

THE SATIRIC CHANTS OF ATUMMA AS A VERITABLE MEANS OF SOCIETAL REFORMATION

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Abstract

Almost all the towns in Njikoka have Atumma masquerades. Njikoka is a local government area in Anambra State, south central Nigeria. The towns that make up the local government area include Abagana, Enugwu-Agidi, Nawfia, Nimo, and Abba with the headquarters at Abagana. In Dunufokia, a neighbouring Local Government Area, there is Atumma Ogufoluchi of Ukpo. Atumma Ugonabo of Abagana, Atumma Ogufoluchi of Ukpo and Atumma Ugonano from Abba are the most popular groups in the area. The three towns with Ukpo from different local government areas, are very close to each other. As sister towns, they share similar traditions hence they have similar masquerades. Atumma masquerades, when they perform, men, women and children gather to be entertained. They are known not just for their wonderful performances but for their melodious chants. Some of their chants are in form of panegyrics, elegy or satire. They perform both in the daytime and at night and they draw their inspiration mostly from what happens around the society. In their chants, they attack the ills of individuals with the view of correcting impression. In some other cases, they ridicule. In this paper, one satiric chant from each of the masquerades is analyzed using the sociological approach with the aim to X-ray the affinity of the chants with literary satires.

Keywords: Atumma, chants, satire, performance, society

Introduction

The term poetry, according to Baldick in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is language sung, chanted, spoken, or written. This entails that poetry must not only be written, it can be rendered orally. To Agnes Stein in her *The Uses of Poetry*, it is the incantations of magic, the chants of ritual, the exhortations to steadfastness and bravery. She is of the opinion that poetry is not esoteric to the illiterates; it is for both the literate and the illiterates alike. Before the advent of printing, poetry has been. This is why Stein writes that poetry is used communally by primitive man for survival (6). In Africa, poetry is indispensable for in virtually every social and traditional occasions, poetry is performed.

Poetry is one of the major genres of literature believed to be as old as man. Among the three genres of literature, poetry is one of the earliest. As William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard put it in their *A Handbook to Literature*, the origin of poetic expression is concealed in the dim past of man. They have made it vivid that no literary historian will presume to point out the earliest beginnings of poetry. According to Uche Nnyagu in *Literature and Literate*, no literary historian has been able to point out the age of poetry and among all the scholars who attempted the definition of poetry, each has a different view about it. Nnyagu goes further to state that etymologically, poetry came into existence when a tribe or a people experienced some perilous moments and they chronicled their experiences, preserved them in dance and sing (74). In Africa, the etymology of poetry is unknown. Critics have said a lot about African poetry, but

none has been able to say authoritatively, the origin of African poetry. According to Joseph A. Ushie of the University of Uyo, English Department, “Modern written African poetry has a double heritage – pre-colonial and western. As in most post-colonial situations, the tilt of our writing should be more towards the pre-colonial African literary heritage as manifested in the song, dirge, folktale, elegy, panegyric or riddle (2). In his own contribution, Akporobaro in *Introduction to African Oral Literature*, affirms that oral poetry has no known origin in all societies of the world. He maintains that research into the oral tradition of various societies does show that this particular poetic form is not only a genre of the poetic tradition of early Greece or Europeans; it is also a very dominant form of poetry in nearly all traditional societies. He clearly puts it in his own words that, “In particular, it features most prominently in the oral literatures of all African rural societies in which song and poetry mingle in a creative alliance” (227). In consolidation, www.Wikipedia discloses that African poetry has no known origin other than that it encompasses the wide variety of traditions arising from Africa’s 55 countries and from evolving trends within different literary genres.

The African had different types of poetry used in various occasions in the pre-colonial era. The poems were collectively composed and performed in particular occasions; in childbirth, particular songs are composed and rendered and at funeral, songs apt for the occasion are communally composed and performed.

Masquerading is part of the tradition of the Igbo. G. T. Basden in his *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, confirms this when he says that “The ceremony of making “maw” (juju) prevails throughout the Ibo country (116b). According to him, men dress themselves in wield costumes covering every part of their body and disguise their voices by means of a small instrument in their mouth. He discloses that the masked men represent spirits. These spirits are accorded some respect as they are believed to have come as visitors from the world beyond to perform certain tasks. During funerals, masquerades perform to entertain the audience. The members of the audience watch and listen to the chants of the Atumma masquerades which are usually hilarious and as the audience watch and listen to them, the mourners tend to forget the perils associated with the loss of their beloved relations. As the masquerades perform on stage, they speak against social ills without fear. What ordinarily, human beings would dread to say for fear of incarceration, would be said by the masquerades and people would laugh and the concerned would tend to take corrections. This is one major feature of satire seen in the chants.

Theoretical Framework

Sociological Approach is believed to be the most appropriate literary theory for the paper. Sociological criticism is defined as criticism that focuses on the social context that the literature is created in; it analyzes social issues and uses the literature as social commentary. Ann B. Dobie, in *Theory into Practice: an Introduction to Literary Criticism*, disclosed that the French critic, Hippolyte Taine was one of the earliest sociological theorists and that he listed three major factors he believed to determine a work of art to include: race, milieu and moment. By race, Taine referred to national characteristics typically found in works of art produced by the creative artists of a given country. Race, Taine believed to mean culture and by milieu, he meant environment and by moment, he meant personal influence. Sociological approach, therefore, prescribes that literature is an expression of society for it originates in society. This approach, while focusing on the relationship between literature and society, maintains that literature is a microcosm of the macrocosm. For this reason, the researchers believe that the approach is most appropriate theory for this paper.

Diction and Poetry

Poetry is not just chanted for the sake of it; it performs a --lot of functions. In Africa, poetry is chanted in different occasions for different reasons. During funerals, funeral songs are performed. In some other occasions, masquerades perform funeral poetry to entertain the audience as well as use their poems to console the mourners. During marriage rites, poems are performed, at childbirth, peculiar poems are performed and in some other traditional occasions like *ofalla* and title taking, particular poems are performed. In many occasions, the performers of the poems compose their poems based on what they witness at the moment. For whatever occasion, poetry uses words well chosen as an indispensable tool to pass information. Poets use words of their poems to evoke a feeling in the audience. Agnes Stein, in her *The Uses of Poetry*, is of the view that the poet or painter evokes in his audience, a familiar feeling they know, a lost feeling they may recapture, or a strange feeling trying for recognition (3). It is imperative at this point, to state that William Wordsworth, a romantic critic has earlier emphasized that poetry is all about feelings when he describes poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility. Good poetry uses emotive language and when it is rendered on stage, the emotion of the audience is purgated. According to Stein, ‘man, responding to some emotional stimulus, whether of pain, fear, grief, or joy, was beginning to speak. Later, these same vocal chords were to produce “song”– a wedding of words and music in a ritualized expression (6).

Poetry tells stories. According to Agnes Stein, one of the major functions of poetry is to tell a story (34). It is a fact well acknowledged that a poet or composer of any poem has information he or she aims to pass across using the poem. As the poem is performed, the story of the poem is told. Stein makes it vivid that stories had always been so told or sung because the devices of meter and rhyme served as an aid to memory as well as quickly catching the ear of an audience. It is the function of poetry to entertain as well as instruct. This cannot be possible without emotive words. When a poem is rendered with the use of percussions, it is enjoyed by the audience. It therefore, becomes futile if after a poem is rendered, the message of the poem is eluded. Perrine, Laurence is aware of this when in his *Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*, he wonders why one would waste one’s time listening to poetry when all it can offer is only pleasure (3). He believes that any poem that offers to the audience pleasure without educating him or her is not worth taking one's time. Good poem needs to tell stories through which life can be effected. Atumma chants entertain as they educate the audience.

Atumma Chants as Poetry

Atumma chant is a variety of poetry known as lyric. Lyric, according to Baldick, is any fairly short poem expressing the personal mood, feeling, or meditation of a single speaker. He says that lyric can be accompanied with musical instruments such as as lyre and could be a choral lyre sung by a group. According to William Flint Thrall and Hibbard, Addison, it is a brief subjective poem strongly marked by imagination, melody, and emotion and creating a single, unified impression. This shows that lyric is the expression of the emotion of a singer accompanied by musical instruments as in the case of Atumma chants. Atumma sings his poems and members of his group who comprise young men beat the percussions as well as respond by singing the refrain where necessary. This is in line with Thrall and Addison's view that in lyric, when a single singer sings expressing his emotions, the refrains (choruses) are rendered by the group. In consolidation, Akporobaro F. B. O. in his *Introduction to African Oral Literature*, affirms that this form of poem is an example of lyric. He calls it poetic-song or a song-poem which he says is an expression of a personal mood or thoughts sung simply or to the accompaniment of musical instruments such as guitar, koras, drum, rattle, bottles or

knocking of sticks. Atumma chants are rhythmical, melodic, and evocative. These, Akporobaro believes are features of the lyric poetry.

Almost all the Atumma chants are performed with the members of the audience responding by singing of the chorus. "Onye Olu Oyibo" by Atumma Ugonabo, "Obi Danda" by Atumma Ugonano and so many others are chanted with the accompaniment of the musical instruments like *udu*, *ekwe*, *ogene*, and drums. In very rare occasions, some are rendered as a solo where the masquerades perform the solo with no chorus from the group members. The chant "Ife na eme n'uwa" by Atumma Ugonano, though very brief, is chanted with no refrains by the members however, not without the accompaniment of the traditional musical instruments. This entails that some of Atumma chants, as lyric poems, can be rendered with or without chorus. In the words of Akporobaro, "The song poem may be performed solo or by a group" (228). In terms of its importance, Akporobaro has this to say,

.... the song poem has a very wide range of manifestation and contexts. It features in all aspects of African life and is therefore known in terms of the social occasions they are associated with. These include work songs, war songs, rowing songs, drinking songs, rite of passage songs, circumcision songs, hunting songs, etc (228)

Atumma chants permeate all activities of life in Igbo belief as according to Akporobaro "poetry permeates all activities of life in the African world."

Atumma Chants as Satire

Most of the chants of Atumma Ugonabo are satires criticizing the ills going on in the society. Atumma Ugonabo believes that unless a particular ill is unveiled, it would continue. That is why he has decided to incorporate satire in his chants. The term "satire" according to William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, is a literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions may be improved. To Abram, M. H., it is "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation" (284 - 285).

The essence of satire is not just to ridicule; satire aims to correct impression using laughter as the weapon. Thrall and Hibbard made it vivid when they emphasize that the true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man's devising and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling. They believe that true satire must use laughter as a weapon to correct impression. To them, satire should not just attack an individual without any positive aim of using the attack for corrective purpose. They emphasize that if the critic simply abuses, he is writing invective and if he is personal and splendid, he is writing sarcasm and when he is sad and morose over the state of society, he is writing irony or mere gloom. The chants of Atumma evoke laughter from the audience who laugh the ills to scorn.

Satiric Strictures in the Chants of Atumma Ugonabo

In his "Onye Olu Oyibo," Atumma Ugonabo uses laughter to criticize a lot of abnormalities in the society. As satire, he never criticizes without proffering solutions. He ridicules the attitudes of some ladies who use their cunningness and avariciousness to milk men dry. Atumma Ugonabo sees such an act as bad and condemnable. He wonders why some women who know that they never loved a man would pretend to love him just to use cunningness to rub him of his riches. In his chants, he uses Theresa, Nwakaego and Oby to represent all the women who live such lifestyle. Theresa, he says, gives a young man the illusion that she loves him. Being

sceptical about the love, the young man asks her to be because he doesn't want heartbreak. Theresa, bearing in mind to jilt him and leave him heartbroken, hides her real self; she gives him the impression that she loves him. She makes him to spend so profusely on her, buying for her all that she desires. Atumma Ugonabo uses satiric chants to present a true picture of most ladies in our contemporary society who are only after what they will gain from a man. He says in a humorous manner that the young man who actually, isn't a neophyte about the machinations of some young women in the society, grants Theresa's request by buying for her the full chicken, sweet, chewing gum and many other things that she had requested. In order to make her happy, he helps her to cut the delicious roasted chicken into sizable chunks. She eats the chicken, drinks and takes the sweets and chewing gums with delight even though she knows she never loved him. When she has eaten everything, Atumma Ugonabo says she uses esoteric language to confuse her host as to leave him heartbroken. He makes it clear in the beginning that the young man had sensed her plan and so, he had warned her to go because he isn't very rich that he can easily forget whatever he would spend for her. In the same vein, Nwakego and Oby use the same tricks on their own respective men. In condemning this poor attitudes of some women, Atumma Ugonabo presents a vivid picture of how the avaricious young women are disappointed as they are forced into sex as a way of paying for what they had eaten. The chorus of the members of the group "*Yes, that which you did makes me glad*" makes young women nursing the intention to cheat on men to take corrections.

Atumma Ugonabo condemns laziness on the part of Igbo men. Igbo men are not lazy. This, Achebe vivified in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo is praised and honored for being hardworking. Okonkwo is seen as a typical Igbo man; in typical Igbo society, a man is known not for his handsomeness but for his exploits. Okonkwo commands respect among his people but Unoka, his father is derided for his laziness. He is not seen as an example of the true Igbo man hence he has no title. Laziness is believed to lead to certain crimes for idle mind, they say, is the devil's workshop. Atumma Ugonabo says that Nwafor Nwaikeke becomes a thief as a result of his laziness. He ridicules Nwafor Nwaikeke who stands for the totality of other young Igbo men who indulge in ill acts. He puts it humorously that anybody visited by Nwafor Nwaikeke should quickly ask him to leave because if he is allowed to stay, either a goat or a fowl would get lost. By this, Ugonabo has said it all that thieves are avoided like pariah and so that young men should never dream of becoming one.

In the same chants, Atumma Ugonabo condemns the attitudes some married women who disrespect their husbands. What usually causes problems in homes according to Ugonabo, is the attitudes of some women who are too garrulous. Women in traditional African society, are to be under their husbands, they are not to talk while their husbands are talking for such act aggravates men. A virtuous woman does not exchange words with her husband. Atumma Ugonabo laments this poor attitude when in his chants, he says that *ekwulekwu umunwany akarigo m*. This literally means that the garrulousness of women is becoming a problem. He makes it very clear that women who talk a lot scare their husbands away. In our society today, some men spend most of their time in the bar after their day work. Most of the men are not in the bar because they have penchant for that but just to avoid their garrulous wives. As a way of ensuring that the ill ceases to continue, Atumma Ugonabo reminds women that they suffer more in the case of broken home. A woman who listens to the chants, needs no other advice from anyone to learn to tame her tongue. That is the advice of Atumma Ugonabo to women.

Satire in Atumma Ogufoluchi's "Omelida"

Atumma Ogufoluchi is that of Ukpo. Like the others, he has melodious voice. He looks very much like Atumma Ugonabo and Atumma Ugonano except for the absence of eagle feathers

on his head. Atumma Ugonabo is so called because his forehead is adored with two eagle feathers. As his name implies, Atumma Ugonano has his forehead adored with four eagle feathers. Atumma Ogufoluchi prefers not to have any feathers on his own head. Like his contemporaries, Atumma Ogufoluchi believes that satiric chant is a veritable tool for correcting impressions. He has, like the others, profusely ridiculed societal ills he witnessed in his society. He condemns in its entirety, the attitudes of some medicine men who are everywhere in the society and who specialize in abetting crimes in the society. These medicine men, he says, concoct bad charms which their diabolical clients use to cause mishaps in the society. He wonders why the medicine men should not concentrate in doing something good with their powers. As he puts it, such sardonic medicine men's preoccupation is producing charms that cause the yams and the cocoyams in the farmers' farms to die. He wonders what such diabolic medicine men benefit when they cause perils to fellow humans. As it is the duty of satire to proffer solutions, Ogufoluchi quickly chronicles the dangers of such devilish charms to the masses including the medicine man himself and suggests for change of attitude when he advises medicine men to specialize in such medicines that would rather unite and herald progress.

He ridicules Nigerian police and army who he says are corrupt. Their corruption endears them to shoot innocent people sporadically. According to him, "*Fa buru egbe, fa emebe ka o tego o bidoro sebe*". Ogufoluchi so aptly presents a true picture of what happens in the contemporary Nigerian society where the army and police leave their civic responsibility which is to maintain law and order as well as to ensure adequate security and have decided to hunt the people they are meant to protect. Ogufoluchi vividly presents the ugly activities of the security agents in such a way that even the unwary would understand and laugh the ills to scorn for correction to take place.

He equally uses laughter as a weapon to condemn high rate of prostitution among women. As a satiric tool, Ogufoluchi uses exaggeration in condemning this decadence. It is exaggeration to assert that all women are the same when it comes to prostitution as Ogufoluchi alleges. Albeit it is fallacious to assert that all women indulge in prostitution, the informed understands that it is only exaggeration that he has applied in line with Uche Ogbuagu's submission that when nine mad people are led by only one sane person, the viewers would not be wrong to say that ten mad men have walked past. The use of the exaggeration is basically for the audience to understand that the situation is getting out of hand for correction to be possible. He makes it vivid that the salacious women are aware that what they do is bad and that is why they go visiting their lovers only in the dead of the night. This is what Ogufoluchi means when he says that "*Ndeeli a dago, nwanyi a baa n'obi*". Obi, in Igbo, denotes the hut of a man. In traditional Igbo society, a full fledged Igbo man builds huts for his wife(ves) and then has his own hut or *obi*. It is at his *obi* that he welcomes his guests and he sleeps there too. This is the place that Atumma Ogufoluchi alleges that the lecherous Igbo men take their lovers who visit them late at night.

Satire in Atumma Ugonano's "Ife Di Egwu"

Atumma Ugonano believes that he has been given license to speak his mind without fear of anything. According to him, "Our people gave me the license to speak my mind." He believes that as masquerade, the onus is on him to point at societal ills, condemn both the ills and the perpetrators for corrections to take place. In his chants, he believes that they are for entertainment and for criticism. As satire, Atumma Ugonano uses laughter as a weapon of criticism. Almost all his chants are satiric. In his "Atumma Kwube," he emphasizes that he has the license to speak without fear. This belief endears him to criticize even the most powerful. In this chant, like Atumma Ugonabo, he condemns the attitudes of some women who cunningly try to siphon men of their wealth. Ugonano laments that in our society today, a woman knows

full well that she never loved a particular man but for greed, she pretends to love him because of whatever she will benefit from him. He uses Amoge of Ukpo to represent all women in that category. One thing peculiar with this Atumma, as he has said, is that he nurses no fear in attacking whoever he wants to attack. The quest for knowledge about Atumma took the researchers to the towns of the masquerades for interview. In Ukpo, the researchers were told that Amoge wasn't a fictional character, she lived and in fact, was alive as of the time Atumma sang about her. The villagers do not see anything wrong about Atumma using his chants to deride. They believe that Atumma is doing so good a job for them because a lot of people known for one ill or the other aspire to do good so that Atumma would not criticize them in his chants. Ukpo is a neighbouring town to Abba. The decision of Ugonabo to use identifiable location isn't an aberration. Baldick describes the type of satire that uses this method as direct or formal satire. He says that this type of satire directly addresses the reader.

Charlatanism among medicine men is fiercely condemned in this chant. Like Ugonabo has said, these category of medicine men who are everywhere in the society, charge exorbitant prices. They use their sugar coated tongues to deceive their unwary prospective clients into paying the huge amounts for solution to one problem or the other. It is pathetic that after the clients have paid, the medicine men would be unable to proffer solution to the problems. Ugonano alleges that why the medicines are impotent is because the medicine men have charged amount higher than the medicine. To him, unless medicine men go back to the status quo, collecting only a token to prepare medicine against any problem, they would continue to be disappointed as their antidotes would always remain impotent.

He ridicules young married women who still keep boyfriends outside their marital homes. This act, Atumma Ugonano sees as a taboo and so, he fiercely condemns it. He calls the women who indulge in such ignominious act *umu agbala sugar mummy, ndi o no na di acho di*. Atumma Ugonano believes that such acts puts families in jeopardy and so, he believes that condemning the act in his chants would be useful in bringing the act to a halt. Humorously, he says that the unfaithful wives deprive young spinsters the opportunity to get hooked because themen who would have proposed them would not because they enjoy cheap sex from the sugar mummies.

Atumma does not pat the lecherous men at the back. He sees them as partners in crime. Such men, he presents them as never-do-wells in the society. Like in the literary satire, Atumma uses symbols as satiric tool. In his chants, he uses Okoye Nwejiofo to symbolize all lecherous men in the society. He is never subtle in his criticism as he obviously seems to believe that satire must be biting for the attacked needs to feel the pains for corrections to be taken. He says that Okoye Nwejiofo prefers to chase after women while his contemporaries are busy working to improve life. He puts it humorously that Okoye Nwejiofo would never be useful to himself because "*ife di na ngada a na atoka ya*."

In Igbo society, a man is expected to be hardworking because laziness is abhorrent in the society. This vivifies why in the traditional Igbo society, able bodied men and women are not expected to be idle in the daytime; tales are not told in the daytime because at this hour, the young men and women should be in their various workplaces. Okoye Nwejiofo is therefore, used by Atumma Ugonano to show how best a young Igbo man should not be.

He directs his criticism to warring communities. He fails to understand why sister communities should fight when they should rather come together to fight for mutual development. Atumma Ugonano is of the view that any community devoid of peace remains static because development can only be possible when there is peaceful coexistence among people of the

community. He blames Aguleri and Umuleri for being in perpetual war. Atumma Ugonano believes that everything in the world is futile and so, he fails to understand why sane people would kill themselves over nothing. As a way of correcting impression, Atumma Ugonano advises the two sister communities to drop their arms and embrace peace which is the only best means of ensuring progress.

Atumma Ugonano is aware of the fact that charlatanism is the order of the day in many churches in the society. Church is now seen as a lucrative business and so many people self ordained themselves to get the docile members siphoned. Wole Soyinka witnessed this too and he criticizes fake prophets who are everywhere in the society perpetuating their ills. In different churches in the society, what the pastors preach these days is wealth and the church which is supposed to help in reforming the society rather contributes in its decay. Atumma Ugonano vividly X-rays this when he says that the church only recognizes the wealthy. He laments that the poor in the church are treated with contempt because their financial contributions in the church are meagre. It appalls him that the church which is supposed to help the poor among them rather exploits them. Authoritatively, many pastors in the contemporary Nigerian society own private jets bought with the tithes of the poor congregation. Many of them own private primary schools, secondly schools and universities built with the contributions of the poor members of the congregation who cannot afford to send their children to the school because of the high tuition fees. Atumma puts it humorously that what has scared him from the church is the manner riches are worshipped. He asks a pertinent question to consolidate his claims "*Unu afunugo ebe ogbenye na achi ndi uka?*" which literally translates that the church in the society today, does not value people but wealth. Atumma Ugonano makes it very clear that church cannot help in any way in redeeming the society because church elders are selfish and greedy and they no longer preach sanity but wealth. Atumma believes that what will help is, as he has left the church, others should do same and embrace our forsaken tradition.

Conclusion

The researchers watched the masquerades perform on stage. The different Atumma masquerades have recorded musical albums. The researchers in addition to watching the masquerades perform live, equally listened to the recorded chants of the masquerade. They have been able to analyze the chants of Atumma Ugonabo of Abagana, Atumma Ugonano of Abba and Atumma Ogufoluchi of Ukpo and they have observed that the chants are mainly satire and they are indispensable for the reformation of the society. The chants use satiric techniques to correct impression. Laughter is used by the masquerades as a tool rather than an end. It is observed that Atumma draws his inspiration mainly from what happens around the society and their chants are better appreciated when they are watched on stage. When the masquerades render their chants, the members of the audience laugh at the foolishness of the society criticized by the masquerades. As Atumma Ugonano has pointed out that he has the license to speak his mind without fear, the researchers noticed that the masquerades freely, without fear, ridicule any erring personality, group or organization. The three masquerades understand that the society is degenerated and that it gets worse and worst as days progress because of excessive and insatiable yearnings for materialism among the people. In order to belong, many people in our society tend to do one ill or the other to become wealthy. Atumma masquerades believe that the society cannot be redeemed if the people keep exhibiting the Philistine attitudes. They have therefore, decided to use their chants to fiercely condemn the social vices with the belief that such would help in sanitizing the society.

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