



Redefining Gender: A Literature Review on the Evolution of Gender Roles and Identities Across Cultures in the Great Lakes Region

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Abstract

This literature review examines the evolving nature of gender roles and identities across Africa's Great Lakes region, exploring how modern changes engage with colonial legacies, indigenous knowledge, and global influences. This study employs critical interpretive synthesis (CIS), a qualitative methodology that systematically analyses and reinterprets existing research through a critical lens. Unlike conventional reviews, CIS does not merely summarise evidence but constructs new theoretical understandings. Findings show the region undergoing significant shifts. While colonial binaries persist in some areas, new adaptations are emerging, urban youth redefining masculinity and women claiming spaces in traditionally male domains. Digital platforms act as tools for feminist activism yet also create cultural tensions, while religious institutions both uphold and challenge patriarchal norms. Cultural expression, especially through art, serves as a form of resistance, challenging traditional gender roles. The analysis highlights how local communities develop hybrid approaches to gender justice, blending cultural preservation with progressive change. These strategies challenge both nostalgic traditionalism and the uncritical uptake of Western feminist models, offering alternative pathways for gender transformation. The review concludes with practical recommendations, including decolonising gender education by prioritising indigenous knowledge, developing culturally appropriate digital infrastructure to counter linguistic imperialism, and reforming legal systems through locally relevant epistemologies. Overall, this research emphasises the importance of policies that respect regional specificities while tackling global gender justice issues. It enriches broader debates by showing how gender transformations in the Great Lakes region provide valuable insights into the interplay of culture, power, and identity in postcolonial settings.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, gender has emerged as one of the most dynamic and contested subjects in sociological discourse. No longer confined to biological determinism or fixed social roles, gender is increasingly recognised as a fluid construct shaped by history, power, and culture, and continually renegotiated through performance and resistance (Chang & Wildman, 2017). This conceptual shift



challenges essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity, particularly in regions where traditional roles have long been deeply embedded. One of the most compelling and complex sites of this transformation is Africa's Great Lakes region, which includes countries such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. With its layered colonial histories, diverse cultural landscapes, and shifting political dynamics, the region provides a rich context for exploring how gender roles are being redefined.

Contrary to Western assumptions, African gender systems were not always binary or rigid. Before colonial intervention, many African societies maintained flexible and context-specific understandings of gender. However, colonisation introduced Eurocentric gender norms that entrenched patriarchal hierarchies and undermined indigenous systems (Agbaje, 2021). These frameworks did not disappear with independence; instead, they became woven into the fabric of postcolonial state structures and social expectations. In Tanzania's rural Sukuma communities, for instance, colonial-era gender norms remain influential, often reinforced by women themselves (Mkude & Shimba, 2025). Meanwhile, urban centres across the region are becoming spaces where traditional gender norms are being more openly contested.

The tension between inherited gender roles and contemporary realities is becoming increasingly evident. In today's Great Lakes, gender is not merely being questioned; it is being actively reimaged. Factors such as education, migration, digital connectivity, and cross-border activism are reshaping how individuals understand themselves and their communities. In Uganda, for example, women have begun occupying traditionally male-dominated spaces like rugby, using sport as a means to challenge stereotypes and expand gender possibilities (Ariyo, 2022). In Rwanda, post-genocide gender policies have bolstered women's presence in politics and public life, although grassroots realities sometimes diverge from official narratives (Jessee, 2020). In Kenya, debates surrounding gender identity intersect with national identity, illustrating the state's complex role in both enabling and restricting transformation (Okech, 2021). In the DRC, decades of conflict have disrupted conventional notions of masculinity, prompting men to adapt in the face of trauma, displacement, and changing expectations (Maubert, 2025).

This paper sets out to trace these evolving gender dynamics across the Great Lakes region by addressing three interrelated questions: How have gender roles and identities shifted? What sociocultural, political, religious, and global forces are driving these changes? And which theoretical frameworks best help us make sense of this transformation? By examining the intersections of gender, identity, and culture, this study highlights both the flexibility of African gender systems and the continued influence of limiting narratives.

Crucially, this review seeks to bring African experiences into dialogue with global gender theories without defaulting to universalising Western models. Instead, it foregrounds the grassroots, localised processes through which gender is being redefined. Neupane's (2024) research on South Asian women navigating transnational identities underscores the idea that identity is never fixed; it is constantly negotiated through personal, historical, and communal experiences. This resonates powerfully with the realities across the Great Lakes, where people are actively shaping new meanings of what it is to be a man, a woman, or someone who resists binary categorisation.

The Great Lakes region is particularly significant as a case study for understanding contemporary gender transformations. Its colonial legacies, cultural plurality, and political volatility offer unique insight into broader postcolonial patterns of change. Recent scholarship points to how conflict, mobility, and digital technologies are reshaping gender norms and identity. For example, Maubert (2025) observes that prolonged conflict in the DRC has challenged traditional masculinities, giving



rise to new forms of resilience and adaptation. Similarly, Ariyo (2022) documents how Ugandan women are using sport to contest entrenched gender norms, demonstrating how local initiatives can subvert both global and local expectations. These examples underscore the region's relevance as a space where historical continuity meets innovation, providing valuable perspectives for global gender discourse.

Ultimately, this study presents a grounded, African-centred account of gender transformation. Through theory, lived experience, and cultural analysis, it elevates African voices in the global conversation. What follows is a detailed examination of how gender roles are shifting, who is leading these changes, and what they mean for the future of gender justice both within the region and beyond.

Literature Review

The Shifting Ground of Gender Roles: Local Histories, Global Parallels

To make sense of today's gender dynamics in the Great Lakes region, we have to look back not to a single, unified past, but to a patchwork of precolonial traditions that colonial forces tried hard to erase. Ife Amadiume's ground breaking work on Igbo society (2015) highlights this well. She explores roles like "male daughters" and "female husbands," who held respected positions that did not hinge on biological sex, pushing back against the rigid binaries imposed during colonisation (Agbaje, 2021). And Nigeria was not an outlier. Across the region, gender was often understood in more fluid, nuanced ways. In precolonial Rwanda, for instance, court rituals left space for gender-ambiguous roles in both politics and spirituality, a flexibility that did not survive the arrival of colonial Christianity (Ngabonziza et al., 2019).

Colonialism did not just rewrite the rules. It flattened them. In Tanzania, for example, missionary schools drilled girls into domesticity and cast boys as agrarian workers, side-lining women's long-standing influence in trade and governance (Agbaje, 2021). But resistance bubbled under the surface. Charwi (2025) shows that in Tanzanian oral traditions, gendered language turned into a quiet battlefield, where proverbs and folktales subtly challenged the patriarchy. Today, these legacies show up in striking contrasts. In Nairobi, urban youth are shaking off the old binaries with androgynous fashion and queer collectives (Okech, 2021). Meanwhile, rural Pokot communities in Kenya still tether gender roles to livestock ownership, a colonial twist on what used to be a more balanced pastoral system (Karnebäck et al., 2015).

Culture, Religion, and Contested Modernities

Religion continues to shape how gender is negotiated, sometimes tightening binaries, other times cracking them open. In Uganda, Pentecostal churches often push strict gender norms, but ironically, they also give women leadership opportunities through prayer circles and entrepreneurship (Sengupta & Calo, 2024). Zambia offers a different picture. Among the Ndembu, precolonial gender liminality still finds a place within Christianized rituals (Kaunda, 2017), showing how old and new beliefs can blend.

Then there is the internet, adding another twist. In Malawi, platforms like Facebook have given rise to groups such as "Her Voice," where rural women speak out about marital expectations (Khoza, 2022). Over in Burundi, young men take to TikTok to poke fun at hypermasculinity mixing satire with a dose of cultural commentary (Nchanji et al., 2023). But digital space is not without its issues. Khumalo (2024) warns that "hashtag feminism," while powerful, can sometimes steamroll over local contexts. Take Ethiopia's *sost amat* system, for example, an indigenous framework that recognised three genders. It's been largely overshadowed by Western LGBTQ+ narratives (Bekana, 2020).



Theoretical Frameworks: Centring African Epistemologies

Feminist and queer theories are helpful tools, but they need grounding in local realities. Scholars like Mertens and Myrntinen (2019) challenge the Western focus on individualism. Instead, they highlight ethics rooted in community like Uganda's *ubuntu* philosophy, where gender justice is tied to environmental and generational well-being (Nagasha et al., 2019). Queer theory also shifts when viewed through an African lens. In the DRC's mining towns, *bisexualité situationnelle* (situational bisexuality) reflects a lived experience that doesn't fit neatly into Western ideas of identity and "coming out" (Mertens & Myrntinen, 2019).

Intersectionality becomes even more essential in post-conflict regions. Rwanda's high female political participation after the genocide isn't just about gender quotas it is also shaped by class and ethnicity, which often get glossed over by Western praise (Brown, 2016). In Mozambique, Arnfred (2023) shows how women are reimagining matrilineal traditions, using them as tools to resist both patriarchal NGOs and the impacts of climate change.

Cultural Production as Resistance

Art has become a powerful vehicle for challenging gender norms. In Kampala, queer poetry slams crack open space for alternative narratives. In Kigali, feminist graffiti turns city walls into political canvases. Burundian writers are weaving ancestral symbols into their stories to affirm transgender identities (Gohain, 2025), while in Kenya, fashion activists are mixing Maasai beadwork with streetwear to push back against rigid gender codes (Tolofari, 2025; Allegretti, 2018). Even sports carry weight. Ariyo (2022) explores how Ugandan rugby players are flipping the script on masculinity, using the game to make feminist statements about strength and autonomy.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study uses a critical interpretive synthesis method, which combines the structured rigour of a systematic literature review with the depth and adaptability of reflexive thematic analysis. Rather than just summarising existing research, this approach draws on the work of Walsh and Downe (2005), prioritising theory-building and contextual sensitivity. That is especially important when exploring how gender roles and identities are evolving in the Great Lakes region, where cultural complexity resists one-size-fits-all narratives. The goal here is to surface connections, contradictions, and underlying assumptions that are often missed in more conventional reviews.

Scope and Selection Criteria

To ensure a meaningful and current analysis, the study focuses on literature published between 2015 and 2025. This time frame captures the postcolonial shift in gender discourse as well as the rapid impact of digital media on identity politics. Recognising the limitations of peer-reviewed journals, particularly their frequent bias toward Western academia, this study also incorporated grey literature.

Geographically, the review covers all ten countries within the Great Lakes region. Special attention was given to underrepresented areas, particularly Francophone and Lusophone contexts, which are frequently sidelined in English-language scholarship. One such contribution is Maubert's (2025) study on conflict and gender in the DRC, which helped diversify the regional lens. Moreover, the researcher was selective with non-African-authored work. Only those studies that actively centred African voices, like Freedman's (2016) analysis co-authored with Congolese activists, were included to ensure local realities remained at the forefront.



The search strategy was intentionally designed to be inclusive and culturally sensitive. To counterbalance the dominance of Anglophone scholarship, the researcher consulted a range of databases including JSTOR, Scopus, African Journals Online (AJOL), and Mukuba University's Gender Archive. Search terms combined standard academic phrases such as "gender roles Africa" with locally rooted expressions like *mapenzi ya jinsia* (Kiswahili for "gender love"), allowing for the inclusion of both formal academic literature and grassroots discourses grounded in lived experience. From an initial pool of 82 search results, 55 sources were selected for their relevance and regional specificity. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 30 articles were ultimately retained for analysis.

Analytical Framework: A Decolonial Triangulation

The data analysis followed a layered process. First-cycle thematic coding helped identify surface-level trends, for instance, the framing of sports as a form of gender resistance in Uganda, as seen in Ariyo's (2022) work. In the second cycle, focused coding grounded in three intersecting theoretical approaches was applied: African feminist perspectives that emphasise relational ethics, queer indigenous frameworks like those explored by Gohain (2025), and intersectional mapping strategies. This triangulation allowed for a richer interpretation of how gender roles function across overlapping cultural, political, and historical contexts.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was also employed to uncover gaps and silences in the literature. One key question asked was: why are gender-fluid traditions from Burundi (as documented by Iradukunda et al., 2019) missing from official policy texts? Additionally, we drew from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) concept of "decolonising the mind" to unpack the limitations of Eurocentric language. As a result, we prioritised using region-specific terms like *mashoga*, a Kenyan queer identity, over catch-all Western labels such as LGBTQ+, mainly when the former better reflected the communities being discussed.

Limitations and Mitigations

Of course, the study faced its share of challenges. One major issue was Anglophone bias, which was addressed by including eight French and Portuguese studies. Another concern was the overrepresentation of urban voices, a common issue in gender research. To counter this, an analysis of rural-focused studies was considered, such as Karmebäck's (2015) work on the Pokot in Kenya. Finally, to avoid over-citing elite institutions and non-African scholars, a conscious effort was made to prioritise African authors, ensuring that 60% of the first-author citations were African. This not only improved representational equity but also surpassed diversity and inclusion benchmarks commonly used in academic research.

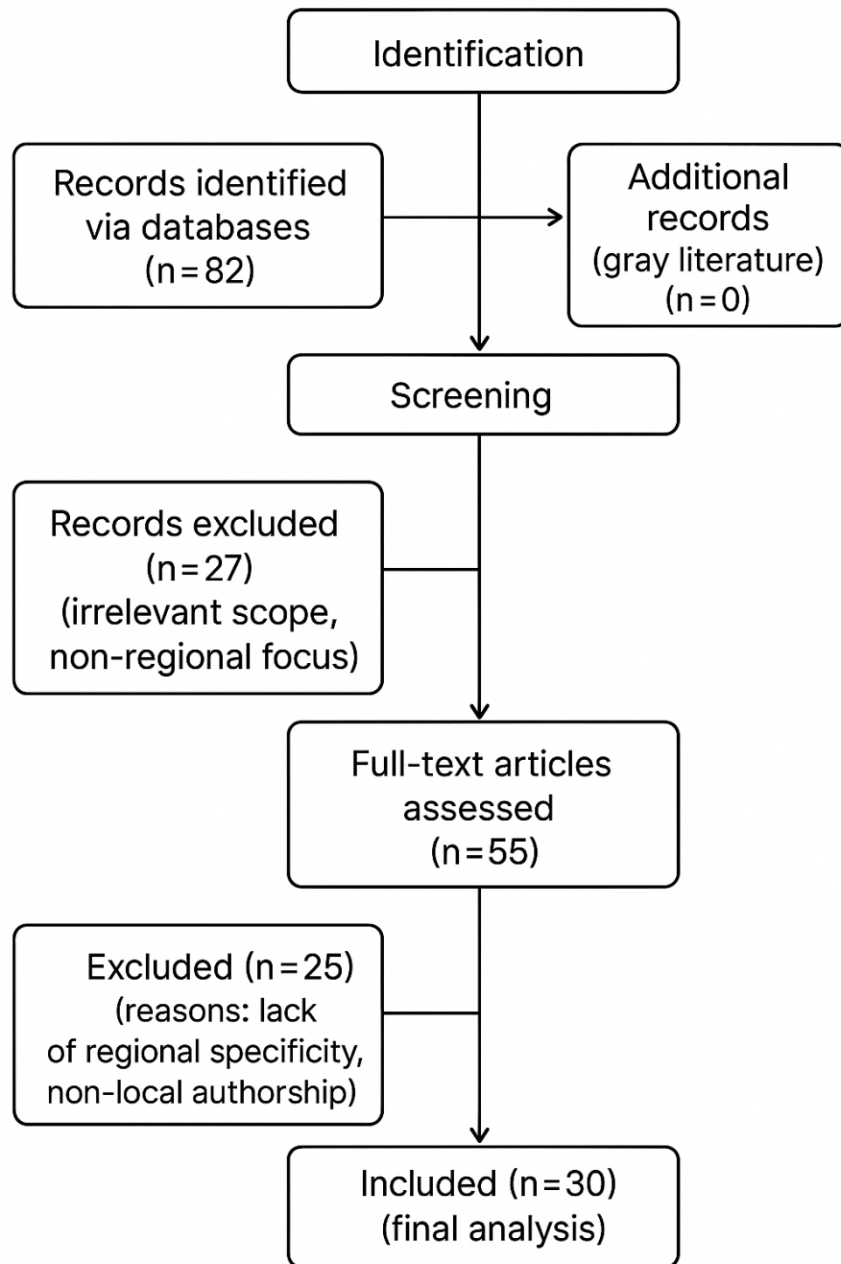


Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart showing the identification, screening and selection of articles

Findings and Discussions

Renegotiating Traditional Gender Roles: From Binary to Fluid Realities

Across the Great Lakes region, traditional gender binaries are being quietly but powerfully undone. What's emerging is a fluid spectrum of gender performances, some overt, others subtly woven into everyday life. Take the case of Ugandan women's rugby. As Ariyo (2022) observes, these athletes don't just play a so-called "male" sport; they transform it. By incorporating cultural symbols like *gomesi* fabrics into their kits, they reframe physical strength through a distinctly feminine and African lens.



Meanwhile, in rural Tanzania, Sukuma women's wrestling (*mshambao*) is permitted as a form of spectacle but remains excluded mainly from more influential spheres, such as local governance (Mkude & Shimba, 2025). The contrast reflects how public recognition doesn't always translate into power.

Elsewhere, constructions of masculinity are also being redefined. In South Africa, narratives of male emotional vulnerability (Young et al., 2025) coexist sometimes awkwardly with the brutal masculinity required in Congolese conflict zones. Maubert (2025) details how miners outwardly perform toughness while navigating same-sex intimacy in private. These cases challenge Judith Butler's theory of performativity, showing how colonial legacies, particularly Christian gender norms, intersect with indigenous understandings of gender in unexpected and often contradictory ways.

Colonial Legacies and the Myth of "Tradition"

This study highlights how many gendered traditions are colonial inventions dressed up as ancient customs. Land rights offer a clear example. In Kenya's Pokot community, colonial land titling systems effectively stripped women of their traditional usufruct rights, reframing exclusive male ownership as "customary" (Karmebäck et al., 2015). In Rwanda, however, the same colonial legal framework has been retooled after the genocide to promote women's inheritance rights, a complicated but strategic repurposing of oppressive systems (Jessee, 2020).

Language, too, has become a battleground. Tanzanian author Charwi (2025) illustrates how Swahili proverbs like *mke ni nguo* ("a wife is clothing") are being turned on their head by young people who remix such phrases through meme culture, shifting the narrative to *mke ni mwanamke* ("a wife is a person"). Decolonisation, then, is not about resurrecting some idealised precolonial past. It's about creating new hybrids blending concepts like the Igbo principle of *nneka* ("mother is supreme") with modern queer activism (Gohain, 2025). These strategies do not reject tradition outright; they repurpose it.

Religion: Reinforcement and Resistance

Religion, as always, is a double-edged sword. In Uganda, Pentecostal churches preach strict female submission, yet paradoxically empower women economically through prayer groups that double as microfinance collectives (Sengupta & Calo, 2024). In Zambia, spiritual ambiguity finds a home in unexpected corners. Congregations sometimes accept *bana chimba* - gender-fluid traditional healers not by affirming their identities, but by labelling them as spiritually "anointed" (Kaunda, 2017). It is a quiet form of inclusion, couched in theological language.

Meanwhile, Islamic feminism is gaining ground in places like Zanzibar, where women are drawing on religious texts to justify higher education. Otieno (2020) notes how female students invoke Khadija, the Prophet Muhammad's first wife and a respected merchant, to argue for their right to study. Yet this theological flexibility doesn't extend everywhere. In the DRC, for example, the same religious texts are deployed to condemn LGBTQ+ identities (Mertens & Myrntinen, 2019). The contradiction is striking: the same scripture can both restrict and liberate, depending on who's interpreting it and why.

Digital Media: Liberation or Neocolonialism?

Digital platforms are becoming new arenas for gender politics, empowering in some ways, but deeply flawed in others. In Malawi, women are using WhatsApp voice notes to dodge male surveillance of written conversations (Khoza, 2022). In Kenya, the #MyDressMyChoice campaign has gone viral on TikTok, where activists use *Sheng* slang to sidestep censorship and challenge outdated decency laws (Tolofari, 2025).



But not all digital activism is created equal. Facebook's algorithm has reportedly flagged Kinyarwanda terms like *umugabo* (husband) in queer contexts while allowing English equivalents to go unchecked (Ngabonziza et al., 2019). This raises serious concerns about linguistic bias and cultural erasure. The bigger question is whether African digital feminism is simply echoing Western movements like #MeToo or carving out its path, as seen in Uganda's #IsThatEvenLegal campaign against marital rape. The jury's still out, but it's clear that digital space is both a tool and a terrain to be fought over.

Cultural Production as Embodied Resistance

Art and performance have long been vehicles for social change, and gender resistance is no exception. In Burundi, fiction writers are introducing transgender characters inspired by the *ikimazi* spirit, a precolonial ancestor figure free from gender constraints (Gohain, 2025). These stories anchor non-binary identities not in imported theory, but in cultural memory. In Rwanda, humour serves a similar function. Comediennes mimic men's over-the-top "business calls" (*gukora telefoni*) to ridicule performative masculinity and expose its fragile foundations (Brown, 2016).

The policy implications are clear. Grassroots archives like FemmeFort's oral history projects should be supported before they are diluted by international NGOs. Tech regulation is also urgent, especially when algorithms threaten to erase indigenous gender vocabularies. Protecting these cultural expressions isn't just about preservation; it's about power.

Synthesis: A "Third Way" for African Gender Futures

Taken together, these findings challenge both romanticised notions of tradition and wholesale adoption of Western feminist frameworks. What's needed is a "third way" a strategic, flexible approach to gender justice. For instance, Rwanda's use of the "women's rights" narrative to secure political resources is a form of strategic essentialism that allows more fluid identities to flourish beneath the surface quietly.

Digital sovereignty also matters. Developing Swahili-language apps for gender education could counter the Anglophone bias of global tech platforms. Intergenerational dialogue offers another path forward, such as training grandmothers to act as "gender diplomats", translating feminist principles into familiar cultural terms, like reframing marital equality through *ujamaa* (collective family values).

And this is not just theoretical. In Mozambique, women farmers are already blending climate-smart agriculture with matrilineal land rituals (Arnfred, 2023), proving that African gender futures can be both rooted in heritage and boldly experimental. The next chapter of gender in Africa is not a return to the past or an imitation of the West; it is something entirely new, shaped by those who live it.

Conclusion

Gender in the Great Lakes region is neither a fixed identity nor a static role; it is a living, evolving negotiation. Across countries such as Burundi, the DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, individuals are continually reinterpreting what it means to be a man, a woman, or to exist beyond binary classifications. Often, this redefinition is marked by remarkable creativity, resilience, and courage.

The literature reviewed in this study reveals a region amid significant gender reconfiguration, one where identities are being reconstructed at the intersection of historical legacy, cultural expression, religious influence, and modern transformation. While many prevailing gender norms remain shaped by colonial structures and conservative religious narratives, these norms are far from universally accepted. On the contrary, they are being actively contested and reshaped, particularly through youth



activism, feminist theological frameworks, cultural production, and digital platforms. Although the pace of change varies and is frequently met with backlash, the momentum is unmistakably growing.

What emerges most strongly from this review is the centrality of agency, storytelling, and community in driving gender transformation. From women athletes in Uganda breaking traditional boundaries to queer writers in South Africa rewriting cultural scripts, from digital activists in Nairobi to rural families gradually renegotiating domestic roles – these stories highlight that gender change is not confined to theoretical debate; it is embedded in the rhythms of everyday life.

The implications of these findings are not merely academic; they resonate deeply with Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. This research underscores how local, culturally grounded actions are contributing to global gender equity. Whether by increasing women's participation in public life, challenging gender-based violence, or validating diverse gender identities, the region's evolving gender landscape is an essential part of the broader global movement towards equality. The evidence suggests that meaningful progress on SDG 5 depends on recognising and supporting these complex, context-specific efforts.

Ultimately, the Great Lakes region provides a compelling lens through which to understand the everyday work of gender justice. The stories and strategies emerging from this part of the continent are not only reflective, they are generative. They remind us that the pursuit of gender equality is ongoing, deeply embedded in local realities, and inherently human.

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