Role of public libraries in promoting literacy in Zimbabwe: Challenges of sustaining a reading culture

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Abstract:

Literacy is critical for socio-economic development because a literate nation makes positive contributions to the general development of a country. Zimbabwe now has the highest literacy rate in Africa at ninety two percent (92%) having nudged Tunisia which is at eighty seven percent(87%).This treatise seeks to investigate how libraries contributed to this extraordinary success .It will seek to find out the strategies that public libraries have employed to promote and sustain high literacy rates. It will investigate the innovative strategies like outreach programmes, competitions and story telling sessions and seek to explain how they have helped Zimbabwe achieve Africa's highest literacy level in 2010 despite the socio-economic challenges. The treatise will highlight how Zimbabwe has contributed to the United Nations decade of Literacy through library services. The writer will investigate how Zimbabwe managed to increase its literacy rate from eighty five percent (85%) to the current ninety two percent (92%).The writer will also probe the public library services that are available for children, youth and adults and how they contribute towards higher literacy rates. The paper will also explore the challenges that public and school libraries have faced especially during the hyper-inflationary period 2007-2008.It will also seek to find out the strategies that are in place to ensure the sustainability of higher literacy rates so that that the newly literates will not relapse into illiteracy. The paper will seek to find out the strategies in place to promote literacy in an Information technology driven society. The writer will also make recommendations on how public libraries and related institutions can contribute toward sustainable higher literacy rates.

Introduction

Ramaiah (et.al) (1997) notes that world development in the economic, scientific, technical , political and social spheres is a product of human development which is fuelled by education , and training, knowledge and literacy and information transfer. It is inconceivable to think of human development without literacy. Zimbabwe 's high literacy rate of above ninety two percent (92%) is attributed to a number of factors ranging from post independent government's policy on education, democratization of education, provision of public library services, support from nongovernmental organisations and the need to break free from the vicious circle of intergenerational poverty. There is immense potential in human capital development but this can only be realized through promoting and sustaining high literacy rates to enable everyone irrespective of race, creed, gender or other factors to participate fully in the conventional economic activities of the country. Youngman (2000) notes that " …for the great majority of people, if life in modern society is to be lived to the full, they must be released from the bondage of illiteracy if they are to make their best contribution to their families, the communities and the nation"

Public libraries and development

From a historical dialectical materialistic perspective the public library has and still is remains as the foremost cultural institution that belongs to the superstructure as an institution for "the pursuit of knowledge and personal discovery ...".It falls in the same category as political, legal, religious and cultural institutions. Universal access to knowledge is the basic premise of a public library system. The foundations stones of the public library are premised on supporting literacy. Jones notes that the ability to construct and understand narrative in order to contribute to and function within society is hinged upon one's ability to read, compute and write.

Lyman (1996) stated that the critical premise of the Public library is the exclusively free use of information by all and subsidy by the community. Kumar (1998) refers to the Public library as the constituent of the gift culture because of the distinct identity that the institution has been able to maintain over time and its distinctive place in the progressive design of things. The author further notes that that the public library, democracy, humanism and socialism are all products of capitalism "Public access to knowledge is of fundamental importance in a society whereby access to learning is subsidized in order to support a theory of social justice, which emphasizes quality of opportunity, in the economy and democratic participation in the polity"

Durcan (2009) notes that even though libraries have always been physically located at the centre of the community, very few of them are perceived as the central learning and development providers that the fast moving society of today requires. Even though the author was commenting on the challenges facing United Kingdom libraries, the same can be said of

Libraries in Zimbabwe as they grapple with the challenges of energizing their services so as to "…Inspire and change lives community by community…".Indeed the Public libraries of the new millennium should prioritize learning, literacy and culture as the core of there services. Fighting illiteracy is high priority for public libraries in Zimbabwe since it is a barrier to the realization of the goals of a democratic and egalitarian society.

Brief Historical Background

The Public library system in Zimbabwe has its roots in colonialism, especially in the 1890's when the white settlers established public libraries to cater for their information, recreational, educational and cultural needs. The first library to be opened was the Bulawayo Public library in 1886, followed by Gwelo Public library 1887, Queen Victoria Memorial Library 1902 in Harare and the Turner Memorial Library in Mutare among other areas. This trend resulted in a wave of subscription libraries serving the elite class.

The Carnegie Era (1928 -1950) saw philanthropic initiatives which elevated the status of libraries by promoting the development of public libraries for the underprivileged Africans despite the colonial government refusal to co-opt Africans into the mainstream socio-economic and cultural activities that required level of literacy. The Carnegie Cooperation was inspired by the need to improve the welfare of blacks through literacy thus enhancing social inclusion. The colonial libraries served as universities for the disadvantaged blacks. The first decade of the twentieth century marked the rise of international librarianship with IFLA being established in 1927 and the American Library Association (ALA).In Africa the first National Library Association was the all white South African National Library Organisation of 1930 while the Zimbabwe Library Association was formerly Rhodesia Library Association of 1959.Currently ZIMLA is the authentic representation of the Library and Information Science profession.

At independence in 1980 there was a relatively proportional growth of libraries to cater for the growing residential areas in high and low income density areas. Currently Harare has two complementary public library systems namely; the City of Harare and Harare City Libraries. The City of Harare Libraries is under the control of local government, while the Harare City Library (Queen Victoria Memorial Library) is an independent non-profit entity managed by a board of management. The former has branches in low and high density areas mainly Highfields, Mbare, Mufakose, Dzivarasekwa, Waterfalls, Mabvuku, Glen Norah, Glen View, Kuwadzana, and Kambuzuma, while Harare City Libraries are in the low density areas like Mount Pleasant, Mabelriegn, Greendale, Highlands and Hatfield. The two public library systems do complement each other even though they have not been able to amalgamate into a unified group. There are also public library services provided by the United States Information Services (USIS) and the United Nations Information Center (UNIC) in Harare and Bulawayo.

Legal Basis for Literacy in Zimbabwe

The Constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees each citizen irrespective of race, creed, age or gender the constitutional right to education. The Education Act of 2007 provides for Adult learning. Literacy is stimulated through various statutory instruments, for example, S.I. 371 of 1998 and Lifelong Education Policy. The Act is also complemented by the National Library and Documentation Service Act of 1985 which aims to promote library development and access to knowledge. Adult Learning and Education is the responsibility of a multitude of ministries namely; Education , Sport and Culture, Higher and Tertiary Education, Public Service Commission, Church Organisations, Adult Literacy Association of Zimbabwe., Local Authorities and the Corporate World.

 Mpofu and Youngman's (2001) comparative study of National literacy programmes in Zimbabwe established that the country had a high illiteracy rates ranging from sixty three (63%) to seventy five percent (75%) prior to 1980.The Government of Zimbabwe gave high priority to redressing colonial imbalances in education by expanding enrollment at all levels of the system and the establishment of Adult Literacy Organization of Zimbabwe (ALOZ). Zimbabwe's literacy programme is   characterized by a unified approach, national focus and it is in sync with national development goals and vision.

What is literacy?

The Human development Report uses the word " literacy" to refer to percentage of people who are fifteen (15) years and older who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on their everyday life. Gray in ALOZ (1994:9) views literacy as the "ability to read, write and calculate". Freire (1983) popularized the concept of literacy as a liberating and empowering tool that should equip the society with tool to transform the status quo.An illiterate person is one who "cannot with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life". He further noted that literacy should help people not only to read the word but to read the world, and to interpret events and situations in an intelligent manner. Thompson viewed functional literacy as an aspect of literacy that "prepares the individual for his /her social, civic and economic role that goes far beyond the rudiments of literacy training".

The Education for All Forum 2000 defined literacy as "… the ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement to one's daily life. It involves a continuum of reading and writing skills and also includes basic arithmetic skills".UNESCO provides an operational definition "Literacy is the ability to identify understand , interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying context…it involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential and to participate fully in the community and wider society."

Basically all the definitions focus on the functional aspect of literacy and neglect the critical aspect of literacy which is useful in developing critical thinkers. Freire (1987) notes that the

provision of library services enables children to learn independently through exploring and constructing knowledge and making serendipitous discoveries , rather than relying on being spoon fed by the teacher. Torres and Mercado (2006) contends that critical literacy also enables learners to question reality and be able to "…read between the lines of the media messages, question the interests behind them, and learn how to look for alternative ways to be informed and/or entertained…"

Value of Literacy

It is argued that the greatest breakthrough in the development of human civilization was the invention of writing as a means of communication, because, writing facilitated the capturing of knowledge and other forms of human narratives and business transactions. Goody and Watt (1987) note that writing helped to radically alter trade, commerce, economic sector and human interaction. Writing is critical because without it the classical epic literary and historical works such as Homer, Hesiod and Iliad could not have been produced. Public libraries helped to facilitate free access to intellectual capital thus equipping citizens with proficiencies and competencies in literacy.

The International Adult Literacy Survey states that literacy affects labor quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society. Illiteracy causes problems for living , working and survival in almost every area of life, for example the basic routine activities, like using automated teller machines, internet, e-mail, filling in taxation forms or understanding supermarket checkout procedures require literacy, numeracy and other multiliteracies.There is a correlationship between employment status, earning capacity and literacy levels because higher literacy levels translate to increased wealth individually and collectively. Bowman and Anderson argue that a literacy rate of between seventy to eighty (70-80) percent is critical for economic expansion to take place and Zimbabwe is way above.

 Steve (1990) states that the greatest weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressor and this explains how literacy can be used as tool to achieve total liberation. Kamal and Zunaid (2006) notes that education is critical since it empowers people to advance their interests and resist exploitation in whatever form. Throughout history dominant cultures have used education as a form of social control over an oppressed culture through the process of transculturation and assimilation. Public libraries in Zimbabwe have used their resources to support access to education by all through complementing formal and informal education as tools for socio-economic redemption and helping previously marginalized groups realize their full potential as worthy human beings.

 The United Nations Development Programme "Human Dev elopement Report 2010" states that there is no country that has seen a decline in literacy or years of schooling since 1970. This confirms that many countries have achieved success in education as measured by the Human Development Index (HDI). Zimbabwe ranks as number One Hundred and sixty (160) on the

Human Development Index (HDI).According to the report Zimbabwe has 92% literacy rate which marks a rise from 87% in 2005.

Literacy and Culture

Literacy takes place in cultural milieu and as such literacy programmes should not be divorced from the socio-cultural environment they operate. Olson and Torrance (2001) state that literacy programmes should be in sync with indigenous cultures including the existing modes of thoughts and social organisation, local knowledge and experience. Zimbabwe has an exoglossic language policy whereby English, Shona and Ndebele are the official language of communication while the former serves as the official language of industry and commerce. This diglossic background of Zimbabwe has resulted in the development of multilingual literacy programmes in English, Shona and Ndebele. Literacy programmes have also been tailor made to reflect the complementarities of oracy and literacy. The plural notion of literacy programmes in Zimbabwe reflects written, oral, visual and digital forms of expression in the main official languages and the use of print and electronic media to communicate ideas and programmes.

Public libraries as social spaces

Oldenburg's Great Place states that the first place is the home, the second our workplace and the third informal gatherings or the free, inexpensive, easily accessible, welcoming and comfortable places.Mylee states that public libraries should develop into community hubs, meeting places and engines of community engagement and development. Third places are anchors of community life as they facilitate and foster broader and more creative interaction. All societies already have informal meeting places; what is new in modern times is the intentionality of seeking them out as vital to current societal needs. Libraries are viewed as institutions that provide social spaces where high and low varieties dialect and dominant literacies intercept. Public libraries in Zimbabwe provide meeting points for various age groups to interact and exchange ideas.

The public library is viewed as part of the community complex because people love the personalized and collaborative learning environment and the social interaction which gives impetus to learning. In Zimbabwe public libraries operate as hubs by providing a network of information, learning and ICT services to both the general public and to adult and community learning providers. Samuel noted that public libraries have maintained their reputation as user friendly institutions whose service benefits a diverse community "…public libraries, unlike other major cultural institutions, have been from the start user- friendly…ministering to what in any given period has been and astonishingly heterogeneous public…"

Role of the Public Library in promoting literacy

Wedgeworth (2003) described public libraries as the natural allies, because the transmission of culture relies greatly on communication in the form of literacy. The author further notes that the

idea of embracing literacy as a core mission of the library will "...have a liberating effect across the spectrum…" Public Libraries play a crucial in providing uses with unfettered access to education, recreation and Information. De Jagger (et.al) (1994) states that public libraries by nature are concerned with early and adult literacy. In Zimbabwe the public library does complement the pre-school, primary, secondary and higher and tertiary education. The public library acts as an extension of the school library or the educational curricular because the highest numbers of users come from the youth, for example, students do make greater use of the public library on a daily basis.

All the public libraries in Harare have places for children's reading to nurture early literacy. The prioritization of English as an official language affects early literacy in the sense that children aspire for proficiency in the high variety language. Alexander and Bloch(2004:9) laments that other hindrances to libraries contribution to early literacy can be attributed to lack of material in local languages because of the absence of viable and effervescent publishing industries ready to invest in local content. In Zimbabwe the Literature Bureau used to promote the publication of books in indigenous languages Shona and Ndebele but since its closure this has dealt a serious blow on access to affordable publications. In the late nineteen nineties (1990's) the Zimbabwe Book Development Council (ZBDC) begun a programme to promote local public and school libraries buy giving them vouchers to buy local publications from local bookshops. The idea helped to stimulate local publishing and promote reading of local content as well as enhance literacy.

Lyman (1977) noted that there was need to direct human, financial and material resources in libraries towards helping young children and adults to be literate "… to learn how to learn …to develop a community wide literacy system…" Children have a special place in the public library system in Zimbabwe even though the amount of space available for use in libraries does not complement the fact that demographically children make up forty percent of the population (0-14years). Public libraries are strategically positioned to expose children to both print and electronic resources as well as meaningful language opportunities that are critical for reading achievement, for example, public library services provide reading materials in both official languages English, Shona and Ndebele.

Story Telling Sessions

The Public library is also using story telling sessions to restore to life, folklore and oral communications of the past which are comparable to the electronic media that transcend time and place. Amadi (1990) proposed a return to the concept of "libraries without shelves" or "oral librarianship" as part of the decolonization and demystification of library services. The approach being used by Public libraries confirms Amadi's proposal to "debook" as a way to return to oral traditions. The author further notes that a revisit to oral traditions and the mood of conviviality which is second to nature to Africans in comparison with alphabetized print oriented culture is helping in the restoration of the vibrancy of Africa's threatened culture. According to Chinua Achebe (1994) storytelling is a critical tool to educate and provide children with a sense of

cultural identity as reflected by the following. "…The story is our escort, without it we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story, rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from another." (Achebe, 114)

Mount Pleasant Public library holds a weekly story telling session which attracts children from surrounding areas in the Northern suburbs. Parents usually bring their children to participate in the story telling session. The idea is in line with the concept of "family learning" which refers to intergenerational learning that occurs among family members. Story telling sessions promote and strengthen intergenerational relationship between children and parents since parents do stay and to some extent participate in story telling either as story tellers or just mere listeners. Children tell stories to each other before the story teller begins the official story telling session. Wells (1985) acknowledges the crucial role of stories in promoting early literacy "...stories are self contextualizing, sustained symbolic representations of possible worlds, they provide the child with he opportunity to learn some of the essential characteristics of written language…"

Family Reading

McElwee (2004) noted that Public libraries have always long been concerned about family reading before the term was actually coined. In Zimbabwe the Public Library provides opportunities for family learning. Family learning generally refers to what people outside the family do to enable and facilitate the learning that goes on in the family. Spacey (2006) note that through family learning adults and children learn together and this strengthen family cohesion and unity. Through family learning parents develop understanding as to how their children learn, improve parenting skills and knowledge of the educational system. Family learning is a product of Adult literacy, community and life wide learning. The promotion of reading groups involving parents, children, teachers and librarians is an example of family learning. School homework also brings parents together with their children

Currently a Harare City Library lease some of its space to the Open University and this implies reflects a symbiotic relationship in the drive to sustain literacy and education and training in the context of life wide learning. Zimbabweans value education as a tool for socio-economic revolution and the family becomes the first social space whereby parents and children discuss education. The concept of family reading is closely related to family literacy which refers to the process of fostering a culture of reading and literacy within the family. Eyre (2004) value family literacy as a tool for socio-economic transformation as reflected by the following;"… through family literacy programmes, the home becomes an environment where young minds can grow to their fullest potential, and where parents can play active roles in their children's intellectuals development…"

Provision of Information and Referral services

The Public library also provides information and referral services to clients even though this service was affected by the economic challenges that characterised the period 2005 - 2008.However as the economy stabilizes there are efforts to provide current awareness services, for example, through Partnerships with Southern African Foundation for Acquired Immune Defiency (SAFAIDS) to establish an HIVAIDS corner with current reading information for users. Students from primary, secondary and higher and tertiary institutions do make use of the reference section which boasts of high quality educational materials covering a variety of subjects. Book famine in schools leaves students with no option other than to rely on the reference services of public libraries. The reference section consists of quality materials as opposed to the non-referral section, for example, fiction section.

Private Public Sector Partnerships.

The public library cannot eradicate illiteracy alone but they can play a critical role in cooperating with other institutions and this implies the need to prioritize Public -Private sector partnerships (PPP's). Public private partnerships are partnerships between public sector organizations and private sector businesses that are used as a platform to develop infrastructure and deliver public services on a cost effective and sustainable basis. The current knowledge driven economy requires institutions to develop sustainable partnerships as a way to ensure that they remain in sync with demand of their dynamic environments according Josh (2003).The city of Harare Library has been able to enter into partnerships with the banking sector to develop an internet center in the High Density suburb of Harare, even, though, all other libraries are print based reflecting the digital and information divide as it affects developing countries. It also was able to enter into partnerships with the private sector to run reading and writing competitions to promote libraries and literacy in 2007.

Partnerships with Private sector have helped add value to the public library service as well as strengthen literacy programmes, restore infrastructure and restock library collections. Partnerships have enabled public libraries to sustain library services through donations from Book Aid International and Young Rotarians and other well wishers. The availability of library services has helped to promote and sustain literacy amongst the locals.

Publicity and Outreach Services

Zimbabwe hosts the annual Zimbabwe International Book Fair and this is a great event that attracts readers, writers, illustrators, storytellers, poets, policy makers, publishers and other stakeholders. The event dates back to 1983 after independence. This event has for the past fifteen years provided the City of Harare Libraries to exhibit and promote its services. This great event helped to promote and sustain literacy as it provided an opportunity for people top buy books at an affordable price and meet and interact with writers and story tellers. Zimbabwe International Book Fair established itself as Africa's premier Book Fair as it become a vital

meeting-place for first and third world literary cultures as well as a viable marketplace and trading crossroads for the African book industries.

People flock to this event for the Writers Indaba, exhibitions, children's story telling sessions and Book Launches.Mbanga (1993) noted that the year 1993 was historic in challenging the publishing industry worldwide to make new books concurrently available to the visually advantaged and disadvantaged by breaking the Guinness Book of Records record for the fastest book production and setting new standards for producing books in Braille and large-print format. This great achievement put Zimbabwe on the world literary Map. It also helped to inspire readers to strive to set higher benchmarks with regards to literacy. The success of the Book Fair was a result of the collaboration of librarians, publishers, writers and donors.

Public libraries in Zimbabwe have also embraced the concept of mobile libraries with Rural Libraries and Development Programme (RLRLDP) championing "donkey drawn carts". These have helped to impel Zimbabwe's literacy levels. These mobile libraries have renewable solar panel energy facilities fitted with television and radio receiver sets facilitating the playing of educational videotapes and compact discs. In the outskirts of Harare in Seke Teachers College provides a mobile library service for those on teaching practice. The Concept of mobile libraries is in line with Mchombu's theory on "librarianship of poverty" whereby patterns of library services are dependent upon the country's level of economic development.

Challenges of providing library services in economically unstable times

Doust (1998) describes problems in providing good quality education in developing countries as the high cost of library services to schools and the public. The author further notes that many third world countries are trapped in a downward spiral of deteriorating educational facilities resulting from the devaluation of local currencies coupled with inflationary trends in the overseas countries from which they buy books. The challenges of providing library services can be traced to the days of International Monetary Fund's Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes which resulted in government cutting down on any funding of social services. Megan, (2008) also laments the devastating impact of economic challenges on libraries as budget dwindled due to the economic meltdown in the first decade of the twenty first millennium. Basics became unaffordable as institutions were unable to budget. The situation was worsened by natural calamities in the form of drought as well as socio-economic and political instability during the decade from 2000 upwards. Zimbabwe experiences a hyperinflationary environment during the period 2007 to 2008 when the Zimbabwean dollar lost value against all other currencies. This seriously affected libraries as they encountered difficulties in raising required capital to purchase books whether print or electronic.

While in developed countries Books are viewed as a surplus product, it is sad to note that in developing countries they remain scarce commodities. Libraries had to rely on Book Aid International, because there was no funding for collection development, let alone service delivery. Book donations in the form of requests and bequests have helped to sustain the public

libraries in Harare. There are various local and multinational publishers, for example, Weaver Press, Zimbabwe Publishing House (ZPH), College Press and Longmans. Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF), Rotarians and Zimbabwe Book Development Association also contribute immensely to literacy through exhibitions and seminars. As a survival strategy Public libraries were forced to introduce subscription fees since they needed to raise finds to sustain services. This caused the number of patrons to go down as some could not afford the exorbitant costs. However, with an improvement of the economy there are prospects that the future of libraries will be brighter as more resources are channeled towards education.

Literacy in the information age

In the Information age Public libraries have to come to grips with a multiplicity of literacies which help to one to cope with the demands of the modern world, for example, library literacy, computer and information technology literacy, media, visual and digital literacy.Bawden (2001) highlights the importance of the all encompassing multiliteracies as critical tools of the Information age. Public libraries in Zimbabwe are concentrating more on general literacies, for example, reading the word and reading the world and basic information literacy or information seeking behaviors skills .Recently they have begun to explore other dimensions of literacies, for example, cultural and family literacy. Key to the technology driven world of information is information literacy which refers to a set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyse and use information in a judicious manner. Public libraries in Harare need to give more priority to equipping citizens with all critical literacies, so that, Zimbabwe's high literacy rate will be sustained.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe has registered a phenomenal success in the battle against illiteracy and this great feat is a result of the heavy investments in education by Government, on governmental organisations, provision of Public library services, and a resilient and disciplined citizenry with a voracious gusto to continuously learn and develop in all aspects of life. As Zimbabwe stamps its mark on the knowledge economy its high time public libraries should start working on how to exploit multiliteracies and integration of local and formal scientific knowledge to sustain high literacy rate and overcome the complexities of the digital environment. The aggressive approach by the public library towards eradicating illiteracy should be enhanced through the design of indigenous grounded literacy programmes which will bring to the fore local languages and culture, help integrate culture and technology, sustain social cohesion tranquility and prosperity for all. Fagerlind and Saha (1987 states that a literate population is an asset and to stomach illiteracy and under- education is tantamount to tolerating wastage of human talent critical for the realization of a nation's development goals. Despite socio-economic challenges , it is inspiring to note that as the end of the United Nations Decade (2003-2012) draws closer Public libraries in Zimbabwe have done extremely well to complement the efforts of the formal education sector in sustaining a high literacy rate in Africa through providing access to information and independent learning.

Recommendations

1. Partnerships between Public library and stakeholders in both private and public sectors should be encouraged to generate support for literacy programmes.

2. Community engagement should be key priority for Public library service planning

3. Amalgamation of City of Harare and Harare City libraries will create synergies that are critical for the sustenance of high literacy rates.

4. Story telling should remain key programme for all Public libraries

5. Public library should provide free access to their services so that it will not undermine its DNA.

6. Government through the NLDS should prioritize the development of school libraries.

7. Mobile library services for the physical and visually disadvantaged and other vulnerable groups should be enhanced as an complement to conventional services

8. ICT's should be incorporated into the Public library service's literacy programme

9. There is need for a Public and School Library consortium that will coordinate Public Library development and work with National Book Development Council.

10. A Government Ministry dealing specifically with Public Libraries and related institutions should be set up

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