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## **A DISCOURSE ON THE ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE ABOH OF THE LOWER NIGER OF NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on the origin and migration of the Aboh of the lower Niger. This is an area of African scholarship that has generated much controversy because it greatly determines group identities in their present locations. This is even more so with the Aboh whose history is characterized by multiple claims of origins which have so far denied them a pan identity. The aim of this study is, therefore, to address the contentious issues in their origin and migration, thereby opening up new vistas of historical scholarship. Sources collected for this study were both primary and secondary. The primary sources are made up of intelligence reports collected from the National Archives, and personal interviews with knowledgeable individuals on the subject. The secondary sources are library-based where relevant materials on the subject were consulted. The study deployed the historical method of analysis to address the subject. It argues that the dominant narrative of Aboh origin does not reflect the reality on ground, but constructed for political purposes. The conclusion suggests how best Aboh origin should be understood with the evidence provided by this study.

**KEYWORDS:** Origin, Migration, Aboh, Lower Niger, Nigeria

### **INTRODUCTION**

Aboh is located in the lower Niger at the extreme of the Western Igbo area. It is presently the administrative headquarters of Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Nigeria's Delta State. Aboh is an ancient African kingdom in whose jurisdiction is located all the Igbo-speaking people in the neighborhood that are collectively referred to as *Ndosimili* (the water people) because they are riverine settlements. Its territory stretches south along the Niger River as far as the head of the Delta eastwards to Ashaka and other towns north of the Sobo (Urhobo) and Isoko countries and east of the Niger for a considerable distance (Hubbard 1948). The 1940 annual report on the area as well as Talbot (1969) established that the town Aboh itself was probably founded about 1530. During the colonial period, Aboh was organized into a division from the Benin Province, covering the *Ndosimili* and Ukwuani areas. The people of Aboh speak the same dialect of Igbo, though they are divided into two distinct classes as far as organization and customs are concerned. They include the *Umude* and *Ndiche*. The former class constitutes all the ruling houses in Aboh, while the latter is the kingmakers' class comprising the rest of Aboh inhabitants and villages.

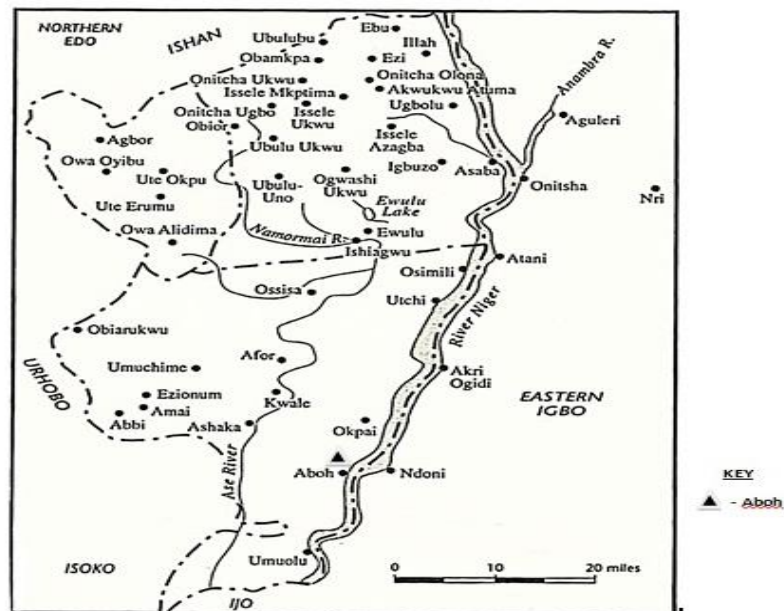
Aboh kingdom like other kingdoms began as a single compact community and expanded over time to six village settlements. The communities were founded by titled chiefs

who moved with members of their clans and dependents to establish military outposts. They were used as platforms to raid and plunder nearby communities. The military outposts grew to the great significance that the Obi (king) and his council used them to control the activities around the Niger River against any outsider such that Aboh was referred to as the guard and defender of the Niger. Although these settlements had their names as Udagba, Udaja, Odugiri, Ukwu Ugbo, Aseomuku, Abalagada, Iseokpo and so on, they pay allegiances to the Obi of Aboh and also attended the religious festival at Aboh. The influence of the kingdom cut across most of the riverine clans as well as some upland clans (Nzimiro 1972, 11-12). It was not too surprising that Ogume, Ashaka, Amai, Ossissa, Afor, Adiai, Okpai, Utuoku, Akarai, and Onya were some of the communities that recognized the authority of the Obi of Aboh (Ikime 1980).

Figure 1:

Western Igbo Area showing Aboh of the lower Niger.

Source: Ohadike(1994), Opone (2017).



The geographical location of Aboh gave her a decided commercial advantage with which it used to build trade relations with her neighbors. Aboh's location at the apex of the Niger Delta enabled her to control the supply of hinterland commodities to the coastal states and the distribution of European goods upriver (Oguagha 1982). The Aboh kingdom is also connected to other hinterland peoples such as the Isoko and Urhobo by trade which it effectively controlled. All of these contributed so much to its local economy. Thus, Aboh entered the 19th century rich as it monopolized the trade of the lower Niger. It commanded the dominant position such that by 1819 it had appeared on Smith's new map of Africa (Oguagha 1982), which indicates her popularity resulting from economic prosperity occasioned by natural resource endowment and many years of contact with the outside world before the nineteenth century.

Historical studies of many Nigerian societies have been dominated by questions about who are they and from where they came to their present locations. Many of those who have attempted to provide clues to this insistent demand have ended up being drowned in the current of dominant narratives. The dominant narrative associates the origin of smaller kingdoms, communities, or villages to bigger ones. This appears largely because of pre-colonial political influence such big polities such as Oyo, Benin, and others may have exercised on their neighbours. This is not helped by the fact that studies of the African past have tended to be lopsided in favor of large kingdoms and empires (Ikime 2018, 1-5). With this obvious disadvantage, the smaller African societies live with the perverted notions of origins and migrations from bigger polities. The problem was further compounded by the colonial official policy that grouped minority ethnic nationalities under major ones as one political entity to achieve the indirect rule system of administration in Nigeria (Afigbo 1972). In doing so and with time, the reality of the history of minority groups was distorted by colonial officials and anthropologists for both racial and administrative expediency. In the end, a great number of them lost their cultural identity to political re-organization.

This is part of the general problem among the Western Igbo who were part of the Benin Province (Hook, 1924). The Aboh and other Western Igbo towns and communities considerably lived under the influence of the Benin kingdom during the colonial period with some implications on their collective identity in the post-colonial times.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several works have been done on the origins and migration of the different Nigerian groups in an attempt to identify their ancestral or territorial homeland (Izuegbu, 2003). There appears, however, a consensus of opinions that migration usually involves the permanent or semi-permanent change in a residence which begins in an area of origin and ends at an area of destination (Barret, 1998, p. 138). Migration in its broadest meaning – spatial mobility – can be regarded as part of the human condition (Bilger and Kraler, 2005). Migration scholars seem to have reached a consensus on what constitutes the determinants of migration. These include political, cultural, economic, ecological, behavioral factors and the social context in which migration occurs. Others include droughts and desertification which are environmental.

The importance of migration to the development of the African continent has received a fair share of scholarly attention. One of such studies notes the historic contacts with the people of the outside world such as the Europeans, the Arabs, the Chinese, and others at different times, all of which contribute to the making and shaping of the histories of the people (Akanji, 2012, pp.1-27). Oyeniyi (2013, pp.1-27) defines internal migration as any temporary or permanent movement of people from one area of a country to another area of the same country for the purpose, or with the effect of, establishing a new residence. The study focuses on pre-colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary migration trajectories in Nigeria. In all, the study establishes the characteristic importance of migration to the histories of the various Nigerian groups. For example, it states that the Yoruba people ‘dispersed’ from somewhere in the Middle East (Arabia) to Ile-Ife, from where they further migrated to other Yoruba villages, towns, and cities. It grouped Binis as a sub-ethnic group of the Yoruba who migrated from Ile-

Ife; while the Itsekiri, Urhobo, and others around the Niger-Delta have been traced to Edo and Awka.

Nwoye (2011) makes comparison among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, namely the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in terms of population spread and reaches a conclusion that the Hausa and Yoruba are also found as indigenous peoples in other African countries unlike the Igbo whose population is mainly concentrated in eastern Nigerian. The paper observes that the River Niger divided Igbo into two unequal parts; the highest concentration of the population in east of the Niger, while the other part occupies west of the Niger. Generally, the paper categorizes the Igbo language as derivative of the sudanic linguistic group of the Kwa.

In our study area, writers have expressed many points of view in respect of origins and internal migration of groups. The Benin kingdom historian, Egharevba (1934) traces the history of Benin from the Ogoiso time to the fall of Benin in 1897. The work purports to treat the history of the entire South Central Nigeria. According to it, the early people of Esan and Afemai Divisions, the peoples of the west bank of the Niger, the Urhobo, Isoko, and the people of Onitsha are all emigrants from Benin. Egharevba's work remains a subject of considerable scholarly controversy. It claims to have covered the Western Igbo land with no single evidence of traditions collected from the area. More disturbing is the fact that many writers have subscribed to the imperial ambit of Benin history by claiming there was a great deal of population outflow from Benin that resulted in the peopling of many places including the west Niger Igbo area.

In general, many of the existing works attempted to describe the origins of the Western Igbo based on Benin political influence on the area. But it is about time scholars come to terms with the fact that political influence of a bigger power on smaller societies does not explain origin and migration of such societies. In the present state, there is a crisis of origins among the Aboh, and unless a detailed interrogation of their traditions is done, it will inevitably lead to crisis of identity.

## **Origin**

Attempts have been made in the past by writers to study Aboh origin and migrations. Some believe that the Aboh town was probably founded about 1530 by an expedition from Benin led by Chima during the reign of Oba Esigie, which also then or later founded many of other clans in the kingdom (William 1934; Talbot 1969). Many sources believe that the Aboh was part of the Onitsha (east of the Niger) party that fled the Benin kingdom to the Western Igbo area. According to them, a section of the Onitsha group that was forced out of the Benin kingdom, instead of crossing the Niger with their leader, Ezechima, went southwards, following more or less the course of the Ase River and its tributaries, they were led by a man called Ogwezi who had the title of "Obi" (Hubbard 1945; Basden 1966; Egharevba 1968).

It is said that Obi Ogwezi led his people through the jungle not knowing exactly where they were going. They pushed on southwards (some of them dropping off and founding new settlements such as Ossissa, Ozoro, and Ashaka) and eventually reached Aboh, where Ogwezi founded his kingdom. In the same vein, it is claimed that js was the third and last "wave" of

migrations from Benin that founded Aboh (Okolugbo 2004). The sources expressed the view that the Aboh were Benin in origin. However, these works have so far speculated on the territorial origin of the Aboh group.

However, an Igala tradition recorded by Boston (1960) contradicts the tradition of Aboh origin which gives Benin identity to the Aboh people. According to the tradition, the lower Niger towns of Aboh, Okpaiye, Umuolu, Onya, Ndoni, and Ossomala were of Igala origin. In particular, the tradition states that Aboh was founded through the migration of a family from Idah (the capital of the Igala kingdom). The kings of Aboh, the tradition maintains, were also subjects of the Ata (the Igala king), and each new chief of Aboh had to spend three months at Idah before investiture, performing rituals and receiving instructions from the king's eunuchs.

Indeed, many riverine Igbo towns have a sizeable number of Igala elements in their midst. Some of them are also known to have been founded by Igala migrants (these include Ebu, Oko and Nzam group of villages). Added to this, is the fact that the Igala is more of a water people than Benin. Seen from this. It can be argued that one of the earliest movements into the Aboh area would have come from Igala rather than Benin. Such a movement from the Igala country to Aboh could have occurred before Ezechima (the founder of Ezechima clan in Asaba Division) migration into Western Igbo land and the subsequent founding of what later became known as Aboh kingdom. This movement might have taken place during the early part of the fifteenth century that marked the "infiltration phase" of Igala fishermen into the Igbo territory (Oguagha and Okpoko 1984). It, therefore, means that the Igala tradition was referring to the earlier movements of the Igala group who settled in the riverine areas for fishing purposes before the arrival of the Aboh party in their present location in the middle of the sixteenth century.

Corroborative evidence was found at Obeti (a Western Igbo community), where the tradition claims that their forebears were Igala who migrated from Aboh (Enukegwu 2017, Personal Interview). A similar claim was made at Ezionum where a group of Igala was said to have migrated from the Aboh area to found Ogbe Ofu quarters of Ezionum (Ikediashi 2019, Personal Interview). The tradition attributes this movement to violence that greeted the arrival of the Aboh party in the area. Despite this evidence, the Igala tradition does not explain the origin of Aboh and its people. So, who are the Aboh, and where did they come from?

### **A Critique of the Traditions**

The popular narrative is that the Aboh is Benin in origin and so, they came from the Benin kingdom. In examining this dominant tradition, two reasons featured prominently for their flight from Benin. One is that they left as a result of the harsh and tyrannical rule of Oba Ozolua, which led to bloodshed and unrest in the kingdom. The other is said to have resulted from the failure of Esume-Ukwu's bid for the Benin throne and was advised by his mother to flee Benin for safety. Whichever way the case, the fact remains that Aboh migration out of Benin kingdom followed from hostilities that characterized the rise of Esigie to power in the Benin throne.

Earlier documentary pieces of evidence on the traditions of Aboh origin identify two different leaders of the group. For instance, the intelligence report on the area compiled by

Milner (1931) and a separate study by Ogedengbe (1971) who wrote as an insider show that Essumei-Ukwu was the first Obi (king) of Aboh. This suggests that he may have led the Aboh party to their present location. But on the contrary, Hubbard (1945) and Nzimiro (1972) point to Ogwezi as the first Obi of Aboh, who led the Aboh movement to their present location. All these indicate considerable confusion surrounding the origin and migration of Aboh people.

Whichever way, does not matter much. Rather, it is about the identity of the Aboh. This is important because the dominant traditions tell little beyond the assumption that they were Benin migrants who fled into the Igbo country for safety. Put differently, the Benin tradition tells more of migration than the origin of the people. But how was it that the Aboh party communicated in Igbo and not Bini (Benin language) or Igala with the Akarai people whom they met on their arrival and their language became Igbo? Was it just because the immediate neighbors were Igbo-speaking or that within Aboh the Igbo groups were numerically superior? Or was it that the migrants led by Essumai-Ukwu or Ogwezi were already Igbo-speaking before they moved to the Aboh area? Why was the leader of the Aboh group from Benin known by an Igbo title of a king (Obi) and not Oba or Ogie as it is referred to in the Benin kingdom? These are some of the questions that the promoters of Benin's identity among the Aboh people have not been able to answer.

However, “an oblique lead could be deciphered from the information” (Opone 2017) obtained from the field. According to it, the Aboh group comprised some migrant families who left Abo town in Awgu area in eastern Igbo land with the Nze ritual symbol (common among the Aro and Nri) to the Benin kingdom in the sixteenth century. This movement is attributed to the lure of lucrative trade and ritual services which they were specialists in. They arrived in the Benin kingdom and settled at a place called Udo. When Udo (one of the vassal states to Benin) was destroyed by Oba Esigie many groups including the Aboh fled back eastwards towards the Niger and after so many days of wandering, they got to their present location originally inhabited by the Akarai people (Ajuwa 2019, Personal Interview). The destruction of Udo by Oba Esigie has been dated as the sixteenth century (Meek 1930; Egharevba 1968, 84), which suggests the possible date of arrival of the Aboh group in their new site

An intelligence report points to Ishago clan in Awgu division of Afikpo Province in eastern Nigeria as the original home of the Aboh (Waddington 1933). The Aboh party was originally from the town of Abo, and in the course of migration, they got to Udo in the vicinity of the Benin kingdom before being forced out by Oba Esigie's hostilities during the sixteenth century. That was why they found no difficulties in settling among the Akarai Igbo, the aborigines. The deduction here is that the Aboh was an Igbo group occupying a compact territory of their own but proximate to Benin after their initial migration to the Edo country.

Some writers even share the view that the party which founded the Aboh kingdom came not directly from Benin City but suggests that their ancestral founders came from Agbor, a Western Igbo town where they had settled for some time. They suggest that the movement from Agbor to Aboh was led by Omasio, the son of Obi Aisama of Agbor in the fifteenth century (Isichei 1976; Nwokoro 2007, 91). It is claimed that Omasio and his group were the first people to arrive from the west, though not necessarily the founders of Aboh kingdom. If this is true, it suggests that there is an Agbor element in the composition of the Aboh population. On the other hand, it suggests that the Aboh party may have sojourned in Agbor

for a while on their flight from Benin before. From Agbor, the party trusted the Niger in bid to return to the ancestral homeland but was attracted by the location of their new settlement.

Even if it is argued that the ancestors of the Aboh group came from within the Benin kingdom territory, they were not Benin in origin but Igbo. That was why there was no language barrier between them and their neighbors on arrival. Another point to emphasize is that they did not settle in an unoccupied area or founded their settlement in a virgin land. All the traditions agree that on their arrival they met the Akarai Igbo people who were the original owners and inhabitants of the present site of Aboh. For instance, one early European source recorded that the original inhabitants of Aboh were named “Akra and when driven away by the race who came from Ado (Benin) they went and settled in different directions, their towns distinguished by the prefix A’kra to the previous name of the spot, thus we have A’kra Ugidi and A’kra Uteri” (Baiké 1956, 63).

In the same vein, Mockler-Ferryman (1892), who visited Aboh in 1889, recorded an Aboh tradition, which claimed that the town of Aboh belonged to the Akris, one of the numerous Igbo clans, the forefathers of the present possessors who came from the direction of Idu. This position is substantiated by information obtained from the field. According to it, after settling in their new location, the Aboh saw the Akarai people as a threat to their ambition of establishing a kingdom in the area and so confronted the unsuspecting Akarai at a general gathering (Izuani) called at the instance of the Aboh group (Ugbomeh 2017, Personal Interview). The Akarai people were said to have suffered heavy casualties and some of the survivors fled north to found new settlements such as Akarai-Etiti, Akarai-Ogidi, and Akarai-atani (Milner 1931).

It is instructive that none of the accounts collected in the nineteenth century recorded the claim, now popular that Aboh was founded by a Benin Prince or a group of Benin migrants. It is logical to argue that were this claim in vogue or current in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it would not have escaped the notice of these foreign visitors. One is persuaded to argue, therefore, that the claim of origin from Benin is a post-1960 construct. Incidentally, thanks to this recent construct, origin from Benin has become the central theme of the Aboh traditions as the case with other Western Igbo communities.

However, the point to reiterate is that members of the Aboh party were not Benin in origin and did not found unoccupied settlements. On their arrival, they met many Igbo groups who had inhabited the settlements for a long time and they communicated in the Igbo language. This is acknowledged by the people themselves. For instance, whenever the Aboh swears by the earth, they are heard to say: *ani Aboh na Akarai*, that is, “earth of Aboh and Akarai” (Enudi 2017, Personal Interview).

Besides the Akarai people whom all the traditions acknowledge as the original inhabitants of the Aboh country, there may well have been other Igbo groups in the area, (Ikime 2006, 234), such as the Iwele, who “ferried the Aboh to their present location” (Enuma 2017, Personal Interview). But there is no evidence by which to determine how long such Igbo groups have settled before the Aboh party arrived in the area. However, an intelligence report on the area suggests that the Akarai Igbo settled in the present Aboh site in the early fifteenth century or before (Milner 1931). If this date is reliable, it means that the Akarai and Iwele had lived in that territory for over a century before the arrival of the Aboh party.



Also, it is interesting to note that Esumai-Ukwu and Ogwezi believed to have led the Aboh migrant band, have Igbo ring about them, which suggests they were Igbo in origin but would have migrated to the Benin Kingdom during a phase in their history. However, on their flight from the Benin kingdom, they probably would have sojourned in an Igbo-speaking area before they moved into what we now know to be Aboh. It, therefore, implied that what grew to be Aboh was the result of migrations of different groups from different directions. That the migration from Benin is the most remembered of other migrations would indicate that it was probably the latest.

A tradition recorded by Okolugbo (2004) claims that the name “Aboh” originated from Ukwuani word, “abo” (a cane basket) which contained the military charm that the Aboh party took as their conquering emblem from their ancestral home. This suggests that after dispossessing the Akarai, the party named the site Aboh to commemorate their victory and occupation. But abo is not only an Ukwuani word; it is a general Igbo word for cane basket. Besides, it has been shown that Ukwuani is Igbo (Opone 2017, 132 - 46). Okolugbo’s (2004) historical explanation unknowingly contradicts his claim that the Aboh is Benin in origin and strengthens the position that their ancestors were Igbo and not Benin by giving Igbo interpretations to the name of the settlement.

The emerging evidence from an Aboh tradition indicates that the Aboh people originated from Obodo Abo in Awgu division, Afikpo Province in Eastern Nigeria, and named the kingdom they founded in the sixteenth century after their ancestral homeland. This pattern of the naming of settlement after ancestral homeland is common among the Igbo to preserve their original identity. This is why it was not difficult for many European sources to describe the Aboh kingdom in the nineteenth century as an Igbo kingdom of the lower Niger. What is more to say? As an Aboh tradition has stated, the court of *Nze* popular in Aboh (which the Aboh party carried from their original homeland) is a religious ritual emblem among the Aro and Nri Igbo. The Aboh kingdom effectively used the religious court of *Nze* as a diplomatic tool towards her neighbors and many of them including the Urhobo and Isoko towns of Ozoro, Elu and Abraka subscribed to it for immunity against their more numerous and hostile neighbors.

It might even be suggested that the Aboh-Onitsha settlements constituted the western vanguard of the Igbo-speaking peoples who were forced to flee further eastwards after losing in one of the early wars of expansion engaged in by the growing Benin Empire during the pre-colonial period. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Benin traditions relate the expansion into Igbo country to the late fifteen century and after (Bradbury 1950, 18-55). Twentieth-century documentary evidence on the history of Aboh division appears to contain very little about movements across the Niger from the East, and a good deal about the movements from Benin. This may be due largely to the importance of Benin during the period and to the fact that Aboh, which has the strongest connection with Benin, was for a long time the most important clan on the banks of the Lower Niger.

The information obtained from the field indicates that the founders of several of the Western Igbo clans including Aboh emigrated from towns east of the Niger, especially Oguta, Utagi, Arochukwu, Onitsha. In particular, Aboh is of Aro origin. It seems likely that these clans, that is, clans founded by people from Eastern Nigeria were established long before the

Ezechima movement took place, and as suggested by the Divisional Officer, Williams (1934), this is the main reason why the “lingua franca” of the area is Ibo and, not Edo. William is clearly of the view that there were earlier settlers in the Division before the arrival of the Aboh party in the place.

According to him, it seems likely that the earliest settlers –the Umuakashiada, Abbi, Emu, and Umukwata clans- arrived during the early part of the fifteenth century and that they as the earliest arrivals in the then uninhabited land occupied the best of it. It was probably about the same time that the Niger banks were occupied by the Abarra, Umuabarautchi, Utuoku and Adiai clans all of whom came from east of the Niger.

## **CONCLUSION**

The foregoing discussion has shown that the claim of Benin's identity by Aboh people can no longer be sustained because it is not supported by the evidence. The evidence provided by this study suggests otherwise. It indicates that they are Igbo in tradition and culture. That the Aboh party had early contact with the Benin kingdom is not in doubt as they moved to the Benin kingdom for greener pastures in a primary migration. But when they were endangered by the hostilities that greeted the rise of Esigie to the Benin throne, they fled to safety in a secondary migration into the area now known as Western Igbo where they founded their settlement named after their hometown, Abo. This should not be misconstrued as an origin from Benin. Rather, it explains their attempt at returning towards their territorial homeland. The fact that they were originally Igbo is indicative of the ease with which they settled in their new location with no language barriers between them and their Neighbors. In all, the claim of origin from Benin now popular among the Aboh is a recent happening promoted by politics of belonging and should not be taken seriously. But it also suggests that identity is not fixed in form; it shifts over time according to the interest of the elite group involved. The main objective is to explain the current social and political situation, providing legitimacy for the claims of the political elite group and attempting to organize a relationship with Benin for political gains. Therefore, the changing identity of Aboh that is promoted by politics is a consequence of the dynamism of the people.

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