

## IDOMA MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

by

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The Idoma are a cluster of peoples inhabiting a vertical strip of southern Central Nigeria, to the north and south of Oturkpo town (Armstrong, 1955a & Hansford et al. 1976). Their population was estimated at a quarter of a million in 1955, but has probably increased substantially since that time. 'Idomoid' is one of the principal branches of South Central Niger Congo and forms a co-ordinate branch with the Nupe languages. Abraham (1967) was the first author to study the Idoma language in detail, and the orthography of Idoma today reflects his original analysis, although it has undergone a certain amount of updating since then.

Idoma terms in the text are transcribed according to the orthography devised by Professor R. Armstrong for scholarly publications. Vernacular orthographies in southern Nigeria usually substitute subdotted letters, 'ẹ' and 'ọ' for the short vowels 'e' and 'o' and do not mark tone. Idoma has three tone levels and these are represented as follows:

´ High Tone  
 Unmarked Mid Tone  
 ` Low Tone

In some cases it proved impossible to confirm the tone markings for certain words. These are marked with an asterisk following in the text (e.g. *ichahoho\**). In some cases, a variety of terms are given for different instruments. This partly reflects dialectal differences between the informants and partly that several words may be concurrent in one area. Often, there are two words for a musical instrument, one describing it in terms of the materials it is made from (cf. *ùbetè*, the pot-drum), and another describing the sound that it makes. The terms given by Professor Armstrong and Ichakpa Amali reflect 'central' Idoma, the speech of the Oturkpo region, although certain terms in the dialect of Southern Idoma are also included.

Armstrong (1955a) provides a general account of Idoma society, demography and history. The Idoma exhibit a diverse range of political and social systems, ranging from the state systems at Doma, Keana and Oturkpo to acephalous groupings such as the Yala. A pervasive feature of the Idoma is the importance of secret societies, and many sound-producers have specific associations either with the rulers or with these societies. Agriculture depends on the hoe, and the central location of Idoma land means that both cereals typical of the north, such as guinea-corn and millet, and tubers such as yams and sweet potato are also common.

Idoma musical instruments reflect the diversity of the society, showing links with both the North and the South. Although a number of recordings of Idoma music are available, there has been no systematic description of sound-producers.<sup>1</sup> Armstrong (1955b) discusses in detail the use of sound-producers as speech-surrogates, that is, talking instruments, and I shall therefore only refer to this aspect in passing. Instruments are classed approximately in the order of the Sachs/Hornbostel classification, but, within those classes, divided according to common generic terms

such as 'drum' or 'bell'. Information about certain sound-producers is fragmentary, either because they are no longer in use or because they are only used in ritual contexts. Sometimes very similar instruments are used in a variety of contexts, and have different vernacular names, according to the ensemble they participate in, for example the conoidal basket rattles. These are initially listed under their most common vernacular name.

The diverse sources from which the information in this article has been drawn means that some of the data are fragmentary or otherwise inadequate, and there are some apparent contradictions. This description should be looked on as preliminary and as a stimulus to a fuller discussion at a later date.

## I. IDIOPHONES

### 1. Bells

a) *ágogo*. A general term for conical iron, clapperless bells made from two triangular plates welded along their flanges (Fig. 1). They can be up to three feet in height, and either single or double. They are struck with a short stick, and provide a rhythmic pulse for dances, as well as forming part of various secret society ensembles. A similar term has been recorded among the Yoruba and Igbo. The term *òjè*, 'iron', is also often used to refer to all types of clapperless bell.

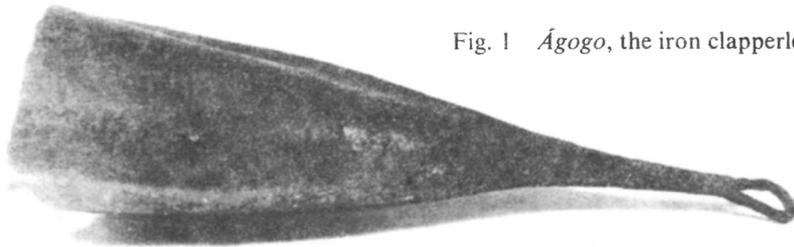


Fig. 1 *Ágogo*, the iron clapperless bell.

b) *ámà*. This is a general term applied to all types of European cast brass clapper-bells and local bells resembling them. The largest type, used for the *ichahoho*\* war society, is six inches across the mouth and seven inches tall, with a handle like a European school bell. Smaller conical brass bells are hung in strings around the arms of masqueraders. Locally cast bells of this type were probably made in Benin and exported to Idoma country. The term *útám* is applied to large European cast bells, such as church bells.

c) *ìchìchà=ekpo*. Ankle rattles, worn usually by masqueraders, made either from candlenut shells or from iron cylinders. The dried fruit-shells are attached by cords to a fibre band, and strike against one another as the masquerader dances. The iron ankle bells are pod-shaped and each end is curled into a hook shape. Jingling rings are looped over these hooks and they strike the pods when the dancer moves.

### 2. Struck vessels

a) *ìkpá*. This term refers to a specific type of bowl-shaped calabash, and a song that is sung at funerals accompanied by the tapping of these calabashes on the ground. When the song has been completed, the singers throw the calabashes on the ground

and trample on them, thus destroying them.

b) *ikplekple*. This is a dried tortoise carapace beaten with a stick to warn away women when the *imálanyi* mask is about to come out.

c) *ikbém=ikpém*. The Idoma name for a glass bottle, struck with a stick and used as a rhythm instrument to accompany the dances of young people.

### 3. Rattles

a) *ǎjá*. A large, spherical dried gourd open at the neck and covered in a rattling network of laces threaded with beads and seeds. When the instrument is shaken, the seeds strike against the exterior surface of the gourd. The instrument is supported by a loop of cord tied around the neck of the gourd and slipped over the player's wrist. It is held so that the open mouth of the gourd faces upwards and the base is struck with the palm of the other hand, creating a deep, booming sound in addition to the rattle of the bead network. This presumably has an aerophonic component, similar to the struck pot, *udu\**, in addition to the idiophonic element. Like a stamping tube, a blow on the base of the instrument causes a concussion shock to travel upwards rapidly and confined by the constriction of the neck, the air makes a dull thud as it escapes.

The *ǎjá* is restricted to men, and women are not allowed to see it. It is used in sets of eight, played simultaneously by members of the *ǎchùkwù* society, for their rituals, in particular the final burial of the *ǎlèkwu* masks. The *ǎchùkwù* society is also charged with the preservation of community morality. For example, if someone jumps the queue at a source of water in the dry season, members of the society will come at night to his or her compound, and play their instruments, disrupting the peace, until the offending individual has paid a fine. The *ǎjá* can also be called *ǎchùkwù* after the society that uses it.

In view of the secrecy surrounding the *ǎjá*, it is curious to find that an almost identical instrument, the *shekere\**,<sup>2</sup> is regularly used by women to accompany church services. These are small bottle-gourd net-rattles, often covered in brightly coloured plastic beads, sold in music shops throughout southern Nigeria. They are played by holding the string network and slapping the gourd against it rhythmically.

The 'serious' use of gourd rattles such as the *ǎjá* appears to be unusual in West Africa, although it also occurs among the eastern Yoruba.

b) *ekpo=ǎkwakwa*. This term applies to strung rattles tied around the waist or ankles and used when dancing. Originally used for the candlenut ankle rattles, *ǎchìchà*, it is today applied to rattles made from scrap tin, folded into pyramidal packets and filled with small stones or seeds. These vessels are tied around the waist of dancers.

c) *ǎchákà*. Conoidal wicker rattles, with circular gourd bases and handles projecting from their vertices, played in pairs by men to accompany dance music. Often played with the *émlà* cruciform whistle, the cones are held in an upright position, so that when the rattle is shaken the seeds strike against the gourd base. A specially made pair of these instruments is used to accompany the *ǎnyǎǎkpó* masquerade and in this context the rattles are also called *ǎnyǎǎkpó* (Amali, 1972).

d) *oyoyo\**. This is a generic term applied to vessel rattles, including the *ǎchìchà* bottle-gourd rattle (see following entry), and a rattle made from a crushed tin can filled with stones, used by children.

e) *ǎchìchà*. A rattle made from a bottle-gourd filled with seeds, and plugged at the mouth. Most specimens are blackened with age and are only to be used by a category of

post-menopausal women to accompany the *ìchìchà* chants (Armstrong, 1969). These chants are partly in other languages, such as Igala, and it therefore seems likely that there is some connection between the two societies. The Igala gourd net-rattle, played when sacrifices are made, is called *eyicha*.



Fig. 2 *ìcékìlicé* 'clackers' or concussion rattles.

f) *ìcékìlicé*=*upukapuka*\*. 'Clackers' made from two small spherical bush-fruits containing rattling seeds, joined by a short length of cord (Fig. 2). One fruit is held firmly inside the fist, and the other swings freely at the end of the cord, striking the first rhythmically. Widespread in West-Central Africa, these instruments are made and played by women for their own amusement. I have recorded more than 70 ethnic groups using them in Nigeria alone.<sup>3</sup>

g) *àgìdìgbà*=*usakasaka*\*. Young girls sometimes accompany their songs with the dried fruit of the horse-bean (*Canavalia ensiformis*), as when this is completely desiccated, the large seeds rattle in the hollows within it. This instrument is widely played throughout northern and central Nigeria.

h) *ichodo*\*. This is the name given for an Idoma rattling staff on a catalogue card at the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford. Unfortunately, the instrument itself cannot now be located, but since most of the neighbours of the Idoma use iron staffs, it is possible that this is correct. The Igede (Ranung, 1970) have an iron staff called *ijache*\* with pod-shaped iron pellet-bells built into it.

#### 4. Xylophone

a) *ògèlà*=*ogllénda*=*ogllémba*=*àgìdìgbe*. A trough-xylophone similar to that illustrated by Talbot (1926). The resonator is made from a large rectangular block of wood, hollowed out, with straw runners along the edges of the trough. The keys are laid across the mouth of the trough, and kept in place by a loop of cord that runs from pegs at either end of the resonator. It can be played by one or several players, who use short wooden sticks without heads. It is only found in Southern Idoma, played for the *égbédògwù* festival. It may well be a recent borrowing from the Northern Igbo.

#### 5. Slit-gongs

a) *ágo*. A cylindrical wooden slit-gong, with a 'butterfly'-shaped slit, consisting of a narrow vent joining two large equal square or rectangular apertures. Struck with paired sticks, it is used together with the *àgìdìgbe*, a larger similar instrument up to 1.5m long. They are played by men in pairs, for the dances of the *ichahoho*\* society. The term *àgìdìgbe* is also used for the trough-xylophone and recalls the Nupe *gìdìgbò*, also applied to a percussion cylinder.

#### 6. Friction idiophones

a) *òwù*. A sacred sound-producer associated with rulers in Southern Idoma. It may be a type of wooden mortar scraped with a large pestle.

## 7. 'Sansa' (lamellaphone)

a) *ògwúmògwú*. A board-'sansa', set into a hemispherical gourd played by men for their personal amusement. This type of instrument is common throughout south-central Nigeria, and usually with the same name. The keys are always iron today, although in the past they were made of cane. In the face of the table are set two crescent-shaped resonating holes that enable the player to grip the instrument firmly while plucking the keys with the thumbs.

## II. MEMBRANOPHONES

### 1. Drums

a) *òkànga*. A large, cylindrical drum with two membranes, one of them snared. The drum is slung over the shoulder so that the membranes are perpendicular to the ground, but the head that is in front of the player is tilted slightly upwards. This head is snared, and is beaten with a hooked stick. The snare is called *uri\**, and the stick *ochì'kànga*. The snare is on the outside of the membrane. It was traditionally made of leather though today modern materials such as nylon wire are occasionally found. It is generally single, though occasionally double. The drum is approximately equal in height and diameter to and closely resembles the Hausa *ganga* (Krieger, 1968). The resemblance between the names is clearly too close to be fortuitous, yet it is hard to imagine that the Idoma borrowed the instrument directly from Hausa, especially in view of the central role it plays in both the *ìchìchà* songs and the royal music (Armstrong, 1972). In the context of royal music, it is used as a speech-surrogate, and the drummers place the palm of the free hand on the 'upper' (that is, the one beaten with the stick) or the lower face to partially damp it and create a contrastive pitch when struck, enabling it to echo in a reduced form the praise-names of the rulers. It is also played for the *osobo\** dance for women. A photograph of a player appears in Armstrong (1972).

b) *samba\**. This word is applied to two types of recently introduced drum, borrowed from peoples living nearer the coast. The first is the rectangular frame-drum, described by Thieme (1969) for the Yoruba. It has a rectangular wooden frame and a tensioning mechanism inside and can be beaten either with sticks or with the hands. The second is a circular frame-drum, consisting of a single membrane stretched over a wooden hoop or an iron ring, and fixed either with laces or small wedges. Similar instruments are also used by the Yoruba under the name *sakara\**. Idoma men play them for 'klub', the name for informal dancing done by young people for their own amusement.

c) *ùbeté*. A closed spheroidal pottery drum with a single head, attached by a wedge-laced lapping ring. The name derives from the terms *ùbà*, 'drum' and *èté*, 'pot'. The body of the drum is spherical, usually about 1m tall and 30-40cm wide, with a constricted neck, and an everted mouth with the membrane stretched across it. The skin is rolled around a lapping-ring and a series of parallel fibre cords join it to a further ring, part-way down the neck of the drum. Large triangular wedges are inserted between this ring and the wall of the drum. Hammering in the wedges tightens the membrane and enables the pitch to be adjusted during performance. The drum is placed on the ground on a fibre quoin, in order to help it stand upright. It is played by men with sticks to accompany certain society dances.



d) *ájigo*. A wooden, closed conical drum with a single wedge-laced membrane played by men for the *áchúkwù* society. Average dimensions are 60cm in height with a head diameter of 30cm. The players lay the drum on the ground and sit on it, beating the membrane with their palms. It is also sometimes played for the *ichichà* society.

e) The usual dance drums of the Idoma are all of a similar type, conical or bottle-shaped, with a single wedge-laced head, open at the base (Fig. 3). Like the *ájigo*, these drums are held between the legs and played with the hands. Their approximate dimensions are as follows:

Fig. 3 A conical, open, wedge-laced *énuùbà* drum, 13.3cm across the base, 35cm tall, a little smaller than normal.

Idoma name	Membrane Diam.	Base Diam.	Height
1. <i>òkplìkplì</i>	18	10	31
2. <i>énuùbà, ùbà, ubalabala*</i>	23	18	36
3. <i>úlààgà</i>	18	10	46

The first two, *ùbà* and *òkplìkplì* are used to accompany the dances of women and uninitiated males, while all three drums are used together for men's dances.

## 2. Friction-drums

- a) *ìgwùmále*. A friction-drum associated with royalty in Southern Idoma.
- b) *èkwu-nòkwu*. A friction-drum associated with royalty in West Idoma.

## 3. Mirlitons

a) *ògakwú*. A mirliton made from a bird-bone, with a membrane made from the egg-sac of a spider. The *àlèkwu* masquerade (Amali, n.d. b) also uses such instruments to distort the voice. Performers in the *ògbiló* society also use *ògakwú* mirlitons. Balfour (1948) describes similar instruments from many parts of southern Nigeria.

## III. CHORDOPHONES

### 1. Stick-zither

a) *ògbaginigini\**. An idiochord stick-zither, made from the fresh mid-rib of the raffia-palm. Reported by Beart (1955) from the Benin Republic, this instrument is also found widely in central Nigeria. A section of raffia mid-rib about 2m long has two or

more long strands raised up from the surface with a knife. Small blocks of wood are placed under the strands thus created to act as bridges and keep them raised from the midrib. Calabashes or enamel bowls are upturned and placed on either end of the mid-rib to act as supplementary resonators, and two extra players sit on these to keep them in place. One boy strikes the string with two short wooden sticks, while another places a knife-blade or a flat stick against the string at various points, thus effectively altering the sounding length of the string during performance. The effect of this is to create rhythmic ostinato patterns used to accompany short songs, sung by small boys present.

## 2. Mouth-bow

a) *inenge\**=*otirigbo\**. A musical bow made from the curved midrib of a palm frond, or from wood, with a string from the fresh epidermis of a palm mid-rib (Fig. 4). The string is wound and knotted around one extremity of the bow, and then passed through a notch at the opposite extremity. The bow is held so that the string passes between the lips, and the mouth thus acts as a resonance cavity. By altering the shape of the mouth, different harmonics can be emphasized as with a jews harp. One hand plucks the string, or strikes it with a thin piece of wood or grass which may simply be picked up on the spot and thrown away afterwards, while the other selects harmonics by holding a short, thick stick, visible in the picture, against the string at various harmonic nodes near the opposite end from the player's mouth. The *inenge\** can be played by men for their own entertainment at any time.



Fig. 4 *Inenge\**, the mouth resonated musical bow.

## 3. Arched harp

a) *ĩgǒ*. The arched harp was played in Idoma before 1940 to accompany a masquerade. The instrument and the masquerade are said to have been borrowed from the Jukun, but both have now disappeared. The *ĩgǒ* had four to seven strings, and resembled those common throughout eastern Nigeria.

## IV. AEROPHONES

### 1. Compression aerophones.

a) *udu\**. The musical pot, common throughout south-central Nigeria, is used principally by women to accompany church services, and as the Idoma instrument has an identical name to the Igbo instrument (Williamson, 1972:513) it was probably borrowed from further south. It is a spherical pot with an everted neck and a circular hole in the side-wall. The player strikes the hole in the side-wall while rhythmically opening and closing the hole at the mouth with the hand, thus creating a regular booming sound. Nicklin (1973) has described this instrument in more detail.

b) *òbò=òpò*. This instrument corresponds to the Hausa *shantu* (Krieger, 1968). It is a long, tubular gourd, open at both ends, cleaned out inside, with exterior pokerwork decorations. It is played by women for their own amusement, by beating the lower end against the forearm or the thigh, and rhythmically opening and closing the upper aperture with the flat of the palm.

## 2. Free aerophones

a) *òhúmíhúmí=òfúmífúm*. A fish-shaped wooden plaque bullroarer, sounded by members of the *àlèkwu* society. It is forbidden to women.

b) *òfukùfukù*. A bullroarer made from a ruler or a piece of scrap wood by young boys for their own amusement.

c) *òkpavuvu\**. A spinning-disc made from a circle of gourd or a flattened top from a mineral bottle, made by children for their own amusement.

## 3. Flutes and whistles

a) *àbótá*. ‘Blowing of hands’— the use of the hands as a vessel-flute. The hands are clasped together to form a roughly spherical cavity and by blowing between the fingers, a flute-like tone is produced. By altering the position of the hands the resultant pitch can be modified, in the same way as the traditional English ‘owl-whistle’.

b) *ìkpali*. A vessel-flute made from a palm-nut that has been hollowed out by insects. A hole is pierced in one end so that an embouchure is created. It is played by children for their own amusement and to communicate with one another. The name derives from *ìkpo*, ‘seed’, and *ali*, ‘palm-tree’.

c) *ùkpape*. A short notch-flute made by children from the naturally hollow stem of the pawpaw. A cylindrical length is cut and a V-shaped notch is made in the top as an embouchure. There are usually three finger-holes. It can be played at any time of year. The name is derived from *ùkpè*, ‘horn’, and *àpe*, ‘pawpaw’.

d) *òkpancile=òkpancina\**. A short cane notch-flute with three or four fingerholes, played for the royal ensembles in Oturkpo with the *òkànga* drum and the *òpò* horn (Armstrong, 1972). Instruments are often bound in leather to prevent splitting. It is used like the horn for ‘speaking’ the praise-names of the ruler.

e) *émlà= émlàadà= ògba\**. A cruciform wooden whistle, open at the base, with a circular embouchure and ‘horns’ — projections to support the lips (Fig. 5). The hole at the base forms one of the three fingerholes, the other two being at each end of the crosspiece. It normally produces four notes, though the top note (all fingers off) is of poor quality and is not used. The *émlà* is one of the most important ‘talking’ instruments in Idoma society, and is used for hunting, to encourage people at collective work-parties, for sending messages over a distance, for dance societies and for the royal music. They can be of any dimensions, and there are no restrictions on their manufacture.



Fig. 5 *émlà*, the open, cruciform wooden whistle.

f) *òcù*. A flute or whistle of unknown type used by hunters.

#### 4. Reed Instruments

a) *òkpò ila\**. The membranaceous seed of the *ila\** tree, placed between the lips, and sounding when the player inhales and exhales. This is presumably a type of ribbon-reed, with the lips acting as a frame for the movement of the seed. Used by children at the end of the rainy season, when the seeds are ready.

b) Name unknown. Another ribbon-reed made from a leaf stretched between two potsherds and placed between the lips. This is another form of the children's traditional squeaker, made from placing a grass-blade between the thumbs. Reed-whistles of this type have been reported from northern Nigeria (Krieger, 1968: 421) and from Mali (Griaule, 1938: 89).

c) *ùfié*. This is what Balfour, in the display cabinets of the Pitt-Rivers Museum called a 'retreating reed'. It is a hollow grass-stem closed at one end, and next to the closure there is a longitudinal slit. The end of the reed is placed transversely in the mouth with the slit entirely covered. When it is blown against, the slit periodically opens like the double-reed of an oboe, creating a high-pitched squeaking. The lower end of the grass-stem has two or three fingerholes to modify the pitch. The instruments are made and played by children in the rainy season, and sometimes they will form small ensembles of different-sized instruments. The name *ùfié* is the same as the grass from which the sound-producer is made.

d) *ògàlùmpe*. A transverse clarinet about 90cm long made from a guinea-corn stalk, played by young men for their own amusement after the harvest. Two internodal sections are hollowed out and a single up-cut reed is set in one end of the tube. There is an optional fingerhole in the far end. The tone can also be modified by placing the thumb over the end of the tube and rhythmically opening and closing it. Some instruments have spheroidal fruit-shells at either end of the guinea-corn stalk that act as supplementary resonators, made from the dried rind of the *áplúké* melon. Similar instruments are widespread in West Africa, reported by Krieger (1968) among the Hausa, and by Duvellé (1971) among the Bisa of Upper Volta.

#### 5. Horns

a) *òpò*. A transversely blown animal horn, open at both ends, used for hunting, communication and sometimes at dances. It was traditionally used in warfare, by players who climbed trees and relayed battle movements to the fighters. It is also used in the royal orchestra and is the most important 'talking' instrument (Armstrong, 1972). Most instruments are bound in leather, to prevent cracking and increase their life-span. The name *òpò*, also applied to the tubular calabash played by women, is cognate with the Igbo *òpì* (Williamson, 1972:383) and the instrument is the same in both form and function (Echezona, 1963). The term *òpìke* is used for a smaller version of this horn, used by hunters to communicate with one another.

b) *ùkpè*. A transverse horn made from the conical neck of a gourd, open at both ends (Fig. 6). During performance the smaller hole is closed with the thumb and small quantities of air are allowed to escape thus changing the pitch and timbre of the notes produced. They are used in tuned sets of eight instruments for the dances of the *ògllinyè* society, and resemble closely those found in other parts of southern Nigeria. The Ibibio

Fig. 6 *Úkpè*, the transverse calabash-neck horn.



(Akpabot, 1975) call similar sets of gourd horns *uta\**. The larger instruments are made from two or more pieces of gourd joined together, and they have a maximum length of 80cm.

c) *ògwú*. A transverse horn identical to the larger instruments in the *úkpè* set. When it is played, the bell of the horn is held inside a large spheroidal gourd. By moving this gourd around, the player is able to modify the pitch of the horn. (Bamileke women in Cameroun hold short trumpets inside baskets to modulate the tone as they play.) The name *ògwú* means 'hyena', and the sound imitates the cry of that animal. The *ògwú* is played when a member of the *odumu\** dance society has died, early in the morning, when the body is bathed before burial.

d) *àkpàṅkhú*. 'A long straight horn' of unknown type blown by hunters.

#### Notes

1. The present article is based primarily on the research of Mr.I.A. Amali, formerly a student at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and of Professor R.G. Armstrong and Dr. S. Amali who kindly assisted me both with their own extensive knowledge of Idoma society, and with the transcription of Idoma terms. My own research in Idoma-land formed part of field-work in Nigeria sponsored by the Social Science Research Council between 1979 and 1982. I am grateful to Andrew Okoli and Unoguvu Ocheba who were my principal informants in the field. Photographs of sound-producers accompanying this article were taken by the author.

2. A term probably of Yoruba origin.

3. *Ed*. A similar rattle has been reported by David Coplan from the Gã in Ghana, called onomatopoeically *televibalakate*.

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