

BEYOND COLONIAL BLUEPRINTS: RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN NIGERIAN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION AND DESIGN STUDIO PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

Objective(s): Nigerian architectural education has been predicated on pedagogues and colonial-inspired Beaux-Arts and Bauhaus studio methodology, unsuited to addressing Nigeria's climate, materials or spatial logics. This paper synthesizes the literature on decolonizing Nigerian architectural education, investigating the potential integration of indigenous knowledge, local building practice and modern pedagogy into Nigerian architectural design curricula.

Methods: a thematic systematic synthesis of thirty independently verified sources (1996-2026, concentrated in 2019-2026) was performed on curricular reform, vernacular geometry codification, climate-responsive passive design, socio-political heritage and comparative African decolonial pedagogy.

Results: Nigerian architecture schools experience a persistent knowledge-implementation gap, compounded by changed accreditation standards that fail to address fundamental studio pedagogy issues. Emerging initiatives, digital vernacular documentation, Afrofuturist studios, and Open and Distance Learning platforms for codifying oral knowledge, provide validated but fragmented approaches to curriculum reform. Technical analysis demonstrates indigenous and hybrid vernacular-modern design solutions frequently outperform conventional construction on cooling energy, cost and comfort.

Conclusion: Indigenous knowledge integration must be re-positioned as a methodological resource for climate-responsive, culturally legitimate design competence rather than an epistemological afterthought, and Nigerian architectural education requires coordinated, resource-appropriate curricular transformation rather than fragmented pedagogical experimentation.

Keywords: decolonizing architecture; indigenous knowledge systems; architectural education; vernacular architecture; design pedagogy

1. Introduction

Architectural education across sub-Saharan Africa was established within, and has largely retained, the institutional and pedagogical structure of the colonial universities and technical schools that first introduced formal design training to the continent. In Nigeria specifically, curricula were built around Beaux-Arts and later Bauhaus-derived studio models transplanted with little adaptation to local climatic, material and cultural conditions, a pattern Stanek (2020) traces through his account of how Cold War-era Comecon and Western modernist networks co-produced Nigerian institutional building, including Lagos's Festac Town, during the transition from colonial rule to independence. This inheritance matters because architectural education does not merely transmit technical skill; it transmits, often invisibly, a set of assumptions about what counts as legitimate design knowledge, whose building traditions merit study, and which climatic and cultural logics a competent architect is expected to master. Seeland's (2025) recent account of African architecture schools founded during the decolonisation era, KNUST in Kumasi, EAMAU in Lomé, and the Faculdade de Arquitectura in Maputo among them, adds an important historical corrective: several African schools already pursued economic independence, cultural diversity and locally grounded studio pedagogy from their founding, suggesting that Nigeria's own contemporary reform debate can draw on a longer regional institutional memory than the more Eurocentric parts of the literature sometimes acknowledge.

Decolonising architectural education, as this review uses the term, does not mean rejecting technical rigour or international design discourse; it means examining critically which knowledge traditions a curriculum privileges, and deliberately restoring indigenous building knowledge, local material science and vernacular spatial logic to a position of methodological equality alongside imported design theory. Ncube (2025) supplies the clearest theoretical statement available in the reviewed literature, applying Critical Race Theory and the concept of epistemic freedom to argue that decolonial higher education requires structural transformation of what counts as legitimate knowledge within an institution, not merely the addition of African content to an otherwise unchanged Western curricular structure. Fisher et al. (2017), writing on cultural hybridity in South African architectural teaching, make a closely related point: a genuinely decolonised pedagogy must hold indigenous and imported knowledge traditions in productive tension rather than treating one as foundational and the other as supplementary. Nigeria's own regulatory environment has recently been revised in ways directly relevant to this question: Enwerekowe and Akah (2025) critically evaluate the revised National Universities Commission Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards for architecture against comparable global curricular modules, mapping persistent physical and technological studio deficits in public universities, and finding that curricular revision at the policy level has not, by itself, resolved the material and infrastructural conditions under which decolonial pedagogical reform would actually need to occur.

The central problem this review addresses is a persistent disconnect between the theoretical case for decolonising Nigerian architectural education and the concrete pedagogical, technical and institutional mechanisms through which such decolonisation might actually be achieved. A substantial literature argues, in general terms, that Nigerian and African curricula should integrate indigenous knowledge systems; considerably less literature specifies how this integration should occur in practice, what it should look like within a studio curriculum, or how its outcomes might be evaluated against existing accreditation standards. This gap has direct professional consequences. Okoye et al. (2020), examining bioclimatic design practice in South-Eastern Nigeria, found that built-environment professionals possessed high theoretical knowledge of

bioclimatic and vernacular-derived design principles while their actual implementation on constructed buildings remained comparatively low, a knowledge-implementation gap that, this review argues, begins at the level of architectural education itself. Jibrin (2026), documenting the mathematical knowledge embedded in Nigerian indigenous building and trade practices across six geopolitical zones, provides direct evidence that this knowledge is technically substantive rather than merely decorative, strengthening the case that its exclusion from active design pedagogy represents a genuine curricular loss. Vernacular knowledge is also disappearing from the built environment at a pace that may outstrip its documentation within educational institutions: Nnamdi et al. (2025), mapping the decline of traditional Igbo compound architecture in Okigwe, Imo State, through visual inventories, AutoCAD documentation, Geographic Information Systems mapping and statistical analysis of forty-two structures, demonstrate empirically that colonial administrative planning and postcolonial urban development have produced measurable, ongoing loss of traditional South-Eastern Nigerian building forms.

This review synthesises the literature on decolonising Nigerian architectural education across three objectives: mapping the current state of knowledge on decolonial curricular reform and pedagogical innovation in Nigerian and comparable African architectural education; examining the empirical evidence on vernacular building knowledge, its documentation, and its climate-responsive design value as a substantive resource for curricular integration; and identifying the gaps in current evidence and practice that limit Nigerian architectural education's capacity to move from isolated pedagogical experimentation toward systemic decolonial reform. Its significance lies in bringing together four literatures that have so far developed largely in parallel, Nigeria-specific curricular and accreditation critique, empirical documentation of vernacular building form and its climatic performance, digital and technical methods for codifying indigenous geometry, and the broader African and Global South theoretical literature on decolonial pedagogy, into a single synthesis offering architecture schools, curriculum planners and accreditation bodies an evidence base for reform grounded in verified Nigerian and comparative African scholarship.

2. Review Methodology

This review adopts a systematic, thematically organised synthesis method, consistent with the tradition appropriate to architectural and educational scholarship, in which sources are systematically identified, critically appraised for relevance and evidentiary strength, and organised into analytical clusters that are read against one another rather than aggregated statistically, since the underlying evidence base spans theoretical, historical, empirical and pedagogical-design literature too heterogeneous in method for a narrowly protocol-driven, effect-size-based systematic review of the kind used in clinical research. Sources were organised around five thematic clusters: decolonial curricular reform and pedagogical innovation; vernacular geometry preservation and digital codification; empirical climate-responsive and passive design frameworks; socio-political legacies and layered built heritage; and comparative African and international decolonial pedagogy. A source was included where it reported theoretical, empirical, historical or pedagogical-design evidence bearing on at least one of these clusters in relation to architectural education, indigenous knowledge, or vernacular building practice in Nigeria or a directly comparable African or Global South context.

A specific and unusually extensive verification step was required by the character of the initially compiled corpus. A number of sources were attributed only to "Anonymous," with journal, year and page information but no named author. Independent search successfully traced four of these

entries to their verified named authors: a study of colonial impact on Okigwe's built environment, correctly attributed to Nnamdi, Chukwukere, Anozie and Nwankpa (2025); a study of Edo vernacular mud architecture and modular design, correctly attributed to Aigboduwa, Orogo and Enesi (2025), whose actual publication year was found to be 2025 rather than 2024 as originally recorded; a study of indigenous landscape urbanism in Rwanda and Burundi, correctly attributed to Malonza and Ndacyayishima, whose actual publication details were found to be *Africa Habitat Review*, Volume 17, Issue 1 (2022), rather than Volume 14, Issue 2 (2020) as originally recorded; and a study of indigenous knowledge systems in Zambian school curricula, correctly attributed to Changwe and Mwanza (2026). Two further anonymous entries could not be independently verified with a named author despite dedicated search and have accordingly been excluded from citation rather than referenced under an anonymous placeholder, consistent with the evidentiary standard this review applies throughout.

Following verification, exclusion of unresolvable entries, and independent search for additional 2019-2026 literature meeting this review's relevance and verifiability standard, the review synthesises thirty independently verified sources. This falls short of an initial thirty-five-reference target; the shortfall reflects a deliberate choice to prioritise verifiable, directly relevant scholarship over the inclusion of tangentially related or unverifiable material simply to reach a numerical target.

3. Thematic Literature Synthesis

Theoretical foundations. The theoretical foundation for decolonizing architectural education rests on a broader literature concerning decolonization in African higher education generally, from which architecture-specific scholarship draws its conceptual vocabulary. Neube's (2025) Critical Race Theory framework, distinguishing structural transformation from cosmetic inclusion, functions as this review's central evaluative criterion for assessing whether a given pedagogical intervention constitutes genuine decolonisation or merely decorative addition. Tunstall (2023) extends this into design practice directly, arguing that modernist design across its architectural, industrial and graphic manifestations has historically encompassed and advanced colonisation, and that decolonising design requires recentring theory and practice within the excluded knowledge traditions of Indigenous, Black and other historically marginalised communities; developed primarily from North American design contexts, this framework nonetheless supplies architectural education with a practical institutional vocabulary, curricular audit, faculty hiring, assessment redesign, that African higher-education theory does not always operationalise to the same degree. Akinsola (2025), studying theatre-in-education as a decolonial pedagogical tool, contributes an important methodological precedent despite its focus on performative rather than built-form pedagogy: socio-cultural competence is best cultivated through active, participatory pedagogical formats rather than passive content delivery, a principle several architecture-specific studies apply directly to design studio teaching.

Curricular reform and pedagogical innovation. Enwerekwe and Akah (2025) provide this review's most directly institutional evidence, finding that Nigeria's revised NUC standards have proceeded without a corresponding resolution of physical and technological studio deficits, meaning even a well-designed decolonial curriculum framework would face significant implementation constraints: inadequate studio space, limited digital fabrication and modelling technology, and constrained access to material libraries. Ahmad et al. (2026) proposes a specific pedagogical response to a related constraint, that of visualising unfamiliar hybrid design solutions

within resource-limited studio settings, reviewing science fiction and Afrofuturist cinema against Nigeria's NUC and NBTE standards to argue that speculative visual media can function as a "speculative laboratory" allowing students to visualise hybrid indigenous-contemporary solutions without capital-intensive physical modelling infrastructure. Adeyeye and Mason (2020) address a different structural constraint, the predominantly oral transmission of much Nigerian indigenous architectural and settlement knowledge, proposing Open and Distance Learning platforms as a policy mechanism for codifying and disseminating oral-based indigenous knowledge at institutional scale, a mechanism capable of operating across Nigeria's many under-resourced programmes simultaneously. Watt (2021) and Datey (2023) extend this pedagogical-innovation literature beyond Nigeria while remaining directly relevant to it; Datey's (2023) explicit framing, that architectural education has historically been shaped in the Global North and transposed with limited adaptation into Global South institutions, restates in curricular-design terms the same colonial-inheritance argument Stanek (2020) develops historically and Ncube (2025) develops theoretically.

Vernacular geometry and digital codification. A distinct and technically rigorous strand of the reviewed literature addresses direct documentation of indigenous architectural geometry as a curricular resource. Johnson et al. (2026) provide this review's clearest methodological blueprint, mapping traditional Yoruba, Hausa and South-South Nsibidi geometric configurations and translating them into AutoCAD-based parametric design models suitable for direct studio use, explicitly warning against romanticising indigenous form as a static historical curiosity rather than treating it as a living, technically specifiable design resource. Nnamdi et al.'s (2025) Okigwe study provides the fullest single demonstration of what rigorous vernacular documentation requires in practice: visual building inventories, AutoCAD drafting, GIS mapping, and structured interviews with planners, elders and residents, combined to chart both physical decline and the socio-political forces driving it. Adeyemo et al. (2025) extend this documentation project into an underexamined register, the semiotic and linguistic dimension of Yoruba spatial meaning-making, arguing that language itself encodes architectural knowledge a purely formal documentation approach would miss; Ale et al. (2025), drawing on 240 respondents across questionnaire, interview and observational methods, corroborate this empirically, finding that Yoruba vernacular architecture communicates philosophical and cosmological meaning extending well beyond aesthetic interpretation. Jibrin's (2026) documentation of embedded mathematical knowledge supplies a further, technically specific register directly usable within structural or construction-technology curricula, countering any assumption that indigenous knowledge integration is relevant only to design-theory or history components.

Climate-responsive and passive design evidence. A fourth cluster addresses the empirical, climate-performance dimension of vernacular and colonial-era architectural knowledge, providing the evidentiary bridge between cultural-heritage arguments and the technical-performance arguments accreditation bodies are more likely to find persuasive on their own terms. Ihunwo and Ezinwo (2025) supply this review's most methodologically rigorous single study, combining direct thermo-hygrometer measurement, occupant thermal-comfort questionnaires and visual inventories across forty-two Rivers State structures to develop a thermal comfort framework adapting passive strategies from colonial and tropical architecture movements; their finding that historically developed passive strategies achieve measurable, quantifiable thermal performance provides the strongest available counter to any assumption that indigenous or historical building knowledge is climatically obsolete. Aigboduwa et al.'s (2025) mixed-methods study extends this evidentiary

base considerably: their hybrid Edo mud-modular prototype achieved a 40 per cent reduction in cooling-energy demand and a 25 per cent reduction in construction cost relative to conventional concrete construction, alongside 85 per cent user satisfaction, giving indigenous-modern hybrid design a specific, quantified case rather than only a qualitative cultural one. The African Journal of Landscape Architecture editorial (2021) situates this individual evidence within a broader synthesis, arguing for hybrid knowledge systems that recognise indigenous knowledge alongside Western sustainable-design approaches, and identifying sponge-city and water-sensitive design models as a domain where Nigerian indigenous drainage and land-management knowledge could contribute directly to urban climate-adaptation design.

Socio-political legacies and heritage. Stanek (2020) demonstrates that Nigeria's architectural inheritance was a genuinely global, multipolar set of influences, not a simple bilateral colonial relationship. Wahab (1996), the corpus's oldest source, establishes curriculum-integration guidelines for indigenous settlement knowledge nearly three decades before Enwerekwe and Akah (2025) document persistent curricular deficits, itself an important finding about how long unimplemented recommendations can persist. Seeland (2025), reviewing a 2025 Munich workshop on the unwritten history of decolonising architectural education in Africa, adds important continental context: several African schools of architecture, KNUST in Kumasi, EAMAU in Lomé and the Faculdade de Arquitectura in Maputo among them, were founded in the 1950s-1980s explicitly in pursuit of economic independence and locally grounded pedagogy, indicating that Nigeria's contemporary reform debate can draw on a longer regional institutional memory rather than starting from first principles. Esimike and Ekhoegbe (2026) bridge Critical Regionalism and decolonial theory, examining cases from the Burj Khalifa to Demas Nwoko's Dominican Chapel to argue that architectural iconicity derives from cultural coding and technological syncretism rather than formal novelty, positioning Nigeria's vernacular systems as a design reservoir for globally legible, culturally rooted architecture.

Comparative African and Global South pedagogy. Salama et al. (2025) develop the most operationalised framework reviewed, the ADAPT2SDG typology, developed through a three-phase mixed-methods design and tested across five initiatives spanning Africa, South America, Europe, South Asia and Australia, articulating specific, transferable characteristics of decolonised pedagogy aligned with international Sustainable Development Goal frameworks. Harriss et al. (2023) compile thirty-four chapters recentring Global South pedagogy around postcolonialism, spatial justice and what its contributors term climate apartheid. Fisher et al. (2017) and Saidi (2005) extend this to South African curricular transition; Olweny (2023) shows Nigeria's colonial inheritance reflects a broader East and West African pattern rather than a uniquely Nigerian phenomenon; Bosman (2015) identifies negative social perception of earth construction as a transferable barrier that Aigbodua et al.'s (2025) performance data directly counters through demonstrated cost and comfort outcomes. Oberholster et al. (2023) and Steyn (2020) provide, respectively, a tested community-engaged studio model and conceptual grounding on culturally variable spatial perception that a purely Western-derived design-theory curriculum would fail to capture. Changwe and Mwanza (2026), studying Zambian basic education through a concurrent embedded mixed-methods study of sixty-one participants, find 72.7 per cent of respondents citing entrenched colonial mindsets, insufficient teacher preparation and limited documented indigenous-knowledge resources as persistent barriers, structurally mirroring the Nigerian architecture-specific gap Okoye et al. (2020) and Enwerekwe and Akah (2025) each document. Malonza and Ndacyayishima (2022) show that Rwanda's Gahanga Cricket Stadium and Burundi's Library of

Muyinga achieved genuine indigenous-informed outcomes while still underusing trees as shading and cultural elements central to the compound typologies both projects otherwise drew upon, a caution this review takes seriously when assessing the maturity of comparable Nigerian interventions.

Research gap. Read together, these clusters show more theoretical sophistication (Ncube, 2025; Salama et al., 2025; Harriss et al., 2023) than operationalised Nigerian curricular models; substantial technical evidence (Ihunwo & Ezinwo, 2025; Aigboduwa et al., 2025; Johnson et al., 2026) not yet incorporated into accreditation debate; and no direct empirical evaluation of an implemented decolonised Nigerian curriculum against graduate design competence.

4. Conceptual Framework

Colonial curricular inheritance, Beaux-Arts and Bauhaus studio models and imported accreditation templates, generates three interacting problems: epistemic marginalization of indigenous knowledge as cultural background (Ncube, 2025; Fisher et al., 2017); loss of vernacular geometric literacy (Nnamdi et al., 2025); and studio-curriculum mismatch with local material and climatic reality (Enwerekowe & Akah, 2025). These converge on the need for a decolonial response organised around recognition, redistribution and representation (Ncube, 2025), operationalised through two parallel, evidence-supported pathways: digital codification of indigenous geometry (Johnson et al., 2026; Nnamdi et al., 2025) and speculative, community-based pedagogy (Ahmad et al., 2026; Oberholster et al., 2023). Both feed a contemporary design pedagogy that genuinely integrates, rather than merely references, indigenous knowledge, producing culturally rooted design competence and the climate-responsive technical literacy Ihunwo and Ezinwo (2025) and Aigboduwa et al. (2025) demonstrate empirically. The two pathways are deliberately parallel rather than sequential, reflecting the finding that Nigeria's most promising interventions combine rigorous documentation with imaginative, resource-light practice simultaneously.

5. Discussion

The knowledge-implementation gap is central. The obstacle to decolonisation is not primarily absent knowledge but a persistent gap between its availability in scholarship and its incorporation into curricular structure. Wahab's (1996) proposal predates Enwerekowe and Akah's (2025) documentation of continued deficit by nearly thirty years; Okoye et al.'s (2020) professional-practice gap mirrors Changwe and Mwanza's (2026) Zambian policy-level gap, suggesting a structural rather than an awareness problem.

Technical rigour strengthens the cultural case. Ihunwo and Ezinwo's (2025) measured comfort data and Aigboduwa et al.'s (2025) quantified 40 per cent cooling-energy and 25 per cent cost reductions show indigenous and hybrid strategies can outperform conventional construction on technical and economic grounds. Presenting indigenous knowledge as a performance-validated technical resource, rather than only a cultural obligation, is likely to be more persuasive to accreditation bodies and sceptical faculty.

Resource constraint shapes which interventions succeed. Enwerekowe and Akah's (2025) documented studio deficits explain why Ahmad et al.'s (2026) low-capital speculative-cinema pedagogy and Adeyeye and Mason's (2020) Open and Distance Learning proposal matter: both were designed to operate without the intensive fabrication infrastructure many Nigerian schools

lack, making resource-appropriateness a genuine evaluative criterion alongside theoretical coherence.

Documentation must extend beyond geometry. Adeyemo et al. (2025) and Ale et al. (2025) show that geometric documentation alone, however rigorous, risks missing the semiotic and philosophical meaning vernacular form was designed to communicate, indicating that curricular vernacular documentation should be interdisciplinary, combining architectural, linguistic and anthropological method.

The pattern is regional, not uniquely Nigerian. Olweny (2023), Fisher et al. (2017), Saidi (2005) and Changwe and Mwanza (2026) together indicate a broadly shared African pattern of durable colonial curricular inheritance, while Salama et al.'s (2025) and Harriss et al.'s (2023) cross-regional evidence shows that deliberately tested, multi-institution interventions yield transferable characteristics Nigerian institutions need not develop from first principles.

Well-intentioned decolonial design has limits. Malonza and Ndacyayishima's (2022) finding that even substantially indigenous-inspired projects underused key traditional elements cautions against assuming stylistic reference equals functional understanding, a considerably higher pedagogical standard than surface citation.

Iconicity motivates reform beyond compliance. Esimike and Ekhoegbe's (2026) demonstration that architects including Demas Nwoko achieved international distinction through, not despite, indigenous engagement reframes curricular integration as a route to professional distinction, a motivational dimension the deficit-focused accreditation literature does not itself supply.

6. Implications for Curriculum and Policy

Architecture programmes should make structured vernacular documentation, combining AutoCAD or BIM recording with linguistic and ethnographic depth (Adeyemo et al., 2025; Ale et al., 2025), a required rather than elective component, ideally before traditions disappear entirely. Curricular reform should explicitly account for resource constraint, prioritising low-capital interventions such as Ahmad et al.'s (2026) speculative pedagogy and Adeyeye and Mason's (2020) distance-learning platform over infrastructure-dependent models. Accreditation bodies should incorporate verified vernacular and hybrid-design performance data (Ihunwo & Ezinwo, 2025; Aigboduwa et al., 2025) directly into technical assessment criteria, presenting indigenous knowledge as a performance-validated competency. Studio assessment should evaluate functional completeness of indigenous-logic application, not merely stylistic presence, per Malonza and Ndacyayishima's (2022) caution, requiring dedicated faculty training. Finally, given that promising interventions remain institutionally isolated, a national curriculum working group or shared digital repository of documented vernacular geometry (building on Johnson et al., 2026) would allow individual innovations to be tested and scaled sector-wide.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This review synthesises secondary, documentary and pedagogical-design literature rather than generating new Nigerian data; its conceptual framework remains a synthesis to be tested through direct curriculum evaluation. The reference count reached thirty verified sources rather than an initial thirty-five-source target, reflecting a deliberate preference for verifiability over volume. The strongest empirical evidence located, Ihunwo and Ezinwo (2025), Nnamdi et al. (2025) and

Aigboduwa et al. (2025), concentrates in South-Eastern and South-South Nigeria, with comparatively less equivalent depth for Northern Hausa or further South-Western Yoruba traditions. Future research should directly evaluate implemented decolonial curricula against measurable graduate design competence, following outcome-based methods comparable to Salama et al. (2025); extend vernacular documentation to underrepresented Nigerian traditions using Nnamdi et al.'s (2025) mixed-methods template; and evaluate the feasibility of a shared national digital repository of vernacular geometry building on Johnson et al. (2026).

8. Conclusion

This review has synthesised the literature on decolonizing Nigerian architectural education, showing that the central obstacle is not an absence of relevant theoretical, empirical or pedagogical knowledge, all demonstrated here in considerable depth, but a decades-long gap between that knowledge's availability and its incorporation into curricular structure, studio practice and professional norms, a gap Wahab (1996) identified conceptually nearly thirty years before Enwerekwe and Akah (2025) documented its continued persistence. The evidence treats technical rigour and cultural decolonization as mutually reinforcing: measured thermal performance and quantified cost and energy savings (Ihunwo & Ezinwo, 2025; Aigboduwa et al., 2025) demonstrate indigenous and hybrid strategies can outperform conventional alternatives, while semiotic evidence (Adeyemo et al., 2025; Ale et al., 2025) and Malonza and Ndacyayishima's (2022) caution about underrealized logic warn against treating documentation or stylistic reference alone as sufficient. Read against the comparative African and Global South literature, Nigeria's architectural education sector faces a regionally shared, rather than uniquely national, structural challenge, and its most promising responses, digital vernacular codification, speculative and community-based pedagogy, and resource-appropriate curricular design, are already individually demonstrated but remain institutionally uncoordinated. The framework and directions offered here are intended as a basis for moving Nigerian architectural education from isolated pedagogical experiment toward coordinated, evidence-based curricular transformation.

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