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Abstract

An indigenous or community language is the language that nurtures the child in the early years of his or her life. The UNESCO land mark publication in 1953 underscores the importance of educating children in their community languages: an education that is packaged in a language which the child does not understand is simply difficult for the child. Kenya has had a number of education commissions that significantly address the place of indigenous languages in a child's education. Further, Kenya Constitution on its part tackles language issues too. This paper, therefore, examines how the Constitution and the various colonial and post-colonial educational commissions that have been undertaken in Kenya treat indigenous languages. Should these indigenous languages be used as a medium of instruction? What are their benefits to a child's life? To answer these questions, the historical method of study which utilizes mainly secondary and primary sources of data is adopted. The main sources of primary data which form the basis of the discussion and analysis in the paper are Kenya's constitution (2010) and the educational commissions and reports in the two epochs: colonial and post-colonial periods. The main sources of secondary data scrutinized include: written documents such as books, journals and newspapers. The paper notes that the various educational commissions contain numerous recommendations that have informed Kenya's education sector over the years on the way indigenous languages should be utilized for both individual and national development. This notwithstanding, the paper concludes that indigenous languages in Kenya have been given a short shrift to the advantage of English language hegemony. The paper proposes a sound implementation of the commissions' recommendations in order to revitalize indigenous languages so that a Kenyan learner can reap benefits that accrue from the use of indigenous languages in education.

Key Words: Indigenous languages, treatment, colonial, post-colonial, education commissions, constitution

1. Introduction

Education in Kenya is directly influenced by government policies and is, therefore, constantly evolving according to a country's socioeconomic and political needs. Consequently, language policy in Kenya cannot be addressed without taking a historical perspective starting from colonial to post-colonial periods (Nabea, 2009). Thus, two epochs are worthy scrutiny: the pre-colonial and the post-colonial periods. As Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) note, in the first epoch of colonial language policy, there were several stakeholders involved in the formulation of a language policy. On the one hand, Christian missionaries thought that the gospel would best be spread in the mother tongue. On the other hand, the colonial administrators feared the Europeanization of Africans through English language lest they became too educated to accept the role of low cadre employees in their administration. As Nabea (2009) argues, the colonial language policy in Kenya impacted greatly on post-colonial language policy. Nabea posits:

[T]he colonial language policy was always inchoate and vacillating such that there were occasions that measures were put in place to promote or deter its learning. However, such denial inadvertently provided a stimulus for Kenyans to learn English considering that they had already taken cognizant of the fact that it was the launching pad for white collar jobs (p.122).

From the above quotation, it is apparent that the genesis of English's hegemonic and divisionary tendencies, between the elite and the masses started during the colonial period. English still occupies a position of prestige even today¹. This position has been perpetuated through education commissions and task forces.

Kenya has had several education commissions in both colonial and post-colonial periods such the Phelps Stoke (1924), Beecher (1949), Ominde (1964), Bessey, (1972), Gachathi (1976), Mackay (1981), Kamunge (1988), Koech (1999) and Odhiambo (2012) and whose

¹The sociolinguistic situation in Kenya is triglossic: English is top of the rank as the official language; Kiswahili is in the middle of the rank as the co-official language and the local lingua franca, while at the base are the local languages or mother tongues (Ogechi, 2005).

terms of reference are comprehensive and varied². Each of these commissions and the Kenya constitution (2010) contain numerous recommendations that have informed Kenya's education sector over the years with the view of making education relevant and practical for both individual and national development.

How have the education commissions highlighted above addressed the place of indigenous languages in education in Kenya? Answering this question is the goal of the paper. The paper seeks to answer this question by reviewing the recommendations of pre- and post-independent education commissions and the 2010 Constitution in Kenya and pointing out how each commission and the constitution tackle the ever critical issue of the use of indigenous languages in education in the country. The paper ends by synthesizing recommendations made by these education commissions as well as the Constitution and suggesting the way forward in the light of the available literature on the benefits of mother language in a child's education. In this paper, the terms community languages, indigenous languages and mother tongues have been used interchangeably.

2. The Colonial Language Policy

During the colonial period, the Africans had already realized that English language was a gateway to white collar jobs and wealth and denying them a chance to learn the language was akin to condemning them to menial jobs (Nabea, 2009). Therefore, for this reason, the Agĩkũyũ of Kenya started independent schools in the 1920s in order to learn English (Whiteley, 1974). Some of the key commissions that were undertaken to review education during this period included: a Ten Year Plan³, Phelps-Stokes Commission of 1924, the Beecher report of 1949 and the Binns Commission of 1952.

²A critical analysis of these commissions is discussed later in this paper.

³The Ten Year Plan sought to provide 50% of school age children with an education lasting six years and to offer within ten years a full primary course for undergraduate teachers to ensure that there was adequate supply of trained teachers (Bogonko, 1992). Moreover, a satisfactory number of pupils of both sexes was expected to receive education up to the certificate level (Sifuna, 1990).

Apart from these commissions, the colonial government also passed three major education ordinances in 1921, 1931, and 1934 and set up several educational committees, councils and boards aimed at improving the quality of African education (Bogonko, 1992). Some of these endeavors which had a bearing on the language policy are discussed in the subsequent section.

2.1 The United Missionary Conference in Kenya of 1909

The United Missionary Conference in Kenya occurred at the same time when the Fraser and Giroud Commissions were put in place⁴. During the United Missionary Conference in Kenya in 1909, the role of the mother tongue, Kiswahili and English in the domain of education was discussed. The Conference adopted the use of mother tongue in the first three classes in primary school, Kiswahili in two of the middle classes in primary, while English was used in the rest of the classes up to university (Gorman, 1974).

2.2 The Phelps Stoke Commission of 1924

Among the primary objectives of the Phelps Stoke Commission (1924) was to make the individual efficient, promote and advance agriculture, develop native industries, improve health, train people in the management of their affairs and inculcate citizenship and service (Bogonko, 1992; Sifuna, 1990). In other words, the Phelps-Stokes Commission advocated for both quantitative and qualitative improvement of African education (Otiende, Wamahiu & Karugu, 1992). From a linguistics perspective, first, the Phelps Stoke Commission noted that the appeal to the native mind cannot be effectively made without

⁴ First, the Fraser and Giroud Commissions called for racial consideration in developing the British protectorate. Thus, the Fraser commission also recommended that education should be on racial lines, with the Europeans getting an academic type of education, Asian children a mixture of academic and industrial training, while Africans were to receive purely industrial education. Second, they recommended a push for industrial development, technical education and the teaching of religion as a moral foundation. Third, the commissions discouraged the import of expensive labour from India. Fourth, the Fraser commission recommended the establishment of a Department of Education in the East African Protectorate (Sifuna & Otiende, 2006, p.193).

the adequate use of the native language. Thus, the commission recommended that the languages of instruction should be the native language in early primary classes, while English was to be taught from upper primary up to the university. Schools were urged to make all possible provision for instruction in the native language. However, the Commission recommended that Kiswahili be dropped in the education curriculum, except in areas where it was the first language. Kiswahili's elimination from the curriculum was partly aimed at forestalling its growth and spread, on which Kenyans freedom struggle was coalescing (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998).

2.3 The Beecher Report of 1949

After the Second World War, there was a paradigm shift in the colonial language policy which hurt local languages (Nabea, 2009). This was because the British colonialists started a campaign to create some Westernized educated elite in Kenya when self-rule was imminent following the freedom struggle. Nabea argues that the British colonialists believed that such an elite group would protect their interests in the independent Kenya. This is another endeavor that buttressed English hegemony. In 1950-1951, the Education Department Reports which included Beecher's (1949), Binns (1952) and the Drogheda Commission of 1952 pointed out that it was inappropriate to teach three languages at the primary school⁵. Consequently, the reports recommended that English be introduced in the lower primary to be taught alongside the mother tongue and called for the dropping of Kiswahili in the curriculum, except in areas where it was the mother tongue. The implementation of this policy started in 1953-1955 (Gorman, 1974). Thus, the Beecher Committee of 1949 was mandated to examine the scope, content, methods, administration and financing of African education (Nabea, 2009). The Beecher Report reinforced the argument of Phelps-Stokes and the Ten Year Developmental plan on the provision of practical education to Africans. The Beecher Report's recommendations formed the

⁵The Drogheda Report was also known as the Report of the Independent Committee of Enquiry into the Overseas Information Services. The Drogheda Report suggested two key changes: a move from cultural to educational work (as the report saw a greater economic rewards for educational work); and a shift in emphasis from developed countries to less developed countries, more specifically, away from Europe toward Asia (Martin, 2014).

foundation of the government's policy on African education until the last year of colonial rule. However, the Africans were vehemently opposed to the Beecher Report. According to Bogonko (1992), the African view of the report was that it was to lead to Europeanization rather than Africanization of education and it sought to maintain the status quo of keeping Africans in low wage positions. In addition, the report recommended that Kiswahili be the language of instruction and literature in primary schools in towns. However, provision was to be made for textbooks in vernacular in rural areas and vernacular languages were to be the medium for oral instruction in rural areas.

2.4. The Prator-Hutasoit Commission of 1952

The Prator-Hutasoit Commission of 1952 endorsed that English be the only language of instruction in all school grades at the expense of local languages. The Prator- Hutasoit Commission heralded the New Primary Approach (NPA) also as known as the English-Medium Scheme (Sifuna, 1980, p. 142)⁶. To implement the new curriculum, teachers were to be trained in English, while their mother tongues were viewed as a premium in teaching the lower primary schools (Mukuria, 1995). According to Nabea (2009), this consolidated English hegemony in Kenya at the expense of local languages. Although the commission made some important contributions in teacher education, it failed to meet Africans personal goals and paid little attention to affective domains of education (Otiende, Wamahiu & Karugu, 1992). Most Africans did not want the type of education it was propagating and thus rejected it. Africans yearned for an education that was not racial and

⁶The curriculum was initially undertaken in schools for Asians in the late 50s, but spread rapidly to African schools. The curriculum was termed the English-Medium Scheme in 1957, but was later renamed the New Primary Approach (NPA) by the Ministry of Education following its "explosive expansion" across the country (Hutasoit & Prator, 1965, pp. 1-2). As Hutasoit and Prator (1965, p. 1) note, the reason the new English medium curriculum became so popular so quickly was because: first, it solved a multiplicity of practical and political problems brought about by giving instruction in a variety of languages; second, it recommended a concept of education centred around learners and activities; third, it provided much more adequate texts and teaching materials than had been available before; and, fourth, it was carried out under the ideal conditions of close supervision and continuous in-service training of teachers (Sifuna, 1980, p. 142).

one that could promote development. Because of its inadequacies many Africans opted to set up their own independent schools (Bogonko, 1992; Sifuna, 1990).

2.5 The Binns Commission of education (1952)

The Binns Commission of education was sponsored by the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Nuffield Foundation to examine educational policy and practice in British Tropical African territories (Sifuna, 1992). According to Sifuna, the commission was a landmark in Kenya's education because it expressed concern regarding the internal efficiency of African education and its ability to address their needs. The commission recommended that English be introduced in the lower primary to be taught alongside the mother tongue and called for the dropping of Kiswahili in the curriculum, except in areas where it was the mother tongue. However, the commission met criticisms from Africans because of its advocacy for racial education, inability to address social and cultural goals and its emphasis on keeping Africans on native reserves. The state of emergency of 1952 rendered the implementation process of both the Beecher and Binns reports difficult. In summary, the Beecher's Report (1949), Binns Report (1952) and Drogheda Commission of 1952 recommended that English be introduced in lower primary and taught alongside the recommended mother tongue in early primary classes, while English to be taught from upper primary to university. Although these commissions recognized the importance of vernacular languages, their role was confined to lower primary classes.

3. The Post-colonial Language Policy

When Kenya attained self-rule in 1963, English was declared the official language. English was to be used in all important governmental sectors (Nabea, 2009). This policy, unfortunately, only re-emphasized what was already in place as a result of the colonial language policy (Nabea, 2009). Research commissions were formed in order to inform the language policy and the first undertaking by the Kenyan government was the drafting of Sessional Paper Number 10 of 1965 which acted as a document for examining the immediate needs and goals of post-independence Kenya. The Sessional Paper Number 10

of 1965 saw education much more of an economic than a social service, a key means of alleviating shortage of skilled domestic workforce and of creating equal economic opportunities for all citizens (Republic of Kenya, 1965b). Various commissions were later formed to address educational challenges: The Kenya Education Commission of 1964 (Ominde Commission); the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policy of 1976 (Gachathi Report); the Presidential Working Party on the Second University of 1981 (Mackay Report); the Presidential Working Party on Education and Manpower of 1988 (Kamunge Report); and the Commission of Inquiry into the Education system of Kenya of 1999 (Koech Commission). These post-independent commissions and their recommendations on Kenyan indigenous languages are discussed below:

3.1 The Kenya Education Commission of 1964 (Ominde Commission)

The Kenya Education Commission was mandated to survey existing educational resources and to advise the government on the formation and implementation of the required national policies for education (Republic of Kenya, 1964; Republic of Kenya, 1965a). With regard to languages, first, the commission noted that most Kenyans wanted a trilingual approach to education. That is, the mother tongue was preferred for verbal communication especially in rural areas, while English and Kiswahili were preferred for education from lower primary to the university. Kiswahili was recommended as a compulsory subject in primary schools and was especially favored in education for purposes of national and regional unity. As Mazrui and Mazrui (1996) argue, Kiswahili was seen as the appropriate language for the Pan-Africanism dream. However, unlike English, Kiswahili was not anchored into the school curriculum, and for a long time, it remained an optional subject. The Commission supported English and argued that it would expedite learning in all subjects by ensuring smooth transitions from “vernaculars” (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1996). Thus, English was introduced in beginners’ classes in primary schools through the New Primary Approach (NPA), in which its learning was heavily emphasized. In addition, the commission recommended that schools include a daily period for story-telling in the vernacular up to class 3. Unfortunately, despite its noble objectives, the

recommendations of the Ominde Commission were not implemented in full, a blunder that has had significant effects on education.

3.2 The Bessey Report of 1972

Half of Kenya's schools used vernacular as their medium of instruction. The report noted that there are important developmental benefits to the children and cultural benefits to the community when school life begins without the shock of confrontation with a new language. The report recommended the use of mother tongue, English and Kiswahili in schools. The report saw the ideal language situation as every Kenyan being able to enjoy a good command of his or her mother tongue, competence in Kiswahili and competence in English. The Bessey Report of 1972 recommended subjects like Kiswahili, art and craft were to be encouraged in many schools in the country. Kiswahili was to be compulsory from primary level. The primary schools curriculum was to be revised so as to suit the needs of Kenyan and African contexts.

3.3 The National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policy of 1976 (Gachathi Report)

The Gachathi Report sought to enhance the use of the Kenyan educational goals to shape its national character and development. The report recommended vocational, technical and practical education (Republic of Kenya, 1964a; Republic of Kenya 1965b). As far as languages are concerned, first, the report recommended the use of languages of instruction to be the predominant language spoken in the schools' catchment area for the first three years of primary education. Second, English was recommended to be taught as a subject from standard one and then as a language of instruction from the fourth grade in primary school to the university (Republic of Kenya, 1964a; Republic of Kenya 1965b). Though the commission also declared Kiswahili an important subject in primary and secondary classes, Kiswahili received inferior status when compared with English in the school curriculum. While English was allotted 8-10 periods out of the 40 hours per week, Kiswahili was allotted 3 hours (Chimerah, 1998). Thus, the supremacy of English in the Kenyan educational system was entrenched by the Gachathi Commission.

3.4 The Presidential Working Party on the Second University of 1981 (Mackay Commission)

The Presidential Working Party on the establishment of the Second University was commissioned to look at both the possibilities of setting up a second university in Kenya and of reforming the entire education system (Republic of Kenya, 1988). One of the most profound recommendations of the Mackay Commission is its recommendation of the change of the 7-4-2-3 education system to 8 years of primary school, 4 years of secondary school and 4 years of university education, whose overall structure was similar to the U.S. education system (Republic of Kenya, 1988). The 8-4-4 system was launched in January 1985, and was designed to provide eight years of primary education, four years of secondary, and four years of university education. The report also placed a lot of premium on Mathematics, English and vocational subjects. Further, the report advocated for a practical curriculum that would offer a wide range of employment opportunities and equitable distribution of educational resources. With regard to language use, the Mackay commission maintained the language policy proposed in Gachathi Report of 1976. First, the commission proposed making Kiswahili a compulsory and examinable subject in primary and secondary tiers. Second, the commission recommended that English remains the language of instruction, while Kiswahili was made a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary education. This policy led to the production of Kiswahili books to meet the increased demands of both students and teachers. The Mackay Commission further advised that the mother tongue be used in lower grades of primary schools, in areas where this was possible (Njoroge, 1991).

3.5 The Presidential Working Party on Education and Man-power of 1988 (Kamunge Report)

The challenges of the 8-4-4 education system forced the Kenyan government to appoint a Presidential working committee on education and manpower training. The main shortcomings of the 8-4-4 system were identified as the educated youth unemployment and examination oriented system (Muricho & Chang'ach, 2013, p.129). The Kamunge Report stressed the need for education to solve challenges in the society/community,

improvement of access, equity, equality and the approach of the cost benefit analysis. The report recommended that the government pays 30% of budget to education and ensure that education being given is concerned with vocational and technical aspects to solve unemployment among the educated citizens. From the languages' perspectives, the commission proposed English to be used as the medium of instruction. The commission noted that in order to improve the learners' proficiency in English and to ensure development of good reading habits, primary school libraries should be established in all schools and properly stocked for this purpose. However, the commission did not come out clearly on the role of indigenous languages in the promotion of education.

3.6 The Commission of Inquiry into the Education system of Kenya of 1999 (Koech Commission).

The Commission of Inquiry into the Education system of Kenya was expected make recommendations on ways that could be used to provide quality education in the country. One of the recommendations was that the medium of instruction in lower primary be the learner's mother tongue or the dominant language within the schools' catchment area and in urban centers (where population is made up of people from different ethnic groups), Kiswahili be the medium of instruction. The Commission noted that the use of the learner's mother tongue would enhance concept formation and articulation in linguistic communication. Second, the commission recommended that English and Kiswahili should be taught vigorously as subjects, but English be used as the medium of instruction throughout the country in upper primary. Moreover, the commission recommended that the ministry responsible for education works out modalities for ensuring the publication of instructional materials in all the local languages in the country. This was a step in the right direction as far as indigenous languages are concerned. However, the Ministry of Education argued that the report was not implementable and cited cost, structural, and institutional limitations. According to Amutabi (2003), the rejection of the Koech Report brought into question Kenya's respect for education planning, curriculum development and recognition of professionalism in research.

3.7 The Taskforce on the Re-alignment of the Education Sector to the Constitution of Kenya 2010 (Odhiambo's Task Force of 2012).

This taskforce had terms of reference that covered the entire education sector including higher education and university, and all the organizational sectors of higher education and university were represented. With respect to language use, first, Odhiambo's task force recommended that the use of the language of schools catchment area in lower primary be maintained. Second, the task force recommended the teaching of English and Kiswahili as subjects in the lower primary to facilitate the switch to English at primary class 4. Third, the task force proposed that the medium of Instruction to be English from Standard 4 onwards. In addition, the taskforce proposed the introduction of international languages especially Chinese in the curriculum.

4 Kenyan Constitution of 2010

The Kenyan Constitution of 2010 addresses language issue. First, the Constitution exalts equity and diversity, including cultural diversity. In its preamble, the Constitution states that "we, the people of Kenya... (are) proud of our ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, and are determined to live in peace and unity as one indivisible sovereign nation." Second, Chapter 2, Section 7(1), of the Kenyan Constitution (The Republic of Kenya, 2010) stipulates that the national language of the Republic is Kiswahili while 7 (2) stipulates that the official languages of the Republic are Kiswahili and English. Chapter 2, Section 7 (3) also notes the following obligations of the state: to promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya; and to promote the development and use of indigenous languages, Kenyan sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities. Although indigenous languages are not recognised as official languages in Kenya, it is encouraging that for the first time these languages are entrenched in the Constitution.

5. Discussion

The review of the colonial and post-colonial education commissions in Kenya presented above shows that indigenous languages are crucial vehicles in acquisition of education. The Phelps Stoke Commission (1924), which was set up during the colonial period, for example, recognizes the great role of the indigenous languages in development of character and acquisition of life skills in areas such as agriculture. Bessy Commission captures the role of the indigenous languages in education by noting the many benefits that accrue when a child starts formal learning in a language that he or she understands. The post-colonial commissions such as Gachathi (1976), Koech (1999) and Odhiambo (2012) all recognize the pride of place that indigenous languages occupy in a child's education. The three commissions recommend that the child should be taught using the pre-dominant language in the school catchment area and Kiswahili should be used only in schools with heterogeneous school population.

The recommendations spelt out in the commissions presented in this paper are in line with those found in literature on the benefits of using mother languages in education (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; UNESCO, 1953). The UNESCO land mark publication in 1953, for example, underscored the importance of educating children in their mother tongue: an education that is packaged in a language which the child does not understand is simply difficult for the child. Children are found to learn better when they start off education in mother tongue then transit smoothly to a second language (English in Kenya, for example). Studies have shown that maintenance and development of language and literacy skills in mother tongues play a critical role with regard to facilitation of second language learning, the development of additive bilingualism and continuous cognitive development (Wangia et al., 2014).

Despite this clarity on the importance of mother language in education, Kioko et al. (2014) observe that varied realities, misconceptions and attitudes that surround the use of mother tongue education in Africa. In most rural areas in Kenya, for instance, despite the elaborate recommendations of previous education commissions in Kenya, and the guiding language

policy, children still enter school and face a foreign language being used as the medium of instruction (Wangia et al., 2014). This is contrary to the findings in language in education research. Available research (see for example, Kioko et al. (2014) indicates that the use of languages actually spoken by learners as instructional languages leads to increased efficiency, fewer dropouts and repetitions, improved learning outcomes and a good command of the major international language of communication, thus the language policy in Kenya should be adhered to due to if the learners are to reap the fruits that come with the use of the indigenous languages in education.

The Kenya Constitution is also clear on the place of indigenous languages in an individual's life and considers it a basic human right. In this connection, failure to expose learners to local languages is denying them basic human rights. It also contravenes international treaties and conventions. For instance, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Article 43 (1) (f) and 53 (1) (b), of Kenya's Constitution is very clear on the provision of Education from a Human Rights perspective and the obligations of the state. Similarly, Skutnabb-Kangas (2006) strongly advocates that education in one's mother tongue is an unconditional human right. This notwithstanding, Wangia et al. (2014, p.10) note that Kenya's education policy tend to favour English at the expense of the indigenous languages.

The Kenyan government should reform the national curriculum to serve effectively both the interests of the diverse indigenous languages and those of the nation. Although English can be liberating for diverse ethnic groups by providing a unified voice in which different cultures identify themselves as one nation (Lunga, 2004), it remains a hindrance for its African users because to some extent it alienates Africans from their own culture and languages. Thus, indigenous languages should be promoted and used in education in Kenya and beyond for learners to benefit fully from education.

6. Conclusion

The paper has highlighted how the education commissions and the constitution have treated Kenya's indigenous languages. There are several things that emerge from this paper: the recommendations of the various commissions, committees, working parties and task forces generated reports, with recommendations, some of which have been implemented in part, while others have never been implemented completely in Kenya since pre-independent to post-independent periods. The discussion of this paper also shows that the recognition of the value of using mother tongues as the languages of instruction in early classes runs through all the major commissions and constitution. The decision to use mother tongues as languages of instruction in early classes is not a 'new policy'. The fact that people see it as new is indicative of the failure of the Kenya's Ministry of Education to implement and supervise the adherence to this policy. There is still need to educate parents and teachers that mother tongues are resources rather than hindrances to learning. The Ministry of Education needs to identify the real issues that make teachers and parents resist the implementation of the mother tongue as a medium in early classes: Is it the highly centralized exam-oriented educational system? Or is it the high social and economic status accorded to the languages designated as official languages? Should mother tongues be examinable to enforce its use in the curriculum? These are questions that researchers and educationists will have to answer and chart the way forward if learners are to reap the benefits that emanate from the use of indigenous languages in education in Kenya.

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