Women, Shared Leadership, and Policy: The Mano River Women's Peace Network Case Study

by

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Abstract

This case study engages the question of the ways The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) in West Africa (Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone) is unique in the field of peacekeeping, based on the belief that women's collective contributions play a major role in African peacekeeping. Hence, this paper presents a context for the need for female peacekeepers including the conditions of women and children in conflict zones; international legislation related to women peacekeepers; theories of leadership; examples of male support and cooperation; and a discussion of African women's strategies in the inclusion of diverse stakeholders. This paper uses secondary sources on women peacekeepers to present evidence that women's leadership can provide a way forward toward peace and non-violence in Africa.

Key words: Mano Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), female peacekeepers, Mano River Region, peacekeeping legislation, African women's leadership, Truth and Reconciliation – Liberia.

> "With fires still burning from the latest battle, the women of Musaga {Burundi} collected what food and clothing they could for victims in Busoro. Then they marched to the local government office, where they rallied with their sisters from Busoro to demand an end to the killing. The Tutsi and Hutu women clasped hands to sing 'Give us peace. Give us peace now!' They sang together for hours before making their separate, dangerous ways back home. And although the war continued, something important had changed. The road that divided them now connected them, and through their local peace group, Twishakira amahoro ('we want to have peace'), the women of the villages have worked to keep this connection strong" (Fleshman, 2003, p.1).

This case study began with a seemingly straightforward and simple question. In what ways is The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) unique in the field of peacekeeping? As I began the research online, possible layers of investigation and pathways for inquiry revealed the complexity of this exploration. Discussions associated with this research topic include: theories of gender and leadership; the role of gender in violent conflicts and negotiations; the functions (theoretical and actual) of policy in eradicating violence; the relationship between gender and communication; and the examination of these topics through an African perspective. In writing this case study, I have woven together aspects of these additional lines of inquiry while maintaining a focus on the original research question. Of particular note is any substantive presence of writings by Africans in the academic field of leadership. One of the strategies of this essay is to present some of the current theories on the subject of leadership, re-examining these discussions in an African context. I have prioritized the words of African women and men in regards to leadership and peacekeeping in their communities to reveal their on-the-ground and scholarly contributions. This research project is compiled using secondary sources. As such this essay could be categorized as a beginning theoretical treatise from which I plan to use primary sources in further research.

This paper will present a context for the need of female peacekeepers, including the conditions of women and children in conflict zones, international legislation related to women peacekeepers, theories of leadership, examples of male support and cooperation, a discussion of African women's strategies in the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, The Mano River Women's Peace Network's unique structure of decentralized, collaborative leadership and my closing reflections. This research project was not conducted dispassionately, the discovery and interpretation of the data collected is representative of my own positioning. As an African American academic and artist whose research and creative projects are done in honor of those who have swept the path before me I have a commitment to the recognition of assets, and the development of resources that contribute to well-being in African and Diasporic communities. As a woman, I came to this project with a prior belief that women's collectivity could play a major role in peacekeeping activities. The evidence proves my original thesis and indicates that it will take an enormous collective and focused effort to combat violence against women in both public and private spheres.

Theory, Women, and Leadership

As exemplified by the opening story from Burundi the peacekeeping activities of African women provide an excellent example of the ways that women's collectivity can work against the odds to shift hearts, minds, and policy from a war paradigm to peacekeeping and community renewal. There have been numerous studies on power and leadership in regards to women and the majority of them separate individual from collective leadership(s).

Recently there has been scholarship that proposes new ways of examining the multiplicity of leadership forms. Pittinsky, Bacon and Welle's chapter, *The Great Women Theory of Leadership,* from Kellerman and Rhode's book, *Women and Leadership: The State of Play and Strategies for Change*, is an interrogation of essentialist ideas and gendered expectations of women in public positions. Critical of the "great leader approach," Pittinsky, Bacon and Welle note that this singular model is promoted and accepted by both men and women, and that it facilitates polarization between perceived masculine and feminine styles of leadership thereby masking the complexity of leadership expression by all genders. In a later chapter, *Women and Power: New Perspectives on Old Challenges,* Evangeline Holvino discusses the various feminist approaches to, and definitions of, power. Both of these theoretical discussions are held in the context of women who hold power in the public sphere This case study on MARWOPNET explores the skills transferred from the home, family, and private spheres to public and regional spheres providing evidence that in an African context private and public spheres can be bridged successfully. The blend of individual and collective leaderships in private and public spheres has contributed to the success of women in environments of conflict. Often found in Africa, hybrid forms of leadership, which rely upon relational skills, are discussed by Crosby & Bryson. In their book, *Leadership For The Common Good: Tackling Problems in a Shared Power World,* the authors question the idealization of the individual bureaucratic leadership model and they explore the value of alternative systems where collectivity is social currency. "In a shared-power world, beneficial change doesn't happen without committed, concerted action by groups of people" (Crosby & Bryson, 2005, p. 34). This re-vision of leadership resonates with the theories and experiences of African women scholars.

African Women: Leadership, Theory and Power

In writings that preceded Pittinsky, Bacon & Welle's essay, *The Great Women Theory of Leadership*, African scholar, Filomina Steady stated that there have been instances where individual African women have served in official governmental capacities and, "In addition, women's associations operate in the 'public sphere' when they challenge the state, formulate policies, demand change, and lobby for greater female representation in decision-making processes" (Steady, 2006, p. 2). These associations represent the type of groups that are members of The Mano River Women's Peace Network. For the women, children and men who are caught in war and conflict zones, theories of shared power as described by Crosby, Bryson, and Steady model effective ways to work toward peaceful resolutions as a unified group.

African scholars such as Filomena Steady believe that the distance between theory and political action should be bridged. This is accentuated when discussing ways for women to examine and address their own needs. According to Steady's argument, European feminism has focused upon the replacement of men by women rather than any "profound social transformations of systems of inequality and entrenched hierarchies" (Steady, 2006, p. 2) and she insists that African women should look toward their own history and legacy of collective action rather than rely upon extrinsic theories. She points out that, "indigenous associations, which have existed for centuries, can yield important insights about the gendered nature of women's collective action" (Steady, 2006, p. 3).

There are other African women scholars who are developing culturally specific theories regarding gender and women's empowerment. Obioma Nnaemeka's feminist theory is inclusive of, and attendant to, values that have been missing in European feminism. She describes her theory of "nego-feminism" as a "third space of engagement," one that "allows for the coexistence, interconnection, and interaction of thought, dialogue, planning, and action {which} constitute the arena where I have witnessed the unfolding of feminisms in Africa" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 360). Described by Nnaemeka as a "non-ego" and "negotiation" type of feminism, nego-feminism is in direct alignment with theories about integrative leadership which promote the ability to connect theory with lived experience to explore the diverse meanings revealed by rejecting the boundary between the academy and the community. "In my view, the work of women in Africa is located at the boundary where the academy meets what lies beyond it, a third space where the immediacy of lived experience gives form to theory, and anticipates the mediation of policy, thereby disrupting the notion of the academy and activism as stable sites" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p.377).

Women, Peacekeeping, and International Policy

Supported by United Nations Security Council resolutions it is now a well-known fact that in war and conflict situations women, children, and the elders are more susceptible to violence than the male combatants themselves. In one graphic example, "It is estimated that between 50,000 and 64,000 women were victims of sexual abuse during the war {in Sierra Leone}" (Steady, 2006, p. 55). The on the ground effect of war and conflict on women's lives and families is deeply destructive. Despite that information, prior to Resolution 1325 women's presence in peacekeeping operations was minimal. "For instance, since 1988, the UN had engaged in twenty peacekeeping operations and no woman had performed on the military peacekeeping staffs" (Umerah-Udezulu, 1999, p.75). According to this same writer, with 235 women involved between 1989 and 1992, women's involvement in United Nations security missions rose to 1% during those years, with a rise to 2 % in 1993. There was a difference however between those involved in on-the-ground conflict and civilian women staff in the U.N. in which the percentages varied from 5 to 23 percent. "Just as the hierarchical gender segregation of the labor force is a structural feature in the state system, such differentiation is a duplication in dominant international organizations, such as the UN" (Umerah-Udezulu, 1999, p.75).

There are women in public positions who have brought the issue of gender parity in conflict resolution staffing to the foreground of the international community. With the support of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who was recently elected for her second term as President of Liberia, and former Finnish Minister of Defense Elisabeth Rhen wrote a report on the effects of war on women. In this document Sirleaf Johnson and Rehn examined related concerns such as domestic violence, internal displacement, women's health, and the victimization of women by peacekeepers. This 2002 report begins and ends with specific recommendations a number of which highlight the need for the establishment of new policies and the effective implementation of existing policies in regard to women's participation and leadership in conflict areas.

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions have provided the foundation for gender inclusive hiring practices in areas of conflict. In 1999 The United Nations approved Resolution 1265 - *On The Protection of Civilians In Armed Conflict*. This resolution notes that civilians are often targeted in war and conflict situations, it calls for disarmament and reintegration of combatants and it articulates "the special rights and needs of children in situations of armed conflict, including those of the girl-child" (S/RES/1265 (1999), p 2). On October 31, 2000, as a follow up to Resolution 1265, The United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 - *On Women, Peace and Security*. Related to the disproportionate level of civilian casualties, part of the Resolution 1325 press release reads; "Expressing concern that civilians, particularly women and children account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including refugees and internally displaced persons, and increasingly are targeted by combatants and armed elements, and recognizing the consequent impact this has on durable peace and reconciliation …"

In the Foreword to Johnson Sirleaf and Rehn's *Women, War, Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-Building (Progress of the World's Women 2002, Vol. 1)*, Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UNIFEM wrote, "Cleary the nature of war has changed. It is being fought in homes and communities – and on women's bodies – in a battle for resources and in the name of religion and ethnicity. Violence against women is used to break and humiliate women, men, families, communities, no matter which side they are on. Women have become the greatest victims of war – and the biggest stakeholders of peace" (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2009, p. 1). One must not assume that all women will join large formal organizations or that women who choose not to join in public activities are unaware or uncaring about violence in their communities. Rehn and Johnson's report supports Filomena Steady's assertion that women's organizing in Africa is sometimes done informally and that even organized groups are hard to define. "The sheer numbers, diversity, and proliferation of women's associations make a universal definition of the gendered nature of collective action challenging" (Rehn & Johnson Sirleaf, 2009, p.4).

Using the harsh conditions as an impetus, women in Africa have risen up as individuals and as a collective force to resist the victimization that takes place in wars and conflict zones. Rachel Amram reports that the West African conflicts of the 1990's provided fertile ground for women to organize. "Grassroots women's groups started to organize, creating networks of information to protect their families and their communities. Women would inform each other of new attacks, safe routes and other vital information so needed in situations when life and death is concerned" (Amram, n.d., p. 14). It is important to note here that many women need to be educated about the importance of peaceful conflict resolution and ways that they can participate. Mary Brownell, a chairperson of the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) and founding member of MARWOPNET, spoke to women to get their support for peace and unification in Liberia, "We are not waiting for you to take up arms for our cause, but at least to hear on the BBC or receive letters of encouragement saying, we recognize ourselves in you" (World People's Blog).

In what could be viewed as an answer to Brownell's invitation and with policy support such as UNSC Resolutions 1265 and 1325, groups such as The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) were formed. The history of the region and the inability to reach peaceful resolutions over several decades was a major motivation for a focus on gender inclusion in arriving at solutions.

Mano River Region History

The creation of The Mano River Women's Peace Network was a response to long-standing and on-going regional conflicts between Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, which have occurred over many decades. The Mano River Union, which includes these three countries, was formed in 1976. The information on the Global Security website notes that the function of this alliance was "to improve living standards." Despite that formalized union, conflicts across and inside the borders of these countries continued with major outbreaks occurring in 1989, 2000, and 2001. According to The Sierra Leone Diamond Policy Study commissioned "at the behest of The United Kingdom," (The Sierra Leone Diamond Policy Study, 2001, p. 9) in 2001 by the government of Sierra Leone, and prepared by AMCO Robertson Mineral Services the source of the tensions and violence can be traced to the diamond trade in the region. Although foregrounding the relationship between economics and conflict, the report does point out the limited mobility and psychological traumas particular to women in areas of conflict (The Sierra Leone Diamond Policy Study, 2001, p. 93-94).

The Mano River Women's Peace Network

"In May 2000, under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a group of African women decided to come together to promote their participation in the process of preventing and managing conflicts and restoring peace in Africa" (marwornet.org). According to this website, the original Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) was created by women from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Their first general meeting was held in Monrovia, Liberia on June 8, 2001. This meeting was organized by Femmes Africa Solidarité, a non-governmental organization and the African Women's Committee for Peace and Development. Representatives from The African Union, the African Economic Community, the Nigerian government and the United Nations Development Program were also in attendance. In the Sixth Anniversary report for peacewomen.org it states, "As part of its sub-regional peace-building program in the Mano River region, 'Femmes Africa Solidarité' (FAS), a women's organization in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, fostered the creation and development of MARWOPNET." The focus of the initial meeting was the creation of a "sub-regional project for and by the women of the Mano River countries" (marwopnet.org) to collaborate with and support already existing peacemaking activities in the region. MARWOPNET as an organization has numerous sub-committees in the Mano River region.

With the intention of including diverse stakeholders, all of these organizations are "composed of women's leaders, rural women, women communicators, women politicians ad parliamentarians, women's rights activists, women union members, religious women and business women" (marwopnet.org). As well as the contributions made in their respective organizations, businesses, and institutions, these individual leaders work together collectively under the auspices of MARWOPNET. MARWOPNET is run by a managing council, which has a term of two years and an executive board consisting of twelve representative leaders - three members from Sierra Leone, five from Guinea, and four from Liberia. This is another instance in which decentralization serves a broad spectrum of the public in the Mano River region. The presidency of MARWOPNET rotates as well with the two other countries providing the vice presidents at various times. The five technical commissions work in the areas of fund-raising, resources mobilization, finance, program, and communication. Flexibility, limited terms of service and representative participation all serve the endeavor of regional inclusivity.

The women who created this regional network were faced with evidence of horrific abuse. It is well known that "few women who participate in conflicts do so by choice. In many cases, women are abducted by soldiers to be used as 'sex slaves', cooks and cleaners in the camps" (Joof-Colé, 2005, p. 2). Evidence of war's mortal effects was verified statistically by Akwasi Aidoo in 2008 when he discussed the on-going conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). "The UN estimates that at least 1,000 people, mostly children and women are dying every day as a result of the war" (Aidoo, 2008, p.3). Motivated by the knowledge that women and children are disproportionately victimized by violent conflicts, MARWOPNET advocated for women to be part of a decision-making process that could prevent these occurrences. As agents for peaceful negotiation MRAWOPNET has earned the trust of regional communities. Ms. Mary Brownell, a Liberian activist speaking about the negotiations in the Congolese conflict zones remarked, "The women in the Mano River Network have the respect of the people." She continued, "So when we make a move, I think the leaders respect us'" (Fleshman, 2003, p.6).

Strategies for Peacemaking: Public and Private Spheres

African women working within the constraints of political structures have been strategic about the methodology by which they confront male resistance. According to her description, Obioma Nnaemeka's "nego feminism" fits the ethos of the African women's peacekeeping endeavors. "But what is *nego-feminism?* First, *nego-feminism* is the feminism of negotiation; second, *nego-feminism* stands for 'no ego' feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of 'give and take/exchange' and 'cope with successfully / go around" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p.378). There are several examples of nego-feminism in action.

At a gathering in Nairobi a Congolese peace activist, Ms. Aningina Bibiane spoke about the value of collective action by women, "We knew we had to be together for the men to hear what we had to say" (Fleshman, 2003, p.2). In another instance in 2003, at an event sponsored by UNIFEM and Femmes Africa Solidarité, (the organization which supported the creation of MARWOPNET), African women found common cause in their quest for inclusion of women in governmental and policy making organizations throughout Africa. With few women involved in formal peacekeeping operations they knew that one or two individual women would not have the impact of a large group of empowered women. Ms. Bineta Diop, Secretary General of The African Women Committee on Peace and Development, which was established by the UN Economic Commission of Africa, said that isolated women would be "just like a toy in the men's structure. If there is one woman amoung 30 men who have a different agenda, how can that woman deliver?" (Fleshman, 2003, p.3). Continuing on, she pointed out the collective power of women, "But when you have a group of women you will see them acting differently—as women together. You will also see the men acting differently, because the process is no longer male-dominated" (Fleshman, 2003, p.3).

Male Stakeholders: Support and Challenges

One of the main challenges to organizations such as MARWOPNET comes from African men who, unaware of the communal benefits of women's leadership, want to restrict the activities of women exclusively to the private domain of the home. As seen in examples such as the Nigerian market women, women beneficiaries of the micro-lending programs and women peacekeepers, investment in women results in better standards of living for children, men, family units, and entire communities.

As noted previously in Ms. Bineta Diop's remarks, the most safe and effective form of resistance comes when women operate as a group rather than individuals. One of the benefits of women in leadership is revealed as their successes become visible in the public sphere and it becomes easier for individual men to acknowledge the value of their contributions. While praising the effectiveness of women, some men have also strongly critiqued men's absence in peace-oriented activities. Tiawan S. Gongloe presented remarks at a 2004 meeting of Liberian women's associations, international women's organizations, and UNICEF representatives.

" I have come here today to do one thing. And that is to pay tribute to the women of Liberia for the tremendous efforts they have made over the last fourteen years for the survival of Liberia as a nation and for the end of conflict in Liberia and the West African Sub-region. While a group of evil-minded Liberian men have chosen violence as the means to attain and maintain state power, Liberian women have remained consistent, persistent and courageous in their efforts in searching peace in Liberia" (Gongloe, 2004, p.1).

Nowhere is the theory of "nego-feminism" more evident than in the area of gender relations and peacekeeping, where women are aware of the need for support from male stakeholders. Rachel Amram reports that in the 1990's when resisting violence in their communities in West Africa, "Women were frequently using information they got from male family members involved in the conflict" (Amram, n.d., p.14) in order to find safe routes of passage and avoid injury. From the village level to the realm of governmental policy, African women have organized for their own survival and the well being of their communities. African women community organizers are quite aware of their gender roles in the family, positions which can also be used as a tool for compassionate engagement and conflict resolution. There are times when the seemingly rigid lines of gender behavior are crossed and this can create an opening for dialogue and emotional connection. On March 8, International Women's Day at a plenary meeting, a women's caucus decided not to do a formal presentation and instead they, "staged a play that dramatized the suffering of women and children in war and concluded with an impassioned appeal for peace" (Fleshman, 2003, p.4). Because the women stepped into rather than outside of their gender roles, "Even the toughest rebels were crying and asking, 'How can the women see us like this? Are the women really suffering this much?'" (Fleshman, 2003, p.4). Through this performance of female gendered-ness, it was made apparent that the experience of suffering is universal to both women and men.

Women and Visibility: Recent Liberian Policy

The peacekeeping work of groups such as MARWOPNET has paved the way for gender inclusive policy-making in Liberia. It is very important to note Liberia's unique status as the first country in Africa with a female elected head of state and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report that has an entire section devoted to women in conflict zones. In their final report, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRCL) recognized violence and exploitation of women as a by-product of "the low socio-political status of women, with the added perception of male superiority" (TRCL, 2009, p.81). The TRCL, which began their work in 2005, also noted that violence against women has secondary effects such as "single parenting, unwanted pregnancies, health problems from sexually transmitted diseases, increasing prostitution, discrimination and increased responsibility due to the loss of breadwinners, livelihoods and the adoption of orphans" (TRCL, 2009, p.81). Recommendations included: skills training programs for women in urban and rural areas; micro-credit lending for the development of women's businesses; a revision of the educational system's biases against women; equality under the law; reparations such as counseling, free medical care, scholarships for children who survive the death of the breadwinner or parent; reunification with children and family for women, or their children who were abducted and forced to work as sex slaves or fighters; and special reparations for the elderly, widows, displaced and homeless persons.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia's report with significant attention paid to the status of women is one of the most recent links in a chain of policies that have been created to address the needs of women in conflict zones, and to recognize women's contributions to effective peacekeeping. In Liberia, it is the work of The Mano River Women's Peace Network, and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf among others that has created an environment in which women's needs in war and conflict zones has become more visible on the level of national and international policy.

Epilogue

As exemplified in the case of The Mano River Women's Peace Network, groups of African women have made great strides in the areas of peacekeeping and leadership. Their active advocacy and outreach has resulted in policy creation and revision. It is my argument that these women operate within both individual and collective modalities, often using relational skills honed from their roles in the family to model flexible, inclusive, and innovative forms of leadership. This integration of leadership forms has been successful in the areas of peace building and peacekeeping in Africa. In Crosby and Bryson's book *Leadership For The Common Good,* there are a number of case studies which support a premise that, "… leaders cannot rely on hierarchic bureaucratic models to bring about needed change. Rational planning on its own is ineffective. Instead, leaders must increasingly focus on building and altering shared-power arrangements within and among organizations, and they must engage in political decision making" (Cosby & Bryson, 2005, p. 33). Noting that there is a emotional component connected with the issue of power, African scholar Obioma Nnaemeka reminds us that women's contributions are essential in re-visioning a relationship between tools of negotiation and community well being. "African women's engagement still nurtures the compromise and hopefulness needed to build a harmonious society" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 381).

It is the combination of inclusive forms of leadership, moral imperative, political awareness, and cultural legacy that has made women in Africa powerful agents for social change and gender equity. As evidenced in this case study, The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) has exhibited effective and unique characteristics in this regard. The women in this network have met the critical need for female peacekeepers in West African conflict zones. They have demonstrated an ability to affect governmental procedures and policy decisions in The Mano River Region and beyond. The effective use of a decentralized structure has enabled their members to organize throughout the region to build a mass network. This type of outreach has allowed MARWOPNET to collaborate with women's associations, businesses, community members, and business leaders. Using both individual and shared forms of leadership, MARWOPNET has done effective organizing across ethnic, class, and gender divisions, including stakeholders from both public and private sectors of society. The Mano River Women's Peace Network has had a profound influence on men in positions that range from heads of state to community and family members.

In this area of their activities, they have had some success in bridging the gender gap in regard to public policy and private perception. This shared power and collaborative mode of operation is an extension of traditional African systems of kinship and community. In a world in which there is a dire need for peace, justice and caring, The Mano River Women's Peace Network provides a model for healing divisions, rebuilding communities and creating socially just, gender specific institutions and policies.

Closing Reflections

My research on The Mano River Women's Peace Network is inspirational for many reasons. MARWOPNET demonstrates the ability of African women to organize under harsh and life threatening conditions in ways that affect political systems. In their endeavor to create peace and enlist the aid of male stakeholders, the women MARWOPNET have used both political savvy and their role in the family as tools for positive outcomes. The Mano River Women's Peace Network has included women from different ethnic and class backgrounds to effectively develop an active mass peace network. In assessing these tools, I wonder if any of them are transferrable to a Diasporic context. In specific, can the same organizational and leadership strategies be employed in urban African American communities? If, in the words of Hutu and Tutsi women from Burundi who organized their village to try to end killing, *"Twishakira amahoro (we want to have peace)"* (Fleshman, 2003, p.1) then I believe that women of African descent and indeed, women and men of all cultures must find the ways forward regardless of geographical location or the specific manifestations of violence. The Mano River Women's Peace Network offers a model of effective organizing for the peaceful resolution of violence in the global public sphere.

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