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## Environmental Injustices and Conflicts in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Evidence from Ogoniland

**Ubongabasi Ebenezer Israel**

Senior Lecturer, Department of History and International Studies,  
University of Uyo, Nigeria

### **Abstract:**

*Ogoniland would come to experience a massive scale of environmental degradation beginning from when crude oil was first drilled on one of the many oil wells in the region in 1958 by the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). Between 1958 and 2016 – when the Oil clean-up exercise was proposed barely one year after President MuhammaduBuhari came to power in 2015, findings revealed that the Ogoni clean-up exercise has continued to remain a lingering issue with a bleak reality ahead. Although, at the initial stage, the idea to conduct a systematic environmental clean-up of Ogoniland was lauded as a right step in the right direction – as it promises to address one of the root causes of conflict in the area, and the entire Niger Delta region – a critical assessment of the Ogoni clean-up revealed that the President MuhammaduBuhari-led administration is yet to fulfill its promise on the clean-up exercise, as very little or nothing have been done to address the issue of environmental injustices that has remained one of the pivotal concerns of the people since 1970 when the first major oil spill happened in Ogoniland.*

**Keywords:** Ogoniland, injustices, Nigeria, Niger delta, and conflict

### **1. Introduction**

For the oil producing ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta and especially the Ogonis[sic] of Rivers state, it was time to confront the federal state on fundamental issues of the injustice of 'killing the goose that lays the golden egg'. For a long time, these communities have had serious grievances [especially in terms of environmental degradation] which have not been well addressed. Foremost is that although the bulk of crude oil, the country's main source of revenue, is derived from their lands, they belong to the ranks of the most backward, and politically marginalized groups in the country. Their leaders attribute this [environmental] injustice to the fact that they are minorities, and accuse the ethnic majority groups of using oil wealth to develop their areas at the expense of the areas from which oil is derived (Osaghae, 1995).

The statement quoted above captures succinctly the decades of challenges the Ogoni people of South-south Nigeria have consistently been confronted with since crude oil was first discovered in their land. Three arguments may be deduced from the statement. First is the fact that the discovery of crude, which ought to have been a blessing to the people became a curse, given the decades of environmental degradation the people have come to experience. Second, the people have lost countless lives as a result of the repressive measures meted to them whenever they put up both peaceful and violent agitations in their demands for justice. Third, a series of politicking have characterized the issues of justice and to date, very little improvement could be seen across Ogoniland as regards the plethora of challenges that have confronted the people.

Ogoniland – comprising the present-day Eleme, Khana, Gokana and Tai local government areas – in Rivers State has been the focus of many debates in terms of ecological injustices, especially since 1993, when the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) began to raise concerns of the devastating impacts of crude oil exploration in Ogoni (<http://www.mosop.org/>; Senewo, 2015). Prior to this time, Ogoniland had gained prominence in the Nigeria crude oil economy after a large deposit of crude oil was found in 1957 by the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) (Nwilo and Badejo, 2008). Since then, over a 100 billion barrels of oil have been reportedly explored from the Ogoni region. Despite these massive contributions towards the oil economy in Nigeria, the people of Ogoni, it has been reported, are yet to receive a commensurate level of environmental justice on the massive destruction of their land due to the oil exploration that has been conducted ever since. Such destructions due to oil spills have become a recurring decimal in the area. For instance, in 1970, there was a report of a massive oil spill that destroyed not only the flora of the region but went on to affect both fauna and human lives (Vaughan, 2011). This spill was said to have led to a £26 million fine for Shell in Nigeria courts 30 years later (Vaughan, 2011; Vidal, 2011).

Besides shortchanging the people of the Niger Delta at large, and the Ogoni people in particular, in terms of repatriating a significant proportion of the oil and gas proceeds to the region where the recourse is situated, the question of oil spills, gas flaring, and the overall destruction of lands and waterways have been a major bone of contention between the people, the various oil companies operating within the region, and the federal government of Nigeria (Tamuno, 2011;

Afinotan and Ojakorotu, 2009; Peel, 2005; Ako, Okonmah, and Ogunleye, Taiwo, 2009; Luqman, 2011; Tobor and Muzorewa, 2016; Babatunde, 2012; Amaraegbu, 2011; Okoli, 2013; Owolabi, and Okwechime, 2007).

It is against the foregone background that the article seeks to conduct a critical evaluation on ecological injustice in Ogoniland since 1958. Moreso, the series of conflicts that have engulfed Ogoniland over the issue of oil spills, and environmental degradation are examined; as well as the numerous attempts both by the federal government and the various oil and gas companies to ameliorate the plight of the Ogoni people. One other critical dimension to this article is the aspect that deals with a revisionism on the struggle for ecological justice by the likes of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the MOSOP since the 1990s most especially through the Ogoni Bill of Rights ([http://www.mosop.org/Ogoni\\_Bill\\_of\\_Rights\\_1990.pdf](http://www.mosop.org/Ogoni_Bill_of_Rights_1990.pdf); Senewo, 2015). The rationale for this research is born out of the fact that since the emergence of the President, Muhammadu Buhari-led government in 2015, the issue of Ogoni clean-up has continued to garner so many debates both among policymakers and stakeholders within the Niger Delta region. For instance, the executive governor of River State – Nyesom Wike – once asserted during a public briefing in Ogoniland ‘they promised you they will do Ogoni clean up. Has it been cleaned?’ (Reed, 2021). After that statement, the Ogoni clean-up, it would appear, has continued to remain a mere political issue, that is stirred up to score political points (Reed, 2021).

In order to execute the aim and objectives herein, this article has been compartmentalized into sub-headings. It begins with an introduction, where the background argument is laid out. Thereafter, the study area follows, then the theoretical framing, a brief history of oil exploration and spillages, and the struggle for environmental justice with greater emphases on Ogoniland, especially since the 1990s, when Saro-Wiwa and the MOSOP internationalized the struggle for better living condition in the region.

## 2. Study Area

Ogoniland is a tapestry of four – Tai, Khana, Gokana, and Eleme – local government areas in present-day River State. Traditionally, the area was structured divisively into six kingdoms: Babbe, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyo-Khana, Eleme, and Tai, with four different but related languages, and united under the Bori town as its capital. The Ogoni area lies between latitudes 4.05 and 4.20 North and longitudes 7.10 and 7.30 East (Amugo and Chinda, 2016). Ogoniland is presently situated in the Southeastern Senatorial district of Rivers State, Nigeria. Historically, archaeological and linguistic evidence suggest that the Ogoni people have occupied their present homeland for more than 500 years. The Ogoni people are located upon an alluvial plain bounded on the north by Imo River and their Igbo neighbours; on the South by the littoral flats inhabited by the Obolo (Andoni); on the east by the Opobo River and the Ibibio; and on the west by the Ikwere, which stretches into the large city of Port Harcourt, Rivers State. (Bamidele, 2016).

The population of the area has been estimated to be around the figure of 2 million people living in a 1, 050 square-kilometre (404-square-mile) homeland. The Ogoni people share a very similar ecological profile with the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta region. The Ogoni people are predominantly farmers and fishermen (Amugo and Chinda, 2016). Their ability to engage in both professions is based on their proximity to both water and land. Indeed, since the first oil was drilled in the area, the lands and waterways have never remained the same owing to the impact of oil spills that has remained a recurring decimal. In the light of these recurring oil spillages, the area has recorded massive social unrest, as well as impoverishments. The people have continued to struggle on a diverse front to survive. Besides the effect of oil spill on their resources – land and waterways – there is almost the dimension that has to do with health hazards, among others.

## 3. Theoretical Overview

Until the introduction of Environmental Scarcity Theory (Homer-Dixon, 1994) (EST) – as enunciated by Thomas Homer-Dixon – in conflict-related discourse, a large percentage of existing analyses on conflict issues across the globe did not make serious attempts to find a connection between environmental problems and civil unrest. The EST denotes a situation where there is a highly demand-induced scarcity in resources (land, waterways, among others) within a growing population with a high consuming level, which on the other hand is suffering from a diminishing or very limited natural resources availability among the various individuals in a single society. Although, Homer-Dixon has argued that ‘environmental change is only one of three main sources of the scarcity of renewable resources [that could stimulate violence]; the others are population growth and unequal social distribution of resources.’ (Homer-Dixon, 1994).

Taking the Ogoniland scenario into perspective, the long span of oil spill across Ogoniland has fueled scarcity of natural resources, which prior to 1958 has sustained the population. The unimaginable destruction that oil exploration has caused within Ogoniland has frustrated many - especially the youth – to revolt through violent means. Moreso, on the aspect of unequal social distribution, scholars have shown that the people of Ogoniland have had their fair share of this social issue, which also is a critical concern when looking at the problems associated with the region. An accumulation of these issues has, no doubt, led to the series of violence that have been recorded within the area (Poronakie, 2015; Adekola, Mitchell and Grainger, 2015).

## 4. Oil Explorations, Oil Spills and (Non-Violent and Violent) Reactions from Ogoniland

When the British colonial government – and the various oil companies – started to prospect for oil in colonial Nigeria c.1903 (Styen, 2009), the people of Ogoniland had not the slightest idea that by 1957, oil would be discovered in commercial quantity in Ogoni area, and by 1958 exported into the global market (Konne, 2014). Specifically, the SPDC has been reported to have explored as well as conducted production activities in Ogoniland since the 1950s by drilling over 96 oil wells (Kadafa, 2012). The period between 1958 and 1990 was characterized by diverse forms of agitations, social unrests and social movement in Ogoniland (and by extension other parts of the Niger Delta) due to the massive neglects,

deprivations, and pollution by the various oil companies that failed to inject a reasonable sum of the oil proceeds back into the communities where the oil was being extracted from.

The history of oil spills in the entire Niger Delta area has remained a bone-of-contention among scholars whose interest in the Niger Delta question is on environmental justice. of the Niger Delta. However, a report compiled by Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) revealed that the Ogoni region in particular have suffered over 2, 976 separate oil spills between 1976 and 1991 (<https://www.foei.org/news/oil-spills-ogoniland-nigeria-shell>, 2019). Even so, since production ceased in Ogoniland, the left-over pipelines littered across the area has also contributed to environmental degradation, especially during raining seasons, where rusted substances from those pipelines further impact negatively on the soils. The oil spill of 1970 marked a watershed in the history of oil spillages in Ogoniland. This very oil spill was tremendously huge, and came with a wide-reaching negative impact on the whole of Ogoniland. The effect of the 1970 oil spill was a long-lasting one that during a tour on some of the contaminated zones in Ogoniland, it was reported that 'the pollution at one of these sites [where the 1970 oil spills had affected, and SPDC claimed it had cleaned up] KagbaraDere, Boobanabe, also in KegbaraDere, dates back to a fire at a Shell oil well in 1970' (Dummett, 2015).

The irony of 1970 was that the oil spill had occurred during a period when Nigeria was experiencing an oil boom, and so much revenue was coming in due to the sale of oil in the international market. In 1970, the federal government of Nigeria established what is today known as the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) Inspectorate (Nworu, 2017); and the year after, Nigeria joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Moreover, the first national (indigenously owned) oil company – Nigerian National Oil Corporation (NNOC), was established, and later metamorphosed into the Nigerian National Petroleum Company by 1977. Yet, in the course of all these progressions, the oil spill in Ogoniland was not given due attention to ensure that the suffering of the people was ameliorated by Shell (Dummett, 2015). Moreover, after the oil spill of 1970, some of the Ogoni Chiefs sent in a strong-worded petition against SPDC to the then Military Governor, where they had complained about SPDC's activities and how it has continued to threaten the very existence of the people of Ogoniland. According to the petition, it was reported that SPDC was 'seriously threatening the well-being and even the very lives' of the Ogoni people (<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/34a/022.html>).

During the over 30 years (1958 – 1990) that Shell operated massively in Ogoniland, over \$30 billion in oil value was extracted from the region. This is in lieu of the fact that during those years of exploration, diverse ecological issues befell the Ogoni people while their lands and waterways were contaminated, and their sources of livelihood perished. Even so, the federal government received so much profit from those years of transactions, without little or nothing getting back to the Ogoni people for their resource-based, psychological and economic losses. This is despite the fact that Ogoniland had been rich in fertile soil 'at the mouth of the Niger River and rested on one of the largest oil reserves in the world' (Nnadozie, nd). Yet, the people lived in penury for those 30 years period even as SPDC drilled oil in various villages across Ogoniland. Worse of it all is that the people lacked basic necessities of life, such as electricity, a proper sewer system, quality healthcare centres, and educational facilities (schools). The situation in the area was made worse by the fact that the area is heavily loaded with various oil pipelines and various platforms.

Consistently confronted by the challenges of having to struggle for access to scarce resources – land and waterways – due to a plethora of oil spills, the Ogoni people (especially their youth) began to put up diverse – both violent and non-violent – forms of reactions in order to draw the attention of both the oil companies (SPDC) and that of the federal government to their plights. The formative years of the Ogoni response to the destruction of their land, which for Ken Saro-Wiwa 'should be considered a form of genocide, (Roelofs, 2019)' has been captured by a report compiled by the underground project (nd) thus:

That year [1970] there was a major blow-out at the Bomu oilfield in Ogoni. It continued for three weeks, causing widespread pollution and outrage. By the eighties other communities were beginning to protest. [thereafter] The Iko people wrote to Shell in 1980 demanding 'compensation and restitution of our rights to clean air, water and a viable environment where we can source for our means of livelihood.' Two years later, when the Iko organised a peaceful rally against Shell, the company called the police. In 1987, when the Iko once again held a peaceful demonstration against Shell, the notorious Mobile Police Force (MPF), locally known as 'kill-and-go' was called. 40 houses were destroyed and 350 people were made homeless by the MPF's attack.

From the quoted statement above, it may be deduced that rather than solve the issue at hand, the government in conjunction with Shell decided to employ repressive measures. The rippling effect of such poor strategic thinking on the part of the government and the oil companies stimulated a series of non-violent and violent protests in the years that followed. By 1990, the Ogoni people had come to the realization that the struggle for environmental justice would take more than just writing petitions to the government and conducting protests – many of which recorded massive death of Ogoni sons and daughters – with little result to show for. Hence, the need for more coordinated and pungent actions became expedient.

Further, the creation of the MOSOP in 1990 by Ken Saro-Wiwa marked the beginning of a new frontier in the struggle for better living conditions among the Ogoni people. Saro-Wiwa's interest in seeking environmental justice for his people in particular and the entire Niger Delta region became intense as the military governments of Generals Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida and Sani Abacha used more repressive measures. The ideals and philosophy of MOSOP were captured in the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR). The OBR primarily advocated for the rights of the Ogoni people. It further set out the movement's demands to include increased autonomy, and a fair share of the proceeds from oil sales for the Ogoni people, as well as a well-structured out environmental remediation to the Ogoniland (Amugo and Chinda, 2016).

One of the major contributions of the MOSOP to the Ogoni struggle in particular and the Niger Delta region, in general, was the internationalization of the plight of the people. MOSOP sought redress on many fronts. The body created so much awareness among the comity of nations as regards the nature and severity of environmental degradation that Ogoniland had suffered since 1958. Saro-Wiwa furthered this cause through some of his literary works. Among these, the *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992) spark further interest in MOSOP's struggle and also attracted even more global sympathy (Senewo, 2015).

In between the MOSOP's struggle for the generality of the Ogoni people, some incidents of violence occurred in Ogoniland. For instance, it was reported that in 1993, a significant disturbance occurred in Ogoniland over their refusal to allow some oil company contractors from laying new pipes, and this action attracted massive punitive action that led to the death of many Ogoni people. Bamidele (2016) captures this incident thus:

In 1993, following protests that were designed to stop contractors from laying new pipelines for Shell, the security agencies raided the area to quell the activities of that militant group. In the chaos that followed, it has been alleged that 27 villages were raided, resulting in the death of 2,000 Ogoni people and displacement of about 8,000 others.

Nonetheless, Ken, through the instrumentality of the MOSOP, and its Bill of Rights created an unstable environment for the operating oil companies within the Ogoni region (Senewo, 2015). The seemingly unending protests from MOSOP and the countless petitions from them to the international community ensured Nigeria – at the instance of General Sani Abacha – almost became a pariah state. The situation became critical when Saro-Wiwa alongside eight Ogoni chiefs were hung by the General Abacha regime in 1995. This killing of Saro-Wiwa and others sparked wide reactions both in Nigeria and within the International community. One of the most significant reactions was the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth of Nations, by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) (Colville, 2007). Lastly, it should be noted that the role played by Saro-Wiwa in the Ogoni struggle, and the Niger Delta generally have been captured in many pieces of research (Amugo and Chinda, 2016; Osaghae, 1995; Tam-George, 2010; Corley, Fallon, and Cox, 2017).

Despite the death of Saro-Wiwa and the other chiefs, the struggle to seek both environmental justice and financial better living condition for the Ogoni people continued, though, in a more violent manner, considering threat Ken Saro-Wiwa who would have employed only non-violent means had been murdered by the Nigerian government. The Ogoni people, were as it would appear, left with no other choice than to take violent approaches in passing their message across to both the federal government and the international community. In most of their militant actions, oil installations were seized, oil pipelines vandalized, as well as several oil workers abducted. However, by 1999 – when Nigeria reverted to civilian rule – the case was not much different as Ogoniland recorded several 'reprisal killings by military and police units in the Ogoniland' (Bamidele, 2016). Even so, tortures and rape cases were employed as instruments in dealing with the Ogoni people, whose only crime was to have demanded environmental justice and fair treatment in terms of better living. Bamidele (2016) noted 'the Nigerian military effectively sealed off the area to outsiders after the Ogonis became vocal and unrelenting in their demands, and Ogoni became a militarized area. As at the end of 1999, at least 2,000 Ogonis had been killed since their protests against Shell Oil began.'

In the years that followed (2000-2009), the Ogoniland recorded massive militant activities since the federal government and Shell would not grant them the much-sought-after environmental justice. Hence, the area, as well as other areas within the Niger Delta region recorded a series of militant activities pending when in 2009, the then President Umaru Musa Yar' Adua's administration initiated the Niger Delta Amnesty Deal (NDAD). Although the Amnesty Deal was meant to curb the recurring militant activities, which had adversely affected Nigeria's oil economy, the programme itself was dead-on-arrival given the fact that the ideological underpinnings and operationalities associated with the programme was only to benefit a few and not the real people who had borne the brunt of the sufferings, deprivations, losses, injustices, since oil explorations began in the Niger Delta region. So, the quest to get that environmental justice for the Ogoniland remained sacrosanct.

## 5. The Ogoni Clean-Up: A Reverberating Mirage?

The cumulative cost of environmental degradation due to oil extraction in Ogoniland alone is \$1 billion (United Nations Environment Programme, 2011).

An average of \$19 million a year since oil extraction began in 1958 (Adekola, Mitchell, and Grainger, Alan, 2015).

Based on the reports above, it could be argued that Ogoniland has been over-stretched in terms of environmental degradations since oil exploration started in the area in the late 1950s. In fact, the most contentious issue since the Ogoni uprising (Osaghae, 1995) remains the question of the Ogoni clean-up. The call for a systematic clean-up of the area is not devoid of the negative impact of oil exploration on the land and across the waterways in the area. Invariably, such devastating impact has rendered many of the Ogoni people in penury given that as predominant farmers and fishermen, they have been cut off from their traditional occupations. Thus, 'government reluctant efforts towards environmental management and oil companies' negligence in the delivery of corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects in oil-bearing communities justified the beginning of hostilities and demand for self-determination in Ogoniland' (Baba *et al*, 2020).

As part of the measures to ameliorate the environmental degradation in Ogoniland through a clean-up exercise, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) submitted 'an unprecedented, scientific, groundbreaking environmental assessment report (EAR) on Ogoniland to the Nigerian government. This was the outcome of a 14-month intensive evaluation of the extent of pollution' (Yakubu, 2017). Fundamentally, the UNEP made some very strong calls that would help address the environmental degradation that the people had suffered over the last five decades. The UNEP made a clear call for the federal government, industries (including the oil operating firms) and the entire communities to

take steps in putting a stop to further oil contamination by monitoring any forms of crude oil theft, and illegal refining, known as *por-fire* in local parlance. UNEP also stipulated that the Environment Restoration Authority (ERA) and the Environmental Restoration Fund (ERF) – directed towards the federal government – ought to be set up as part of the overall measure at addressing the environmental hazards in Ogoniland, as it would take up to 30 years to conduct a holistic cleanup in Ogoniland (Jaja, 2019).

Since the submission of this report in 2011 – five years (2006) after it was initiated – only about three have been partially implemented in Ogoniland (Yakubu, 2017; Fentiman and Zabbey, 2015). Of course, notimplementing the UNEP's report on how to tackle the environmental injustice that has taunted the Ogoni people is invariably another way to ensure that unrest and militancy persist in the area. There is no gainsaying that the years of persistent refusal by the oil multinationals and the federal government to activate measures of addressing lingering environmental hazards in Ogoniland has been a major trigger for the many conflicts that have come to characterized the histories of Ogoniland since the 1970s when the first oil spill occurred (Baba *et al*, 2020).

The threat by the Niger Delta Avengers on President MuhammedBuhari cannot be so much disconnected from the delay in the clean-up exercise (Onwuemenyi, 2016), which have taken so long for the successive governments to actually see-through. The question, therefore, would be, is the promised cleanup exercise on Ogoniland, just another means to score cheap political point? Does the federal government intend to revamp the long-decade environment that has left many impoverished, ill, and even led to countless numbers of death? What are the true intentions of the federal government and the corporate multinationals (all of which had and are still benefiting from the Ogoniland and other parts of the Niger-Delta) towards making some amends in terms of addressing environmental degradations and ecological injustices across the Niger-Delta zone? Even so, the lackadaisical dispositions of the federal government and the various oil multinationals towards the cleanup exercise have continued to cast doubts on the minds of many – especially the people of Ogoni, who remain the most-hit (Godwin, 2020; Gaffey, 2016,).

In some quarters, the delay in carrying out a complete and total cleanup exercise in Ogoniland has been attributed to the nature of politics that is evidenced in the entire Niger Delta region (Gbonegun, 2020). Quoting the Executive Director, Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), Auwal Ibrahim Musa who noted that 'the political class in the region at both the state and federal levels should rise above their differences irrespective of party affiliations and enforce transparency, accountability, and patriotism in the clean-up process to bequeath a sustainable environment to the present, and future generations' (Gbonegun, 2020). Indeed, the politics of the region in a state as Rivers (where Ogoniland is located) appears to be very dynamic and fraught with wide uncertainties. Such uncertainties are due to the fact that the state is heterogeneous and the nature of ethnic politics within the state is also a problem to consider.

On the whole, the Ogoni cleanup exercise could be said to have consistently remain a mirage given that findings conducted by civil society groups, environment experts and other concerned citizens have pointed out that the exercise appeared not just too slow, but stands no chance of recording milestones before 2023 when other rounds of elections would bring up new leadership at the federal and state levels. The potential effect of this delay would among other things include resurgence in militancy, violence, and social movements of intense force. Even so, it also would mean that the over two million inhabitants of Ogoniland would continue to be denied their fundamental human rights to good health, portable water, and even their sources of livelihood, which remains the most paramount, considering that the people are predominantly farmers and fishermen.

## 6. Conclusion

The article has attempted to underscore the nexus between environment injustice and conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, even as it employs the Ogoniland as its case study. The Ogoni struggle for environmental justice has remained a litmus test for Nigeria. It has left a question mark as to what the position of the federal government is towards oil-producing communities. Based on the narratives herein, certain deductive reasoning could be made. First, the clean-up exercise has been a major factor that has fueled the recurring state of crises in Ogoniland and by extension other areas within the Niger Delta region. Also, the protracted issue revolving around the clean-up exercise has been majorly affected by politics and the insincerity of the government and the oil multinationals in discharging their duties of ensuring that the Ogoniland is cleaned up properly in compensations for the decades of damages that had been done on the people, their land and their sources of livelihoods.

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