

**AFROCENTRICITY AS A BASIS FOR RESTORATION OF AFRICAN
IDENTITY AND AGENCY. A CALL TO AUTHENTIC EDUCATION
IN AFRICA**

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Abstract

Based on data collected recently from African youth aged 18 to 25 years, the paper decries their superficial knowledge, understanding and appreciation of African spirituality and culture. Devoid of a systematic grip on the values, grounded in relationships, that are at the basis of African meaningful living, African youth, families and communities in general suffer severe cultural deracination and its consequent psycho-spiritual fragmentation--the makings of a crisis of identity. Their ongoing search for depth and meaning is compromised by this identity crisis. How can the situation be redressed? The paper highlights some emergent trends of pathways for restoration that Africans have undertaken, including some facilitated through social media. These increasingly cross-border initiatives have potential for growth and for networking into mainstreamed African consciousness. Their particular novelty is that they demonstrate the value and urgency of Afrocentricity as an approach to take Africanity to depth. In line with these trends, the paper proposes that educational interventions in the formal and non-formal spheres need to embrace Afrocentricity as a cardinal pillar. According to its proponent, Molefi Kete Asante (2020, 2017, 2003) the Afrocentricity theory demands that Africans appropriate their realities, their history and ultimately their destiny from an Afrocentric perspective. This builds up a rooted Africanity, the only authentic foundation for the restoration to full-stature agency of African peoples in diverse fields of their own and world affairs. Afrocentricity is indisputably the ground zero for authentic education in Africa. It is a condition sine-qua-non for sustainable personal, communal and societal

integration and growth. In order to embrace the centrality of relationships and their spiritual significance, African individuals, families, communities and even ventures need to cultivate the authority born of an Afrocentric consciousness.

Keywords: African Education; Afrocentricity; African Spirituality; Cultural deracination; African youth; Africinity.

Introduction

The concept of Afrocentricity denotes its etymological meaning with a special emphasis on the African person and African communities wherever they may be in the world. It is the conviction and way of proceeding in all matters of life, by putting the African notion, experience and ideas at the centre of the process of decision-making. Being centred in African interests, Afrocentricity considers that the greatest and most authentic possibility of delivering in its favour is assuming Africa points of departure. As Molefi Kete Asante has so clearly put it, it is the only way to ensure the welfare of African peoples across the world - their ability to define their identity, history, anthropology, theology and especially epistemology. MK Asante further underscores that Afrocentricity has a minimum of three main projects, namely, the restoration of the psychological location of Africans and people of the African diaspora, refocusing their sense of agency and defending elements of African culture (Asante 2005). Afrocentricity decries the loss of African identity by Africans all over the world, a ripple effect of those extreme experiences of alienation of black peoples in slavery and colonialism. Because of the extremity and persistence of these experiences, many African people have lost a sense of their centre, and seek to define and appropriate themselves in the world as an appendix of the Western world. The latter, in addition, has set itself up as a hegemonic reference of meaning and legitimacy, down-grading especially indigenous cultures around the world, with African people being among those taking the worst impact of this imperialist onslaught. African people and their realities are misunderstood and misrepresented when viewed from standpoints that put them at the periphery of other people's history, economics, education and all other concerns.

In this anti-African perspective, Africans consider themselves to be advanced only in so far as they ape the ways of other, especially Eurocentric, cultures. Through a five-centuries long and continuing onslaught on other peoples of the world, the Eurocentric dominant cultural hegemony has pitched camp in other parts of the world posing as the model. Buy-in to these notions leaves African people emaciated of their sources of life, and damned to keep playing chase after

other people's ways, never measuring up. It is an unfortunate way to live in the world, always unsure of one's foundations and awaiting the beck and call of others to dictate the direction one is to go. Such is the state of African peoples unless and until they awaken to their identity and history.

A Swahili proverb goes, *mwacha mila ni mtumwa* (one who abandons culture is a slave). Degruy-Leary (2017) denounces the generational trauma caused upon black people as a result of slavery. According to Seraki (2022), Africans went through a gruesome process of transformation in all facets of their lives ranging from emotional, mental, social, spiritually, and even intellectual capabilities through the experiences of colonialism and slavery. White supremacy propagates the idea that the whites are superior to people of colour, which from an African perspective is but a fallacy (Asante, 2003). African identity has been lowered to the bottom. Africans have come to believe that they cannot think for themselves, that their actions and feelings as Africans are not valid, and so they have to conform to the western ideology. This has led to great disorientation and dislocation of the African persona. The idea that Africans will be one with the white is ill placed. Ture (n.d) regrets that trying to integrate and merge Africans with their enemies will never solve the African problem. Liberation of Africa will be done by Africans themselves. This liberation can be achieved by restoring an African-centred perspective among the African people. This is the concern of Afrocentric consciousness and Afrocentric education.

The values and practices of Africans, though largely undermined today, are the very strings that hold Africans together as a people. Research statistics indicate that 60% of the African population is made up of people below 25 years of age. According to the United Nations (n.d), youths are people aged between 15 and 24 years of age. This is indicative that the future of Africa lies in the hands of the youths who are the majority. Unfortunately, these same young people have little if any appreciation of their cultural heritage. Traditional African society knew young people to be hardworking and united. They would wake up to the fields where they could till the land the whole day and go home with a wage which helped to maintain their families. However, with the onset of education and modernization, young people flee to the cities as soon as they are done with basic education. The city has no fields to till, thus they spend their days on the byways or on couches browsing the social media. This has led to increased dependency and joblessness (Wachege & Rugendo, 2017). Borrowing the western culture alienates the Africans making them slaves of a fake identity (Asante, 2021).

Without being Afrocentric, education continues to expose African youth to predictable paths of self-rejection and enslavement to others. It is for this reason that a clear position in favour of African ways and African-centred perspectives on all reality is imperative, urgent and deserving of the resilience that it will take to shift the foundations back in place. This then is the call of Afrocentricity. It is an approach by African peoples to their history, knowledge and purpose from their own perspective. Afrocentricity occurs “when Africans view themselves as centred and central in their own history, they see themselves as agents, actors, and participants rather than as marginal and on the periphery of political or economic experience” (Chawane, 2016, 78). As a Pan-African idea, it seeks to restore and relocate the African person to their original African identity economically, philosophically, socially and politically. Although the idea of Afrocentricity was initiated by Molefi Kete Asante, an African-American, the idea of African-centred thought existed among contemporary African-centred anthropologists and psychologists. Perceiving that African youths have lost their bearing on culture and mannerisms, the proposers of Afrocentricity as a social justice theory envisioned that in years to come, Africans can look at themselves proudly through their own eyes.

The paper proceeds by first exposing the findings of a field research on the positioning of African youth vis-a-vis African culture, followed by a reflection on the said findings against an adaptation of Hofstede’s cultural onion model. Alternative approaches to African cultural and historical heritage in favour of Afrocentricity are then explored and their common characteristics drawn. Finally, some proposals for implementing Afrocentricity in education are put forward.

African youth today: their positioning vis-à-vis African culture

An empirical study was done through a group of 39 university students from a class that was studying African culture. Each was requested to collect data from 10 young people ranging between 18 and 25 years of age. The catchment area for these youth was not defined. It was to be African youth within the reach of the students. Most collected the data from their neighbourhoods but a few also used online connections, especially those that wanted to get the views of young people from their home countries or regions who were not within their immediate physical reach. Accordingly, the 320 questionnaires from which the data we report here is collected are mainly from Nairobi, including but not limited to university students. The participants were 140 male and 179 female.

Of the 320, 269 were Kenyan and the other 51 distributed between various other African countries.

The data collection tool sought to gather mainly quantitative data, with two questions gathering qualitative data. The qualitative data was about what the youth like and what they do not like about African culture. Frequently mentioned among things they like are African foods, Traditional dances and festivities and African dress. Others that made the list of what they like included respect for elders, respect for God, communal games like bull-fighting and human dignity. Among the things they do not like and feel should be expunged from African life are female genital mutilation, polygamy, wife-inheritance, myths and taboos, witchcraft, and incantations.

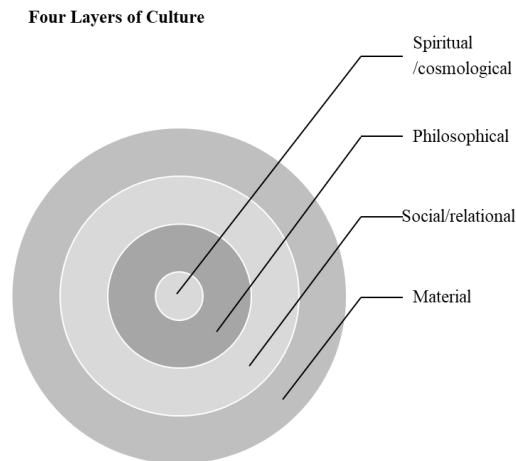
While 82% of the participants expressed being interested in learning their African culture more deeply, only 62% declared believing that their culture is useful, while 25% considered it to be not useful; 14% were not sure of its usefulness. Within the 82% interested to learn the culture are therefore a considerable percentage who are not quite sure that it is of any use. The doubt cast on the sense of usefulness of African culture is made clearer by the 80% who believe that African culture has in fact been overtaken by technology.

Critical appreciation of African youth positions on their African culture

It was fascinating to recognise from the findings the great appreciation of their own culture that African youth have. This bears witness to a resurgence of African cultural practices and values among African communities. The research was carried out in a predominantly Christian section of Kenya. Given the sustained attack that the African culture has borne from colonialism and faulty perceptions of the African culture that predicate it to be fundamentally anti-Christian, it is of significance that there is still reasonable appreciation of African culture among young people and a desire, albeit somewhat uncertain, to sustain and draw value from it.

A study of the lists of elements the youth value and those they do not appreciate from African culture shows the level at which the young people's knowledge of African culture is at. Using an adaptation of Hofstede's cultural onion (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2012) as laid out below, it becomes clear that the youth's knowledge of their culture is at the material and at deepest, social levels only. Food, dress, dance and games are evidently at material level and in some cases the social dimensions. Little of philosophical significance is evident. The spiritual and

cosmological dimensions are barely articulated. Given that many of the respondents were university students who study many other subjects at deeper (philosophical) levels, it becomes clear how the appreciation of African culture is left out of their educational and development journey. It should not surprise the reader then that the youth think that African culture is overtaken by technological advancement.



Ignorance of a deeper level of African cultural meanings yields a sense of inferiority in the African youth and the communities from which they come. These find themselves unable to account for many of the practices of their people, and resort to the answers provided by dominant cultural voices - that those are primitive peoples with largely irrelevant cultural practices. The fact that many African youth consider African culture to be incompatible with technology reflects disconnect with African history given that African antiquity was a time of significant technological advancement (Ahmed, 2020; Bangura 2020); but it also reflects a disaffection with own culture producing a negative assessment of its relevance to life in modern society (Diouf & Prais, 2013). These are disturbing positions to hold vis-a-vis one's own roots and foundations. It renders the youth, and indeed the communities from which they emanate, vulnerable to abuse by agents of displacement. The impact of this abuse manifests in the tendency of African people to move from one foreign fashion to another, becoming the marketplace of all foreign goods with little appreciation of what Africans themselves produce.

It is not within the scope of this paper to enter into the assessment of specific cultural beliefs and practices. What interests us is the inability of African people

to account for their stances from an African perspective; this inability leaves them in alienation from their meanings. While every culture needs to be self-interrogating and self-renewing, Africans can be rendered unable to renew their culture if they do not first have a deeper appreciation of its meanings. Rendered ignorant of their history and cultural wealth, African people become unable to appreciate African epistemologies.

In addition, such alienation exposes the African person to suffering spiritual self-negation since this is rooted in belonging proudly to the African community of life. This is their natural gateway to the cosmological community of life. Thus, colonised in their mentality, it is not surprising that the African world continues to submit to academic colonialism, often propagated from within the continent. With the emergent Afro-pessimism, a fitting environment for economic exploitation of the peoples and other resources of the continent is secured. A sorry state of affairs is set in motion and maintained. How can such a situation be reversed in a sustainable, not just cosmetic, manner?

Common trends in emergent Afrocentric consciousness

The experience of enslavement of African Americans and its attendant alienation may have made the urgency of the need for the restoration of African consciousness more imminent for such voices as Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Dubois. Even the resistances to colonialism in Africa were guided by prophetic African leaders who had a sense of the spiritual-cosmological significance of historical developments that were ongoing. Thus, the voices of Mekatilili wa Menza (Nyamweru, 2015), Kinjeketile (Solanke, 2013) and others in East Africa alongside cultural commentators such as the novelists of colonial Africa led by Chinua Achebe (1958), Okot p'Bitek (1966) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1964, 1965) all drew attention to the spiritual and philosophical rupture that was playing out within the drama that was colonialism and its antiques. The great Cheikh Anta Diop, a physicist and historian from Senegal contributed greatly to the beginnings of African restoration by reconnecting present day Africa with her antiquity in ancient Kemet. Given the racist academic traditions of the dominant western academic hegemony, his scholarship has been the subject of much controversy, with many Western scholars doubting the African origins of civilization, to which he gives testimony (Diop, 1974) alongside the scientific proof of the presence of melanin the mummified bodies of pharaohs, proving that Kemet was a Black African civilization (Clarke, 1989). In the years since his untimely demise, there has been increasing evidence to support Diop's initial

findings. One of his seminal contributions was to link Kemet to the rest of the continent of Africa; his studies which have had post-humous confirmation through linguistics (Sharman, 2013).

What is most interesting today however, is the emergence of an African search for re-routing. Conversations of an African renaissance have found a rich cultural tradition even in music such as that by Bob Marley, that invites Africans to return to their deeper heritage. These streams of consciousness cannot now be ignored by scholarship. One cannot, for example, ignore the influence of Dr. Mumbi Seraki spiritual show with at least 115, 000 followers on YouTube. There is a hunger for African meanings being felt and met. Immense contributions have been wrought by the spirit of Afrocentricity.

Efforts to preserve African Heritage have been seen all over the world and especially the USA. This comes from the recognition that African culture is rich and fit for the African people even in the current age and era. Africans in America preserve their heritage by observing cultural festivals in which they practise and showcase their culture through artefacts, songs, dances, food, drumming, and dressing. Trinidad and Tobago cities can be termed as homes of African heritage. Many places in these cities hold features that tell the stories of African resilience and resistance. Most African countries today also hold festivals and honour cultural days in which they come together to remind themselves of their roots; institutions also exist across the world which open doors for children and youth to learn and appreciate their African culture. In search from Africa Heritage International (2020), Africa Heritage Academy UK is one of the highly recognized heritage institutions which was inspired by the Tenstrings Music Institute in Nigeria. The institution offers customised lessons which African students can relate to and enjoy. It also tolerates and offers freedom for students to express themselves in an African way. For example, the students can wear colourful artistic hairstyles, exercise hand and verbal expressions, among other things that were rather misinterpreted in mixed-race schools.

Propagators of Afrocentricity and African-centred worldview support that for Africans across borders to recover their lost glory, there is need to come together and promote the original African values which include unity, hard work and cooperation. This is being achieved through emerging initiatives steered by Africans for Africans. The Earth Centre, for example, is a movement that was started to promote and preserve the KEM culture (The Earth Centre, n.d.). The movement recognizes Africa as the cradle of all civilizations. However, African

civilization is different from European modernization. African civilization calls for preservation of African beliefs and practices from one generation to another. The KEM community is one of the communities around the world who have jealously guarded their culture to this day. The NABA bloodline for example, is still esteemed as the mediator between humans and Divinity. They are still known as the shrine keepers, and the noblest of all tribes of the Kem community. The Nabas have been initiating their legacy and beliefs from one generation to another through father to son and mother to daughter by observation and word of mouth to date. The Earth Centre promotes this by offering a platform for Africans to exercise their genius to come up with solutions for African problems both locally and in diaspora. It also fosters an understanding of African history from an African perspective through original methods of research and knowledge sources.

Kwanzaa is an annual celebration in America celebrated by African-Americans between December 26th and January 1. In this seven-days holiday, African-Americans get to celebrate the seven principles of African Heritage coined by Kwanzaa founder, also known as *Nguzo Saba* (Mayes, 2009). Kwanzaa was founded in 1966 after the Watts riots of 1965 by Maulana Karenga (Richardson, 2022). The holiday would offer the black people an opportunity to celebrate themselves, honour their culture, and break from the dominant Christmas holiday whose significance Karenga despised. According to Karenga, this cultural revolution would bring about a restoration of African identity, direction and purpose (Mayes, 2009). He was inspired by first fruits festivals celebrated by the Zulu in South Africa. In Swahili, First Fruits means *Matunda ya Kwanza* from which he derived the name *Kwanza*. An extra 'a' was added to make seven letters, significant to the seven days of celebration. Each day of the seven was marked by a special greeting derived from the seven principles of Pan-Africanism. One would ask, "*Habari Gani?*" (what's the news), and the other would respond with the principle of that day, for instance, "*Umoja*" (Unity) (Anderson, 2009). The principles - *Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, Nia, Kuumba, and Imani* signified a special objective of Pan-Africanism and were distributed throughout the seven days respectively. Kwanzaa celebrations were also honoured through other practices such as wearing of special clothes such as Kaftan for women, presentation of fresh fruits to symbolise 'first fruits', decoration of households with artefacts, and other cultural exhibitions. African literary works such as poems, songs, African dances were also exhibited in *Kwanzaa* celebrations (Anderson, 2009).

Afrocentricity International was founded by MK Asante with the goal, according to him (2021) of restoring and relocating the African worldview in African history. He argues that Africans have been marginalised and put at the periphery of Europe such that they view themselves as objects of European control rather than subjects of their own narrative. Asante argues that the Greek dogma that gives Europe precedence in the formation of world rationalism is inaccurate and unseasoned. This construction undermines the achievements of the Africans suggesting that only the Europeans have the ability to think rationally. Afrocentricity International seeks to achieve for all Africans across the globe freedom from oppression and suppression by the white supremacy. The movement promotes cultural, economic and educational development by creating a consciousness in the African people of their capabilities to create their own solutions and live on their own terms (Mazama, 2014).

Signature trends in all these and similar initiatives of African restoration include:

- Increasingly cross-border networking into mainstreamed African consciousness.
- Recognition of the similar plight of the Black/African peoples of the world across the seas.
- The call to Afrocentricity – an African and Historical consciousness which demonstrates the value and urgency of Afrocentricity
- Reference to Kemet as the classical heart of Africa – the golden age of African culture.

These trends are encouraging and invite us to a mainstreaming of Afrocentricity in all ventures, beginning with spirituality and permeating especially education.

Potential of Afrocentricity in Education

Education is first and foremost a project in humanisation, enabling individuals to become most able to be agents of the work of advancement of the cosmic community that is their heritage and mission. This work and preparation for it through education are interactive communication processes. Humanisation is a social and also spiritual process in which the culture of the subject has to be relevant and operative. Mindful of this mammoth task of education, and aware that it is possible to sabotage it by unrooting the subject and encapsulating them in a space and context where they are disabled to be agents, becoming objects of the processes of their lives, the clarion call for the restoration of the rootedness of African education in the Afrocentric standpoint is urgent. Global current

movements of return to indigenous knowledge systems corroborate this need. In this section we discuss a few, certainly far from exhaustive, but hopefully indicative, relevant steps that can fruitfully be taken in making education in Africa Afrocentric at the family, institutional and other social settings.

Afrocentric imagery for education and socialisation

Education is full of the use of imagery be it visual, narrative or other. In the African context, it is critical that the images of what is good, what is model achievement, behaviour and all things desirable, be deliberately African. This fits into the concern of psychological location which is a central project in Afrocentricity (Asante, 2017a). It can also restore and validate African beauty, and put it before the African child as theirs to reclaim, relish and develop.

African History from Afrocentric standpoints

Another help towards this restoration would be to restore a pride in African history, beginning in family histories and ethnic-national histories. African children can then have pride in their African names and create a sense of belonging with the greatness that is in their own family and people. Alongside this is the return to a reading of African history from African perspectives. This can restore a sense of responsibility for African concerns and of power to transform African reality for the better, standing as they do on the shoulders of great African giants. Along with this therefore, must be the teaching of African history from antiquity, from the perspective of the African people, not as an appendix of European expeditions. The radical shift entailed here is critical for a proper sense of ourselves as a people.

Restoration and development of African Languages

Language has been acknowledged as a gateway to the cultural wisdom and depth of a people. The claim that the use of African languages puts African children at a disadvantage in world affairs should be counteracted with the understanding that ignorance of their own makes them vulnerable to limited choices, all of which have been created in answer to other people's questions, not theirs. The economic repercussions of such developments ought to be obvious to all; yet these are not the only deficits that come with the loss of African languages. The reclaiming of the learning, use and development of African languages is highly recommended.

Celebration of African unity in diversity

It is critical to reclaim the resources of our multiple ethnic identities. Imperialist and isolationist interests have rendered many African countries more aware of ethnicities as a liability instead of the great resources that they are. The exploitation of African differences for the rendering Africa fable should be discontinued. African people need to open up to their common heritage and fate. The same must be said of the mistaken notion that the diaspora Africans are no longer part of African heritage. Fortunately, it is the African-American diaspora that has emerged from the ashes of extreme exploitation by imperialism to rediscover their great history on the continent. Shaded under the guise of independence, African countries and African people remain innocent of the extreme losses they continue to incur by alienating their own centre and giving allegiance to other peoples and civilizations as their point of reference. It is time to return to our roots and bring the contribution of Africa to the table of recovery of civilizations. Africans cannot do that while still looking to other people for permission to be themselves. Accordingly, African children are owed a return to their heritage and to the 'heartbeat' of their meaning, namely their cultures in their varieties.

Restoration of the education and ritual life of African peoples.

As a people who live in a ritual cosmos, African people need to restore the norm of ritualising life. In particular, the proper rites for initiation and promotion to various ranks in society need to be appropriated to modern life without adulterating the symbolic depth of meaning this carry. By returning to ritual life, African youth are better accompanied in the journey of personal and social development, individually and communally, and empowered to embrace the responsibilities of different ranks in the community. The rites of African life embody social and emotional education that is critical for psychosocial adaptation of young people, and can be mined as resources for integral socialisation.

African resources and needs to inform the aims of Education in Africa

Much as Africa is part of the global village, it is still a valid point of departure for the aims of education because it is part of the global village. Since colonialism, the education of the African youth has been tailored to meet the needs of the Eurocentric economies. In the name of global appropriation, African youth have their education deracinated from their identity. This 'fragilizes' African youth and renders them prone to modern forms of intellectual enslavement. To become able to participate in the world economy on their own terms, African youth need

an African-rooted education; it is this that can increase their agility. African perceptions of God rooted in the African deities and African anthropology will be the pathways to a fitting understanding of and engagement with their aspirations. It is this kind of rootedness that can uproot the slave mentality that has taken grip on Africans world over.

Afrocentricity and methodological implications across disciplines

Finally, it bears mentioning that higher education in Africa needs to put Afrocentric concerns at the centre of teaching and learning, research and publication enterprises. The concern to preserve and document the knowledge of the common peoples should be put in a foremost position; these have persevered the attack on their ways of apprehending challenges and opportunities by dominant yet less suited approaches. Academia owes them the support of documentation in support of transmission and mainstreaming. A case in point is the farming methods of African peoples in their various terrains and climatic zones, together with the preservation of seeds which have kept famine at bay for centuries, in spite of the advancing desert conditions. Today, seed colonialism from dominant economies with killer multinational companies threaten to overwhelm local seeds and local methods of farming altogether. African academia and political institutions must bear the responsibility for upholding and protecting traditional knowledge. The challenge is that most of those holding powerful positions in these fields are products of the colonising systems. Yet African ways must increasingly become mainstreamed for Africa to stand in her full stature in the family of nations, peoples and civilizations.

Conclusion

In this paper we have diagnosed the culturally deracinated sense of their own selves that is the lot of most Africans youth, a symptom of similar self-experience at societal level. Most African people today have a sense of dislocation and the youth may manifest this more. Africans' self-understanding which is rooted in their belonging to family and community, marked by their traditions, values and sense of belonging, is the core of their strength and resourcefulness. The Afrocentric perspective on themselves, their communities, their material and social resources, their epistemology and cosmo-spirituality is the gateway to their self-determination and agency. Recovery of the ability to access the depths of African spirituality and culture is a path to integration. There are indicators

that this is in process and opportunity to leverage it for through education for positive and joyful outcomes for Africa and Africans. All efforts in the pursuit of truth and freedom, peace and prosperity in Africa must support the honour of these Afrocentric endeavours if they are to be authentic, effective and sustainable.

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