above has resulted from the practice credited to the deities. Plutarch’s position that superstition is worse than atheism is an objection to attributing bad qualities to the supernatural. The philosopher would not only disassociate himself from the notion but would also identify it as the tragedy of superstition. Neither would he see it as morally fitting for himself to be represented

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as someone ‘who ... will set his teeth into your body and bite it through, or ... get hold of your little child and beat him to death, or ... turn the beast that he owns onto your crops and spoil your harvest’ (Plutarch, 170a), simply because he is ignored or not given attention. Yet, today, when little ones suffer inclement weathers and other dangers of major public roads; when some inexperienced ones become juvenile delinquents and others grow into adult criminals as they are exposed to the beggar’s ‘profession’; whether advertently or unwittingly, it is credited to the supernatural by those who hold on to the Yoruba beliefs. With streets adorned with unkempt and malnourished children, when a “mother” was asked about why beggars subject even babies to dangers, she responded: ‘God will protect them. God protects children, so nothing will happen to them.’(Nigerian News Service, May 2010). With vehemence, Plutarch would disagree with her.

## **Conclusion**

At a time when children are made to suffer harsh realities with the belief that God will protect them, the thrust of Plutarch’s treatise should be more obvious. This foolhardiness would be seen by the priest, not simply as religion, but as superstition, deserving all condemnation. Hence, this part of *Moralia, Peri Deisidaimonia*, is a call for a change in the way people think about the supernatural influence, which would invariably affect the

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attitude toward public activity and government's policies. Positive social changes could only be concomitant with adjustment in the religious orientation of the people:

Social scientists tell us that human beings should live and ply their businesses in a disciplined society so that investments and economic progress are not hindered. In the same vein, students of Religious Studies are taught to understand that societal indiscipline frustrates all genuine efforts to increase the productivity of a nation (Ukachukwu, 2009, p. 6).

Rather than subjecting people to slavish thinking that is not only harmful to an individual but also a menace and a source of embarrassment to the public, Plutarch advocates a religious culture that trains, as well as equips the minds of the people to make responsible choices which promote care for others and the environment.

Even when rehabilitation centres are in good condition and monthly sustenance allowances are provided by the government, street begging may not become a thing of the past in a country such as Nigeria unless the religious atmosphere that gave birth to it disappears. A BBC World Service programme speaks to the issue:

In an effort to sanitise the Nigerian city of Lagos, the state government is

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returning all beggars on the streets to their states of origin. Is it right to ban begging? They say they have already removed at least 3,000 beggars in the last year but have now...banned giving alms to beggars as well. Violators will face two year imprisonment without the option of paying a fine. Do you give to beggars? Senegal attempted a similar project last year but the number of beggars on the streets of Dakar remains high. Is this really the best way to deal with beggars? What else should be done (Attwood, 2011, p.1)?

The question of ‘what else should be done’ only draws attention to the fact that religious leaders, to say the least, generally have more to do to mitigate the socio-religious problem. Plutarch spoke to the people under his priesthood apparently to effect changes in their perception of the supernatural vis-à-vis their lifestyles. Custodians of religious systems that sustain street begging would have to assume a similar role in the fight against what has become a public nuisance. The reason for the current state may not be farfetched. Yoruba traditional beliefs, for instance, continue to impact on the people’s attitudes and actions because the Yoruba cosmos remains an interplay of physical and spiritual forces, hardly leaving any room for the notion of

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superstition. Taking steps to rid the street of beggars may be sacrilegious to some.

This background that makes the concept of superstition completely alien to the traditional Yoruba society could rather reinforce street begging. Hence, religious leaders, under the banner of Christianity and Islam, have sufficient avenues to skilfully ‘beg’ for money, and would encourage their members not only to generously give in support of ‘the work of the God’ but to also extend giving to the less privileged or individuals with physical disabilities. Blessings from God are supposedly simply contingent on doing this. The traditional orientation of the people, which find some parallels in foreign religions, is just a perfect framework for the social consequences. One of the Yoruba respondents to the BBC programme further admits that:

religious leaders have condoned street begging:...these days, decorum has been jettisoned and even able bodied persons in the community now disguise or pretend to need others’ help on the streets. It is then difficult to know a genuinely disabled, self-made destitute, or someone who was a victim of one form of disaster or the other.  
.. In my opinion, religious practices admonish us to give out to help others but considering what obtains today, governments should as part of social

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services ensure that beggars are taken away from the streets (Attwood, 2011, p.1).

A vital strategy can be deduced from the treatise of Plutarch in handling the situation. If 'religious practices admonish' giving, perhaps, the voices of religious leaders should be loud and clear on how to *properly* practise giving. Unless such voices harmonise with that of the government, all efforts to end street begging may remain forlorn.

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