

BEYOND RELIGION: THE BOKO HARAM CONFLICT AND CRIME IN NIGERIA

**Funmi Saliu Imaledo
and
Omotanwa Rosheedat Okusanya**

ABSTRACT

Religion is a unifying factor globally; however, it has increasingly been associated with conflict and crime, contrary to its historical role. This paper examines factors beyond religion that contribute to conflict and crime, using the Boko Haram insurgency in north-east Nigeria as a case study. The Relative Deprivation Theory serves as the theoretical framework. Data were collected through a comprehensive literature review. These data were systematically organised under purposively selected themes and sub-themes to address the study's objectives. Findings indicate that various overt and covert factors, including colonial legacy, deprivation, poverty, and corruption, sustain the Boko Haram insurgency and associated crimes in north-east Nigeria. A concerted effort by stakeholders, particularly the Nigerian government, to address these root causes beyond a religious perspective could restore trust and mitigate the conflict.

KEYWORDS: Boko Haram, religion, insurgency, crimes, and Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world increasingly scrutinises religion due to its role in daily life and its entanglement with complex public conflicts. It's displayed dynamics face complex conflicts in the public spaces. One of the features of religion is its cultural expression and attachment to culture. The cultural dimension of religion encompasses a wider perspective that may not fit a single narrative on how and why conflict revolves around it. Scholars argue that religion is often instrumentalised to legitimise actions against established authorities, rather than being the sole cause of conflict (Huntington, 2003; Girard, 1972).

It would be premature to attribute global conflicts solely to religion. The intricate interplay of power, resources, religion, and values complicates our understanding. While these elements can individually spark conflicts, their

combination often escalates violence (Santagati, 2020; Daniel *et al.*, 2021). For instance, although there were waves of violence across the globe in the 1970s, the idea of conflict of that period cannot be used to conclude that religion alone causes that violence. In the face of that wave, especially in the Middle East, a response to the occupation of Palestine led to the murder of the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981. The Egyptian, Umar Abd ar-Rahman, and the Palestinian, Abdallah Azzam, the Hamas movement claimed responsibility for this death (Hans, 2005, p.3).

This aligns with Marx's philosophical perspective, which views religion as a tool for mobilising action, a concept further elaborated by Lenin. Lenin provided a clearer interpretation of Marx's notion that "religion is the opium of the people" (Lenin, 1905/1965).

Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labour of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate-priced ticket to well-being in heaven. Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man (Lenin, 1905/1965, p. 83).

Marx's philosophy suggests that religion engages the minds and can mobilise the masses, particularly the poor, to achieve specific goals. However, Huntington's "clash of civilisations" thesis shifts the focus to culture, arguing that contemporary violence stems from cultural misunderstandings rather than religion alone (Huntington, 2003). Similarly,

Similarly, Armstrong in his book 'Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence, Penguin, Random House, 2009' notes:

'In the West, the idea that religion is inherently violent is now taken for granted and seems self-evident. As one who speaks on religion, I constantly hear how cruel and aggressive it has been, a view that, eerily, is expressed in the same way almost every time: "Religion" has been the cause of all the major wars in history.... Obviously the two world wars were not fought on account of religion.... Yet so indelible is the aggressive image of religious faith in our secular consciousness that we routinely load the violent sins of the twentieth century onto the back of "religion" and drive it out into the political wilderness (Armstrong, 2014, p. 1).

Armstrong argues that major wars, such as the First and Second World Wars, were not religiously motivated, challenging the notion that religion inherently breeds

violence. This paper uses the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria to explore why some scholars argue that religion alone does not cause violence. It is divided into five sections: introduction, conceptual clarification, theoretical framework, discussion, and conclusion.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

To articulate the central themes of this paper and ensure valid conclusions, two reasons justify clarifying key concepts: first, it facilitates in-depth analysis; second, the concepts, conflict, crime, violence, and religion, are contested.

Conflict, Crime, Violence, and Religion

Conflict, crime, and violence seem to reveal the dynamics of a society at large. A society revolving around identity and a stringent culture is faced with the challenge of defining conflict, crime, and violence. There are general definitions of conflict, crime, and violence among scholars. Conflict, crime, and violence have appeared to represent a single belief of violence among scholars. Jackman (2002) presents a complex perception of violence as an action that aims at inflicting, threatening, or resulting in injury. While this action could come in form of corporal, written, or verbal, the injuries may manifest in form of corporal, psychological, material, or social. The combination of conflict and crime portrays the violence in this case. For violence to have taken place in the first place, conflict has been conceived, and crime became an open interpretation of violence. Separating crime from conflict, Oguntunde *et.al* (2018) express crime as an offence punishable by law. In the same vein, Siegel (2012) believes that they are prohibited activities, or the omission used against offenders in a court of law. The two scholars have assumed that crime could only occur when one is in contention with or abuses a laid-down code of conduct of a given space backed by the law. Conflict is a disagreement, and its situation is viewed perceptively. The worldview is often a personal expression that is displayed in the public domain. By culture, conflicts are often revealed at the manifestation stage. Conflict is a disagreement, often expressed publicly and shaped by cultural and perceptual differences (Imaledo, 2024).

Religion intersects with conflict, crime, and violence when it engages with politics. Kukah (1993) views religion as a political bargaining tool in Nigeria, while Ellis and Ter Haar (2007) describe it as a political language in African contexts. Guyer (2022) and Barnard (2022) define religion as a personal and cultural experience, marked by sacred practices, texts, and places of worship. This is why

Ellis and Haar (2007) describe religion as a political language in African politics. From various positions of scholars on religion, conflict, crime, and violence, religion in the context of this paper is seen as having faith in God, while conflict, crime, and violence will be seen as responses to unfavourable human situations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the Relative Deprivation Theory to explain why violence may occur without religious motivations.

Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative Deprivation Theory examines psychological and societal conditions leading to aggressive behaviour. Gurr (1970) argues that frustration arises when outcomes fall short of expectations. People can endure harsh conditions if they align with expectations, but disparities breed discontent, which can be politicised and manifest as violence under conducive circumstances. Gurr emphasizes that ethnicity can be leveraged to mobilise opposition against the state, which is responsible for meeting citizens' expectations.

In Nigeria, the constitution mandates the state to ensure citizens' welfare, freedom, and happiness through social justice and equality (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Failure to meet these obligations has led to frustration, expressed through armed banditry, oil bunkering, and terrorism, including the Boko Haram insurgency.

BOKO HARAM OF NIGERIA AS A CASE STUDY

The Northern Nigeria

The modern history of northern Nigeria is shaped by the 1804 religious revolution led by Uthman Dan Fodio. The region is diverse, with multiple ethnic groups (e.g., Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri) and religions, though Islam predominates (International Crisis Group, 2010). British colonisation in the early 20th century introduced other religions in the region, but Islam remains dominant. Pew Research Center (2010) provides varying religious demographics: the 1963 Census reported 36% Christians, 48% Muslims, and 16% others; the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey estimated 53% Christians, 45% Muslims, and 2% others; and the 2009 Pew Forum reported 46% Christians, 52% Muslims, and 1% others. Despite these variations, Islam is the dominant religion in northern Nigeria.

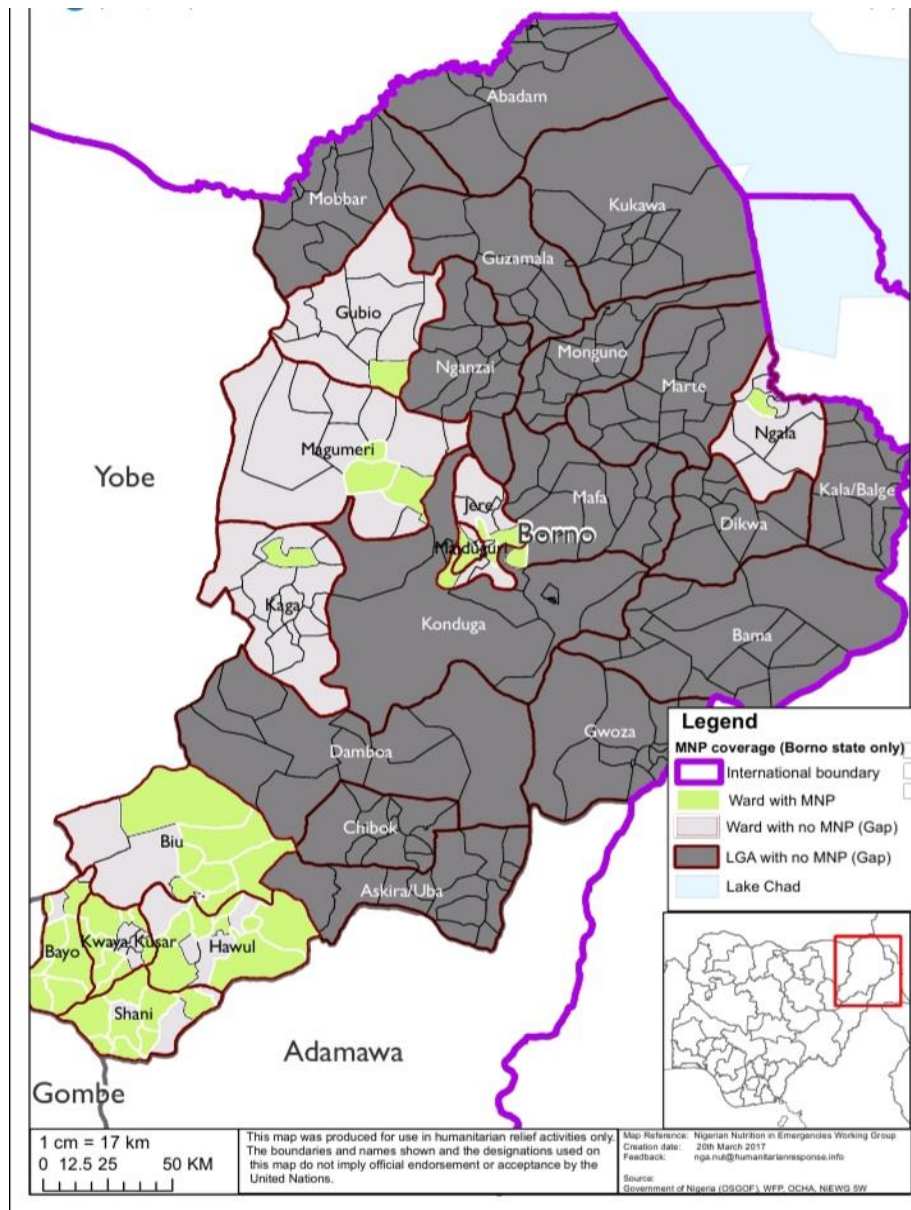
Nigeria is a secular state, meaning no religion is officially adopted, and religion is a private matter (Muhammad, 2006). Muhammad (2006) has tried to define secularity in the context of the Nigerian state. He noted:

Secular means not to be concerned with spiritual or religious affairs. A secular state, therefore, is one which is established on the assumption that political authority is completely independent of religion or supernaturalism and therefore not concerned with the spiritual life of its citizens. The emphasis here is that religion is confined to private practice and individual preference. The state will not adopt any religion as official, neither will it give overt or covert recognition and assistance to any group (Muhammad, 2006:294)

What is so important in Muhammad's observation is the position that religion is a personal business of individual Nigerians, a right that should not be imposed on other members of the country. McCain (2005) gave a better understanding of secularisation in the context of Nigeria, as he noted that it gives safety to other minority religions in a country. Secularisation has shown that Northern Nigeria cannot claim a sole religion, especially Islam, as the religion of the region. The core objective of this paper is to examine whether Boko Haram's violence is a religious endeavour and identify its root causes. Some questions can help guide the discussion of this paper. Some of them are: Is Boko Haram's violence a religious adventure in the northeast of Nigeria? What are the causes of Boko Haram violence in the northeast of Nigeria? Before we go into the details of this paper, the study area is elucidated more.

Northeast of Nigeria

North-east Nigeria, comprising Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Bauchi, Gombe, and Taraba States, accounts for 13.5% of Nigeria's population and nearly one-third of its landmass (Nyako, 2016). Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe are the epicentres of Boko Haram's insurgency, with an estimated population of 15,382,951 (Owonikoko, 2022). The region's challenges, including issues with Micro Nutrient Powder distribution noted by the United Nations in 2017, highlight government failures in addressing citizens' needs. The map below illustrates the geographical proximity of these states, emphasizing their shared socio-economic and security challenges.



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2017. *Map of North-East Nigeria: Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States*. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/nigeria> [Accessed 27 June 2025].

BOKO HARAM VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHEAST OF NIGERIA

This section addresses two key questions: Is Boko Haram's violence a religious endeavour in north-east Nigeria? What are the root causes of this violence? In 2002, a group of radical Muslims suddenly became what would become the

world's deadliest Islamic terrorist group that would surface in Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa. Before this period, this radical Muslim group, Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), later tagged "Boko Haram" aims "Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad" were so clear by the name they chose to be known with. Objectives like these are not new among the Islamic groups. For instance, in 1945, an Islamic scholar, Muhammed Marwa, moved from Northern Cameroon to settle in the city of Kano with the hope of purifying Islam. He overrated his confidence, preaching and acting lawlessly against the state (Danjibo, 2009). As put by Falola:

He (Marwa) was a Qur'anic teacher and preacher. Forceful, persuasive, and charismatic, he rebelled against many popular opinions among Kano Islamic circles, denouncing certain parts of the Holy Qur'an and even criticizing the Prophet Muhammad. At one stage in his career, Marwa granted himself his most prestigious credential when he revealed himself to be an *annabi*, a prophet with divine power and a mission to save the world...He was alleged to have replaced the name of the Prophet Muhammad with his own in personal copies of the Qur'an...He was opposed to most aspects of modernization and all Western influence. He decried such technological commonplace as radios, wrist watches, automobiles, motorcycles, and even bicycles. Those who use these things or who read books other than the Qur'an were viewed as hell-bound 'pagans' (Falola, 1990: p. 143).

So, this systematic approach was not new in propagating Islam in northern Nigeria. Jama'ah al-Ahlu al-Sunnah Li al-Da'wah wa al-Jihad emerged around 2002 as a peaceful local Salafist Islamic movement (Shuaibu, *et. al*, 2015). The unfortunate situation of poverty was great in Northern Nigeria; thus, the group assumed since independence, things were no better compared to the era when Islam ruled the region. The western-like government was responsible for state failure, political corruption, underdevelopment, poverty, inequality, and injustice in the region and considered Islamic solutions to the problems (Amusan & Oyewole, 2014). Perhaps, this is the greatest disease that has ever happened in the 21st-century Nigeria and best expressed in Karem's opinion of fundamentalism. She notes:

These "fundamentalists," as they are called, are convinced that they are fighting for the survival of their faith in a world that is inherently hostile to religion. They are conducting a war against secular modernity, and in the course of their struggle, they have achieved notable results (Karem, 2001:8).

It is important to note Zach's (2012) perception about the cause of Boko Haram: he noted four main issues; long history of radical Islamic movements in the

North, the socio-economic marginalisation against the northern population, revenge against extra-judiciary killing of its members, elites's instrument to show their anger the central government and 'finally, the group can be understood as developing as an offshoot of the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and probably Al-Shabaab' (Warner 2012). It is pertinent to examine the root cause presented by scholars against the religion as the sole cause of Boko Haram, which many scholars dwell on.

COLONIAL LEGACY, DEPRIVATION, POVERTY, AND CORRUPTION

The amalgamation of the southern and the northern protectorate under Lord Lugard had already shown that the northern protectorate would not be able to stand on its own if not merged with the south. The train project was then being financed with the proxy from the South (Falola & Bakindo, 1983). This, on its own, was not manifested suddenly; the system of government adopted by the northern protectorate to maintain, preserve, and complement Uthman Dan Fodio's achievement in the region forced the British to allow such a system. Thus, Islamic culture was more important than Western civilisation, that have colonised the region in the first place. When at the independence, it was clear that the northern region was the least and the most backward in Nigeria. The table below could explain the wide margin of differences in potential and skilled manpower in 1963.

Potential Manpower			Skilled Manpower (excluding teaching and research)		
Region	primary	Secondary	Intermediate category		Senior category
North	410,706	9,881	North	11,549	2,220
East	1,278,706	39,938	East	6,341	2,640
West	1,099,418	60,630	West	8,713	3,132
Lagos	107,522	11,372	Lagos	17,560	5,738

Source: Federal Office of Statistics, Economic Indicators. Lagos: April 1966

The table indicates that the north lacks the modern potential, that is, more qualified manpower to drive and key into the new form of economic plan put in place by the colonial government after the independence of a modern Nigeria. Although this data may not be perfect to justify the backwardness because migration from the north to the south could have caused relocation and interchange of members of the regions. The fact remains that both western and eastern regions (southern protectorate) were far ahead compared to their northern counterpart. One may ask

which type of education was encouraged in the northern region of Nigeria? The answer to this is not far. This disparity reflects the north's reliance on the Almajiri education system, which prioritised Islamic culture over modern education (Ifeh & James, 2018). Almajiri pupils, often vulnerable and impoverished, became tools for political and religious manipulation, with Boko Haram leaders like Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau reportedly educated in this system (Agbo, 2019). Zakirai and Akinyemi (2015) highlight the dire conditions of Almajiri pupils: 58% beg, 29% receive food as payment, 40% sleep on the streets, and 97% engage in child labour.

Colonial policy on education did not help to create a good environment that could enhance economic development in the north, but rather created frustration, inequality, and a lack of modern education that could have allowed the youths that are used to instigating violence in the region. There is no way that a group is deprived of basic expectations that they will not revolt against the power that be. Thus, the Almajirai system of education encourages reserved foot soldiers rather than modern education in Nigeria.

Another cause of violence in the northeast of Nigeria is the issue of deprivation and corruption. Deprivation and corruption further fuel violence. Northern Nigeria, particularly the north-east and north-west, has poverty rates of 76.3% and 77.7%, respectively (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The Relative Deprivation Theory explains how unmet expectations lead to violence (Gurr, 1970). During the heyday of the Maitatsine riots, Bala Usman questioned religion as the cause of the violence. He noted:

What are they actually fanatical about? What beliefs, values, and practices in contemporary Nigeria are they specifically fanatically opposed to or in support of? What exactly in the Islamic faith and practice in the contemporary world do they regard as so fundamental as to determine all their actions so totally and exclusively? (Usman, 1987, p.73).

A further version of Bala Usman's Maitatsine riots shows that religion is just a tool in the hands of the elite and the political class to manipulate their ways to their taste. He believes that "fanaticism that drove the Maitatsine sect into violent demonstrations, but rather economic hardship triggered by bad governance" (Danjibo, 2009, p. 917). Similarly, Mallam Hussaini Salis noted "...The level of frustration and poverty among youths in the country is a fertile ground for activities of such groups (Boko Haram)...their conduct is un-Islamic, but the whole problem boils down to the failure of government at all levels to make the welfare of the citizenry a priority... A nation that allows its youths to be idle is sitting on a time bomb because frustrated people seek relief in religion" (Tell, August 10, 2009:38).

In reframing Mallam Hussaini Salis's opinion, the northeast being deprived of turning her teeming youths for profitable economic expenditure, sow the seed of what is today, Boko Haram.

Corruption has also been tied to conflicts in this area in Nigeria, rather than religion. Religion, in most cases, is just an instrument that could help corruption, to trigger these conflicts. Adetoria (2001:2) sees corruption as the "misplacement of issues, trust and priorities as well as refusal to act in accordance with the laid down rules and regulations". Nye will go ahead to explain corruption as "a behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role, because of private (gains) regarding personal, close family, private clique, pecuniary or status gains". The private gains that the masses could have shared and alleviated even an inch of their predicament are now stolen by the fortunate in society. This act has attracted different religious ideologies from individuals or groups of people. In the Northeast, where Boko Haram featured more, individual religious ideology prevails. Religious ideology could also help explain why Nigeria is a secular state. In northern Nigeria, religious ideology has helped in challenging and confronting some anti-cultural policies that have survived centuries. For instance, politically motivated corruption is buried in the trust that the masses have exhibited through a legal means of election. This same trust becomes the platform on which the custodians abuse it. Politically motivated corruption is noted as "the unlawful use of official power or influence by an official of government either to enrich himself or further his cause and/or any other person at the expense of the public, in contravention of his oath of office and/or contrary to the conventions or laws that are in force" (Ekiyor, 1988:279).

In the same north in 1804, a revolution was championed to topple the Hausa government of the day. The reason for this revolution is not a religion but a way a people should be governed in the fear of God. Abdullahi noted that the pre-jihad Hausa society was notorious for corruption in the form of bribery, gratification, tyranny, looting, and personalizing wealth (Abdullahi, 1984, p. 19). This he associated with the success of the revolution, and this can only be carried out through violence. It is on this note that corruption breeds conflict and crime. The killing of Muhammed Yusuf is questionable because it never went through the legal process.

The post-Mohammad Yusuf in the struggle against the violence and crime of Boko Haram was frustrated by highly embarrassing corruption from the top and some of the best military and security officers Nigeria has provided. The Boko Haram conflict and crime will go ahead to reveal the politically motivated corruption in Nigeria. Innocently, Nigeria budgeted billions in naira while fighting Boko Haram, yet some of them could not be accounted for.

I have tried to combat some of the corrupt activities while fighting the Boko Haram. It should be noted that this paper limited the money involved in this table below to a billion dollars, which reveals the arms and ammunition funds shared by some former NSA based on billions of naira.

Arms and Ammunition Funds shared by the former NSA				
S/N	Name	Amount	Purpose	Remarks
1	Attahiru Bafarawa	N4.6 billion	Spiritual purposes	Arrested by the EFCC
2	Chief Raymond Dokpesi	N2.1 billion	Publicity and Media	Arrested by the EFCC
3	Alh. Aminu Babakusa	N2.2 billion	Shared to politicians	Arrested by the EFCC
4	Waripamowei Dudafa	N10 billion	Shared to PDP delegates	
5	Chief Olisa Metu	N1.4 billion	Shared to politicians	Arrested by the EFCC
6	Mrs Esther Nenat Usman	N2.5 billion	Shared to party officials	Arrested by the EFCC
7	Air Marshal Adesola Amosu (rtd)	Returned N2.3 billion		Returned 2.3 billion
8	Bashir Yuguda	N1.5 billion, N1.2 trillion, and N775 million	Suspicious payments	

Source: Adopted from Jimoh, 2016, compiled by the Authors.

A critical look at this table reveals how the northern leaders are involved in corruption, which will eventually affect their region in Nigerian development. At least over seventy percent of the people involved in these various corruptions are from the North. This speaks to why the Boko Haram violence gained more supporters in recent years. The people realised that they had been cheated, and this was why at the initial stage of Boko Haram, some of the northerners, including the leaders, were indirectly supporters of the group.

CONCLUSION

Violence does not occur in isolation; it is often triggered by issues critical to improving people's well-being. The claim that religion alone breeds conflict in the

context of Boko Haram is invalid. Factors such as colonial legacy, deprivation, poverty, corruption, politics, ethnicity, and resource competition play significant roles. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2009 visit to Nigeria reinforces this: "The most immediate source of the disconnect between Nigeria's wealth and its poverty is the failure of governance... Lack of transparency and accountability has eroded the legitimacy of the government and contributed to the rise of groups that embrace violence and reject the authority of the state" (The Nation, 2009, p. 1). Stakeholders must address these root causes holistically, beyond a religious lens, to mitigate the Boko Haram insurgency effectively.

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