

The Academic As A Public Intellectual: Olu Obafemi's Ideas And Ideals

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The role of a public intellectual is often a multifaceted one. The public intellectual employs informed perspectives to penetrate and reveal progressive insights into the workings of their world. Olu Obafemi, a Nigerian academic, foremost literary critic, human rights activist, creative writer, and newspaper columnist, fits into this description as his works significantly impact his immediate society. In his literary oeuvre, newspaper columns, interviews, speeches, and role as a public servant, Obafemi reveals himself as a public intellectual in different variations and forms. This essay focuses on the ideas and ideals of Obafemi as a committed public intellectual using, for illustration, a series of interviews, his media works, his speeches, and personal notes to the author. His speeches and media works are viewed through his language and communicative style to portray him as a thinker and dissenter. Using the lens of critical analysis, rhetorical analysis, and cultural pluralism, this paper establishes that Obafemi is a public intellectual who has deployed his intellectual gifts to promote the cause of ordinary citizens by critiquing the ills of society.

Keywords: Olu Obafemi, Public Intellectual, Social Commitment, Ideas and Ideals

Introduction

It is pertinent to state that the concept of, and what it means to be, a public intellectual is quite unstable. In previous studies on the topic of who should be called a public intellectual, the concluding opinions are usually fluid and academics, social scientists, and educators have all provided different dimensions to the definition of this concept. To corroborate this, John Issitt and Duncan Johnson could not easily resolve their discussion on whom to call a public intellectual (Issitt & Johnson, 2013). In their paper, they offer “a minimal introductory brief” mainly voiced by Issitt and conclude that:

there is no institutional agenda save wanting to support the exchange of ideas and explore the interesting topic of the public intellectual but what they say is wholly up to

them. If they press me for some starting suggestions, I say that I am looking for what the public intellectual might be, what it might become, its tensions, its changes, its history, its locations, its roles, its responsibilities, its status and its ideological conditions. If they want even more direction, I say that I'm interested in how they feel about their role, what identity they feel they should have / or adopt and what voice they think they have. (p. 1)

Similarly, in his discussions and notes on public intellectuals, Olu Obafemi, a distinguished Nigerian academic, foremost literary critic, human rights activist, creative writer, and newspaper columnist, concludes that there are different variations surrounding the conceptualization of who a public intellectual is: "I have ventured on two previous public occasions dedicated to the commemoration of two seniors-friends and elder brothers—Professors Bolaji Akinyemi and Olatunji Dare—one a political scientist in the political arena and the other a media practitioner—to render fluid definitions" (Obafemi, 2012 p. 3). Due to this lack of specificity and pinning the roles and responsibilities of a public intellectual to a particular or single function, it will be important to highlight the different spheres that a public intellectual might fit into. In other words, those to be regarded as public intellectuals are those who engage in the affairs of the public and offer their opinions to the various discourses of their immediate society. This assertion is in line with the thoughts of Obafemi as he believes that a public intellectual should be heavily involved in the happenings of his immediate environment. Thus, Obafemi suggests that the examples of two senior colleagues he commemorated in a public speech—Professors Bolaji Akinyemi and Olatunji Dare, as mentioned above—underscore the profile of a public intellectual through "the specific spheres of their commitment as intellectuals," and their participation "in the public affairs/public policy discourse of the Nigerian society and perhaps the world" (Obafemi 2012 p. 4).

Hence, it may appear quite easy to answer the critical question of who is a public intellectual and how Olu Obafemi's life and work fit into that answer. A permissible and moderately apt definition of the public intellectual refers to someone who commits themselves to work with their intellect through critical thinking and reading, research, writing and reflecting about society. Based on the foregoing clarifications, this paper focuses on the work and personality of Obafemi, which fits into this definition of a public intellectual in different ways. The paper draws from compilations of interviews and conversations in "The Toyin Falola Interviews" (Falola, forthcoming) Obafemi's literary texts, and popular articles in the Nigerian journalistic space, as well as from some of his keynote speeches in academic settings.

Through the Lens of Cultural Pluralism: Obafemi's Ideals on Peaceful Co-existence and Social Cohesion

Born in April of 1950, the future Professor Obafemi was raised in an environment where the prospect of education was seen by the few prescient people who took the bold decision to send their wards away for a Western education. Behind every Nigerian who was educated in the colonial period was a suspense-filled history. After all, schools were conceived as an avenue for intellectual baptism, usually from the colonial imperialists' perspective; yet, they were also seen as a forest of identity reconstruction, whereby African cultural retrieval would be difficult.

For this reason, the reluctance of African parents to send their wards to school

was evident in their outright denial of enrollment opportunities for their children and in how they engaged them in farming. However, those who had the option must show a compelling reason why their education investment was not ill-conceived. Obafemi fell into this category, and the present results of his academic brilliance are proof of his commitment.

After his elementary education in the present-day Kogi State in Nigeria, he proceeded to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he studied English. During that time in Nigeria's university history (and even in the whole of Africa), there were not many institutions that offered postgraduate studies. This meant that progressing in one's academic pursuit was dependent on distinctive performance in order to attract willing sponsors or government scholarships to continue in their intellectual quest. Therefore, it was not surprising that Obafemi continued his postgraduate education at the University of Sheffield and the University of Leeds where he earned his Master's and Ph.D. degrees, respectively.

Having acquired these remarkable academic credentials, Obafemi was battle-ready to enter into the African intellectual market to maximum impact. However, it became a challenge for him to make his mark in the literary atmosphere with Chinua Achebe, as well as Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, and D. O. Fagunwa, as his Nigerian literary ancestors. From Ibadan, for example, Soyinka had already gone to Leeds to leave his literary footprints in the Yorkshire enclave of the UK.

More beneficial was the fact that post-colonial Nigerian and African political infrastructures left sufficient socio-political and socio-cultural situations in pragmatically difficult conditions, allowing for a site of literary exploration to emerge indiscriminately. In other words, the area of engagement was vast, and what was necessarily required was the discerning ability of writers to see these situations and, in the end, turn them into helpful information sites to negotiate social equity, cultural rejuvenation, and political freedom for the subalterns. Therefore, we are not overestimating Obafemi's intellectual talent when we infer that his body of work has contributed to shaping public consciousness in resisting social inequities and promoting good governance especially as it affects the less privileged members of the Nigerian society.

Obafemi belongs to the distinguished category of Africans whose early life was an admixture of African cultural traditions and Western culture, infused with formal education. They can be said to be the last generation of Nigerians who experienced the beauty of African customs, traditions, and mores combined in some uncontaminated form. Before the cultural deracination of African values especially in the modern era, several rural settlements in the continent were immune to the blinding effects of imperial cultural encroachment, which later decomposed the people's cultural traditions and distorted their orientations. These settlements enjoyed a certain degree of immunity from the insanity of colonization since the imperialists abhorred interior African environments and because of this, they had limited influence in many rural settings. Their engagement with any rural environment was determined by the quantity of raw materials they could extract from the place. This meant that the more distant a people or community was from direct imperial power, the safer their cultural traditions were. They would remain original to themselves and not become cultural outcasts, forced by the prevailing manipulations of these external conquerors.

Bunu, where Obafemi comes from, is a sub-group of the Yoruba, which means that they share a common linguistic and philosophical ancestry. Obafemi enjoyed the beautiful combination of African cultures and civilizations because he witnessed

some cultural traditions in their older forms. For instance, during his childhood in Okun, there was the annual celebration of indigenous traditions, such as the masquerade festival, where participants treated their audience to the beautiful spectacle of Yoruba artistic performance in oral and acrobatic displays. Through the celebration of ancestors, the Yoruba pass on their indigenous values and social behavior to younger generations. Contrary to the Europeans' misconception that these practices were used to display Africans' unholy traits, the worship of unseen forces, or the conjuring of spirits for nefarious reasons, African peoples use these cultural platforms in ways that a non-member or non-practitioner would not easily understand at first glance.

For one, the masquerade activities that graced Obafemi's childhood experience, along with other Yoruba or Africans of that time, are an important part of the people's culture where they celebrate their ancestors whom they believe can see them from the realm they occupy. The system achieves several things, including the validation of their perception about the triadic levels of existence—the unborn, the born, and the dead—and to celebrate their existence as it is the umbilical cord between the past and the present. But beyond these, masquerade celebrations have additional value. They are regarded as conflict resolution agencies in many African societies, mediating between warring factions of family members, communities, or resolving other disputes that cause chaos in communities. As such, young people who witness these events are tutored about their impending roles as members of society and their expected contributions to that society's development.

African societies are a site of numerous socio-cultural activities where different events serve interrelated functions. Cultural osmosis takes place during these events, and as a result, the people extend the lifespan of their cultural traditions to future generations. Aside from the social development value that these activities represented in Obafemi's childhood, they provided enough entertainment to ease public tension. The entertainment segment always features the cultural dance, rites procession, and wrestling, among other things. Many ideas are shared and ultimately evolve to the point where society will integrate those that are applicable to them and discard those that are morally unappealing. Unfortunately, some of these practices have become rare since the time of Obafemi's childhood. However, anyone familiar with Obafemi's level of cultural rootedness and cosmopolitanism would understand the connection between him and his rich cultural background.

Again, Obafemi's childhood experiences enable us to understand the gendered cultural underpinnings of the Yoruba, as well as of many other African societies. Like many other Africans, he came from gendered roots because his people recognize the significant place of women in society. Better than the ways children relate with their paternal siblings, the Yoruba have a socio-cultural arrangement that emphasizes women's roles, and as a result, various elements of "matrilineal" connections. This structure reveals a great deal about the people. With the widespread misconception that Africans are solely patriarchal, a number of anthropologists believe that the odds are stacked against women in the social makeup (McClaurin, 2001). This is not only contrived, but it also shows that there is an information or knowledge deficit about these civilizations. Women have their roles in the social arrangement in the same way that men have theirs, and they are never considered as being below men in the social hierarchy. In Yoruba society, there are few social positions from which females are excluded. Every trade and many endeavors require the registration of both genders in equal measure. Being treated to this kind of ideological configuration helps to facilitate a knowledge of gender equality. Sadly,

the above equality no longer exists as a result of colonial gender norms.

However, Obafemi's childhood experience would be grossly under-represented if the colonial or European influence were not discussed. Fortunately for him, he belongs to a generation that accessed Western education when it was both poisonous and liberating. In the former case, Western education was toxic for African children because it challenged their existential values and ridiculed their inherited epistemology. This was done by subtly promoting the narrative that the African cultural infrastructure was weak and inappropriate for the development of a worthwhile civilization. African children, even while in the African classroom, got the impression that their indigenous education system was inferior and dangerous to their own sanity. In essence, the classroom became an abattoir of identity lynching where the pupils' cultural existence was sacrificed at the altar of Western epistemology. The reincarnation of their indigenous structures was not possible until certain courageous African intellectuals began to challenge the established misinformation so that the future of Africans would not be left entirely for the Europeans to determine. Obafemi went to a missionary school for his primary school education. However, since he was well-versed in African cultural traditions, he was able to strike a balance.

Proximity brings about the stimulation of ideas, and from Obafemi's extensive experience, it is undeniable that he has been a product of multiple cultures. He was born in Nigeria, one of the modern-day monuments to cultural pluralism, and was raised in border areas where two or more civilizations still exchange culture very closely and easily. Okun, his ancestral lineage, shares geographical boundaries with different cultures, making cultural osmosis very easy for him. Bordered by the Hausa, Igala and Ebara people, it is understandable that ideas would flow in the head of this intellectual figure. In the early period of Nigeria's independence, the regional governments embarked on various projects, including the sponsorship of an educational system that would promote excellence. Obafemi had his secondary education in a different cultural setting under the northern regional government. Although he was gaining the necessary knowledge in these schools, he was simultaneously absorbing the cultural information that would eventually help him navigate his journey as a Nigerian and a Yoruba icon with a stake in the provincial and national eco-political developments.

After informally imbibing an assortment of cultural and social history, Obafemi continued his education in England at the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds, where he obtained an English education. As an undergraduate student, he received some training as a journalist. As expected, Obafemi did extraordinarily well in his studies both at home and abroad, which prepared him for the excellence he was later known for in his career. Upon graduation, Obafemi's academic adroitness was put to a practical test. His knowledge acquisition in journalism was immediately set in motion when he was employed as a journalist at The Herald Publishing House in Ilorin in 1973. There, he worked exceptionally well and built a robust ethical structure that continued to dictate his trajectory even when he considered pursuing a career as an academic where he would eventually build a greater profile for himself. After nearly five decades of service as an academic, he influenced the Nigerian educational system. Even after retirement in 2020, he became more valuable in the public sector where he was engaged in different capacities.

The Socially Committed Intellectual: Obafemi's Ideas on Leadership and Development

The assumption that we can control the activities around us, though understandable, can be open to both contention and interpretation because of the timeless quandary between fate and faith. With the latter, humans depend primarily on their intuitive capacity to influence activities around them, while many seek divine collaboration to unlock the potential to affect their wishes. However, with the former, the situation is nuanced. No matter how cautious and intellectually active one would later become, it is difficult to determine either the season or the timeframe when one would arrive on earth and the level-playing environment where their brilliance would be put into use. Our struggles and concerns are also shaped by context and historical circumstances. In the Maiden Valedictory Lecture (2021) delivered by Obafemi discussing the state of affairs of Nigeria, he notes the importance of creating an ideal society and how leaders should help in its creation:

Every society is shaped by socio-political and economic values. This implies that social, economic, and political factors are the fundamental metrics for measuring the state of any nation. Some nations are adjudged greater than the others based on the extent to which their people are willing to propel the factor of national development and national reconstruction. Each nation is dynamic in the ways in which it has established her socio-political and economic perspectives. Every nation possesses the propensity for development to its desired level. It is therefore imperative that a nation should strive to fulfil the dreams and visions of its people for an ideal society. My concern, and that of all committed humanists in our country, is to mobilize our creative resources for the realisation of our national ideal. (Obafemi, 2021 p.3)

For Obafemi, one of the most prolific intellectuals of his generation, it cannot be over emphasized that fate had placed an assignment before him given that he was raised under a post-colonial umbrella, with its overdose of administrative incompetency. Although one would argue that not everyone who is physically available in the socio-politically cancerous timeline undertakes the duties of social liberation through their intellectual engagements with ravaging issues, it must be said that such an assumption would be ridiculing the fact that some people invest more effort than others in society's development.

With Obafemi professionally advancing against the backdrop of Africans' cultural and political de-articulation supervised by European imperialists, it became a natural call for him to dedicate his intellectual agility and vibrancy to challenging not only institutionalized structures but also to interrogating moral and infrastructural legacies. Not many members of his generation who undertook this social responsibility demonstrated the level of commitment Obafemi did. His history of dedication has been a powerful rod, dividing the seas of uncertainties for him to make an impact.

Being a playwright, poet, scholar, professional biographer, translator, and professor of English are markers of Obafemi's academic brilliance and an indicator of what sets him apart. In these various fields, he has made impressive landmarks, coupled with the remarkable impact that identifies him as an exceptional character in the culture of writing. As a playwright, for example, he published *Nights of*

a *Mystical Beast* (1986), *The New Dawn* (1986), *Suicide Syndrome* (1993), *Naira Has No Gender* (1993), *The Love Twirls of Adiiu-Olodumare* (2016), and *Iyunade* (2016). These texts addressed different socio-political conditions with varied success. For example, the *Nights of a Mystical Beast* is a canonical play which reflects the post-colonial and post-truth decadence in which Nigeria is circumscribed. The play is characterized by ambivalent insensitivity to the impending plight of citizens subjected to the abuses of power in the hands of those with whom power is reposed.

At the early stages of the post-independence era, political insincerity was prevalent and the playwright effectively captures the events that continue to frustrate the efforts of Nigerian civil society. The play dispassionately examines the propensity of Nigeria's post-independence era elites for backstabbing, and how they have chosen to backstab the innocent Nigerians looking to them for economic and social redemption.

Most certainly, any writer who wishes to become a social emancipator must first begin by being the people's conscience, which will involve serving as the moral inspiration for their social attitudes. By the 1980s, people were experiencing deprivations of great magnitude, abuse of unimaginable proportion and economic decline of accelerated speed. These were all byproducts of the irresponsible leadership that beleaguered them, and they needed a moral scaffold that could support them when they wanted to fall to ethical pieces.

The preceding position of support, which writers always occupy in the society, and the opportunity to serve in this position, is determined when the writers are faced with the barrage of political injustices. Obafemi demonstrates that he is worthy of critics' plaudits for his literary engagements. Having produced works that exposed the growing decadence in society, signaled by the political impoverishment observed in the corridors of power, he released another important literary text whose title is couched in a query—*Dark Times Are Over?* (2006). The play, an evaluation of Nigerian society's challenges, remains one of his most vital intellectual Trojan horses. It pierces through the conscience of its audience/readers about how centers of knowledge production are fast becoming an arid land that incubates delinquent and morally reprehensible behaviors. Only the hiss of the highest contempt imaginable in the Yoruba speech pattern would capture such idiocy—*Shio!*

Like the questions posed by Shakespeare's historical drama, *Julius Caesar* (1991), by the character Marc Anthony, in the historical indictment against his person about Julius Caesar's death, *Dark Times Are Over?* interrogates society because of its active complicity in the erosion of values in knowledge generation centers namely universities. Contrary to what such citadels ought to represent, some of them have become grounds for producing intellectual prostitutes, religious tensions, social injustices, divisive agendas, and pervasive cultism. Some others have imported religious crises into the educational setting by their erection of religious centers in schools, which allows for the continuation of the internal contradictions already ignited by religious pluralism. Like his predecessors, Obafemi has established the necessary impression that drama and theatre can be used as socio-cultural development instruments. Play on!

Besides his literary successes exemplified by *Dark Times Are Over?*, Obafemi has equally critiqued the country's socio-political conditions through his scholarly publications. One significant example in this category is his book *Nigerian Writers on the Nigerian Civil War* (1992). Here, Obafemi uses the piece to x-ray many writers' works on the historical Civil War, which became a painful thorn in the national flesh. While doing this, he does not forget to explore the war's basis and the corresponding devastating consequences that greeted its demise.

From the very ashes of the Civil War, which lasted for thirty months (between 6th July 1967 and 15th January 1970), arose xenophobia, ethnic hatred, political discordance, and other multiple divisions. Given the persistence of these issues in contemporary times, the writer might assume that the problems ravaging the country are congenital. But when scholars address a sociopolitical problem, it is not to add to the issues already on the ground but to find a standard solution to a collective problem. This is why Obafemi would later write about the beauty of Nigerian culture in *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision* (1996). The abiding theme of the work is that the country is rich in its cultural diversity, and the people can tap into this for collective advantage. In essence, Obafemi's prolific nature can never be in doubt. He has convincingly proven himself as an intellectual who continually raises the bar and maintains a brilliant consistency. The man continues to break boundaries and receiving national and international accolades is a crown to his efforts.

Growing up under Nigeria's sociopolitical conditions enabled him to understand the expanding gap between the privileged in political circles and the unlucky masses. The latter's fortune is perpetually tied to the apron strings of the former. Sadly, the occupants of the positions in the former category are unapologetic about their financial deprivation of the defenseless masses. Inequity continues to grow and class stratification has become so pronounced that the future has a bleak outlook.

Even when the subaltern understands the source of their political and economic decapitation, they are eternally disallowed from airing their grievances. When they do, these agitations have minimal or no social significance. The horrible situation that confronts them, notwithstanding, public intellectuals—who serve as their conscience—do not cease to represent them at given opportunities. One of them is Obafemi. The source of his intellectual and literary motivation was the gross class stratification imposed on Nigerian and African societies by political elites. To construct a morally upright society takes the conscious sacrifice of personal industry and a sentiment for collective goals.

It was in this thinking, therefore, that he decided to identify with the subaltern in his writings and engagement. He believes that even when individuals benefitting from the rot refuse to reconsider the appropriation of a better social and political philosophy, the nature of tyranny can change the course of events to everyone's disadvantage. When an equitable financial flow is difficult to achieve, the overstretched system can soon explode with consequences that may not be easy to contain. Hence, Obafemi ensures that his works are constant harbingers to the few privileged ones in society. He believes the system created by the privileged few could turn on them, and his works are a message of hope to the helpless.

In essence, Obafemi can comfortably be described as a committed activist-writer who challenges political domination by the privileged class with its patronage network. He is a celebrated writer whose engagement of political representatives who encouraged this social condition is not motivated by vindictiveness or bitter ambition. Instead, he continues to challenge them with the need to build a just society in which everyone can benefit. The tentacles of Obafemi's academic ingenuity spread to the international community too, as he has made several appearances in the Black diaspora where he gave notable contributions to biting social issues. In an international conference in 2012,¹ he was generally evaluative and

1 Olu Obafemi delivered a Lecture to participants of the Executive Intelligence Management Course, Institute of Security Studies, Abuja, "Effective and Functional Communication Skills", February, 2012.

particularly scientific in his diagnosis of the world's current security situation, and he suggested different ways to forge a path out of the doldrums.

Nigeria is currently immersed in a cancer of internal violence that has birthed ethnic panic and suspicion. Insecurity in the country has become a hydra-headed challenge that threatens the country's stability and frustrates all efforts at social rebuilding. This is more disturbing in the context of a novel coronavirus that challenges the global security and safety architecture of the country. Apart from the growing concerns that this has ignited in the hearts of many, it has equally ridiculed the knowledge and research infrastructure of the intellectual elite whose years of knowledge production and research engagement did little to mitigate the damage of the novel coronavirus. The devastating effects on developing countries such as Nigeria hardly need to be imagined.

To successfully combat this situation means that the government must create an enabling atmosphere for dialogue where proper recognition would be given to the country's multi-ethnic colors for progress. Of course, we are aware that Obafemi continues to provide fresh perspectives on the country's issues, and his revolutionary dispositions cannot be neglected. Through his efforts, people have added their mental resources and redefined the simple gift embedded in them. As President of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) between 2001 and 2004, with the writer-journalist Nduka Otiono as the General Secretary, he encouraged writing on an extensive scale. In 2018, the Governing Board of the Nigerian National Merit Award (NNMA) considered him worthy of being honored with the Nigerian National Order of Merit (NNOM) in the Humanities category. This award was one of many he has obtained. His nationalist posture, above all, reinforces his commitment to his field, his nation, his people, and the world at large.

The responses elicited from Obafemi when asked about the roles of a dramatist or a creative artiste in the development of their immediate society are inspiring. People can quickly identify with a medical doctor's job, but not many individuals know the roles that creative professionals play in society. To their general audience, dramatists and literary scholars are mere entertainers whose relevance ends with their ability to make the audience laugh. However, the social and cultural engineering activities that people in the drama or entertainment industry undertake as their responsibility goes beyond their commitment to providing comic relief to a burdened society or interlude to the barrage of social challenges. In the spirit of public intellectuals, they have the self-assigned duty of serving as society's conscience while also being known as the eyes of their cultural identity, seeing far into the future and making necessary indications to encourage planning and to avoid imminent melancholy. Even when their role goes primarily unnoticed, they remain dedicated to their profession with a fantastic work ethic. Obafemi belongs to this category, and from my interviews with him, one can deduce the assortment of ideas he has contributed to society through his works. A number of these will be extensively discussed shortly.

Incidentally, Obafemi is both a literary artist and a scholar-critic. More importantly, he has remained successful in the two domains. As a literary critic, Obafemi's cardinal philosophy of evaluating a work of art is to consider its practical importance. Like other African writers on the continent, Obafemi does not write just for pleasure. He shares the commitment to social responsibility with them. African countries are ravaged by insecurity, disease, economic degradation, political insincerity, among many other ills. Therefore, it is only logical that intellectuals, especially those from the literary sphere, reflect these challenges in their work to be project-

ed to places not imagined. This is what Obafemi has been doing in his criticism. In other words, the appropriateness of a particular work of art is measured according to how it can reflect sociopolitical conditions. When books satisfy these preconditions, they are seen as contextually fitting and socially significant to society.

By investigating writers' works regarding their ideological standings, sociocultural, and sociopolitical exigencies, Obafemi has been recognized as an impartial critic whose judgment of literary material is informed by objective scholarship. To get to this position in academic engagement means one has vast knowledge of globally canonized literary theories. Theories are to literary critics what syringes are to doctors or what gasoline is to every car owner. The former would find it extremely difficult to provide medical services to patients without the aforementioned instrument, while the latter would make no observable move without gasoline. Theories are the abstract mechanisms through which literary works are evaluated and appreciated. Obafemi has a good mastery of the theories associated with literary scholarship (Obafemi, 2003). He has deployed them in his intellectual examination and evaluation of works produced by various scholars. It is noteworthy that being accustomed to criticism enables one to understand people's political and economic composition, contributing to society's configuration.

Literary critics are, by profession, expert social scientists who reflect on the emerging discourse in a text in relation to society in order to arrive at informed conclusions. Looking at the technical aspect of their work as mentioned above, one can ask how literary critics are significant to national development. To such curious minds, Obafemi states that their trade is appreciated by individuals who can establish the connection between their works and society. For example, the critic analyzes a work of art and brings out society's economic structures responsible for distributing wealth to steer society's trajectory in a specific direction. He looks at the instances of capitalist culture and how it has been the basis of the social relationships between different classes in society. From there, the critic can be predictive of such a society's future, making informed projections about the probable outcome of an excessively capitalist adventure and its disposition to birth an overly chaotic and generally detached society that does not cater to the well-being of the average individual. As consumers of such scholar-critic works, one would understand that the society reflected in the writings is sitting on a keg of gunpowder, waiting for an explosion at the slightest provocation. Such works are exceptionally informative because they reveal the oddity involved in the appropriation of any philosophy in the running of society's affairs. Still, they also show the intricacies of human relationships encouraged by such a society's forms of ideas. Whatever the critic shows can be used as a basis for measuring the society to understand what is most suitable.

As a creative writer, however, the above system's internalization helps create his artistic productions. Obafemi belongs to a school of scholars who appreciate works of art by using a series of theoretical models as a guide, so it becomes significant to use them in his artistic creations. He is aware that the successful sustenance of the audience's attention lies in providing sequential and captivating results because that would be the basis for getting their unalloyed attention. This inevitably places a level of pressure on him and every committed artist like him. For reasons that are not unconnected from their desire to carry the audience along, writers must conduct an accurate feasibility study of their intended audience so that the materials handed down would have maximum impact. For example, suppose one aims to write about the moral decadence evident in loose or indecent dressing that has perforated contemporary time's moral architecture; in that case, the most suitable audience for

such work is the youth demographic, who are experiencing the process of enculturation. Therefore, it places some responsibility on the writer to consider the age bracket's language peculiarity to achieve the predetermined goals. Informed critics who are also creative writers understand their works' enormity in this sense, and they always stand up to the responsibility.

As a result, what the artist is doing is no less than a leader's work because literary works simulate leadership roles in many ways. For one, the audience whose intention is strictly entertainment would not be forsaken at the behest of others whose concern is didactic or moralistic fervor. Thus, it is incumbent on the dramatist to factor in the audience's concerns so that none of them would have reason to despise his/her intellectual productions. Apart from the fact that this places much responsibility on the producers of these works, it also brings out their leadership capabilities. This is where Obafemi's message becomes more explicit; the onus of leadership lies in responding to diverse and differing opinions without making either side feel disrespected. Here, the emphasis is mainly on managing diversity and various views, especially about the world's current sociopolitical conditions.

At the intersection of globalization and civilization is the responsibility to update one's attitude to accommodate society's changing dynamics. Individuals from different sociopolitical backgrounds look up to leadership to provide solutions to their existential challenges and expanding issues. This is one of the numerous lessons that being a dramatist has taught Obafemi. It therefore justifies the thematic and ideological focus around which his works are circumscribed. Although it is clear from literary scholars' efforts that behind the production of celebrated works of art is an eternal circle of activities that authors indulge in to bring satisfaction to the audience, it comes at a personal cost.

In most cases, writers like Obafemi have to sacrifice their time and leisure to explore all the possible ways to ensure that their audience is satisfactorily catered to. They view their profession as a means of achieving humanity's ultimate plan, to lighten people's lives through their works. While they are duty-bound to make sure that their audiences across every setting are sufficiently engaged, they equally must check that they do not sacrifice truth-telling, originality, and ethics in the process so that the quality of their works cannot be questioned. They must understand that beyond their desire to ensure that their audience gets maximum satisfaction, there remains a social responsibility to x-ray what is happening in their society through their creativity. A society that is corrupt to an unimaginable proportion of the population or that is plagued by insecurity caused by the inability of its politicians to manage its territorial integrity cannot be rebranded as if nothing is wrong with its political system. As much as their profession binds them to reduce the social pressure and burden placed on them, they are equally expected to showcase the environment's downsides through their works.

When asked about the possible solutions for Africans to "get out of the woods", Obafemi is very pragmatic and analytical. Like many African scholars, he traces Africa's underdevelopment to the western imperial system that has erected a barrier to Africans fulfilling their potential. He laments that this wall was erected during slavery and was succeeded by its destructive accomplices' colonization, neocolonialism, and the contemporary neoliberal economy tailored to exploit Africa and Africans. Being trapped in the middle of nowhere is a condition traceable to Africa's recent European relationship (Falola, 2021). For people whose human capital was exploited for more than four centuries, it is impossible that the consequences are not subsequently seen in their public life. During slavery, the continent's best hands

were forcefully displaced because of the duress of expansionist ideologues. Enslaved Africans became outcasts in two different civilizations. Those left behind suffered a psychological backlash from the experience and became incapacitated by their people's violent extraction. This would be immediately followed by the colonization agenda where the colonial powers indiscriminately seized Africa's political institutions and structures.

Obafemi further explains that the continuation of exploitation during colonialism sent Africa centuries back in the development trajectory. Having their political systems controlled by imperialists meant that their natural resources were taken in overflowing abundance. In the process, their institutions worked essentially for the West to the misfortune of African countries. The assignment of domination and subjugation was in place with colonial infrastructure as Africa's economic and political life was subsumed by a foreign one. Therefore, the combination of slavery and colonialism became so poisonous for the people that it comfortably inhibited them from growing maximally. Consequently, every African country, without exception, became vulnerable to economic and cultural predation because they were exposed to activities that critically challenged them beyond what they could handle.

During the post-independence period, emerging African leaders became willing collaborators with Western imperialists, thereby inaugurating the era of neocolonialism. They offered themselves as conduits for the continuous exploitation and despoliation of African resources. With a tempting financial and political offer, post-independence African leaders succumbed to the colonial Europeans' pressure and conceded to the unholy demand of sabotaging African development. It was almost unbelievable that the people who should have been the cornerstones of African transformation, despite their awareness of the long-lasting dehumanization that their forebears suffered under the same colonial systems, erected a mercantile political structure in the post-independence period where significant positions and juicy appointments were reserved for the highest bidders. As Obafemi implies in his critique of the postcolonial political system, the consequences entangled African progress and civilization because it mushroomed into something bigger, incapable of being handled without extreme diplomacy (Falola, 2021). Heightened by globalization's pressure, the African people became lost and were constantly in a state of flux. They did not have a central philosophy with which their civilization could be developed or launched. Indeed, constructing an effective solution becomes part of the problem.

According to Obafemi, what is needed to combat these existential challenges, having understood that the burden of solutions lies with forward-looking individuals, is to develop the right set of leaders who understand the importance of shared leadership. Leadership attracts the necessary encomium whenever something is done correctly, just as it receives criticism for a society moving in a purposeless direction. Thus, understanding places a responsibility on the leaders to develop the right frame of mind to combat the continent's problem. To do this, the class stratification that has become a part of African culture must be carefully and effectively dismantled. The existence of class presupposes that it would be subject to intimidation. The upper-class occupants would find sufficient reason to challenge those in the middle class, who would, in turn, scout the lower class to flex their muscles against. All of these are a means of weakening social infrastructure, which would have a detrimental effect. To corroborate this, in his media work in *The Sun Newspapers*, Obafemi (2016) laments the dysfunctional leadership in the country and how it breeds poor structures and institutions thus:

Those of our so-called elders who canvassed for and brought to reality the existence of that state today must writhe in grief and pain of guilt wherever they are—on earth or in sepulchres! The question that discerning minds—either citizens or concerned empathisers raise today is why is the state so jinxed or jaded or both rolled into a pathetic mimic of statehood? And this situation has arisen, painfully with regard to poor and dysfunctional leadership, which has erected weak and non-thriving institutions (5).

As a realist, Obafemi concludes that Africa still has the potential to leapfrog others in the development index if it quickly works towards translating its human and natural potential into tangible results. This can be achieved by having a structured plan for growth because it is important to define one's trajectory of development against going into the unseen future without active plans. To do this, one needs vision, driven by incurably patriotic sets of leaders who would accept the duty of advancing the society as natural and generous. Leaders who cater more to their elitist group above most people would have difficulty transforming humanity into something exceptional. Representative leadership starts from how leaders prioritize the people and how they conduct themselves. The ones who prioritize the people above themselves would consider the masses' welfare as primary and non-negotiable. When these leaders occupy the various leadership seats in the continent, they will begin to untangle the colonial and neocolonial web, thereby giving the continent a clear direction.

Accountable Public Intellectual: Obafemi's Ideas on Effective Transformation

Extensive academic research has cemented the place of mentoring and career guides for people in contemporary times. The action of guiding people to choose a particular career path had no place in the Nigerian education system, especially during the heyday of colonialism and Nigeria's post-independence era in the 1960s. The reason for this is not unknown. There was a scarcity of academic graduates who understood the place of mentorship to develop individuals coming behind them. In addition to this, not many career opportunities were available or open to these individuals.

Thus, individuals usually chose their career journey based on a factor associated with personal preferences or social pressure. It was more difficult because the availability of courses and career options determined, to a large degree, the career choice of prospective graduates. This was the social and historical context in which Obafemi was raised, and therefore, he was affected by this same condition. For someone who would choose to be an academic, the assurance of that career choice was not something he had, even at the early period of his school days as an undergraduate. With little vital counseling, if there was any at all, the prospect of being a future academic was not forthcoming. Still, the fact that he had engaged in a few commitments made it one of his career directions.

Obafemi engaged in social activities that sharpened his communication abilities and increased his persuasive skills. As a university student, he was exposed to several group activities, such as the drama society, current affairs club, debate society, editorship of school magazines, among many other engagements. It was in these various areas that he had the opportunity to improve himself in many ways. For example, becoming a member of the drama society exposed him to audience dy-

namics and how to confront them in a public situation. It is incontestable that many individuals have glossophobia (fear of public speaking). To be candid, people who confront a large audience for the first time are usually faced with this challenge. It requires a gradual engagement with the public before one can conquer the fear. However, the situation was different for Obafemi because he belonged to a drama society where the opportunity to speak to an audience was offered to him on many occasions. Without knowing it, he was being groomed for a teaching career. But if the drama society meant anything to him, it was that it exposed him to the act of speaking in public without nursing much fear.

We would be right to say that the university provided mentors and guides that helped Obafemi in his choice of teaching and acting career. Because he was unsure of following this trajectory at the beginning of his academic enrollment, what life introduced to him in the university showed him his career journey. Being a member of the debating society improved his persuasive skills. To debate in Nigeria, tertiary institutions are meant to involve a series of mental gymnastics where one makes conscious efforts to keep one's brain fit and agile. Debating precludes shyness, and because one would be duty-bound to make people understand a situation from a person's perspective, one needs more than substantial evidence of facts. One needs the ability to make the listeners understand issues from one's standpoint. From what Obafemi implicitly conceded to, the debate club helped sharpen his communication skills and persuasive power. Without a doubt, a teacher would need these attributes to achieve a successful interaction with their learners. Looking at this great man's social involvement, one would undeniably understand why his artistic productions are a reflection of brilliance and intelligence. Apart from dedicating his time to social events as a student, he belonged to a series of groups that added to his academic ingenuity.

Being an editor of a magazine meant that Obafemi was gifted in his mastery of the English language. After he was established as a public actor and figure whose communicational competence could not be contested, he dived into the stream of advocacy where he employed his communicating to challenge authority in a quest for equity and justice. Whereas society usually likes to celebrate the genius among students and individuals, they can be critical of them when they use their intellect to organize demonstrations, especially whenever they consider that there is injustice in the environment. In Obafemi's case, he had once been a voice of freedom in a particular demonstration in his school, Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria, and because of the hostility of postcolonial African leaders to criticism of any color, he barely escaped rustication for his involvement (Falola, 2021). Although the school was successful in repressing his voice after he engaged with the said affair and struggle, it ignited a passion in him to consider public speaking in his determination to educate people on essential ideas regarding their environment. Becoming a teacher readily came to mind. There are not many opportunities for people to carry a message to their desired audience, but teaching offers this golden opportunity, as we all know. Also, the media presents a similar chance, and it is rewarding that he explored both options in his two careers.

In the age of Obafemi, if one did not belong to a political circle, the choice was limited to either becoming a teacher or belonging to the civil service. This was so because the government controlled the bulk of employment opportunities and there were not many private corporations to work for. This meant that Obafemi was open to serving as a civil servant, but he refused to follow directions for many reasons. He confessed that the country's civil service was a site of vindictive politics where superiors deliberately toy with the futures of their subordinates and thus prevented

them from reaching their fullest potential. He was not unaware of this decadence and, realizing how being a victim of such an antagonistic system would compound his woes, it appeared preferable to consider a career in teaching rather than to subsume his future under the exceedingly corrupt and particularly disconcerting civil service system. He laments that authorities in the system always got themselves involved in actively denying their subordinates' progress without necessarily having a reason for their actions other than to be outrageously vindictive.

Bureaucratic decadence thrived for a long time because of the association of absolute power and authority among the occupants in office. Meanwhile, it has allowed the system's destabilization because it especially discouraged individuals who would have added to the beauty of civil service and crushed their productivity in the process. Anyone familiar with the destructive politics in this sector would run kilometers away from it. One such individual is Obafemi, who decided to move away from the possibility of functioning as a civil servant. Here, postcolonial politics are unraveled, and because they encouraged corruption and other forms of condemnable behaviors, they prevented the people from reaching their potential. During this time, the foundation for Nigeria's decline in economic and political virtues was sedimented and the people's moral decadence took off at an accelerated speed. The ubiquity of unpatriotic people in different parastatals in contemporary Nigeria started when the civil service who constituted the labor force of the country was treated with such a level of disdain and disrespect. Even though the country underwent a record-breaking economic transformation from its mono-economic business, the elite class' extravagance negatively impacted the people as it impeded their progress.

These became the factors that determined the quality of individuals who enrolled in the civil service, and that also chased some individuals away. Because the teaching and acting sectors were comparatively better than others, they became the preference of this man who was already built with an interest in sharing knowledge with the people. Obafemi was aware during these periods that the inherent leadership deficit and moral decadence pervasive in the civil service were something to educate the citizens about, perhaps hoping that they would contribute positively in fighting the menace. He considered the classroom as the grounds where challenges confronting the country would be appropriately corrected. The continuation of decadent behavior is naturally impossible when conscious efforts are made to educate the younger generation on the devastating consequences it would have on society. Teaching, therefore, became a natural call to service. It was the only platform where the construction of a better and fair society was possible. It was natural for someone who had already developed reliable communication skills to consider teaching as the career choice to help him fulfill his God-given potential. Without mentoring and guidance, he dived into it and became successful at it.

Invariably, the other side of Obafemi, which teaching and acting have revealed, is his leadership qualities. Apart from being a seasoned academic, Obafemi has had a good record as an administrator and an organic intellectual, dating back to his undergraduate years. He led several demonstrations to reveal the excess among authorities while he was a student. In addition to this, teaching exposed him to the ills of academic inquiry in a country like Nigeria. It appears the solution to these challenges is naturally beyond the confines of a classroom. The domain of making policies and formulating regulations is something beyond what a teacher can do. To provoke a noteworthy change in the polity, one must belong to the circle where decisions about education affairs are made. It became necessary for Obafemi to be a

representative at the union level before he would ever undertake broader administrative positions.

He had information about the Nigerian Academic Staff Union of the Universities at his fingerprints, so the political dynamics of union affairs were not strange to him. Immediately after taking the role of the Union's secretary in 1982 and that of Chairman in 1983, he recognized his capacity to impact the academic and political spectrum of the country. The union was seen as the firebrand advocacy group for fairness in government. However popular, the political structure of the country was hijacked by the capitalist culture that has been deep-rooted in the nation's political system. His generation was especially radical, committed to the people's emancipation and the enhancement of fair treatment of staff and students in tertiary institutions. Unionism became the only platform for the projection of their voices against the government, whose members were distracted by the euphoria of power and their desire for personal aggrandizement. There were eminent personalities in the union at the time. Because they shared a common interest in creating a fair society, it became exceedingly difficult to compromise their moral principles.

Having done essentially well at the union level, Obafemi eventually considered an administrative assignment beyond the union and competed for the Vice Chancellor position at his university, a reflection of his exceptional service at different levels. He was the Head of Department of English at the University of Ilorin and eventually graduated to the deanship. In these two positions, he brought innovations to leadership. He was student-friendly and became very active in the enhancement of the welfare of staff under him. Ascending to a greater position of power in an academic environment is a testament to one's progression and achievements. If a leader does not introduce new leadership trends or is operationally deficient in managing a team, the opportunity to function in greater positions would be taken away from him. However, this is not the case with Obafemi. Having served successfully in the role of the head of department and dean of his faculty, he was promoted to fill in a senate capacity. To cap it off, he was chosen as an administrative head by popular election.

For Obafemi, the evidence of success in the positions where he had been chosen is substantial. In Nigeria, one earns the opportunity to be nationally known if one contributes immensely to the advancement of activities for which one is elected or selected. Obafemi became popular because of his activism through academic labour union positions he had held at different times. This level of popularity eventually helped his upward mobility and career trajectory. He became actively involved in shaping the country's educational system in his position as the head of a department, the deanship, and then the school generally. But this would be surpassed by the positions he subsequently occupied. Having realized how important he was in the various positions where he served, he was called to serve in higher roles of national importance to the country, generally. In the year 2000, he was appointed Chairman of the Governing Board of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments.

Before being appointed as the chairman of the Governing Board of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Obafemi served in several positions with records of enviable achievements. When he served on the Board of Governors of the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital, he brought his leadership experience and made notable contributions to the committee's enhancement of success. However, one thing that stands out is that he was never so distracted by these positions as to waiver in his commitment to teaching. Despite being bombarded with respon-

sibilities, Obafemi found no difficulty in managing his business with respectable performance

Obafemi recalls that upon voluntarily retiring from his work as a columnist and freelancer in 2015,² his critics assumed that he quit because he had become frustrated “about the seeming unchangeable nature of Nigeria” or because he “became close to government” (2). However, Obafemi countered that his work as a columnist, heavily criticizing and attacking the government as well as his work during his role as a public servant, are of the same significance and with the same level of social commitment. He asserts that in the context of the 1990s “and its turbulence, first following the annulment of the very free and fair democratic election by the Babangida Government and the mass fury that culminated in the June 12 activism with the formation of NADECO and the authoritarian militocracy of Sanni Abacha” (2), his columns became fiercer and more virulent in *The Comet* (what later transformed into *The Nation*). One of my columns in June 1998 actually predicted the end of the Abacha regime, just as one of my poems in “*Song of Hope*” asked IBB to quit or be rid of by mass anger. I moved on to *The Sun Newspaper* from *The Comet* in 2003 where I had my longest tenure of 11 years until 2014 when I moved, first to *Daily Trust* and started a syndicate column with both *Daily Trust* and *This Day*. In most of these papers, especially since *The Post Express*, I was both a columnist and a member of the Editorial Board. I voluntarily rested my work as a columnist and freelancer in 2015, not as some people hazarded because of frustration about the seeming unchangeable nature of Nigeria, or because I became close to government. The fact is that the periods that I took appointments with government were the times when my criticism of the state was more virulent, 2001-2004 and 2010-2015. (2021 p. 2)

For him, at every point in time a writer should be a bearer of hope, empathy and deliverer of solutions as no writer can choose to bask in disillusion and terror. To buttress this point, he emphasized: “If ever I was to see the end of hope or the loss of faith in society, and therefore humanity, then I should cease to be a writer, which I am not about to contemplate” (Ibid). This proves that Obafemi is a writer and public intellectual who not only dissects the problems of society but who is also accountable to the public itself.

Conclusion

Scholars such as Homi Bhabha (2012), Edward Said (1978), and Frantz Fanon (1963) write negatively about the impact of colonization and its destructive infrastructure because of the complex effects of identity politics in a postcolonial environment. Children’s psychological domain is developed by the philosophical constructs used in their immediate environment. Moreover, because their minds are susceptible to manipulation when they have the wrong impression about an environment, it goes on to determine their social behavior, not only in the society in which they developed, but also toward the people with whom they will share future relationships. For instance, Said discusses the unhomeliness of the postcolonial

2 Prior to quitting writing for the press and serving on the editorial boards of newspapers, Obafemi acquired extensive media experience dating back to 1981 when he first began to write a column for *The Herald* and did a weekly serialization of his novel-to-be, *The Wheels*, in the *Sunday Herald*. Other newspapers for which he wrote and served on their editorial boards included: *The Punch*, *The Triumph*, *The Tribune*, *The Post Express*, *The Comet*, *Daily Trust*, *The Sun*, and *ThisDay*.

African child whose mind and psychology are divided between two diametrically opposed civilizations. By being “unhomed,” according to him, the ex-colonial candidate oscillates between the indigenous community’s cultural traditions and that of the European world that has been imposed. In fact, it was more sardonic with the introduction of the internet as a means of globalization. There is little opportunity for the ex-colonies to continue with their cultural systems because they have not only been carefully displaced by European systems, but they also face critical challenges in reclaiming “traditional” African culture. As a result of this condition, they have struggled with identity issues, and the problem of unity persists.

In essence, individuals who fall within the minority circle in Nigeria face a perpetual problem of segregation and subversion. They are vulnerable because getting the appropriate political attention in the country remains a constant challenge. In addition to this, there is the possibility that they are reaping unsatisfactory dividends of democracy due to ethnic politics. Meanwhile, intellectuals like Obafemi have ideological reservations about the state of affairs in the country and commit themselves to the business of public intellection. Perhaps being a member of the Okun community exposed him more to inequities. The experience of Okun people is more complicated because postcolonial Nigerian society mobilizes political power to advance a parochial agenda. For example, categorizing Okun, which culturally and ideologically belongs to the Yoruba, among the northern bloc, has put them in ambiguous, marginalized political positions. When the issue of political power surfaces, they are considered as northerners, and because of this grouping, they use their political stake to influence the concession of power to the said bloc. All of these are factors that contributed to Obafemi’s position in the messiness of politics and his profile as an intellectual activist. He understands that the politics of difference is mobilized by the elite for their parochial objectives, allowing them to remain in power even when they have no credible credentials to operate at these political levels.

Regardless of their conflict-prone experience, people can make something out of every situation based on some approaches: One, an individual who is determined to become very great, will always consider pressure and widening challenges as the necessary instrument for the crystallization of their life agenda and goals to make maximum impact in their lives. Two, rather than being encouraged or challenged by daring situations, some people are usually downcast and forlorn, allowing the pressure of situations to overwhelm and submerge them beyond repair. Three, there are those caught between these horrible conditions, and who, because of their indecision, make no meaningful addition to themselves, and neither would be considered backward. It would not be a mistake to say that Obafemi belongs to the first category. In the process of being affected by a polarized environment, he used the experience as a motivation to build a lasting legacy by attaining a level of academic excellence that would project him beyond the confines of his cultural geography.

There is no better way to demonstrate how important Obafemi’s sociological background was to his eventual intellectual growth and public intellectual orientation than to provide evidence of his involvement and success in different personal, professional and public engagements. He is an actor, a playwright and a theatre director in part because he was involved in itinerant school, acting during his formative years. As a student, he was equally outspoken, and all of these reflected very well in his life in the later stages of his journey. He has been using his intellectual property as a tool to negotiate political justice in an environment where equity is allowed and fairness is possible. Participating in preliminary verbal debates and polemics laid the groundwork for his future journalistic adventures. Life has thrown a

sizeable number of challenges at him in the form of growing up in an environment where pluralism is a given. Beyond this, he was shown a cultural economy that enriched his moral and sociological experience while also guiding him in his engagements. He has worked as an administrator in different capacities, has successfully organized a handful of academic programs, and created a patronage network that continues to propel him beyond expectations.

As previously stated, Obafemi's grounding in tradition gave him the opportunity to create a culture that would later transform him into someone of international relevance. It appears that the cultural pluralism of the environment did not become an albatross to his career and social development. Instead, they became a pool of cultural possession in which lay different possibilities for him. During one of my engagements with him, he fantasized about the masquerade celebrations during his childhood and how this introduced to him the heart of Yoruba culture. He confessed that these cultural activities became the creative inspiration behind his literary and artistic productions.

The multicultural society in which Obafemi grew up influenced his future creativity, as the icons of his cultural traditions are the muses and indexes of literary engagements. He has successfully transformed what was considered an inhibiting challenge into a motivating factor in developing a worthwhile academic and moral ideology, while exemplifying the profile of an academic and a creative artist as a public intellectual.

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