

# The Dual Colonial Heritage of Cameroon: A Roadblock to Viable National Education Reform

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## Abstract

Educational reform on a national scale often presents complexities due to the myriad perspectives of the stakeholders involved. Particularly in multicultural and multilingual societies, the distinct frames of reference can significantly impede compromise. One challenge is the change agents' occasional oversight of local nuances. In Cameroon, attempts at reform, especially at primary and secondary education levels, have been notably contentious since the country's independence from France and Britain in 1960. The subsequent reunification of British Southern Cameroon and French Eastern Cameroon established an imperfect union, birthing two education and legal systems with distinct characteristics, difficult to harmonize. A comprehensive review of the literature indicates that resistance to educational reform is more deeply rooted in the dual colonial legacy than the vast diversity of ethnicities and languages. Notably, in 1960, Cameroon comprised over 279 ethnic groups and languages within a population of less than six million. In contemporary times, for a now-divided Cameroon, home to approximately twenty-four million residents, successful educational reform that addresses modern-day needs can only materialize if both decision-makers and citizens prioritize a Cameroonian identity over their Francophone or Anglophone affiliations. This shift is crucial given the prevailing sociopolitical challenges that not only complicate educational harmonization but also impede national integration and unity.

**Keywords:** Education reform, Harmonization, Multiculturalism, Resistance, Change, Colonialism, Francophone, Anglophone

## 1. Introduction

European colonizers' influence in African nations is multifaceted. While they primarily perceived themselves as beneficial forces, they significantly reshaped the societal fabric of these countries (Lee & Shultz, 2017). Their actions, albeit deemed presumptuous, involved redrawing territories with scant regard for indigenous tribal boundaries, resulting in the displacement of families and imposition of European languages, educational paradigms, and legal systems. By the independence era of the 1950s and 60s, many Africans, even from identical ethnic backgrounds, tended to associate more profoundly with their colonizers' language than with their native tongues, leading to designations such as Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone, and Hispanic, depending on the respective colonizer (Lee & Shultz, 2017).

Distinct from other African countries, Cameroon's post-colonial landscape in 1960 was characterized by an absence of a unified language or educational system. Instead, two distinct subsystems emerged, with East Cameroon favoring the French model and West Cameroon leaning towards the British model. This bifurcation was a direct consequence of the post-World War I division of the country between Britain and France after Germany's defeat. The subsequent 1961 reunification of these regions precipitated complexities in the educational and legal realms, stemming from a strong inclination on both sides to uphold their respective colonial legacies. Such inclinations hinted at potential discord in the union. The integration of these disparate educational systems became a herculean challenge post-independence, not merely due to the intrinsic disparities but also due to their potential to exacerbate Cameroon's political intricacies (Fonkeng, 2007).

This overwhelming political and educational challenge was palpably articulated by Cameroon's first president post-independence, Mr. Ahmadou Ahidjo. In a 1965 address, just five years subsequent to reunification, he elucidated his frustrations and accentuated the pressing necessity to harmonize Cameroon's educational structures:

“It is impossible for the children of one and the same country to be educated under different systems. We do not believe that language barrier is sufficient enough to prevent the harmonization of syllabuses and structures. We have already expressed our beliefs that harmonization is not intended to ensure the domination of one linguistic group by another but ... to gradually help to create an original culture, which retains what is valuable from foreign cultures and adds what is valuable of our own.”  
(Fonkeng, 2007, *p.* 170).

Despite numerous endeavors by successive Cameroonian leaderships towards reform and harmonization, Cameroon's primary and secondary education systems remain bifurcated as Francophone and Anglophone systems. On a brighter note, higher education reform and harmonization were finally realized in 2007, driven by Central African countries' adoption of the Bologna Process model (Mngo, 2011). However, it is premature to declare full harmonization. Significant disparities persist between the credit and certification systems of anglophone and francophone universities. Anglo-Saxon universities in Cameroon have predominantly adhered to their familiar credit system rather than transitioning fully to the

CEMAC Credit System, as advocated by the Bologna model's Bachelor, Masters, and Doctorate (BMD) reforms.

Resistance to educational harmonization has been robust from both sides. Still, it is discernibly stronger from anglophone stakeholders, stemming from perceptions of inequitable representation during negotiations. This sense of marginalization exacerbates the nation's polarization, with many viewing the government as apathetic or even ineffective in the midst of political and social unrest. Such unrest is further fueled by the minority anglophone population's apprehensions that their legal and educational heritage is under siege. The prevailing discord within Cameroon's political landscape is significantly influenced by this minority's perception that the state is covertly endeavoring to overlay anglophone educational and legal practices with those of the francophone through subtle harmonization strategies. Recent governmental policies, like appointing predominantly French-speaking educators and judges to anglophone institutions and courts, are perceived as an assimilative maneuver reminiscent of the French colonial direct rule strategy in Africa (Lee & Shultz, 2017).

### *1.1 Purpose of the Study*

This review study aims to delineate the primary causes of the educational harmonization quandary in Cameroon, proffering potential remedies for this enduring issue in a nation polarized by profound socio-cultural and political variances, which largely trace back to its colonial past. Furthermore, the study aims to investigate the implications of this resistance for national integration, unity, and the overall effectiveness of the education sector in contemporary Cameroon.

### *1.2 Problem Statement*

The problem addressed in this study is the formidable challenge of implementing successful educational reform in Cameroon, a nation characterized by a complex history of dual colonial legacies, linguistic diversity, and multiculturalism. The study seeks to understand the factors that hinder educational reform efforts, with a particular focus on how the legacy of French and British colonialism, alongside the multitude of ethnic groups and languages, contributes to resistance against harmonizing the education system.

In complex multicultural contexts, understanding individuals' cultural perspectives and socio-cultural affiliations becomes crucial for the successful implementation of educational reforms. Politics, often misconstrued as inherently negative, plays a pivotal role in this process (Lientz, 2004). As Clark (1983) asserts, bicultural educational environments often encounter challenges stemming from distinct cultural differences, each rooted in its unique socio-historical backdrop. While educational systems may exhibit superficial similarities across different cultures, their foundational philosophies and objectives might vary significantly (Doh, 2007). This dichotomy can lead to sustained political discord, where even minor differences can result in prolonged standoffs, especially in the absence of a willingness to negotiate. Such is the case in Cameroon, where attempts to unify the two prevailing higher education systems frequently encounter obstacles due to socio-cultural, political, and economic differences.

Change advocates, from politicians to academic stakeholders, need to effectively navigate the political terrain, capitalizing on its dynamics to foster constructive change (Lientz, 2004; Fullan, 2007). Invariably, every reform proposal will be interpreted through a political lens, particularly when the proposals come from rival factions. Thus, for any meaningful educational reform in Cameroon, it's paramount that leaders gain a deep understanding of the nation's distinct political environment and factor in stakeholders' political preferences in harmonization efforts.

This research, based on the prevailing literature, posits that a nuanced political comprehension of Cameroon's milieu, coupled with well-structured reform plans, could offer a solution to the ongoing harmonization challenge (Bache & Taylor, 2003; Lientz, 2004). Within this framework, "harmonization" can imply either merging the two systems or adopting one as the national archetype. Both approaches demand compromises. However, historical records indicate a consistent reluctance from both sides to make such concessions. A more balanced compromise could have been within reach if political considerations associated with the resistance to educational reforms had been addressed through inclusive dialogues. Alas, after Cameroon's reunification in 1961, most reform initiatives lacked broad-based consultation and negotiation, leading to predictable resistance. Both dominant groups, the Anglophone and Francophone communities, could sense potential hidden agendas, feeling that their socio-political and cultural priorities might be overlooked.

## **2. Research Questions**

The study is guided by the ensuing questions:

- 1) How much resistance to reform can be ascribed to Cameroon's dual colonial heritage?
- 2) What potential solutions can bridge this divide?

### *2.1 Hypothesis*

The success of educational reform in Cameroon, particularly in the context of the dual colonial legacy and linguistic diversity, will depend on the extent to which decision-makers and citizens prioritize a unified Cameroonian identity over their Francophone or Anglophone affiliations.

## **3. Methodology**

This review study on educational reform in Cameroon employed a comprehensive qualitative research approach to gather, read, and analyze in-depth information reflecting the diverse perspectives and experiences concerning education in the country. This method was crucial for understanding the intricate sociopolitical and historical context of educational reform within Cameroon's multifaceted multicultural and multilingual society.

- 1) Literature Collection: A systematic approach was utilized to collect existing literature. This included academic articles, historical documents, government reports, policy papers, and books, sourced from academic databases, government archives, and reputable online repositories. Special attention was given to materials that provided historical perspectives,

policy analyses, and sociocultural insights into Cameroon's education system.

- 2) **Media Analysis:** To gauge public discourse and opinions about educational reform, a comprehensive analysis of various media sources was conducted. This encompassed national newspapers, social media platforms, and educational broadcasts. The media content was carefully selected to represent a range of views, including those from both Anglophone and Francophone communities, as well as urban and rural perspectives.
- 3) **Comparative Approach:** The study also employed a comparative approach, examining differences and similarities in educational challenges and reform efforts between the Anglophone and Francophone regions. This was done to better understand the unique contexts of each system and the implications for national educational reform.
- 4) **Interdisciplinary Insights:** Insights from various disciplines, including education, sociology, history, and political science, were integrated into the analysis to provide a multidimensional understanding of the challenges and opportunities in Cameroon's educational reform.
- 5) **Ethical Considerations:** Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, particularly in ensuring the confidentiality and respectful representation of the diverse opinions and perspectives analyzed in the study.

Through this methodological approach, the study aimed to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of educational reform in Cameroon, considering the country's complex colonial history, linguistic diversity, and current sociopolitical landscape.

#### **4. Literature Review: Study Background**

To understand the complexities of the history of education reform and harmonization in Cameroon requires an appreciation of its multifaceted colonial legacy, which has exerted profound social, political, judicial, economic, and educational influences on the nation's institutional fabric.

Cameroon's colonial journey commenced with its annexation by Germany in 1884. Although the British initiated missions in the region from 1945, they acknowledged German sovereignty over the territory then termed "Kamerun." Under German dominion, which persisted until World War I, the 1910 Education Law mandated German as the instructional language in all primary and secondary schools. This policy aimed to propagate German culture and administrative principles, conditioning funding on adherence. By 1914, there were an estimated 531 primary schools, predominantly elementary, enrolling approximately 34,117 students (Doh, 2007; Ngoh, 1987; Tchombe, 2001). Notably, Germany became the preferred destination for higher education for those few "Kamerunians" who demonstrated both academic prowess and loyalty to the German regime.

##### *4.1 The Emergence of Two Cultures*

Germany's defeat in World War I precipitated the fragmentation of the country. It was

apportioned between the victorious powers: Britain and France. Britain acquired one-fifth of the erstwhile German Cameroon, bordering Eastern Nigeria, while the larger remainder went to France. These territorial assignments were sanctioned initially by the League of Nations in 1919 and subsequently by the United Nations, instituting mandates and trusteeships respectively (Doh, 2007; Fonkeng, 2007; Ngoh, 1987; Tchombe, 2001).

With this bifurcation and the reins of power held by two colonial behemoths, Cameroon became a melting pot of two distinct cultures. These influences were deeply entrenched, leading to the evolution of two discrete political, economic, cultural, and educational models in the two Cameroons (Ngoh, 1987). Education, a pivotal conduit for transmitting cultural norms and values, witnessed significant changes. While the curriculum in French Cameroon was realigned with the French paradigm, English Cameroon's education mirrored the English system (Ngoh, 1987; Nyamnjoh & Akum, 2008).

Independence dawned upon the Cameroons in 1960. A subsequent plebiscite on February 11, 1961, resulted in British Southern Cameroon opting to integrate with the "Cameroon Republic." This merger birthed the Federal Republic of Cameroon, comprising West Cameroon (formerly British) and East Cameroon (previously French).

The realization of the intricate challenge of melding two distinct educational architectures dawned upon the nation's leaders post the 1972 reunification. The constitution enacted that year endorsed both French and English as official languages, underscoring the pivotal role of bilingualism. However, the legacy of bifurcated judicial and educational systems lingered. What was not anticipated then was the profound attachment that English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroonians retained for the respective British and French educational blueprints bequeathed by their colonial predecessors.

#### *4.2 Challenges of Reform and Harmonization*

Cameroon's dual educational heritage, rooted in both British and French colonial influences, presents unique challenges in reforming and harmonizing its education systems. Initially, both primary and secondary systems were overseen by a single Ministry of Education. Policies often emerged without significant input from Anglophone stakeholders, leading to inconsistencies across the two education systems. Such disparities were highlighted by Doh (2007), who advocated for separate leadership structures for each system, emphasizing the inefficiencies of a unified leadership unfamiliar with one of the systems.

Post-independence, Cameroon faced the daunting task of harmonizing its dual systems, each deeply entrenched in its colonial past. While an agreement to coexist was reached at the primary and secondary levels, Anglophone students felt marginalized at the tertiary level. The only federal higher education institution in Yaoundé primarily served Francophone students. Many Anglophone students struggled to adapt to a system unfamiliar to them before entering college. Establishing higher education institutions that catered to both linguistic communities was challenging due to limited financial resources and expertise (Ngoh, 1987).

Cameroon's tertiary education took its first step in 1962 with the establishment of the *Institut Nationale d'Etudes Universitaires* (National Institute for University Studies). Predominantly



influenced by the French, this institution faced significant language barriers for Anglophone students. This institute transitioned to the University of Yaoundé which, despite being envisioned as bilingual, was primarily French-taught. Resentments brewed among Anglophone educators, who felt overlooked in promotions compared to their Francophone counterparts. Further illustrating the French bias, subsequent tertiary institutions followed the French model. However, a paradigm shift occurred with the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon Universities of Buea in 1992 and Bamenda in 2011, catering to Anglophone high school graduates.

In an effort to emphasize official bilingualism, the government introduced the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism in schools in 1998. Its objectives included merging the primary and secondary education systems and producing graduates fluent in both English and French. While this policy led to the establishment of many bilingual schools, the implementation often fell short of genuine bilingual education.

Tensions have grown as Francophone students educated in the Anglophone system now vie for limited spots in Anglophone universities. The Anglophone minority, feeling already marginalized, perceives this competition as an added insult, especially when enrollment decisions appear not to be merit-based.

Furthermore, the Anglophone community's skepticism towards governmental intentions in harmonizing education is exacerbated by their underrepresentation in governmental roles and positions. Despite constituting about twenty percent of the population, Anglophones hold fewer than five percent of government ministerial roles. This disparity, particularly evident in the predominantly public education sector, fosters mistrust and complicates efforts towards education reform.

## **5. Results**

### *5.1 The Hurdles in Merging Primary and Secondary Education Systems*

The quest for a unified primary and secondary education system in Cameroon has been met with significant resistance, particularly due to attempts to eradicate the Anglophone system in favor of the Francophone counterpart. The discord culminated on April 23, 1989, when a ministerial decree proposing the merging of Anglophone General certificate of Education (GCE) 'O' and 'A' Levels with the Francophone *Brevet d'études du Premier Cycle (BEPC)* and *Baccalauréat* exams was met with staunch opposition. The opposition was primarily from Anglophone educators and the academic community of the University of Yaoundé (Nyamnjoh & Akum, 2008). The proposal followed a National Education Conference, during which the Minister of Education announced the dissolution of the Anglophone educational system. Anglophones perceived this as an overt attempt to eliminate their unique educational heritage (Yufanyi, 2010). The backlash was immediate and intense, with notable protests originating from prominent institutions like the Cameroon College of Arts, Science and Technology. The minister's controversial stance led to his swift dismissal by the president.

Harmonization has been a contentious issue for both Anglophone and Francophone stakeholders. Each group remains deeply attached to its colonial-era traditions, models, and

cultural values in education. The Francophone segment's adherence to outdated French models is especially evident in the continued use of the *Probatoire* certificate exam, despite its obsolescence in France (Wirba, 2015). Francophone Cameroon remains one of the few French-speaking regions to utilize this exam, making it challenging to equate the *Probatoire* with any current Anglophone or French exams. Despite the debate surrounding its relevance, the Francophone-dominated Ministry of Secondary Education remains unmoved in its stance.

In his analysis, Njiale (2009) states that neither of the two subsystems has undergone substantial reform since the country's independence. The structural foundations of both systems largely mirror the pre-independence frameworks inherited from colonial powers. Furthermore, the titles of various primary and secondary certifications have remained unchanged since independence. Only minor adjustments have been observed, like the renaming of the Francophone *Certificat d'Etude Primaire Elimentaire* (CEPE) to *Certificat d'Etude Primaire* (CEP) in 1995, and the reduction of primary education years in the Anglophone system from seven to six. The British and French educational models, which form the basis of Cameroon's K-12 education subsystems, have evolved considerably over time. This development highlights the pressing need for Cameroonian education stakeholders to transcend their cultural differences and detach from outdated practices. Embracing reform and working towards a convergence of these subsystems is essential for aligning with modern educational standards and methodologies.

## 5.2 Navigating Higher Education: Reform and Harmonization Obstacles

In 2005, the European Bologna Process began to reshape higher education perspectives in Cameroon. This global influence extended to other countries within the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) which includes Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Republic of Congo. Many of these nations, having previously adopted the higher education traditions of their French colonial rulers, moved towards aligning their systems with the Bologna-inspired French qualifications framework (Clark, 2007a; Clark, 2007b; Libreville Declaration, 2005). Exceptions were Equatorial Guinea, with Spanish colonial ties, and Cameroon, which had both French and English higher education systems. It was only in 2007 that Cameroon officially adopted the Bologna model of higher education, fully integrating the pro-Anglo Saxon Bologna Process European model (Mngo, 2011).

### 5.2.1 The Acceptance of BMD Reform and Harmonization

Mngo's 2011 study of faculty attitudes across 13 Cameroonian higher education institutions revealed neutral perceptions of the Bologna reform. Despite reservations about organizational support and concerns about the reform, faculties were positive about the potential benefits of a unified higher education system. Key motivations included compatibility with European institutions, flexibility, and facilitating international recognition of Cameroonian degrees. Njiale (2009) noted the BMD reform's inclusive approach, which honored both the French and British educational legacies, as per the 1999 European Bologna Process reform.

A significant catalyst for the reform's acceptance was the lack of perceived threat to either the



Francophone or Anglophone educational traditions. Faculty across the board welcomed the new European-style credit transfer system and the opportunities for European academic exchanges.

Doh (2007) credited the reform's success more to global influences than local inclinations. The endorsement of the Bologna process by France, a primary destination for Cameroonian students, also fostered its acceptance. Cameroon's substantial contribution to France's international student population further underscores this link.

### 5.2.2 The Underlying Reasons for More Success in HE Harmonization

Higher education reform in Cameroon has encountered less resistance than K-12 reform, largely due to historical differences in their establishment. Following independence in 1960, Cameroon had K-12 institutions in both Anglophone and Francophone regions, but only French model tertiary institutions existed, primarily in Yaoundé. The need for harmonization in higher education emerged with the introduction of the Anglo-Saxon model in Buea and Bamenda in 1993 and 2011, respectively.

The 2007 adoption of the Bologna model (BMD) marked a significant step in higher education reform, garnering more support than earlier efforts. Mngo's 2011 study on faculty attitudes in 13 Cameroonian higher education institutions revealed concerns about government support for reform implementation but overall positive attitudes towards its potential benefits. Faculty saw the BMD as promoting degree comparability within Cameroon and facilitating academic exchanges with European institutions. The reform's acceptance was also influenced by the perception that it would not disadvantage either Anglophone or Francophone graduates, with the new European-style credit transfer system (CCTS) aiding in the international recognition of Cameroonian degrees.

Doh (2007) noted that the reform's endorsement by France, a key player in Cameroon's education sector, eased concerns among Francophone students and parents. The BMD's alignment with some aspects of both French and British higher education systems also played a role in its acceptance by both groups. Dr. Matthew Gwanfogbe, director of the Bambili English Campus at the University of Yaoundé I, highlighted that the BMD closely resembled the Anglo-Saxon educational system, facilitating its implementation in English-speaking campuses.

Despite broad support, the LMD reform's implementation has faced inconsistencies, especially between Anglophone and Francophone universities, in areas like curriculum design and certification. Faculty have also noted a lack of resources and pedagogical support. Nonetheless, the reform represents a significant step in the evolution of Cameroon's higher education landscape.

## 6. Overcoming Resistance to Harmonization Amidst Mutual Distrust

The mutual distrust between Cameroon's Anglophone population and the Francophone-dominated government poses a significant challenge to harmonizing primary and secondary education. Despite this, there remains a possibility for unity, though it is

waning due to ongoing tensions. The strife in Anglophone Cameroon since late 2016, marked by strikes from teachers and lawyers, underscores the community's deep dissatisfaction and sense of marginalization.

In 2016, Anglophone lawyers in Cameroon protested against the predominance of Francophone civil law and the assignment of Francophone judges in Anglophone courts. Similarly, teachers opposed the limited inclusion of Anglophones in teaching roles and the placement of Francophone teachers with minimal English proficiency in English schools. Wilfred Tassang from the Cameroon Teachers' Union highlighted in a 2016 Al Jazeera interview the disadvantage faced by Anglophone students, especially in science and technology, due to these issues. The situation has escalated to demands for independence in Anglophone regions, with the government appearing indifferent.

The ongoing conflict, which has taken on the characteristics of a pseudo civil war in the two Anglophone regions, further complicates the prospect of reaching a consensus on education reform. Nonetheless, there is some optimism because the unrest is not a clash of cultures between Anglophone and Francophone citizens but a reaction to the government's persistent attempts to marginalize the former British West Cameroon. A 2011 study (Mngo, 2011) revealed that faculty in bilingual institutions were more favorable towards the BMD higher education reform than their counterparts in monolingual institutions. This suggests that effective government's policies to promote bilingualism are having a positive effect on national integration. In such settings, the cultural barriers to education convergence seem to dissipate.

Genuine reform in primary and secondary education in Cameroon could be realized if bilingual schools truly adopt bilingualism, transitioning from the parallel existence of two systems to a unified approach. The government's responsibility is to promote proficiency in both French and English. Learning from past reform failures is crucial for progressively adopting reform measures. Challenges such as inadequate teacher-student ratios, staffing difficulties, and underfunded facilities must be addressed (Ngwana, 2000; 2003). Insights from external education experts and local authorities could be instrumental in integrating the K-12 education systems while preserving educational quality. The establishment of a nationally recognized quality assurance body and substantial government investment in the BMMD reform could enhance its acceptance and ensure more consistent implementation nationwide.

## **7. Conclusion**

The journey towards unifying primary and secondary education in Cameroon is fraught with difficulties, stemming largely from the historical disputes that have persisted since the 1972 reunification of French East Cameroon and British West Cameroon. Despite these challenges, the possibility of achieving a cohesive education system exists, as seen in multicultural nations like Belgium and Canada. These countries managed to overcome integration challenges and harmonize their school systems, providing a model of hope for Cameroon. According to Ngalim (2014), Cameroon's task should be relatively simpler as its education systems are primarily derivatives of foreign, colonial influences.

However, the resistance to merging the French and English educational systems post-colonization indicates the deep-rooted impact of colonial legacies, particularly in countries heavily influenced by the French colonial policies of direct assimilation. These assimilationist policies significantly shaped local cultural and educational norms (Lee & Shultz, 2017). Cameroon's government, despite expressing a commitment to harmonization, has shown limited dedication, a fact made more evident by the ongoing social unrest.

The lack of harmonization in Cameroon's education system has been a topic of scholarly discussion, particularly regarding its impact on educational equity and quality (Ngalim, 2014). The 2016 teachers' strike in Anglophone regions highlighted these issues, with grievances about the underrepresentation of Anglophones in professional spheres and concerns about the dominance of Francophone personnel and students in Anglophone educational settings (Cameroon Today, 2016).

Legislative measures aimed at fostering national unity have only marginally addressed these challenges. Substantial progress in harmonizing the education system necessitates more than declarations of bilingualism and national unity; it requires meaningful engagement with Anglophone educational stakeholders. Discussions should focus on convergence approaches that avoid replicating assimilationist policies. Embracing a collaborative, transparent, and mutually trusting approach is essential. Given the complexities of the task, both Anglophone and Francophone communities need to be willing to make compromises. If the Cameroonian government can demonstrate political will by acknowledging and addressing the concerns of both communities, the long-standing goal of harmonizing the country's primary and secondary education subsystems could be within reach.

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