



Paul's Perspective on the Role of Women in Leadership and its Relevance to the Church in Africa

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Abstract

Many African societies are androcentric. Evidence of gender inequality reflects in their education, economic, political, and religious systems. Some church denominations are struggling to establish women's roles in church leadership. The struggle is to what extent is it culturally acceptable and biblically justifiable to allow women to assume preeminent leadership positions? This paper examines women's roles as presented in Pauline epistles to discover Paul's view of women's ministries in the Church within the purview of diverse cultural orientations of his days. It argues that Paul adopted a progressive and transformational approach to address the age-long controversial issue of women's roles in the Church. In some areas, his approach is counter-cultural, and in others, it is conventional. The paper adopts an analytical approach to unravel Paul's perspective of women's leadership roles from Pauline's literature and scholars' opinions. It ascertains that the Church in Africa should develop cultural sensitivity and appreciation, ensure the Husband-Wife relationship and mutual development, maintain orderliness in worship, campaign for gender equality, and safeguard against heresies. It is recommended that pastors in churches and theological educators should adopt Paul's position concerning women's ministry roles in the Church and encourage women to take their place beyond cultural limitations.

Keywords: Women, Leadership, Church, Gender, New Testament era.

Introduction

Controversy about the Biblical position on women's roles in the Church continues among scholars. Some believe all facets of ministry should be opened to women. Others argue that women should be restricted to supportive roles in the Church. The cultural orientation of society and religious conviction play a significant role in the position one adopts. Many African communities are patriarchal. This often reflects in their social and religious orientation and practices. Evidence of gender inequality reflects in education, economic, political, and religious systems. Akintunde (2010:143) observes that "the record of oppression, subordination, and silencing of women has been so widespread and longstanding." She also posits that African societies see women as mere "playthings, sex objects, unpaid cooks, housekeepers, childminders, brainless simpletons, who could not engage in rational discussion...."

This perspective of women's subordination originated from antiquity. In the words of Aristotle, "females are imperfect males, accidentally produced by the father's inadequacy or by the malign influence of a moist south wind." Similarly, Plato avers that "a bad man's fate would

be reincarnation as a woman." Thus women are portrayed in the shadows of obscurity, marginalised, and subordinated. According to Olademo (2009:137), the origin of gender inequality in Africa is traceable to the advent of the colonial enterprise, affecting the African people's ethos and gender classification. Gender classification in Africa before colonisation was characterised by mutuality and interdependency. However, cultural contact between Africans and western civilisation could be described as an exchange revealed by the creation of African Christianity and the influence of philosophy on practices and biblical interpretation in orthodox Christianity in Africa. This exchange was a direct product of the distinction between the public and private sectors, which translated to the disempowerment of African women.

The submission of Olademo is verifiable in African history. African history is replete with epochs of several women who made indelible marks in their generations. Among them were Moremi Ajasoro, who was instrumental in delivering the Ile-Ife people from the Igbo raiders. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti challenged the abuse of power of the then monarchy and campaigned for women's recognition in Nigerian politics. Queen Amina Bakwa, through her military prowess, became the leader of the Zazzua cavalry, among others.

Olademo's claim on the origin of women's subordination and marginalisation in Africa is subject to debate. In line with Olademo's view, Akintunde (2010:150-151) opines that the Church is guilty of women's discrimination and subordination in Africa. Some church denominations limit women's roles to those associated with traditional roles and deny their leadership functions. Rather than focusing on biblical passages that teach sexual equality, they emphasise controversial passages due to faulty hermeneutics. Wilhelmsson (nd: 3) notices that the discrimination against women in the contemporary Church is more pronounced than in the political and social world. Churches are divided on the position and roles of women in church ministry. Clouse and Clouse (1989:11) recognise two radical reformers groups that gave a unique opportunity for women to minister; the seventeenth-century Baptists and the Quakers. Today, the Baptist and Pentecostal denominations lead among churches that give women special recognition and leadership roles.

Many church denominations are still in the web of struggles to establish whether it is biblically justified for women to take significant leadership roles in the Church or not. They also queried the extent of its cultural acceptability. In this light, this paper examines women's roles as presented in Pauline epistles to discover Paul's view of women's ministries in the Church within the purview of diverse cultural orientations of his days. To this end, the concept of biblical manhood and womanhood is examined to provide a contextual framework for the subject of discussion. It also delves into the Graeco-Roman world to discover the cultural background of Pauline's position on women's roles in the Church. Several passages in Paul's epistles are analysed to decipher Paul's perspective on the subject matter and will draw inferences for the Church in Africa.

Overview of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

Biblical manhood and womanhood are volatile because of the conflicting opinions and presuppositions on the subject matter. This writer attempts to create an idea of the biblical position on manhood and womanhood to provide a background for the paper's objectives.

The creation account in Genesis 1:26-28 reveals God's purpose to make man in his image. According to Ortlund (1991:87), the image of God that man carries is the personal soul reflection of God's righteous character. In a more general sense, he said the image of God includes "human rationality, conscience, creativity, relationship and everything we are as a man." This divine privilege makes man a ruler of other creatures under God.

A close look at Genesis 1:27 shows the dual sexuality of man. Man is both male and female. Ortlund (1991:87) corroborates that the equality of both sexes is also reflected in the passage because both males and females display the glory of God in equal brilliance. As a result, both sexes are responsible for ruling the animal world. The designation of man in Genesis 1:26-27 is a generic term that connotes male and female. The Hebrew word *adamah*, translated as Adam, means "earth or ground," which reveals man's origin and implies human beings, not male man. Spencer (1991:89) opines that since both males and females were created to reflect God's image and glory, both are needed in the Church's authority position to help people comprehend God's nature better.

Beck (2005:30) states that males and females are responsible for bearing and rearing children. The idea that the woman's job is to produce and raise the children and the man's job is to work the land is not found in the creation accounts. Both men and women are charged to be fruitful and enjoy the earth's produce. Males and females are portrayed in the creation account as equal in personality, social status, and spiritual position.

Ortlund (1991:89) identifies a paradox in biblical creation accounts. He observes that Genesis 1 emphasises the equality of males and females as bearers of God's image and vice-regent of God on earth. At the same time, Genesis 2 introduces another dimension of male headship and the female as the helper. Ortlund believes this ideal does not contradict the idea of male and female equality. Males and females are equal in position but are distinct in roles. The males are saddled with the headship responsibility while the females have the duty of helping.

Thus, male headship could be described as "the partnership of two spiritually equal human beings, male and female, the man bears the primary responsibility to lead the partnership in a God-glorifying direction" (Ortlund, 1991:86). It should be noted that male headship is not equivalent to male domination. Some feminists among the Evangelicals argue that God created man and woman as equal in a sense that excludes male headship. They believe male headship or domination is a punitive measure imposed on Eve consequent upon the fall. They see that a woman's redemption in Christ releases her from the punishment of male dominance. Is this position aligning with the overall teaching of the Scripture?

On the contrary, Piper (1991:28) observes that the nature of masculinity and femininity, as revealed in the Bible, describes diverse responsibilities for men and women. Men and women are created to fulfil different roles concerning each other. The leadership roles placed on men and the supportive roles placed on women should not be seen as temporary cultural norms but as a permanent creation order. Role differences should not be attributed to the fall but as part of Eden's model before sin corrupted it (cf. Genesis 1:27;2:15-18). Role differences between men and women should be seen as a divine calling. In that regard, man's headship is a primary responsibility for Christ-like servant leadership, protection, and home provision. On the other hand, the wife's submissive role implies giving honour, affirming her husband's administration, and carrying it through. Man and woman are not created to be independent but interdependent in the divine arrangement.

Perspectives of Women in the Graeco- Roman World

In all ancient Mediterranean societies, women had limited legal and political rights. The status of a woman varies from one locality to another. For instance, Roman women enjoyed certain privileges and rights than their Jewish counterparts. As a general rule, women were subject to their fathers or husbands and were restricted to women's quarters. Hellenism brought changes to the cultures of the cities around the Mediterranean world. At least Greek and Roman Women of the upper classes had access to leisure and had the opportunity to hold public offices, own property, and run households (Koester, 1995: 62). To understand

the peculiar nature of each community's cultural perspectives on women's socio-religious roles, this writer examines the three dominant communities in the Mediterranean world.

The Jewish Women

The specific prayer of men reveals that women were subordinated in Jewish communities. Thus, a man prays, "Praise be to God that he has not created me a woman" (Tucker and Walter, 1987, 59). In the Jewish community, a girl child was given limited privileges for education. Their mothers trained the girls in the household arts, purity laws, and women's responsibilities. The man decides where and how to rear a child. Boys were withdrawn from their mother's tutelage from age seven and were led to the world of men. The diet of boys was richer than that of girls. Women were bound to household chores and farms (Kroeger, 2000: 1276).

Women were allowed to participate in the religious circle but were not encouraged. It is evident from the Talmud that women were exempted from the Jewish Law and certain prayers on specific occasions (Tucker and Walter, 1987: 61). Women cannot constitute the membership of any official congregation. The Mishna forbade women from carrying their babies outside on Sabbath days (Kroeger, 2000: 1279). Although inscriptions from ancient Synagogues indicate that some women held prominent roles in some synagogues, this was not a norm in the Jewish community. Women were not officially accorded the role of teachers or becoming disciples (Keener, 1993: 432).

Witherington (1984: 7-9) suggests that women were limited to their court in the Jerusalem Temple. Scholars are unsure when the practice of having unique galleries for women in the synagogues began. It is plausible that this existed in Trajan's time. Witherington concludes that, at least in theory, a woman's position and privileges concerning the Jewish cult during the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods differed little from their status and rights in Old Testament times. The separation of women and men in the Temple and synagogue was introduced after Old Testament times. The Old Testament's high regard for women's religious rights seems to have been preserved legally in rabbinic literature with notable exceptions. There were no official leadership roles that Jewish women could assume.

The Greek Women

The Greek women appeared to be most secluded among the women in the Mediterranean societies. At a time in Greek history, citizen-class women were not supposed to show their faces outside. The Greek woman was thought to have less virtue than man and was seen to lack moral conscience. Because women were not trustworthy, they were forced to remain indoors. In some areas, women were prohibited from sleeping, eating, or engaging in discourse with men, especially in public. This attitude resulted in bitterness and depression among Greek women (Kroeger, 2000: 1276-77).

Women in the traditional Greek religion were denied legitimate participation in certain religious rites like blood sacrifice, consulting oracles, and entrance to particular temples. As a result, women worship different gods from men. Certain cults allowed women leadership. By the first century CE, the Temple of Artemis of Ephesus had a high priestess, no longer a high priest (Kroeger, 2000: 1279).

The Roman Women

In the Roman world, women were charged with supervising domestic work, caring for children and other household members, and attending to their husbands' wishes. In contrast,

men worked in the public sector. They participated in intellectual and political discourse with other men (Osiek and Pouya, 2010: 47). A Roman woman enjoyed far greater freedom than a Greek woman. She was accorded deep respect and enjoyed a higher position in society. Wives could appear with their husbands in the theatre and at dinner parties (Koester, 1995: 63).

Women with higher social status were often actively engaged at many levels of society. Many elite women were benefactors, property owners, builders, and patrons. A woman's status and authority increased when she became a mother, especially when she gave birth to sons. Women were prohibited from directly participating in politics. Nevertheless, she could support her husband in political events or exercise political power through their sons (Osiek and Pouya, 2010: 47). Women were attached to a male protector or tutor, who could be either their father or husband for life irrespective of their social status, (Kroeger, 2000: 1277).

Roman women's most significant advantages were available in religious and cultic activities. Women were allowed to assume priesthood positions in the cult of Emperors and some other cults. Several women were given the title of high priest. Newer cults gave women more leadership opportunities alongside men than the older state cults (Meeks, 1983:25). Although Kroeger (2000) observes that the appointment in some positions had a political undertone, positions were given to women from influential families.

Paul's Views on Women Ministries in Church

Paul's descriptions of women in his epistles indicate a new realm of ministry activity that was denied to the typical Jewish woman. Many women mentioned in the Pauline Epistles seem to have enjoyed economic and social independence. Women in Pauline's circle appear to be leaders of households, business owners, and wealthy people who travelled with their slaves and helpers, many of whom Paul led to Christ. Some women took on the same roles as men in the congregation. Some exercised functions like public praying and prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:4-5). Some served in positions of leadership in the Pauline congregations. Women like Lydia (Acts 16:14, 40), Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3; Romans 16:3-4; 1 Corinthians 16:19), Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), the mother of Rufus (Romans 16:13) and Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11) were fellow workers with Paul. They are described as evangelists and teachers, and some hosted churches in their homes. The level of leadership function of women in Christian congregations is not known. This may result from no fixed or formal offices at that time (Jeffers, 1999: 252).

Pauline's letters in the New Testament have been a battleground upon which the issues of women's roles in the Church have been contested (Byrne 1988: 13). Those who argue for women's involvement in church leadership get the basis of their arguments in Pauline epistles. On the other hand, those who campaign against women's inclusion in church ministry also cited Paul to support their claims. Presenting the exegesis of the passages in Pauline's epistles that addressed women's roles in the Church is beyond this paper's scope. However, to discover Paul's perspective of women's leadership roles, this writer highlights some controversial passages regarding women's ministry in Paul's Epistles and adopts some scholars' exegetical conclusions, which support this writer's egalitarian view.

The significant contestants in women's ministry roles in the Church are the proponents of the complementarian view and the egalitarian view. The complementarian believes God created males and females to serve different duties in the Church and at home. They focus on women's place and play down women's functions. They teach that women's highest calling is to be wives and mothers. Conversely, the egalitarian holds that men and women have equal access to God and are given unique abilities to function in various church ministries (Wilhelmsson, nd: 15).

Craig (2006: 283) believes that "Paul discerned no tension between preserving certain elements of his patriarchal culture and adopting counter-cultural, liberationist strands of thought within that larger framework." Banks (1980, 122) posits that Paul sees women and men as contributors to the order and well-being of the Christian community. To Paul, men and women have freedom at several levels and restrictions on their roles in church life.

Paul's position on women's roles was probably influenced by the tradition of Jesus and his relationship with women against the culture of his times. Paul might have perhaps come in contact with the women who followed Jesus. He also knew and cherished the acts of God in the Old Testament with their strong emphasis on the ministry of women (Kroeger, 1992: 23).

Paul's view on women's ministry roles stemmed from his teaching on the unity of believers in Christ in Galatians 3:28. Here, Paul reminds his readers that all believers, regardless of race, class, or gender, possess great benefits from the union with Christ. Paul intends the unity of Jews and Gentiles, freeborn and slaves, and male and female. Grenz (1995: 100) admits that scholars agree on the central point of Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 but disagree on his intent. They believe that of a truth, in Christ, all believers enjoy equal status before God, but the advent of salvation has not eliminated all human distinctions. They claim that even when we become believers, we retain our distinctive racial and social standing and continue to exist as male and female. To this writer, the male and female distinction is, in essence, not in function.

The complementarians limit Paul's declaration of equality in Christ to the fundamental equality of our position before God and not social equality between males and females. Conversely, the egalitarians argue that this text must be read in the light of Paul's main interest, which is the reconciliation of divisions among humans by participation in a common reconciliation with God. Thus the egalitarians see Galatians 3:28 as the foundation for new social order and believe that the equality of salvation position in Christ must receive appropriate outworking in the practice of the Church and society (Grenz, 1995: 101-105). If the Jews and Gentiles, freeborn and slave, have equal standing before God and can partake in leadership roles in the Church, the same principle should apply to men and women.

Paul's attitude towards women is documented in Romans 16, and other passages show that men and women are equal recipients of God's grace of salvation. In the Scripture, it is evident that men and women played vital roles in salvation history. Several women were mentioned and commended in Romans 16. Among them are Phoebe, Prisca, a diminutive form of Priscilla, Andronicus, and Junia. The terminologies Paul used to describe them speak volumes about Paul's view of their ministry efforts.

For instance, Phoebe was addressed as a servant, minister, and helper of many. Phoebe was probably a prominent member of the early Church. For Paul to have trusted her enough to send the Romans' epistle through her, as some scholars believe, shows she was a stakeholder among believers (Baldock, 2006: 197). Keener (1993: 432) observes that the terms *diakonos* (servant, minister) and *prostatis* (helper) suggest that as a *diakonos*, Phoebe was a person with administrative responsibility in the Church. As a *prostatis* she was perhaps a house owner and a woman in the position of honour. The term *prostatis* usually referred to a patron in antiquity.

Paul acknowledges in 1 Corinthians 1:11 that a delegation led by a woman identified as Chloe brought a report from the Corinthian Church. One can infer from here that it is probable that this woman held a position of influence in the Church at Corinth (Wilhelmsson nd: 90). Also, in 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, Paul presents his argument on the equality of men and women. He affirms that the wife has equal conjugal rights as her husband; the husband should be sensitive to her needs and desires. There should be no denial despite the supposed spiritual purpose. However, they must come to a mutual agreement to keep their relationship

(Wilhelmsson, nd: 90). In the same vein, Grez (1995: 106) observes that Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 7:34-35 elevates the service of single persons in Church and thereby opens the way for women to assume roles in the Christian community other than wife and mother. Like men, women may remain single and wholly dedicated to serving God.

Wilhelmsson (nd: 90) notices that the complementarian refers to 1 Corinthians 11:8-12 to support their claim for female subordination. They assume that the 'order of creation,' to which Paul refers, emphasises man's leadership and authority over the woman. They believe that the order of creation establishes the hierarchical order of the male-female relationship. A close look at 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 appears to emphasise man's dependence on God and the interdependence of man and woman.

Keener (1992: 17) opines that Paul allowed women to minister in the congregation but counselled women to do away with whatever could bring distraction to men in worship. The cultural issue addressed in this passage is probably that women of higher wealth and status were decking themselves out, distracting men with their artificial beauty. Paul sided with the lower class, more conservative elements in the congregation for propriety and church unity. Grez (1995: 115) suggests a clue to discovering Paul's intention in the passage. Paul assumes that both men and women actively and vocally participate in public worship. Paul does not want to change the practice but merely put up regulations that will guide men and women in carrying out their duties in the Church, not misinforming people outside the Church.

Concerning the dichotomy of 1 Corinthians 14:34- 35, some scholars claim that Paul was advocating that women be silent. Keener (1993: 432) states two clear points for consideration to arrive at Paul's correct interpretation: Paul does not encourage total silence on women since, earlier in the same letter, he expects them to pray and prophesy publicly along with men (1 Corinthians 11:4-5). The context does not support the claim that a woman cannot teach the Bible.

This passage addressed women who asked misguided questions during teaching within the church service, thereby slowing down the service. Paul seeks to correct this error by urging husbands to take a more active interest in their wives' spiritual and intellectual maturity. Grez (1995: 124) posits that Paul was sensitive to the day's culture and advised women not to use church worship to ask questions that may result in chaos and counteract the day's cultural orientation. Paul is probably encouraging the men to assume responsibility for educating their illiterate wives. 1 Timothy 2:8-15 is the most controversial passage in Paul's letters concerning women's roles in church leadership. Paul said here explicitly that women should keep silent in the Church. Keener (1992:18) opines that Paul allowed women's teaching roles in the Church, but he addressed a particular problem in the Ephesian Church. Women were less educated than men. Paul wanted to prevent those susceptible to false teaching from being in leadership positions to forestall heresies rampant in the Church. Patterson (2005:187) refutes Keener's position. She believes 1 Timothy 2:8-15 provides clear and consistent boundaries for what women may and may not do in the Church. She posits that a woman teaching or ruling over men in the Church might bring dishonour to God's word. This position of Patterson represents the complementarian view of women's ministry roles in the Church. (See also Nicolaidis, A. (2016) on Assessing Tertullian on the Status of Women in the Third Century Church, and (2005) on The Role of Women in the Eastern Orthodox Church).

Grez (1995:127) gives a background to the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15. He suggests it is probable that certain women were attempting to gain improper authority over men in the Ephesian Church. It is also possible that some were teaching heresy, and Paul wanted to prevent them from using the Church for that purpose. Alternatively, the women in that congregation were more susceptible to false teaching due to their cultural background. All these are possibilities for discovering Paul's intention. This statement of Paul negates his

prior teachings on women's roles so that he might be addressing a peculiar problem in the congregation, and his instruction may not apply to all.

Considering Paul's teachings, Elwell and Yarbrough (2013) see Paul as a progressive man, a liberator of women, one who followed Jesus in a much higher place than was common in the socio-religious circles of his time (322). Cotter (1999: 354) avows that women's leadership in the first century's male-dominated society of the Mediterranean world might "represent a new counter-cultural movement inaugurated by Christian groups. It would appear that Paul provided women with an open avenue for their involvement and, unlike the androcentric organisations of his day, encouraged and praised women for their exercise of leadership in his communities."

Relevance of Paul's Approach to Women's Roles in Church in Africa

Although women's role in the Church is controversial, most especially the seeming command of silence in the Church in 1 Timothy 2:11-12, the Church should not be perturbed by this. Instead, we should be focused on clear passages to convince us about gender equality and encourage women to take their place in the task of populating God's kingdom.

Paul's concern is that each person should use their ethnic background, social status, or gender as the context through which God will be glorified and expand his kingdom. Gender distinction should not polarise or restrict the use of our God's given special abilities in Christian communities. In the same vein, Jesus' ministry reveals the mind of God to us. While on earth, he gave special recognition and attention to women regardless of the position the society placed them. The Church is doing great harm if it marginalises and restricts women. The following points could be deduced from Paul's approaches to women's ministry roles:

Develop Cultural Sensitivity and Appreciation

In some communities, Paul's approach to women's ministry roles in the Church is counter-cultural. Nevertheless, Paul worked within the culture to maintain a balance between his days' Christian faith and cultural practices. The Church should be a leveller where everybody feels important and valuable to the best of their ability. Today's Church should not allow cultural bias and prejudice to blindfold her to the sound biblical teaching she stands to protect and promote.

Ensure Husband-Wife Relationship and Mutual development

As a way to resolve the problem of disorderliness in worship, Paul encouraged men to build cordial relationships with their wives that would engender mutual development both spiritually and intellectually. Since women in antiquity had limited access to education and spiritual formation, women were far behind men in social relationships, which may account for their misbehaviour in church worship. Men in contemporary churches should make it a duty to carry their wives along in their spiritual growth and social engagement.

Maintain Orderliness in Worship

Paul's seemingly controversial order restraining women's participation in church leadership originated from Paul's passion for ensuring orderliness in worship. This responsibility was not directed to women alone, but both genders contributed their quotas to ensure church programs' smooth running. A lackadaisical attitude to church activities should be discouraged. The attitudes of indiscipline prevalent in many churches today should be addressed.

Campaign for Gender Equality

Paul is known among the egalitarian advocates as a champion of women's emancipation. Gender issues should not be allowed to create an unnecessary dichotomy in the Church. If Jesus Christ could recognise and honour women, who were marginalised and reckoned as social outcasts in His days. In that case, there is no reason for discrimination against women holding leadership positions in church life. The Church should no longer allow gender inequality to reflect in its practices. As Paul did, the Church should always be an umpire and solution provider to cultural imbalances in society. Men and women are given equal access to salvation and spiritual gifts. Women are not less gifted than men. So, we are equally saved, gifted and called to God's service.

Provide Safeguard Against Heresies

Paul was conscious of the heretic teachings proliferating in his community. Paul's specific instructions and restrictions were geared towards safeguarding the young assembly of believers from falling victim to heresy. False teachings equally bedevil the contemporary Church. Strong emphasis should be placed on sound biblical teaching and doctrinal orientation. Any form of education that does not represent the Scripture's holistic teachings should be vehemently rejected regardless of how beautifully and convincingly presented. The Church cannot afford to condone mischievous behaviours and religious syncretism that is apparent in our churches.

Conclusion

This paper reveals that Paul adopted a progressive and transformational approach to address the age-long controversial issue of women's roles in the Church. The idea of relegating women to the background is alien to Paul. Sexual differences between males and females should not be interpreted to depict domination, subordination, and oppression. Since Paul's ministry is cross-cultural, his approach to women's ministry differs from location to location. In some areas, his approach is counter-cultural, and in others, it is conventional. The Church has many inferences from Paul's approach to women's roles. This writer recommends that pastors in churches and theological educators adopt Paul's position concerning women's ministry roles in the Church and make a concerted effort to inform and encourage women to take their place beyond cultural limitations.

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