"Reclaiming Cultural Identity through Collective Memory: Applying Postcolonial Lens to Butler's Dawn, Mind of My Mind and Okorafor's Binti"

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Abstract

This paper delves into how cultural memory becomes a powerful force for reclaiming identity in Octavia Butler's *Mind of My Mind* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti*, two landmark works in the Africanfuturist tradition. Rather than treating memory as a mere storytelling device, both authors use it as a decolonial strategy as a way to resist erasure, navigate complex identities, and assert cultural sovereignty. In *Mind of My Mind*, Butler explores the psychic bonds of the Patternist network, showing how inherited memory can serve both as a tool of control and a site of resistance. Okorafor's *Binti*, on the other hand, centers embodied memory rituals, language, and ancestral ties as a means of holding onto identity in the face of alien worlds and unfamiliar knowledge systems. Okorafor's embodied memory in deeply rooted in indigenous epistemology. Grounded in postcolonial theory, Black speculative thought, and indigenous epistemology especially focussing on the theoretical lens provided by Stuart Hall, Cassandra Jones, Paul Gilroy, this paper argues that cultural memory acts as a living archive. It allows protagonists to evolve without losing their cultural roots. Ultimately, the paper frames Africanfuturism not just as a genre, but as a methodology for cultural reclamation where memory becomes a lifeline, a weapon, and a blueprint for imagining liberated futures.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Africanfuturism; Cultural Memory; Postcolonial Theory; Identity; Resistance; Hybridity

Culture is a deeply human phenomenon born from our interactions, shaped by our histories, and carried forward through shared experiences. While it often serves as a source of connection and identity, culture can also be wielded as a tool of power, used to justify hierarchies and assert dominance. In this way, it becomes central to the politics of representation and control. Far from being fixed or easily defined, culture is complex, elusive, and layered with history. It's a living system of meaning-making, constantly evolving through the ways people engage with their environments and with one another. The word culture itself comes from the Latin *cultura*, meaning cultivation or worship suggesting both growth and reverence. At its core, culture encompasses the everyday practices, belief systems, and symbolic expressions that emerge within communities. It lives in language, ritual, art, and custom. And it survives through transmission, passed from generation to generation through stories, gestures, and shared values. Culture is always in motion, shaped by historical forces, social norms, religious frameworks, and artistic production. Society, in turn, cannot exist without culture. It is through a shared cultural framework that individuals come together, forming communities with common understandings of meaning and value. As such, culture becomes both a foundation for communal identity and a contested space—where ideas about belonging, recognition, and worth are constantly negotiated.

Culture, as Edward B. Tylor famously defines it, is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society," encompassing nearly every aspect of human social life (qtd. in Avruch 1). Within the realm of Afrofuturism, this intricate cultural fabric becomes fertile ground for imagining futures that challenge oppressive histories and question long-standing norms. It offers a space where inherited customs can be reexamined—and, in many cases, transcended. Stuart Hall's influential essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (2005) provides a compelling framework for thinking about cultural identity in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. For Hall, identity is "a matter of becoming as well as being," shaped not only by historical continuity but also by rupture, representation, and transformation (Hall 445). He outlines two key perspectives: one that sees cultural identity as anchored in a shared historical past, and another that understands it as fluid and constantly evolving—formed through

difference, discontinuity, and change (446). Hall cautions against overlooking "the powerful creative force" that drives the "rediscovery" of "hidden histories," emphasizing that the substance of identity can be "found" in these acts of reclamation (444). He describes this process of rediscovery as "an act of imaginary reunification," one that "[imposes] an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas" (445). These representations of "imaginary reunification," Hall argues, are vital. They help mend "the rift of separation, the 'loss of identity'" inflicted by colonialism and slavery. More than symbolic gestures, they become "resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed" (445).

This duality between fragmentation and regeneration finds powerful expression in Octavia Butler's *Mind of My Mind*, where the protagonist dismantles the autocratic, centralized regime of her predecessor and replaces it with a more decentralized psychic Pattern. In Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti*, the migratory nature of cultural belonging takes center stage, as Himba traditions are not abandoned but adapted even in the unfamiliar terrain of interstellar space. Both narratives reflect Stuart Hall's understanding of diasporic identity as simultaneously fractured and generative, a theme that will be explored in greater depth below. Mark Dery, who coined the term *Afrofuturism*, frames the concept as a speculative mode that interrogates African-American experiences within the context of technoculture. His pointed question, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" captures the urgency and poignancy of Afrofuturism as a response to historical silencing and epistemic violence (Dery 180). Both Butler and Okorafor engage with this question through narratives in which characters wrestle with fragmented cultural memory and the challenge of reconstructing identity in post-apocalyptic or alien worlds. Protagonists like Mary in *Mind of My Mind* and *Binti* in *Binti* embody this struggle, piecing together cultural frameworks from remnants and echoes mirroring the diasporic anxieties surrounding lost heritage and the longing for continuity. Building on Dery's foundational theorization, Ytasha Womack expands the scope of Afrofuturism, repositioning it not merely as a literary genre but as a cultural lens and a methodology for healing. Her work underscores Afrofuturism's potential to serve as a space for reimagining identity, reclaiming history, and envisioning liberated futures.

Interrelation of Memory and Cultural Identity

Memory serves as a powerful catalyst in the works of Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor. Many of their characters are deeply engaged in the act of remembering, negotiating cultural identity as they move through shifting terrains of class, race, gender, nationality, and even planetary existence. In both authors' narratives, memory and cultural identity are not static elements but dynamic forces, shaping, challenging, and liberating the individuals who carry them. These characters often bear the weight of their pasts, yet memory also becomes a source of strength and transformation. It operates on multiple levels: personal, communal, ancestral, and cosmic. Butler and Okorafor weave memory and culture into their storytelling in ways that complicate traditional notions of selfhood, ancestry, and belonging. Their protagonists frequently inhabit posthumanist landscapes and mystical societies, where the familiar markers of identity are destabilized. In these altered environments, characters must confront themselves waging internal battles to define who they are amid cultural fragmentation and existential change.

Culture, in these narratives, is never monolithic. It is a richly diverse terrain, reflecting multicultural backgrounds and hybrid realities. The characters do not possess fixed identities; rather, their sense of self is continually negotiated through memory, embodiment, and acts of resistance. As Stuart Hall reminds us in *Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation* (1989), "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think… we should think of identity as a

'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 68). In this light, cultural identity becomes, as Hall puts it, "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 445). In this vein, Butler and Okorafor's characters navigate the complexities of memory and culture not only to survive, but to reimagine what it means to belong.

Reclaiming Cultural Identity through Collective Memory in Butler's, *Mind of My Mind* and Okorafor's *Binti*

In the speculative worlds of Africanfuturism, cultural memory is far more than a record of the past, it becomes a generative force that shapes identity, agency, and resistance. For communities that have endured erasure, displacement, and epistemic violence, memory emerges as a radical act of reclamation. It offers a way to assert cultural sovereignty in the face of assimilation and alienation, and to imagine futures rooted in ancestral knowledge. Octavia Butler's *Mind of My Mind* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* mobilize cultural memory to reclaim and reconfigure identity within speculative futures marked by hybridity, transformation, and uneven power dynamics. In *Mind of My Mind*, Butler constructs a psychic network, the Pattern where memory is both inherited and manipulated. This raises complex questions about autonomy, lineage, and control. Mary's rise as Patternmaster is not just a story of power; it's a reclamation of identity through ancestral memory and communal consciousness. Okorafor's *Binti* follows a Himba girl whose journey into interstellar academia forces her to navigate the tension between cultural tradition and alien knowledge systems. Her bodily rituals, the use of *otjize*, and her deep ancestral ties act as mnemonic anchors, tools that resist cultural dilution and affirm her identity in unfamiliar and often hostile environments.

Mind of My Mind operates on a deeply psychological level, crafting a psychic landscape that serves as a metaphor for cultural transmission. Mary's rise to the role of Patternmaster is more than a narrative of power, it symbolizes resistance against patriarchal authoritarianism and a reclamation of communal memory. The Pattern she creates is not just a network of telepathic abilities; it becomes a space of collective agency and shared resistance. In contrast, Doro's approach to memory is rooted in manipulation. Through centuries of breeding and control, he disrupts lineage and erases cultural inheritance, attempting to shape identity through domination rather than connection. Yet within Mary's Pattern, cultural memory survives not through bloodlines, but through communal consciousness. Mary, Doro's most cherished creation, is seen by him as the future of the race he has spent centuries engineering. Living in Forsyth, California, and gifted with telepathic powers, Mary is assigned the role of mother to Doro's future progeny. But this role forces her to confront the many layers of her identity. As circumstances shift, she begins to question her place in the evolving community. Rebellious by nature, Mary resists being reduced to a mere breeding vessel—just another name on Doro's long list of breeder-mothers. In a moment of disillusionment, she challenges Doro, only to be met with a response that confirms her worst fears. She realizes she is nothing more than a tool in his empire-building project, as she reflects: "Doro wanted an empire. He didn't call it that, but that was what he meant. Maybe I was just one more tool he was using to get it. He needed tools, because an empire of ordinary people wasn't quite what he had in mind" (Butler, *Mind of* 94).

Culture plays a critical role in this dynamic. Doro comes from a tradition where authority and centralized power are paramount. Mary, however, envisions something different. As someone shaped by a culture from the margins, she values collective growth and the decentralization of power. Her vision stands in stark contrast to Doro's centuries-long breeding program, which has been sustained through figures like Anyanwu. Cassandra Jones, in her influential essay *Memory and Resistance: Doro's Empire, Mary's Rebellion, and Anyanwu as Lieu de Mémoire in Octavia E. Butler's Mind of My Mind and Wild Seed* (2018), describes Anyanwu as a "Lieu de Mémoire", drawing on Pierre Nora's concept (Jones 701). According to Jones, Anyanwu's role as witness to centuries of telepathic history whether latent, active, or muted, makes her

more than a keeper of memory. She is history itself, physically present and deeply embedded in its unfolding. She embodies cultural continuity and ancestral memory, standing in opposition to the historical amnesia perpetuated by both Doro and, later, Mary. Anyanwu's resistance is quiet but profound. Rather than confronting the Patternist system head-on, she resists through her embodied memory, her unwavering connection to Igbo culture, and her refusal to be absorbed into a system that denies her history. In doing so, she becomes a living archive, a testament to alternative possibilities and the enduring power of cultural survival.

For centuries, Doro has ruled as an autocrat, driven by a singular ambition: to engineer a race that will obey him without question. His vision is rooted in a deeply hierarchical worldview, one that mirrors the age-old dynamic of master and slave, owner and owned. Those he brings into existence through his breeding program are treated as property, tools to serve his purpose. As Butler writes, "He treated them kindly, as servants who had been faithful. Their gratitude often made them his best servants in spite of their seeming weakness" (Butler, *Mind of* 5). Once they've fulfilled their role, he grants them limited freedom, but always within the bounds of his control. Cassandra Jones observes that "Doro considers those he breeds to be his 'by right' of his power to breed them. Seeing himself as God-like in his ability to genetically manipulate humans over time, growing their powers through his breeding program, Doro sees those he manipulates as little more than pawns on a chessboard that only he can see" (Jones 706). His regime, as Jones suggests, evokes the pre-colonial and antebellum periods of slavery, marked by domination, coercion, and reproductive control.

Mary's rebellion against Doro's oppressive rule signals a shift into a postcolonial framework. Her resistance and eventual overthrow of his authority position her as a postcolonial subject, fighting for autonomy and collective liberation. Critics like Lisa Yaszek have read *Mind of My Mind* through the lens of the neo-slave narrative, and Jones builds on this by offering a postcolonial interpretation. She writes, "In respect to historic colonialism, Doro's colonization is marked by the violent oppression of the people under his domination via torture, coercion, and reproductive control" (Jones 702). Jones posits, "the novel explores the tension between history and memory and the question of what our future might be without a firm grasp on the past" (Jones 699). When Mary questions Doro's sense of belonging to the people he has created, his response is chillingly detached voicing his non-belongingness: "A mutation. A kind of parasite. A god. A devil. You'd be surprised at some of the things people have decided I was" (Butler, *Mind of* 96). Of all these roles, it is the parasite that most accurately defines him. Doro no longer possesses a body of his own; he survives by inhabiting others, consuming their psychic energy, and discarding them when they are no longer useful. His origin story underscores this parasitic nature. During his initiation, a fatal process for most telepaths, he recounts, "I was one of twelve. I survived, the others didn't… I died then for the first time, and I took them. First my mother, then my father. I didn't know what I was doing. I took a lot of other people too, all in panic. Finally, I ran away from the village, wearing the body of one of my cousins, a young girl" (Butler, *Mind of* 97). In this moment, Doro ceases to be human. As he tells Mary, "I'm not black or white or yellow, because I'm not human, Mary" (Butler, *Mind of* 96). Having long severed ties to his human origins, Doro no longer recognizes the significance of identity markers like race, class, or gender. Though he was born Black, his parents Nubians from a village near the Nile; he dismisses this fact, claiming such distinctions matter only to humans. For him, race is irrelevant. He selects bodies based on psychic sensitivity, regardless of their racial background. In this way, Doro becomes a true parasite: feeding off the psychological energy of others, discarding bodies when they no longer serve his purpose, and perpetuating a system of control that erases individuality and cultural memory.

Doro has a plan for Mary, a calculated move in his centuries-long breeding program. As he tells Emma, "She's part of my latest attempt to bring my active telepaths together. I'm going to try to mate her with another telepath without killing either of them myself" (Butler, *Mind of* 10). But Mary's background stands in stark contrast to Doro's ambitions. Raised in a working-

class neighborhood, she reflects on her upbringing with sharp clarity: "Even the south-west side, where we live, wasn't a ghetto—or at least not a racial ghetto. It was full of poor bastards from any race you want to name—all working like hell to get out of there. Except us" (Butler, *Mind of* 20). Doro attempts to convince Mary that she is just like him, another parasite in a long line of psychic predators saying, "Your predecessors were parasites, Mary. Not quite the way I am, but parasites nevertheless. And so are you" (Butler, *Mind of* 102). But Mary resists this characterization. She draws a clear line between herself and Doro, telling her husband Karl, "I'm not the vampire he is. I give in return for my taking" (Butler, *Mind of* 224). For Mary, the distinction is vital. "She was a symbiont, a being living in partnership with her people. She gave them unity, they fed her, and both thrived. She was not a parasite, though he had encouraged her to think of herself as one. And though she had great power, she was not naturally, instinctively, a killer. He was" (Butler, *Mind of* 231).

Though she reluctantly accepts Doro's wish for her to become the mother of his future progeny, Mary redefines that role on her own terms. She constructs a vast psychic network, a mental web known as the Pattern. Through it, she connects telepaths and latents alike, initiating them and awakening their dormant abilities. She becomes, in essence, "some sort of mental queen bee, gathering her workers to her instead of giving birth to them. She would be totally dedicated, and difficult to reason with or limit. Difficult, or perhaps impossible" (Butler, *Mind of* 163). For Mary, the Pattern is everything. She is willing to sacrifice herself for its survival, and she instills a deep sense of belonging among its members. Her leadership inspires loyalty. As Jane tells Rachel, "I think he's [Doro] wrong to believe that Mary still belongs to him. With the responsibility she's taken on for all that she's built here, she belongs to us, the people, to all of us" (Butler, *Mind of* 222). Doro, threatened by Mary's growing influence, urges her to stop expanding the Pattern. But Mary stands firm. "You've been watching them die for thousands of years …You've learned not to care. I've been saving them for two years, but I've already learned the opposite lesson. I care" (Butler, *Mind of* 208). She pleads with him: "Join us, Doro. If you destroy us, you'll be destroying part of yourself. All the time you spent creating us will be wasted. Your long life, wasted. Join us" (Butler, *Mind of* 218). When Doro refuses, Mary turns to the collective strength of her Pattern. Drawing energy from its members, she confronts and ultimately destroys him—ending his autocratic reign. Her strategy of decentralizing power and fostering communal responsibility triumphs over Doro's rigid centralization and authoritarian control. In the end, Mary proves stronger, dismantling the seemingly indestructible Doro and ushering in a new era of psychic community and shared agency.

Through her distinct vision of Afrofuturism what she terms *Africanfuturism*—Nnedi Okorafor offers a cultural landscape deeply rooted in African traditions and cosmology. In *Binti*, she foregrounds the role of cultural memory and African heritage as central to identity, especially in unfamiliar and alien environments. The novella follows its protagonist, Binti, on a transformative journey to Oomza University, an intergalactic institution of higher learning. For Binti, culture is not just background, it is the essence of her being, the source of her strength, and the anchor of her identity in a world that often misunderstands or dismisses it. Throughout her journey, Binti encounters two dominant cultures: the Khoush, who view themselves as superior to the Himba people, and the alien Meduse, with whom she shares a surprising biological and emotional connection. The Khoush routinely belittle Himba traditions, harboring deep-seated biases. Yet, despite this hostility, Binti chooses to broker peace between the Khoush and the Meduse, an act that requires her to undergo a dramatic physical and emotional transformation.

In Himba tradition, space travel is discouraged. As Binti explains, her people "prefer to explore the university by traveling inward, as opposed to outward" (Okorafor, *Binti* 21). Her decision to accept admission to Oomza University defies her family's expectations, and as she leaves her home, she carries her culture with her, not just symbolically, but quite literally. The cultural

bias she faces is immediate and visceral. "I was the first Himba in history to be bestowed with the honor of acceptance into Oomza Uni. The hate messages, threats to my life, laughter and ridicule that came from the Khoush in my city made me want to hide more" (Okorafor, *Binti* 29). These reactions echo colonial mindsets, resentment toward the progress of those deemed inferior. Okorafor uses Binti's journey to expose both the prejudice directed at indigenous African communities and their desire to break free from culturally imposed limitations. At the space station, Binti is subjected to overt discrimination. A Khoush woman tugs at her braids, smears her fingers with otjize, and sneers, "These 'dirt bathers' are a filthy people," later remarking that it smells "like a shit" (Okorafor, *Binti* 16). This moment of cultural violence reflects Paul Gilroy's assertion in *Black Atlantic* (1993) that "The especially crude and reductive notions of culture that form the substance of racial politics today are clearly associated with an older discourse of racial and ethnic difference" (Gilroy 7).

Binti's cultural practices: her dress, otjize, anklets, and edan are often met with bias, but also with curiosity. She explains to a ship technician, "I told him that I was Himba…I explained to him the tradition of my people's skin care and how we wore the steel rings on our anklets to protect us from snakebites. He looked at me for a long time, the others in my group staring at me like a rare bizarre butterfly" (Okorafor, *Binti* 21). In *Binti*, tradition and technology are not opposites, they are intertwined. Her hair, thick and carefully braided, is encoded with meaning. When Heru counts her braids, she reflects, "I wanted to tell him that there was a code, that the pattern spoke my family's bloodline, culture and history. That my father had designed the code and my mother and aunties had shown me how to braid it into my hair" (*Okorafor, Binti* 23). Even the act of applying otjize, a clay mixture infused with fragrant oils is a form of cultural resistance. As Cesaroni et al. note, such practices "make Indigenous life visible" and "introduce the West to other ways of knowing" (Cesaroni et al., *Overrepresentation* 116). Binti's pride in her Himba identity is evident throughout, and her hair becomes a living archive of her lineage. Her cultural markers are not just aesthetic—they are mnemonic devices, anchoring her in ancestral memory. This cultural pride extends even to her interactions with the alien Meduse. When Okwu expresses curiosity about otjize, Binti explains, "It is otjize, only my people wear it and I am the only one of my people on the ship. I'm not Khoush." … "Mostly…mostly clay and oil from my homeland. Our land is desert, but we live in the region where there is sacred red clay." … "Because my people are sons and daughters of the soil" (Okorafor, *Binti* 47). This declaration is a powerful act of cultural affirmation. Despite her brilliance in mathematics and technology, Binti remains deeply rooted in her heritage—proudly identifying as a daughter of the soil. Otjize, in this context, becomes more than a cultural symbol. It possesses healing properties, as seen in its effect on Okwu and the Meduse chief. It functions as a mnemonic device, aligning with Stuart Hall's view of cultural identity as shaped through historical and symbolic practices. The clay becomes a portable archive of Himba heritage, resisting erasure even in alien settings. In this way, Okorafor challenges colonial narratives that frame Africa as technologically backward. She redefines the relationship between character and land, "considering how place can be encountered as more than a mute backdrop for young people's discoveries" (Nxumalo & Cedillo 104). Through Binti, she offers a vision of Africanfuturism where tradition and innovation coexist, and where cultural memory becomes a force of resistance, survival, and transformation.

In *Binti*'s speculative universe, Nnedi Okorafor envisions Black futures where technology is not monopolized by dominant groups but becomes a source of empowerment and innovation for marginalized communities. The Himba, Binti's tribe, are the planet's primary suppliers of astrolabes, sophisticated devices that resemble contemporary smartphones in their communicative and computational functions. Binti and her family are masterful creators of these tools, blending tradition with technological ingenuity. As Binti recounts, "My astrolabe was thoroughly scanned by the travel security officer. I had to give them access to every aspect of my life, including myself, my family, and all of my future plans. His hands, suddenly steady,

worked the dials as though they were his own, and he whispered a few specific equations to coax it open" (Okorafor, *Binti* 13). This moment underscores how the Himba's technological expertise challenges stereotypes about non-Western societies being technologically backward. In *Binti*, the astrolabe is not a futuristic anomaly, it is embedded in long-standing cultural practices. As Nxumalo and Cedillo argue, "the recontextualization of African cultural potentialities" disrupts the primacy of Euro-Western knowledge systems (99). Okorafor's narrative reframes African innovation as both ancestral and forward-looking.

Toward the end of the novella, Binti undergoes a profound transformation after being stung by Okwu, becoming part Meduse and part Himba. Her metamorphosis positions her in a liminal space—what Homi Bhabha calls the "third place," neither fully here nor there, but somewhere in between. As a hybrid being, Binti becomes a cultural bridge, navigating and negotiating between two vastly different worlds. This tension between nature and culture, between Indigenous knowledge and Western epistemologies, runs throughout Binti's journey. Initially, she struggles with the contradictions of her identity, especially when confronted with unfamiliar cultures. But in moments of crisis aboard the spaceship, she discovers the life-saving power of her village's traditional knowledge. The otjize, a clay mixture she wears with pride, mysteriously heals the wounded Meduse. Her edan, a seemingly inert artifact, self-activates to repel an attack. These instances reveal that scientific insight and technological creativity are not exclusive to the West. By centering the astrolabe in the narrative, Okorafor asserts that African cultures possess their own sophisticated systems of knowledge and invention.

Conclusion:

In *Mind of My Mind* and *Binti*, Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor craft speculative worlds where cultural memory isn't just a backdrop, it's a lifeline. It becomes a vital force for reclaiming identity in the face of control, alienation, and radical transformation. Through Mary's psychic evolution within the Patternist network and Binti's interstellar journey as a Himba girl navigating ancestral tradition alongside alien knowledge, both authors treat memory as a living archive, one that refuses to be erased and insists on cultural continuity. Butler's narrative probes the politics of inherited power and communal consciousness, showing how memory can be used to dominate but also to resist. Okorafor, on the other hand, roots memory in the body, in ritual, language, and spiritual connection. For Binti, these practices become anchors of identity, even in the most unfamiliar and hostile environments. In both texts, cultural memory is not a passive recollection of the past, it's an active, ongoing reclamation. It's how the protagonists assert who they are, preserve where they come from, and navigate the complexities of hybridity without losing their cultural integrity.

Ultimately, Butler and Okorafor show us that speculative fiction especially Africanfuturism is more than imaginative storytelling. It's a decolonial method, a way of using memory as a tool for survival, transformation, and cultural sovereignty. Through Mary and Binti's journeys, we're reminded that imagining liberated futures requires a return to the past, not just to remember it, but to re-member it: to piece it back together, to make it whole again.

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