

Research Article

Bible For The Deaf: Implication For Sign Language Bible Translation

ABSTRACT

The Deaf community in Nigeria is confronted with the challenge of non-translation of the Bible into Sign Language, leading to a greater percentage being biblically illiterate. Some churches use interpreters who are not knowledgeable in Nigerian Sign Language, and as a result, many deaf people do not benefit from the interpretation of sermons. This article assessing data through bibliographic approach discovered that Sign Language is not a universal language due to its uniqueness as the Deaf communities in different countries develop their bespoke Sign Language which makes translating one Bible to serve the deaf globally an unrealistic venture. The Nigerian Deaf Community is estimated to be 1.9 million with a very low percentage that has come to know Jesus personally. The greater percentage cannot read printed Bible due to illiteracy and lack of understanding of abstract concepts and its grammatical structure. The Deaf will understand the Bible better when it is “read” (watched) in their language. This paper recommends the translation of the Bible into Nigerian Sign Language by trained Deaf Bible translators who have sufficient hermeneutical skills that will help them in the translation of the Bible into Sign Language.

Keywords: The Deaf, Sign Language, Bible Translation, Nigerian Sign Language, Hermeneutics

INTRODUCTION

Jesus gave the Great Commission to the church to preach the gospel and make disciples of nations. Efforts are ongoing to preaching the gospel through the use of different means to communicate the gospel to the unsaved. One of such means is getting the Bible in people’s languages as a tool of deepening believers’ knowledge of God and spreading this knowledge to others. The charge to reach all nations with the gospel is enormous and broad. Different categories of peoples are yet to hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the categories of people to be reached with the gospel is the hearing impaired (deaf). Many Christians have responded to this assignment by taking the gospel to the deaf globally with some fruits attending this effort. Language had been the major challenge of communicating the gospel to the deaf due to lack of understanding of Sign Language of the deaf. This challenge is due to the lack of translated Bibles in Sign Language. The task of Bible translators is to translate the Bible into every language without which the speakers of those languages will not have the opportunity of reading the Bible in their languages. Sign as language is unique to each country. Portions of the Bible are available in Sign Language in some countries, but in others, none at all. America is the first and only country with a complete Bible in Sign Language as at present.² Sign Language differs from one country to another and this makes the task of translating the Bible into Sign Language difficult.

Perception of Deafness

Hearing precedes speaking for those whose hearing ability is normal. Hearing “vocabularies far exceed speaking

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² “World’s First Complete Sign Language Bible Now Available,” accessed March 19, 2020,

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vocabularies.”³ The hearing impaired have difficulties with this, their world is different from that of normal people. Hearing loss has placed the deaf under special need; that is, people who deserve extra care in order for them to socialize and relate to God with understanding. Deafness is defined as when one is “totally or partially unable to hear.”⁴ Hearing losses are classified by the degree of the loss and the age it occurs⁵ except for those with hard-of-hearing who may benefit from hearing aid. Hard-of-hearing people are “people whose sense of hearing though defective is functional with or without a hearing aid.”⁶ A person who is deaf cannot use hearing aid to understand “speech, even though that person may be able to hear some sound.”⁷ Deafness can be conductive, where both the outer and middle parts of the ear are affected; it can be sensorineural deafness which affects the inner ear, and it can also be mixed hearing loss which is a “result of one or more organs in the conductive and sensorineural.”⁸ The individual can also lip-read to “hear” what others are saying or communicate through Sign Language.

A deaf person cannot hear any oral speech or communicate the same to others. The “inability of the individual to hear”⁹ can be frustrating and needs to be addressed by educators as well as Bible translators.

The degrees of hearing are identified as:

Normal Hearing (0-25dB): the person can hear “both soft noise, speech and every other sound. The hearing is considered normal when an individual can hear sound up to 25 decibels (dB)”¹⁰

Mild loss (26 to 40 dB): the individual cannot hear soft noises and cannot understand any speech in a loud environment.

Moderate loss (41 to 70 dB): soft and moderately loud noises are not heard at this level. It is difficult for them to understand-speech especially if background noise is present.¹¹

Severe loss (71 to 90 dB): Conversations are conducted loudly for the person to hear.

Profound loss (above 95 dB): The person with profound hearing loss can hear very loud noises, but cannot communicate orally.¹²

Hearing loss is a fatal loss of one of the major organs of the body, which affects the speech and language of the affected person. Deafness is the most subtle of all disabilities, particularly if it is not in the case of multiple disabilities where the victim is both deaf and blind or crippled, deafness is not easily noticeable. Unless there is close contact with the deaf or the need for communication, the Deaf has no physical sign of disability. They can easily be sidetracked and considered as those with no disability.

Language Skill of the Deaf

Hearing-impaired persons are severely affected in the “comprehension and use of oral language”¹³ particularly those whose deafness is from birth. Speech development relies on the discrimination of the different sounds in any¹⁴ language and the accurate production of these sounds. All languages have rules of combining sounds together into words which express ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Language learning occurs when “experiences combined with hearing the language of others.”¹⁵ There is an absence of combining oral hearing and language hearing by the Deaf. It is difficult for them to use the oral language of the society where they are located, although some of them who are post-lingual deaf, that is, who developed linguistic before becoming deaf before they became deaf and could use oral language but may not hear what others are saying. The pre-lingual hearing impaired persons do not possess any oral language experience; “pre-lingual hearing loss occurs before a student develops linguistic skills and the reliance on hearing to obtain from the environment.”¹⁶ This set of the deaf, though can utter incomprehensible sounds rely on Sign Language as its first language and the only means of communication.

³ Margaret G. Werts, Richard A. Culatta, James R. Tompkins, *Fundamentals of Special Education: What Every Teacher Needs to Know* (Columbus, Ohio: Pearson, 2007), 265.

⁴ Rodney Webb, ‘Basic Understanding in *Working with Deaf Persons on Sunday School*, ed. John A. Cooper (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1982), 19.

⁵ Margaret Wert, Richard Cullata and James Tompkins, *Fundamentals of Special Education*, 767.

⁶ Lottie L. Riekehof, *The Joy of Signing: The New Illustrated Guide for Mastering Sign Language and Manual Alphabet* (npp: Education Tax Fund Project, 2002), 7.

⁷ Margaret, Richard and James, *Fundamentals of Special Education*, 269

⁸ Ajobiewe, Anthonia Ifeoma and Odewenwa, Oludare Joseph, “Concept of Disability: Types, Causes and Prevention in *Perspectives on Disability: A Resource for Theological and Religious Studies in Africa*, eds. Samuel Kabue, Helen Ishola-Esan and Isaac Deji Ayegboyin (Ibadan: Baptist Press (Nig.) Limited, 2016), 7-8

⁹ Adima Emmanuel E., Solomon O. Ladipo and Chigoram O. Abosi, *Introduction to Special Education*(Ibadan: Heinemann Education Books (Nigeria) Ltd., 1981), 15

¹⁰ Ajobiewe, Anthonia Ifeoma and Odewenwa, Oludare Joseph, “Concept of Disability: Types, Causes and Prevention, 6

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Westwood, P. *Commonsense Methods for Children with Special Educational Needs: Strategies for the Regular Classroom* (London: Routledge palmer, 2003), 48.

¹³ Margaret G. Werts, Richard A. Culatta, James R. Tompkins, *Fundamentals of Special Education*, 270.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid., 274

Sign Language

The means of communicating with the deaf in homes and communities is sign language which is regarded as the “deaf people’s mother tongue, their first language which uses a set of signs, syntax and is officially recognized by the government as their primary means of communication.”¹⁷ According to J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, the mother-tongue is a person’s first language as compared to other languages one might learn later in life. It is not the same as a vernacular which is the common language of a region or group, no matter how naturally a person may be well vexed in such a language and its usage. Rather, the mother-tongue is a person’s own native and indigenous language, very much intertwined with a person’s identity; it confirms and affirms who a person is, where one comes from and one’s sense of identity.¹⁸

Sign Language uses gestures to represent words, ideas and concepts. Some signs are iconic, which means that they look like what they represent or that they act out a message.¹⁹ Sign Language is used to communicate the minds and intentions of the deaf among themselves as well as with the hearing world.

There is a variance of Sign Languages in the world because each country has its own form of signing just as there is a variance of spoken languages. Most of these Sign Languages developed independently of each other, and that is why their ways of expression are not the same. “The discovery that Sign Languages are languages in their own right has led to the blossoming of literary culture in sign.”²⁰ Sign Language is an alternative to speech or oral language. The necessity for a Bible in Sign Language stems from the study of linguists that Sign Language is a language of its own, with its own grammatical structure that is different from the English language.²¹ In Nigeria, for example, the Deaf do not understand their local language or dialect except those with post-hearing deafness. They communicate in Nigerian Sign Language that is different from American or Australian Sign Languages. The Sign Language was not an English language invention; rather, it developed within the Nigerian deaf community as in other nations.

Crucial to Sign Language is fingerspelling, which is a “means of bringing English words to the eyes of the deaf.”²² It is used to spell names, and words that have no sign. The experience of the writer’s interaction with the Deaf revealed that apart from fingerspelling names and words that have no sign, those who are weak academically or semiliterate usually fingerspell whenever they have the occasion to read the Bible publicly. The challenge of understanding Nigerian Sign Language is enormous because hearing teachers who teach the Deaf at school or serve as interpreters do not understand Nigerian Sign Language which is different from American Sign Language which they learned at school. This disparity makes it difficult for both the teacher and learners to understand themselves and the communication gap do occur.

Need for Sign Language Bible Translation

The task and goal of Bible translators are to translate the Bible into all languages of the world. Some of these languages already have portions of the Bible translated into them or have a complete Bible translated while many are still on the waiting list. Since Sign Language is recognized as the primary language of the Deaf, the Bible needs to be translated into the various types of Sign Languages found across the globe. The Deaf should be given the opportunity to have a relationship with God through His Word. The discrimination that deaf people experience in terms of employment, education and the like due to lack of understanding of deaf culture, which expresses their beliefs, attitudes relationships, values and language, should not be transferred to translating the Bible for the deaf in Sign Language.

The Deaf in Nigeria do not have the entire Bible translated into Nigerian Sign Language except portions of Chronological Bible Stories by a group of deaf Bible translators. The Deaf in Nigeria are at disadvantage due to lack of competent interpreters and teachers who do not understand Nigerian Sign Language. In most cases, the Deaf at religious gatherings are spectators since they could not flow along with their interpreters due to communication gap. Having the Bible in their own language can bridge this gap. Africa lacks in Sign Language Bible translation as claimed by Michael Ireland, who posits that “African countries do not have a Sign Language Bible translation for local deaf individuals.”²³ The Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN) has taken the bull by the horn to establish a Deaf Translation Centre, “the first of its kind in the world.”²⁴

¹⁷ Lottie L. Riekehof, *The Joy of Signing*, 2

¹⁸ J.E.T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 3 (4) (2012): 575-579.

¹⁹ Lottie L. Riekehof, *The Joy of Signing*, 2

²⁰ David M. Perlmutter, “What is Sign Language?” *Linguistic Society of America* accessed March 5, 2020 https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Sign_Language.pdf

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lottie L. Riekehof, *The Joy of Signing*, 13.

²³ Michael Ireland, “Deaf Bible Society Fueling Sign Language Bible Translations,” accessed March 5, 2020 <http://assistnews.net/deaf-bible-society-fueling-sign-language-bible-translations/>

²⁴ Isaac Taiwo, “Bible Society Solicits General Overseers, Others Support for Bible Translation,” *The Guardian: Sunday Magazine*, March 31, 2019, <https://guardian.ng/sunday-magazine/bible-society-solicits-general-overseers-others-support-for-bible-tanslation/>

The BSN has translated the Bible into one hundred and ten (110) Chronological Bible Stories.²⁵ Though very expensive, the effort is to ensure that the Deaf hear the word of God in their own language and in their own locality and through this disseminate the message of salvation to the unsaved Deaf. The challenge is that 90 per cent of the Deaf are not aware of the translated portions of the Bible into Sign Language in Nigeria.²⁶

The number of Deaf population globally calls for united efforts to enable them to hear the word of God. It is reported that “there are approximately 70 million deaf people worldwide according to the World Federation of the Deaf with less than two per cent of the world’s largest unreached and unengaged people groups.²⁷ Many Deaf have not had a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, while only an insignificant number believe in Jesus Christ. There is a challenge of discipling the Deaf who have come to the Lord Jesus due to lack of adequate words to express concepts, vocabularies and names of the Bible which are foreign to their languages and culture in the written Bible.²⁸ It will take those who have been trained in hermeneutics to interpret the Bible to them at their various levels. It becomes easier to “watch” (read) the Bible and grasp the meaning of the passage being read.

A research carried out in Nigeria in the Deaf community revealed that less than 40 per cent of the Deaf in Nigeria could read well enough to understand a written Bible.²⁹ In most cases, they carry the written Bible around but do not understand its contents either by themselves or through unskilled interpreters. If the whole Bible is interpreted into Sign Language, the Deaf will be able to understand the gospel and could through that respond appropriately by accepting the offer of salvation in Christ Jesus. The hearing populace have the Bible in different versions and languages, and the Blind can read the Bible through Brail, but the Deaf in Nigeria have no complete Bible in Sign Language, and the few portions available are limited in circulation. One effort to translate the Bible into Sign Language was reported by Olayinka Latona thus:

Determined to make the Bible available to over 1.8 million Nigerians with hearing impairment, the Christian mission for the deaf church, Nigeria in collaboration with Door International, the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria and the Bible Society of Nigeria recently launched 77 Chronological Bible Translation for the Nigerian Sign Language Bible. 77 Bible stories were added to the previous translation that contained 32 stories which were launched in 2014, adding that with the Bible, the Deaf would be able to read and understand the word of God.³⁰

Translating the Bible into Sign Language is a herculean task embarked upon by the Bible Society of Nigeria whose goal is to make Bible available in all Nigerian languages. The need to translate the Bible into Sign Language for the use of 1.9 million deaf community of Nigerians who use Sign Language as a means of communication was added to this goal. It may be argued that since the Deaf can see, do they really need a separate Bible like the Blind? Unlike the vocal languages, Sign Language has received little attention until recently. According to United Bible Societies, it is important to remember that in most countries the Deaf do not consider themselves as disadvantaged or ‘disabled;’ they have a strong sense of identity rooted in Sign Language and deaf culture and their alternative life experience. During all stages of Bible translation work, it is important to involve deaf translators and the deaf community and not to work at any time from a hearing perspective.³¹ To avoid interference on the translation exercise, the Deaf who understand their own culture should be engaged in this task. “The Christian faith becomes meaningful when “translated into a culture,”³² since many African Sign Languages evolved within the context of deaf culture³³ but existed within the deaf culture.

Bible translation has often served as a catalyst for gospel expansion which the missionaries explored in the early stage of Christianity. Andrew Foster, an American missionary brought American Sign Language to Nigeria,³⁴ which is being taught in schools in order to expand the horizon of deaf culture in Nigeria. Bible translation belongs to the category of literacy and artistic translation, which converts a source text into a target one. It is also known as ‘trans-mediatization’, or the transfer from one median to another³⁵ The Bible was translated from the original languages

²⁵ “BS Nigeria Set to Dedicate Deaf Translation Centre,” accessed March 29, 2020,

<http://biblesociety-nigeria.org/news/bs-nigeria-set-to-dedicate-deaf-translation-centre/>

²⁶ Ogunwale, Olatunde (Secretary, Deaf Mission Church), in discussion with the author, March 2020.

²⁷ Nigerian Sign Language Gains Scripture” accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/nigerian-sign-language-gains-scripture/>

²⁸ The writer had worked as a Bible teacher among the Deaf since 2003. She discovered from her interactions with the Deaf that many of them are yet to respond to Jesus Christ for salvation.

²⁹ The Deaf Community of Nigeria: The Nigerian Sign Language Community” accessed March 5, 2020, https://joshuaproject.net/assets/media/profiles/text/t19007_ni.pdf

³⁰ Olayinka Latona, “BSN launches 77 Nigerian Sign Language Bible.” *Vanguard*, December 17, 2016, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/12/bsn-launches-77-nigerian-sign-language-bible/>

³¹ United Bible Societies, “Sign Languages and the Bible: Briefing Sheet 8” accessed March 5, 2020 <https://www.bibel.no/~media/Files/Pdf/Sign-languages-and-the-Bible.ashx>

³² Bosch, J.D. *Transforming Mission Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 337

³³ Olanike Ola Orié and Karen W. Sanders, eds. *Selected Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Conference on African Linguistics: Linguistic Interface in African Languages* (Sommer Ville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project, 2013), 77.

³⁴ Runnels, Joel. “Dr. Andrew Foster: A Literature Review.” *American Annals of the Deaf* Vol 162, no. 3, (2017): 243-252, www.jstor.org/stable/26235342

³⁵ Jean – Claude Lake – Mkole, “History and Theory of Scripture Translations” *HTS*, 64, 1 (2008): 254

(Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin) to the receptor languages which brought the Bible to the doorstep of every tribe globally.

Translation goes through the process, which includes “a lesser or greater degree of deletion, distortion, generalization, specification, or equivalence between the source text and the target text.”³⁶ Translating the Bible into Sign Language will undergo this process since the language does not follow the English language grammatical structure or any other language structure. The uniqueness of Nigerian Sign Language implies that the Bible cannot be translated word-for-word or chapter-by-chapter, instead of into a Chronological Story that each Deaf person can understand as he or she “reads” (watches) the Bible.

Reasons for Translating the Bible into Nigerian Sign Language

1. The problem of linguistic differences makes it a necessity because Sign Language is not a universal language; hence each country should embark on its own translation project. For example, the sign for “good” in Australian Sign Language is different from that of Nigerian Sign Language. It may be difficult for a Deaf in Australia to understand a fellow Deaf in Nigeria without an interpreter. Having the Bible translated into Sign Language will enable the Deaf to “read” (watch) it to expand their knowledge of the word of God. Through this, discipleship becomes easy and they become functional church members who contribute worthwhile skills to the development and growth of the body of Christ. Sign Language is not a written language; though many Deaf have learned to read, reading is not natural to them.
2. Many Deaf can be reached with the gospel of Christ as Christian deaf are involved in evangelism. The knowledge gained through the word of God equips them in this noble assignment. Reaching a fellow Deaf with the gospel is easier for them than preaching through an interpreter.
3. It provides training opportunities for the Deaf who might not have gone beyond primary or secondary education. Bible translation training is a higher form of training that qualifies them for different roles within the translation team.
4. Most Deaf do not have a literate worldview hence are not abstract thinkers. According to Melanie Clinton, A passage like 1 John 1:6-7 which instructs believers to walk in the light and not darkness is easy to translate into sign but might be confusing for literal thinkers. Focus is on translating and recording signed versions of key Bible stories rather than verse by verse or chapter by chapter translations. Even passages from Paul’s epistles may be turned into stories by framing his teachings with details from the book of Acts which tell the stories of the churches he planted and then continues to train.³⁷

In order to make the word of God meaningful for the Deaf, Sign Language Bible translation becomes an important tool in achieving this.

Hermeneutical Implications for Bible Translation into Sign Language

Bible translation involves skills in hermeneutics, for without a better understanding of Bible interpretation, errors will creep in and can mislead the reader. Those skilled in hermeneutical skill “interpret and make exegetical choices”³⁸ while translating. Bible translation is a “dominant form of African biblical interpretations or hermeneutics. It consumes a vast amount of Biblical interpretations and produces significant biblical scholarship”³⁹ The challenge Sign Language Bible translation faces is finding skilled interpreters of the Bible to be involved in translating the Bible into Nigerian Sign Language. United Bible Societies have suggested that those who should be used as Sign Language translators should come from the deaf culture in order to translate the Bible from the deaf perspective. How vast is their knowledge of hermeneutics in order to become an authority in Bible translation is an issue to be addressed by the Bible Society of Nigeria.

The effort of DOOR (Deaf Opportunity OutReach) based in Kenya in training local translators is commendable. However, to what extent can this training qualify the translators for Bible translation? DOOR International has worked for over fifteen years in training deaf leaders in evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and leadership development so they can impact their countries and communities with the gospel. In 2004 it became clear that this training cannot be done effectively without God’s word in the heart language of the deaf, Sign Language. As a result, DOOR International joined the Wycliffe Alliance and began work in Sign Language Bible translation.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid, 255.

³⁷ Melanie Clinton, “Three Reasons the Deaf Need Scripture in Sign Language” accessed March 5, 2020 <https://www.imb.org/2019/04/12/three-reasons-the-deaf-need-scripture-in-sign-language/>

³⁸ Ibid, 258.

³⁹ Gerald O. West, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Its Relevance for Bible Translation in Africa” in *Triple Heritage: Gospel in Intercultural Mediation*, eds. Loba-Mkole and Wendland ((Kinshasha: CERIL, 2005), 3

⁴⁰ “Deaf Bible: DOOR International Join Forces to Eradicate Bible Poverty Among the Deaf,” accessed March 6, <https://www.newswire.com/news/deaf-bible-door-international-join-forces-to-eradicate-bible-6501969>

With adequate training and detailed review by the professionals, the Deaf can read the Bible in the language convenient for them, which is the Sign Language.

Standards for Sign Language Bible Translation

According to the President of DOOR, Rob Myers “Hearing organizations have been doing Bible translation for hundreds of years, but it is only within the past 20 or 30 years that Sign Language Bible translation has even been considered, or even begun to take place.” In order to ensure accuracy of Sign Language translation, the following standards should be strictly followed:

1. The person signing the on-screen must be a Deaf, whose translation style must be approved by the deaf community. As the deaf community watches him or her and observe the signer’s translation style, the community can make contributions to the translation, and this makes the Sign Language Bible a tool to be used by the community.
2. The Deaf and their adult hearing children who have grown up in the deaf community and conversant with their parents’ Sign Language though not deaf, should be involved in the translation team to enable the recipient of the Bible to own the project and use the Bible after translation.
3. Bible translation is a joint effort of professionals and the speakers of the language as such, a professional Bible translator should be engaged as a consultant to the team of Deaf Bible translators who will help guide and ensure conformity to the standard guiding translation. The consultant should be one who understands and is fluent in Sign Language. The consultant must be a member of certified bodies involved in Bible translation project in each country.
4. The lack of translation consultants poses a challenge to Sign Language Bible translation. “Another significant need in the world of Sign Language Bible translation are Bible translators into Sign Language who are less than ten translation consultants worldwide with fluency in at least one Sign Language.”⁴¹ DOOR developed its Consultants – in-Training (CIT) to address this need. The above steps, if strictly considered and followed, will ensure the hermeneutical integrity of the translation of the Bible into Nigerian Sign Language.

CONCLUSION

The paper had examined the necessity for the Nigerian Sign Language Bible translation for the deaf community in the country. The Deaf are a unique set of people who through the hidden nature of their disability can be sidetracked except through close contact with the individuals that his or her disability can be detected. Coupled with their uniqueness is the Sign Language, which is the heart language of the Deaf with which they socialize, interact with their environment and relate to God. The deaf culture is all about the deaf worldview, which is significantly different from their hearing counterpart worldview. Since most pre-lingual deaf people do not have any other language other than Sign Language, it is of necessity to have the Bible translated into Sign Language in order for them to “read” (watch) it and deepen their knowledge of God. Deaf translators should be equipped with hermeneutical skills to enable them interpret the Bible well in the course of translation. The prophecy in Isaiah 29:18a, which states “on that day, the Deaf shall hear the words of the scroll” can be fulfilled. Although there are many allusions to disability imagery of the text, physical deafness is a fact to which the church should not close her eyes. In order to enable the Deaf to hear the word of the Scroll (the Bible), it should be translated into their language of communication.

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