

african art history sociological approach

The Sociological Lens on African Art History: Unpacking Meaning and Function

african art history sociological approach offers a powerful framework for understanding the complexities and nuances of artistic production across the diverse cultures of Africa. It moves beyond mere aesthetic appreciation, delving into the social structures, belief systems, power dynamics, and everyday lives that shaped and were shaped by African art. By examining art within its socio-cultural context, we can uncover the profound meanings embedded in objects, from ceremonial masks and sculpted figures to textiles and architectural forms. This approach illuminates how art served as a vital tool for communication, ritual, social cohesion, political expression, and the transmission of knowledge across generations. Our exploration will delve into the foundational principles of this interdisciplinary field, the key methodologies employed, and the insightful contributions it has made to our comprehension of African artistic heritage, revealing art not as isolated creations, but as integral threads in the fabric of society.

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The Sociological Foundations of African Art Studies

The emergence of a sociological approach to African art history was a significant departure from earlier, more formalist or ethnographic interpretations. For a long time, Western scholarship often viewed African

art through a lens of exoticism or as purely functional artifacts devoid of deeper societal meaning. Sociologists and art historians working within this interdisciplinary space recognized that art is never created in a vacuum. It is deeply interwoven with the social fabric of its origin. This perspective insists that to truly understand a piece of African art, one must understand the society that produced it. This means looking at the artists, the patrons, the audience, the specific occasions for which the art was made, and the broader cultural values it embodies.

Early anthropological studies, while often focused on cataloging objects, laid some groundwork by describing the cultural contexts in which art was used. However, it was the deliberate application of sociological theories that truly began to unpack the 'why' behind African artistic creations. Thinkers began to ask critical questions: Who made this? For whom? What was its purpose beyond its visible form? How did it contribute to social order or challenge existing norms? By posing these questions, the sociological approach shifted the focus from the object itself to the dynamic interplay between the object, its creator, and its society. It's like looking at a puzzle piece not just for its shape and color, but for how it fits into the larger picture of the entire puzzle, revealing the complete image.

Key Sociological Concepts Applied to African Art

Several core sociological concepts are indispensable when analyzing African art. The idea of art as a form of social communication is paramount; objects often served as visual languages, conveying status, lineage, or spiritual authority. The concept of social stratification is also crucial, as art frequently reflected and reinforced hierarchies within a society. For example, the regalia worn by chiefs or the elaborate carvings adorning royal palaces spoke volumes about power and social standing. Furthermore, understanding rituals and ceremonies is vital, as many art objects were integral to these practices, marking life transitions, appeasing deities, or ensuring communal well-being. The sociological perspective views these art forms as active participants in the social drama of life.

The concept of collective representations, as explored by Emile Durkheim, is particularly relevant. African art often embodies shared beliefs, myths, and values that bind a community together. A mask used in a certain rite, for instance, might not just represent a spirit but embody the community's collective understanding of that spirit and its role in the cosmic order. Similarly, the principles of social solidarity and conflict theory can be applied to understand how art might either reinforce group identity and cohesion or, in some cases, be used in contexts of dispute resolution or even social protest. It's about recognizing that art is a powerful social glue, or sometimes, a potent catalyst for change.

Methodologies in Sociological African Art History

Applying a sociological lens requires a diverse set of research methods, moving beyond the visual analysis of an artwork to engage with its lived reality. This often involves extensive fieldwork, spending time within the communities that produce and use the art. Ethnographic observation, where researchers immerse themselves in a culture to observe practices firsthand, is a cornerstone. This allows for direct interaction with artists, elders, and community members, gathering oral histories and understanding the practical application and significance of art objects in daily life and during specific events.

Historical research also plays a critical role. While oral traditions are vital, examining historical documents, travelers' accounts (though critically assessed for bias), colonial archives, and early photographic evidence can provide additional layers of context. This helps to trace the evolution of artistic styles, the impact of external influences, and the changing social functions of art over time. The combination of these qualitative methods allows for a rich, multi-faceted understanding that a purely aesthetic or formal analysis could never achieve. It's about piecing together a comprehensive narrative from various fragments of evidence.

Oral History and Community Engagement

Engaging with oral histories is perhaps one of the most crucial methodological tools for a sociological approach. Many African societies have rich traditions of passing down knowledge, history, and artistic lore through spoken word. This involves conducting interviews with elders, artists, and custodians of cultural knowledge. These individuals are the living archives, possessing intimate understanding of the meaning, creation processes, and social roles of artworks that are often lost in written records. Building trust and rapport within communities is essential for obtaining genuine and insightful information. This process is not simply about data collection; it's about respectful collaboration and acknowledging the authority of local knowledge keepers.

Community engagement also extends to participatory research, where members of the community are involved in the research process itself. This can involve co-interpreting artworks, contributing to the documentation of artistic traditions, or even in the preservation and exhibition of their own cultural heritage. Such approaches ensure that the narratives surrounding African art are told from within, challenging colonial perspectives and empowering communities to define their own artistic legacies. It's about ensuring the story is told by those who lived it, not just by outsiders looking in.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Contextual Analysis

The sociological approach thrives on interdisciplinary collaboration. Art historians working in this vein often partner with sociologists, anthropologists, historians, linguists, and even archaeologists. Each discipline brings a unique perspective and set of tools that can enrich the understanding of African art. For instance, a sociologist might analyze the impact of trade routes on artistic production, while an anthropologist could provide insights into kinship systems that influence the design and use of objects. This collaborative effort allows for a more holistic view, recognizing that art is influenced by and, in turn, influences multiple facets of social life.

Contextual analysis is the overarching principle that guides these methodologies. Every artifact is viewed not in isolation, but as part of a complex web of social, economic, political, and religious factors. This means considering the material culture associated with the art, the specific ceremonies it was used in, the power structures that commissioned or controlled its production, and the way it was perceived and interacted with by different groups within the society. By meticulously examining these connections, the sociological approach moves beyond simply describing what an object looks like to explaining what it does within its social environment.

Art as a Reflection of Social Structures

African art has historically served as a powerful mirror reflecting the intricate social structures of the societies that created it. The way a community organizes itself—its hierarchies, its kinship systems, its economic activities, and its political organization—is often vividly encoded in its artistic output. Consider, for example, the elaborate beadwork of certain Southern African cultures. The colors, patterns, and the specific motifs used can communicate complex information about a person's age, social status, marital status, and even their clan affiliation. These are not mere decorations; they are visual statements of social identity and position.

In many West African societies, the hierarchical nature of leadership and authority was often materialized through art. The intricate carvings found on stools, staffs, or thrones belonging to chiefs and elders were not just symbols of office; they were active agents in asserting and maintaining that authority. The detailed iconography could represent ancestral lineage, military prowess, or spiritual mandate, all of which were crucial components of a ruler's legitimacy. This artistic language reinforced the social order, making abstract concepts of power and status tangible and visible to all members of the community.

Kinship, Lineage, and Ancestor Veneration

Kinship systems, which are fundamental to the organization of many African societies, are frequently expressed and reinforced through art. Objects associated with marriage, childbirth, or initiation rites often carry symbolic meanings related to family ties and ancestral connections. For example, fertility figures, found in various forms across the continent, were not just representations of potential offspring but also served as focal points for prayers and rituals aimed at ensuring the continuity of lineage and the well-being of the family. The importance of respecting and honoring ancestors is also a pervasive theme, with art playing a crucial role in mediating the relationship between the living and the departed.

Ancestor figures, often carved with great skill and imbued with spiritual significance, served as conduits to the spiritual realm. They were consulted for guidance, appeased to ensure good fortune, and honored to maintain social harmony. The creation and maintenance of these figures were often the responsibility of specific family lines or lineage groups, further solidifying social structures and responsibilities. The materials used, the artistic style, and the placement of these objects all communicated important aspects of kinship and the enduring influence of ancestors within the community. It's a way of keeping the past alive and actively present in the lives of the living.

Economic Systems and Artistic Production

The economic underpinnings of a society invariably shape its artistic production. The availability of materials, the division of labor, and the mechanisms of trade all influence what is made, how it is made, and by whom. In societies where art was a specialized craft, certain individuals or guilds would develop particular skills, often passed down through generations. The patronage system, where wealthy individuals or institutions commissioned artworks, also played a significant role in directing artistic output and shaping aesthetic preferences. The economic value and social prestige attached to certain artworks could also be a reflection of broader economic realities.

Furthermore, art objects themselves could sometimes function as a form of currency or wealth. Certain prestige items, such as elaborately woven cloths or intricately crafted metalwork, might have been used in transactions, bride price negotiations, or as markers of accumulated wealth. This economic function is inseparable from their symbolic and social meanings, demonstrating the complex interplay between art and the material realities of life. Understanding these connections helps us see art not just as beautiful objects, but as vital components of an integrated social and economic system.

Art and Ritual: The Sociological Significance of Ceremonial Objects

Ceremonial objects lie at the very heart of understanding African art from a sociological perspective. These are not objects of mere decoration or private contemplation; they are active participants in the communal life of a society, essential tools for navigating the sacred and the profane. Rituals, whether for life cycle events like births, marriages, and funerals, or for seasonal cycles, agricultural success, or appeasing spirits, often require specific art forms to be performed effectively. The creation and use of these objects are deeply embedded in shared beliefs and social obligations.

Consider the transformative power of masks in many African societies. A mask is rarely just a static object to be admired. When worn in a ritual context, by a trained performer who embodies the spirit or character it represents, it becomes a dynamic force. The mask, the costume, the accompanying music, and the dance all coalesce to create a powerful sensory experience that can instruct, heal, entertain, and reinforce social norms. The sociological significance lies in how these performances enact and reaffirm the community's understanding of the cosmos, the spiritual realm, and their place within it.

Masks and Performance in Social Cohesion

Masks and the performances associated with them play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and order. In many communities, secret societies or age-grade associations were responsible for the creation and use of masks, and participation in these groups was integral to social integration. The masks often represented ancestral spirits, powerful deities, or even idealized social figures, and their appearances during rituals served to educate younger generations about moral codes, social responsibilities, and cultural traditions. The awe and respect they commanded helped to reinforce communal values and collective identity.

Furthermore, masked performances could also serve as mechanisms for social control and critique. While often reinforcing established norms, certain masks and performances might have also provided a sanctioned space for addressing social anxieties, critiquing undesirable behavior, or even temporarily inverting social hierarchies. This complex interplay of reinforcement and subtle challenge highlights the dynamic role of art in the ongoing negotiation of social life. It's a way for the community to collectively process its challenges and reaffirm its bonds.

Sacred Objects and Spiritual Authority

Many African art objects are imbued with sacred power and are central to the exercise of spiritual authority. Objects used by diviners, healers, or religious leaders often possess unique designs and are treated with great reverence. These items are not simply tools; they are seen as having agency and the capacity to connect with the spiritual world. For example, a diviner's bowl might be covered in intricate carvings that represent various spirits or forces, and the way objects are arranged within it or the patterns they form when thrown are interpreted as messages from the divine. The authority of the diviner is thus intrinsically linked to the sacred nature and symbolic language of these art objects.

The creation of such sacred objects often involved specialized knowledge and meticulous ritual processes. The artist was not merely a craftsman but often a spiritual practitioner themselves, capable of imbuing the object with the necessary power. The materials used, such as specific woods, animal parts, or minerals, also held symbolic significance and were believed to contribute to the object's efficacy. This deep integration of art, spirituality, and social roles underscores the profound importance of these objects in maintaining the cosmological order and the social fabric of African societies.

Power, Politics, and Patronage in African Art

Power, in its various forms—political, economic, and spiritual—has always been a significant driver of artistic production and dissemination in Africa. Art has frequently been employed as a tool to legitimize, consolidate, and express power. Royal courts, for instance, were often centers of artistic patronage, commissioning elaborate works that served to project the ruler's authority, wealth, and divine right to rule. These artworks were not just beautiful displays; they were potent instruments of propaganda and statecraft, visually communicating the power and prestige of the ruling elite to both internal and external audiences.

The use of specific symbols, motifs, and materials in court art was highly deliberate. For example, the adoption of certain colors, animal imagery, or geometric patterns could signify allegiance to particular dynasties or invoke ancestral spirits who legitimized the ruler's claim to power. The scale and grandeur of royal commissions, such as monumental sculptures or intricately decorated palaces, were also designed to impress and overwhelm, visually reinforcing the ruler's supreme position within society. This artistic display was an integral part of the political landscape.

Royal Regalia and Symbols of Office

Royal regalia are perhaps the most potent examples of art functioning to express political power. Crowns, scepters, elaborate garments, and ceremonial weapons worn by monarchs and their officials were not merely adornments but symbolic signifiers of their authority and status. Each element of the regalia would carry specific meanings, often related to historical events, military victories, or spiritual protection. For instance, a particular sword might represent the power to dispense justice, while a specific beaded necklace could symbolize a lineage or a covenant with ancestral spirits.

The craftsmanship involved in creating these regalia was often of the highest order, reflecting the wealth and resources commanded by the ruler. The materials used, such as gold, ivory, or precious stones, further underscored the ruler's economic power and ability to command luxury goods. By adorning themselves with these symbolic objects, rulers visually asserted their dominion and their right to govern, reinforcing the social and political hierarchy within the kingdom. It was a visual performance of power that was essential for maintaining order.

The Role of Patrons in Artistic Direction

Patronage has always played a pivotal role in shaping the direction of artistic creation in Africa. Whether the patron was a powerful chief, a wealthy merchant, a religious leader, or a community as a whole, their desires, beliefs, and social agendas often influenced the subject matter, style, and materials of the artworks produced. In many cases, artists were beholden to their patrons, and their creative output was a direct response to the demands and expectations placed upon them. This relationship was not necessarily one of oppression, but rather a dynamic collaboration where the artist's skill was employed to serve the patron's social or political objectives.

Understanding the patron is therefore crucial to understanding the artwork. Who commissioned this piece? What was their motivation? How did their social standing or political aspirations influence the final creation? By answering these questions, we gain insight into the social function and intended audience of the art. This also sheds light on the artist's position within society – were they revered specialists, respected craftspeople, or somewhat anonymous laborers fulfilling a commission? The sociological approach seeks to unravel these complex power dynamics inherent in the patron-artist relationship.

Gender and Identity in African Artistic Expression

Gender roles and the construction of identity have always been deeply intertwined with artistic expression across the African continent. Art has been a powerful medium for both reinforcing and sometimes challenging societal expectations related to gender. From the types of art produced by men and women to the symbolism embedded within specific objects, gender often plays a significant role in how art is created, used, and interpreted. For instance, in many societies, certain crafts were traditionally the domain of women, such as pottery, weaving, or basketry, while others, like metalworking or carving, might have been primarily undertaken by men.

These divisions were not arbitrary; they often reflected broader societal understandings of gendered labor, spiritual roles, and social responsibilities. The aesthetic qualities of women's arts might also differ, perhaps emphasizing patterns related to fertility, domesticity, or communal well-being. Conversely, men's art might focus on themes of warfare, hunting, or political leadership. However, it's crucial to avoid rigid generalizations, as there was considerable variation across different cultures and historical periods. The sociological approach seeks to understand these nuances and the specific ways gender shaped artistic practices and meanings.

Women's Contributions to African Art

The artistic contributions of women across Africa are immense, though they have historically been underrepresented in scholarly discourse. Women have been central to the creation of many everyday and ceremonial objects, including textiles, pottery, beadwork, and body adornment. These art forms are often imbued with profound cultural significance, communicating complex ideas about family, community, spirituality, and social status. For example, the intricate patterns woven into textiles by women often carry proverbs, historical narratives, or moral teachings that are essential for cultural transmission.

Beyond the creation of tangible objects, women have also played vital roles in the performance arts, such as singing, dancing, and storytelling, all of which are intrinsically artistic. Their roles in ritual, healing, and the transmission of cultural knowledge further highlight their deep engagement with the artistic life of their communities. Recognizing and valuing women's artistic contributions is essential for a comprehensive and equitable understanding of African art history. It's about ensuring that all voices are heard and all contributions are acknowledged.

Art and the Construction of Masculinity and Femininity

Art serves as a crucial arena for the negotiation and performance of masculinity and femininity. Certain objects or styles might be associated with the ideals of strong, protective masculinity, while others might be linked to nurturing, fertile femininity. For example, the weaponry or shields crafted by men could symbolize their role as protectors of the community, while sculptures representing pregnant women or nursing mothers would embody ideals of fertility and maternal care. These artistic representations are not mere reflections of innate qualities but are actively involved in shaping and reinforcing cultural understandings of gender roles.

Moreover, initiation rites, which are often rich in artistic and ritualistic elements, play a significant role in transitioning individuals into adulthood and shaping their understanding of their gendered roles and responsibilities within society. The art associated with these ceremonies often visually articulates the expected behaviors, social duties, and identities of both young men and women as they enter the next phase of their lives. It's a powerful visual education in how to be a man or a woman within a particular cultural context.

The Role of African Art in Social Change and Resistance

While often associated with tradition and continuity, African art has also been a dynamic force for social change and resistance throughout history. Artworks have been employed to critique oppressive systems, challenge colonial authority, and express aspirations for independence and self-determination. During periods of colonization, for instance, art could serve as a subtle but powerful means of preserving cultural identity and resisting assimilation. Artistic styles might be adapted to incorporate new materials or influences, but the underlying symbolic language and cultural meanings would be retained, acting as a form of cultural defiance.

Post-colonial art has also played a crucial role in grappling with the legacies of colonialism, exploring themes of identity, displacement, and the ongoing quest for cultural authenticity. Artists have used their work to engage with complex issues of nation-building, social justice, and the redefinition of African identities in a globalized world. The sociological approach helps us to understand how these artistic expressions are not just aesthetic statements but are active interventions in the social and political landscape, contributing to ongoing dialogues and movements for change.

Art as a Tool of Resistance Against Colonialism

During the colonial era, African art became a significant site of resistance. While overt political action might have been suppressed, artists could use their work to subtly undermine colonial narratives, preserve indigenous cultural practices, and foster a sense of shared identity among subjugated populations. This could manifest in various ways, such as the continued production of traditional religious or ceremonial art, which upheld pre-colonial belief systems and social structures, or the creation of new artworks that incorporated coded critiques of colonial rule. For example, a carving might depict a colonial administrator in an unflattering light, or a textile pattern might allude to traditional forms of governance that were being suppressed.

The preservation of artistic traditions was itself an act of resistance, asserting the enduring value and dignity of African cultures in the face of attempts at cultural erasure. Furthermore, art could serve as a rallying point for nationalist movements, providing visual symbols and narratives that inspired solidarity and a shared sense of purpose. The ability of art to transcend language barriers and communicate powerful emotional and symbolic messages made it an invaluable tool in the struggle for liberation. It offered a way for people to connect with their heritage and envision a future free from oppression.

Contemporary African Art and Social Commentary

In contemporary Africa, art continues to be a vibrant and crucial vehicle for social commentary and critique. Artists are engaging with a wide range of pressing issues, including globalization, urbanization, political corruption, environmental degradation, and the complexities of post-colonial identity. Through painting, sculpture, installation, performance, and digital media, contemporary artists are challenging societal norms, provoking dialogue, and advocating for change. Their works often reflect the realities of modern African life, blending traditional aesthetics with global influences to create powerful and thought-provoking statements.

The sociological approach is vital for understanding this contemporary artistic landscape. By examining the social, political, and economic contexts in which these artists are working, we can better appreciate the messages they are conveying and the impact their art is having. Contemporary African art is not just about aesthetics; it is deeply engaged with the pressing social and political realities of the continent, offering critical perspectives and imaginative visions for the future. It's about art actively participating in the ongoing conversation about Africa's present and its future.

Challenges and Future Directions in Sociological African Art History

Despite its invaluable contributions, the sociological approach to African art history faces ongoing challenges. One significant hurdle is the scarcity of comprehensive historical documentation for many societies, particularly those that relied heavily on oral traditions. This can make it difficult to trace the evolution of artistic practices or to fully understand the social contexts of older artworks. Furthermore, the legacy of colonial scholarship continues to cast a long shadow, with many existing collections housed in Western museums, often divorced from their original cultural contexts and interpretations. Reclaiming these narratives and re-contextualizing these objects remains a crucial task.

Another challenge lies in avoiding essentialism or monolithic interpretations of "African art." Africa is a continent of immense diversity, and applying broad sociological theories without acknowledging these specific cultural variations can lead to inaccurate or oversimplified conclusions. Future directions will likely involve even greater emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, the integration of digital humanities methodologies for analyzing vast datasets, and a continued commitment to decolonizing art historical narratives by centering the voices and perspectives of African artists and communities themselves.

Decolonizing Art Histories and Reclaiming Narratives

A critical aspect of future directions involves actively working to decolonize African art histories. This means questioning and dismantling the colonial gaze that has historically shaped how African art has been viewed and interpreted, often through a lens of primitivism or exoticism. It involves critically examining existing archives, identifying and addressing biases in Western scholarship, and actively seeking out and amplifying marginalized voices. The focus must shift from viewing African art as a mere object of study by outsiders to understanding it as a vital expression of African cultures, created by Africans for Africans, with its own rich intellectual and social traditions.

Reclaiming narratives involves empowering African scholars, artists, and communities to tell their own stories. This includes supporting the development of African art historical institutions, fostering local research initiatives, and ensuring that the interpretation and presentation of African art are grounded in the knowledge systems and cultural contexts of the societies that produced them. The goal is to move towards a more equitable and nuanced understanding of African artistic heritage, one that celebrates its complexity, dynamism, and profound humanistic value. It's about telling the story from the inside out.

Integrating New Methodologies and Global Perspectives

The future of sociological African art history also lies in embracing new methodologies and a broader global perspective. The digital revolution offers unprecedented opportunities for research, from creating virtual archives and databases to using computational tools for stylistic analysis and tracing networks of exchange. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can help visualize trade routes and settlement patterns that influenced art production, while digital storytelling can bring oral histories and artistic performances to life. Furthermore, an increasing engagement with global art historical discourse allows for a richer understanding of how African art has influenced and been influenced by artistic traditions worldwide.

The globalization of the art market and the increasing visibility of contemporary African artists on the international stage also present new avenues for research. Examining the reception of African art in global contexts, the challenges artists face in navigating international biennials and galleries, and the ways in which their work contributes to global conversations about identity, culture, and social issues are all fertile grounds for sociological inquiry. By integrating these new approaches, African art history can continue to evolve, offering ever more insightful and relevant interpretations of the continent's rich and enduring artistic legacy.

FAQ

Q: What is the main goal of a sociological approach to African art history?

A: The main goal of a sociological approach to African art history is to understand African art not just as aesthetic objects, but as integral parts of the societies that created and used them. It seeks to uncover the social structures, belief systems, power dynamics, and everyday lives that shaped artistic production and to reveal how art functioned within those contexts to communicate meaning, maintain social order, express identity, and facilitate cultural practices.

Q: How does a sociological approach differ from a formalist approach to African art?

A: A formalist approach focuses primarily on the visual elements of an artwork, such as line, color, composition, and style, independent of its cultural context. In contrast, a sociological approach emphasizes the social and cultural context, examining how the artwork relates to the society, its functions, its creators, its audience, and its role in social life.

Q: What are some key sociological concepts used in studying African art?

A: Key sociological concepts include social structures, kinship systems, power dynamics, ritual and ceremony, social cohesion, collective representations, gender roles, identity formation, and the function of art as a form of social communication and symbolic expression.

Q: Why is oral history so important for a sociological understanding of African art?

A: Oral history is crucial because many African societies have rich traditions of transmitting knowledge, history, and artistic lore through spoken word. Elders and community members hold intimate understanding of the meanings, creation processes, and social roles of art objects that might not be recorded in written documents, offering vital insights into the art's lived reality.

Q: How did art function as a tool of resistance during the colonial era in Africa?

A: During colonialism, art served as a form of resistance by preserving indigenous cultural identity, subtly critiquing colonial rule through coded symbolism, and fostering a sense of shared identity among oppressed populations. It maintained pre-colonial belief systems and provided visual inspiration for nationalist movements.

Q: What role does gender play in the sociological study of African art?

A: Gender plays a significant role by examining how societal expectations of masculinity and femininity influenced the types of art produced, the materials used, the subject matter, and the artistic roles of men and women. It helps understand how art reinforced or challenged gender norms and how women's often underrecognized artistic contributions shaped cultural life.

Q: What are some challenges faced by sociologists studying African art history?

A: Challenges include the scarcity of historical documentation, the legacy of colonial biases in Western scholarship and museum collections, the need to avoid generalizations about the vast diversity of African cultures, and the ongoing effort to decolonize art historical narratives and reclaim interpretations from African perspectives.

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