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**Anthropologies of the Khmer Rouge, Part I:  
Terror and Aesthetics**

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# Anthropologies of the Khmer Rouge, Part I: Terror and Aesthetics

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## Terror and Aesthetics

Toni Samantha Phim

The 1970s were horrific years for the country and people of Cambodia. As the decade dawned, civil war along with spillover from the conflict in neighboring Vietnam resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, the uprooting of millions and the destruction of vast amounts of arable land. When the war ended in 1975 with the Khmer Rouge (KR)<sup>1</sup> defeat of the Khmer Republic headed by Lon Nol, many welcomed what they thought would be an era of peace and re-building. Instead, the KR revolutionary regime – whose official name was Democratic Kampuchea (DK) – headed by Pol Pot, unleashed unfathomable suffering upon the populace as the upheaval and destruction continued, but on an unprecedented scale.

The revolution's leadership, known by the appellation of *Angkar*, or "organization," strove to be the sole focus of people's loyalties. Policies of mass re-location and family separation tore people from their communities. Religious worship, schooling, markets and free association were banned. Constant surveillance was the norm for the masses in this "great leap"<sup>2</sup> toward a self-reliant, agrarian, socialist state. The populace was divided into two main categories: the "old" or "base" peasantry which had been under KR rule in its liberated zones prior to 1975, and the "new" or "April 17th" people who had lived in towns or villages under the control of the Khmer Republic. Some "base" people held positions of local authority while the "new" people were often subject to much more deprivation and harassment than the others. Forced hard labor, lack of access to modern medicine and adequate food and brutal punishment led to the death of close to two million people

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<sup>1</sup> Prince Norodom Sihanouk named Cambodia's communist movement the "Khmer Rouge" in the 1960s. "Khmer Rouge" is generally used as a plural term.

<sup>2</sup> See references to a "great leap" in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs journal (Anonymous 1997-98) and in Chandler, Kiernan and Boua (1988).

(almost a quarter of the population)<sup>3</sup> from overwork, starvation, disease, torture and execution in just under four years of rule.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I will discuss the conjunction of terror with aesthetic practice under the Khmer Rouge, viewing terror as both strategy and effect. The focus of my previous work has been on the relationship between war and dance over the past quarter century in Cambodia, with a concentration on the lives of the dancers themselves (Shapiro 1994). Here I wish to continue my examination of the arts, this time expanding the scope to include the nature of the evil of the KR. Looking at music and dance and aspects of the KR's exercise of power, I hope to shed light on what Taussig has called, in reference to the situation in Colombia, the "sinister quality [that] depends on the strategic use of uncertainty and mystery" (1989:7), which, at the receiving end, resembles the terror experienced by Cambodians under KR rule.<sup>5</sup>

Music, or more specifically, songs, and dance were among the sites of signifying power recognized by the KR leaders. They created and organized public displays of revolutionary songs and dances through which they attempted to define reality and indoctrinate accordingly. Meanwhile, they forbade the practice of dance as Cambodians had known it (in all its variety) and allowed no performance of pre-revolutionary popular, folk or ritual songs.<sup>6</sup> I will begin by talking about the new songs and dances and then move on to stories that turn our idea of officially-sanctioned art during those years on its head. Viewing both musical expression and corporeality as loci of meaning-making, I will explore the articulation of relations between history and memory and between aesthetics and ideology in performance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars' estimates range from 750,000 deaths (Vickery 1984), to 1.7 million (Kiernan 1996), to 2 million (Heuveline 1998), out of a pre-1975 population of between 7 and 8 million.

<sup>4</sup> For a cultural analysis of what he terms KR "genocidal practices," see Hinton (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt points out that "the ultimate consequence of rule by terror [is that] ... nobody, not even the executioners, can be free of fear" (1979[1951]:6), which certainly holds true for many members of the KR who were eventually purged. This broader discussion is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Some revolutionary songs retained traditional melodies while discarding old lyrics. See David Chandler's note in Chandler, Kiernan and Lim (1982:326).

<sup>7</sup> The cultural significance of "the training and deployment of bodies in dance" is far-reaching and includes "what it can tell us about the range of allowable representations of the body in motion and the policing of bodily form in a specific time and place.... Dance.... encompasses not only movement style but critical reception and aesthetic motivation" (Koritz 1996:91). See also the collection of essays in Foster (1996) for fascinating interdisciplinary examinations of dance.

In Democratic Kampuchea, songs and dances became instruments of battle, used to implicate enemies in the context of an on-going struggle. Excerpts from "The Red Flag" song follow:

Glittering red blood blankets the earth – blood given up to liberate the people.....  
The blood swirls away, and flows upward, gently into the sky,  
turning into a red revolutionary flag.  
Red flag! red flag! flying now! flying now!  
O beloved friends, pursue, strike and hit the enemy.  
Red flag! red flag! flying now! flying now!  
Don't spare a single reactionary imperialist: drive them from  
Kampuchea.  
Strive and strike, strive and strike, and win the victory, win the  
victory. (Chandler, Kiernan and Lim 1982:326)

Survivors' memoirs and the recollections of others who lived to tell of their experiences under the KR reveal the omnipresence of revolutionary songs for many. At the worksite, in the communal eating hall, even while packed in trucks during a re-location, people were force-fed songs extolling the virtues of *Angkar* and the new Cambodia. Played on transistor radios, blared over loudspeakers, and even sung by the workers, as one person recalls, "[Singing and listening to their songs] was the most effective tool of indoctrination. You started to believe in it" (interview cited in Um 1998:148).

It was particularly important to *Angkar* that children started to believe what they were telling them. Ben Kiernan has noted that "[DK] could not trust those outside of its creation or control" (1996:4). Children, "pure," clean slates in the eyes of the KR leadership, were pivotal in building, enforcing and continuing the revolution as they could (potentially) be molded to fit the vision of this new society. There was an entire repertoire of songs composed for and taught specifically to children, songs which revealed not only the KR conceptions of their revolution, but also the place of children in it.

During the KR regime, both attitudes toward and expectations of young people were upturned. Whereas Cambodian children had always been trusted to be deferential to their elders, under the KR it was often they who gave orders and meted out punishment to people two and three times their age. And, whereas (biological) family had been so key in people's lives in terms of identity and loyalty, *Angkar* aimed to take the place of parents and siblings.

Songs were significant to the process of creating and raising *Angkar's* revolutionaries.

Lyrics from the song "Children of the New Kampuchea," found in a DK songbook, proclaim the battle-readiness of the boys and girls and their gratitude to be guided by the revolution. Here are excerpts:

We the children have the good fortune  
to live the rest of our time in precious harmony  
under the affectionate care  
of the Kampuchean revolution, immense, most clear and shining.

We the children of the revolution  
make the supreme resolution to strive  
to increase our ability to battle,  
and make the stand of the revolution perfect. (Marston 1994:110-111)

Workers, young and old, often formed the audience for performances of revolutionary arts troupes, as part of a celebration of the anniversary of the KR victory or in connection with another large meeting. There were, as well, separate performances explicitly for KR cadres, foreign visitors or residents of Phnom Penh. Someth May recalls that after completion of a dam, a performing group entertained the workers. Of the performers, he writes (1986:177):

They sang of our love for the Angkar -- it was as wide as the sea, it had no boundary. We were masters of our work. There was no more exploitation. We could do whatever we wanted. The canals were the veins of the Angkar.<sup>8</sup> We were no longer reliant upon rain. We could produce as much rice as we wanted.

They sang to the workers who had survived. Hundreds had died while laboring on the project. This is one example of how "the official voice can so strikingly contradict reality and by means of such contradiction create fear" (Taussig 1989:16).

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Kiernan (personal communication 1998) has suggested that the concept of the embodiment of the country *in Angkar* could be extended to encompass the embodiment of Cambodia in the leader, Pol Pot, if we look at aspects of the use of the term *Angkar* by members of the KR. "[T]he Organization' ... has a home address, watches movies, is sometimes 'busy working,' but can be asked favors if one dares" (Chandler, Kiernan and Boua 1988:232). See my dissertation (Shapiro 1994) for preliminary work on Khmer notions of carrying "Cambodia" within themselves.

After a twelve-hour day at a labor site, a work brigade might be marched, sometimes several kilometers, to such a political gathering and required to listen to speeches and songs, and watch the dances. Many were too exhausted -- and too uninterested -- to watch. But, said a woman who was a little girl at the time, "We would be punished if we didn't pay attention. Many of us learned to sleep with our eyes open" (personal interview 1992).

In addition to being instruments of battle, dances, in their enactment, also modeled ideal revolutionary behavior and attitudes. What follows are examples of the formulaic pattern harnessed as a means of educating and militarizing the populace in body and social space, thereby disciplining both.

On a wooden platform in front of hundreds of weak, emaciated people, dancers, dressed most often in black tops and loose trousers, checkered scarves around their necks, dark caps on their heads, and rubber tire sandals on their feet, would stand in formation. Armed KR soldiers patrolled around the silent audience. Props in hand (they varied; dress remained the same) the dancers proceeded to march in their choreographed patterns.

The following dance song makes explicit reference to *Angkar*, and links the youth to their collective history:

We are young men and women  
protecting the coast.  
Children of the people of Kampuchea  
receiving new tasks of great importance  
to protect the integrity of our great country....

However much the rain falls, the waves roll, the wind blows,  
Together we follow *Angkar's* tasks forever.  
We love our *Angkar*, homeland and people,  
With the cooperative which makes our produce plentiful....<sup>9</sup>

On stage, the dancers held wooden guns.

When lyrics in other songs referred to the glories of agricultural work, the dancers carried hoes and shovels; when the words praised industrial development, they wielded wrenches. Lyrics aside, performers modeled ideal revolutionaries through their militaristic demeanor, lack of gender

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<sup>9</sup> This dance was performed for me by an ex-Khmer Rouge dancer who also provided the lyrics.

differentiation in dress and gestures, and by, as was often the case, carrying a real gun slung over one shoulder.<sup>10</sup>

Many performers were of the "base" or "old" peasantry, those the KR most trusted. But some "new" youth were recruited as well. Recalls one, "I took the job because they didn't cut rations for dancers if we were sick. Regular workers starved if they couldn't complete their tasks." Dancers were also soldiers who spent their time, when not performing, transporting supplies and attending educational or political indoctrination sessions. They heard repeatedly that anyone who expressed distrust in or disloyalty to *Angkar*, even a member of one's own family, was a traitor, an enemy in need of elimination. They were being taught to hate, and, in that aim, to dance.

Official speeches, as well as performance of the songs and dances, inculcated the notion that the entire population was an army engaged in combat with the elements – rain, the earth – and with human foes. Indeed, much of the way the leadership administered the country "appeared [to be] a direct continuation of... methods and apparatus employed in war" (Um 1998:142; see also Marston 1994). Haing Ngor wrote in his autobiography that at the conclusion of one performance, dancers pounded their chests with clenched fists and repeatedly shouted at the top of their lungs, "Blood Avenges Blood..." On the word "avenges" they stuck "their arms out straight like a Nazi salute, except with a closed fist instead of an open hand... They shouted other revolutionary slogans and gave the salutes and finally ended with 'Long live the Cambodian revolution!' It was a dramatic performance, and it left us scared... Blood avenges blood. You kill us, we kill you. We...had been on the other side of the KR in the civil war....they were going to take revenge" (1987:140-141). The enmity toward perceived/accused traitors worked through the body by means of redundant, brusque gestural and verbal pronouncements evocative of battle, and even of killing, instilling fear in the audience.

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<sup>10</sup> Staged "folk dances" meant to represent peasant lifestyles and activities were created by professional artists in the capital, Phnom Penh, in the 1960s and 1970s, and became very popular across Cambodia. Opposition of the sexes, including flirtation, is a central motif of many of these, a theme never invoked in KR-era creations. The comic elements of some of these theatrical folk dances are also absent in revolutionary pieces. For more on theatrical folk dance see Phim and Thompson (in press).



It is at this point that I would like to shift gears and look at a notably different dimension of the KR relationship to music and dance. I will begin with the story of a young man named Dara.<sup>11</sup>

As part of a mobile youth work brigade in Battambang province in northwestern Cambodia in 1977, Dara lived in a hut in the middle of the forest. Nights were engulfed in silence, and in fear. Because at night people were taken away and never seen again. "I prayed," said Dara, "that nights would never come..."

At 4:00 am they would wake us. The rice fields were a one and a half hour walk from our base. People were so hungry and weak when they were harvesting or building irrigation paths that they would collapse. If they didn't work, they received no food, or worse, they were killed. So many of us became sick, especially with night blindness. Mine lasted three months. We needed to be led out into the forest from our huts to find a place to go to the bathroom. But because everyone was exhausted and sick, nobody had the strength to help anyone else. We had to crawl through excrement and garbage to find a place to relieve ourselves. I had given up hopes of surviving and decided I needed to do something to soothe my soul until my time came. So I found some bamboo and, using a small knife I had carried with me since I had been evacuated from Phnom Penh, I carved a *khloy* [bamboo flute]. I had no instrument to measure the proportions, and the bamboo I used was the wrong kind, but I made a crude flute one night and sat down and played. The sound of the flute carried through the silence of the forest. The head of the KR in that area heard. He came to find me and called me in for questioning.

Dara's dormitory mates and work partners had been disappearing nightly. Each evening he changed the position and place in which he would sleep so as to elude those who might come for him as they had come for others. But once called in for questioning, he felt his time was up and, even though he had heard that "they were killing artists in another area just because they were artists," he decided to tell the truth. He had been a student of the arts. Yet, counter to what Dara expected, after admonishing him for making and playing the flute, the cadre told him that if he agreed to serenade him with the *khloy* every night, his life would be spared. So he did.

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<sup>11</sup> The following stories employ pseudonyms and are from personal interviews conducted by the author in Cambodia between 1990 and 1993.

One night, months later, they held a big meeting at about 8:30. There must have been thousands of people there, from many villages. They talked to us about socialism and how we should give up all our possessions so as to benefit the whole society. After the meeting they asked me to play [my flute] for everyone. I played a lullaby. Everyone started to cry. The leaders were furious. 'How dare you sabotage our meeting!?' they shouted. They had wanted to create an atmosphere of trust in the revolution, and I had made the people cry. But I hadn't really done anything. It's the power of the music and people's memories...

The cadre who had originally sanctioned his performances rescued him from the grip of the enraged officials present. His fate is uncertain.

In Battambang province as well, a young woman who had been a dancer was also living in fear of the night, and struggling to keep up with her work load during the day. Before moving on to her story, I want to describe one form of the variety of pre- or non-revolutionary Cambodian dance I referred to above, as it figures prominently in what I am about to detail.

The official history of Cambodian classical (or court) dance is linked with that of temples and monarchs. Inscriptions from as early as the seventh century tell us that dancers were presented as offering to temples (Groslier 1965:283). And for centuries it was through the medium of the dancers that royal communication with the divinities was effected to guarantee fertility of the land and well-being of the people in the king's domain.

Girls and boys start training at a very young age, when they are supple enough to be molded into the seemingly unnatural poses (hyper-extended elbows, flexed toes, arched backs and so on), which require tireless discipline to master. When a certain virtuosity is attained, a classical dancer in the capital city becomes integral to particular royal rituals and national celebrations, as well as stage performances for dignitaries, tourists and the local population.<sup>12</sup>

It has been assumed that because of their intimate association with the state, and therefore, with previous regimes, classical dancers were a particular target of the KR. Indeed, the post-DK Cambodian government estimated that

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<sup>12</sup> The dancers' performances are coordinated by officials of the Royal University of Fine Arts and the Department of Arts, both under the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, as well as palace administrators on specific occasions. Princess Bopha Devi, daughter of King Norodom Sihanouk and a leading court dancer herself decades ago, periodically selects and coaches dancers prior to certain performances.

eighty to ninety percent of the country's professional artists had perished. The high death toll resulted, perhaps, from a number of factors in addition to the artists' high-profile relationship with the state.<sup>13</sup> What we know more concretely is that this kind of dance itself was a target.

In Battambang in 1977, a young woman named Dani would awaken daily at 4:00 am, missing her parents and feeling that it "would have been easier to be dead. We worked hard all day, then lived in fear all night." Indeed, the darkness and silence that might have provided shelter from the "panopticon" that ruled the days instead brought increased terror, as it did for Dara.

At one point Dani became seriously ill and couldn't work for several months. She was feverish and would shake uncontrollably every evening, then start singing and dancing. "It was as if I had gone crazy," she said.

Dani and her cousin, both from Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, were in a village populated mainly by peasantry most trusted by the KR, as opposed to people from the cities or unliberated parts of the country before their national victory in 1975. Some local inhabitants took pity on her, calling a series of traditional healers to her one after the other. "I don't know why they took an interest in caring for me. I don't know why they didn't just kill me or let me die, as, in my condition, I was worthless to them." The ninth healer suspected Dani might be in offense of the spirits of the dance. Those present asked her cousin whether Dani had been a dancer before. When her cousin answered that Dani had danced with the royal troupe, there was an audible sigh.

The residents of that region were familiar with court dance from the trips that Prince Sihanouk had made a decade earlier to a local temple to ask for blessings from the deities during which dancers would perform as a means of communication with the heavens.<sup>14</sup> Villagers had been involved in the preparation of offerings for those rites, and for Dani, they started the

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<sup>13</sup> A report from the People's Revolutionary Tribunal (convened in 1979 to try KR leaders in abstencia for genocide) includes testimonies from survivors about the brutal killings of some individual performing artists. The report claims that it was KR policy "to massacre or at least to mistreat the artists" (Tribunal Populaire Revolutionnaire 1979:2). My own interviews suggest that status as a "new" person (from the city) or being a spouse or sibling of an official of the Lon Nol regime were among the various other reasons people who happened to be dancers or musicians or actors were executed.

<sup>14</sup> Norodom Sihanouk was initially King, then stepped down to become Prince and Head of State from the mid-1950s until the coup d'état in 1970. He is once again King of Cambodia.

same sorts of preparations for a ceremony to appease the spirits which had been offended.

After they had made the offerings they brought in an exorcism orchestra. The musicians played half the night, but their music didn't seem to help. Someone then said, 'This young woman needs a *pin peat* orchestra.'<sup>15</sup> I don't know where they found the instruments and the people, but soon there was a full orchestra, just like we use today. And they started playing... and even though I didn't 'know' myself, I sat up and demanded a certain kind of dance shirt and pantaloons and a silver belt. When I was properly attired, the music started again, and I danced...

Dani danced and danced, her energy reaching to her extremities (fingers curved back and toes almost constantly flexed upward), in measured, controlled, yet lyrical movements devoid of hard edges and sharp displacements of weight. The music continued until dawn. "In the morning I was able to go to work again" for the first time in months.

Before getting sick, Dani had entertained her cousin at night by dancing. One time she danced the role of the powerful and sacred character Moni Mehkala, a role which is passed down from teacher to pupil in a special ceremony (see Shapiro 1994). Dani had never received permission to practice or perform this role; she had only watched others in the palace from afar. But here in Battambang she had dared perform. She believes the spirits had seen her, and had registered their displeasure by inflicting illness upon her.

The fact that any of this took place – the burning of incense and candles, a *pin peat* orchestra performance, a calling to the spirits, the execution of a classical dance – might seem remarkable in itself as each of these practices was forbidden. And in combination, with the participation of many, including the tacit consent of the local KR authorities who neither protested nor stopped the proceedings, it might appear truly extraordinary. However, I contend that it is, rather, more prosaic than it seems. It is exactly the contradictions, the unexpected, which kept everyone in suspense and maintained the ever-present possibility of arbitrary violence (and arbitrary benevolence.)

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<sup>15</sup> The *pin peat* orchestra accompanies classical dances, Buddhist temple ceremonies, shadow puppet plays, etc.

Across the country in Kompong Thom province a man named Bun had been sick for months as well. He was so weakened by malaria that he had to crawl to get water. "I could hardly even stand up." Then, one day, seemingly from out of nowhere, KR soldiers "captured me at gunpoint, and forced me into a boat... I was crying..." He was taken to a prison. About sixty men were being held captive, chained and locked in by their feet. The first thing Bun noticed was the stench. Under each plank (used as a bed) was a box for excrement and urine.

At night, prisoners were taken for questioning. Some returned from the ordeal and fainted. Others were tortured (he heard their cries) and never came back. When Bun was interrogated he told them the truth, that he had been a dancer and teacher at the University of Fine Arts and that he had traveled abroad to perform, to Indonesia, the U.S., Thailand. "I told him that I did everything following the authorities at the university. Then he asked me what my specialty was. 'Hanuman,' I replied." (Hanuman is the monkey general in the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic of Indian origin.)

The interrogator grew silent. He eventually asked Bun to demonstrate a few dance moves. Skinny and bald (he had shaved his head when he was so sick, as is the custom), Bun struggled to lift his arms, to position his legs. The cadre was impressed with this wretched 'monkey.' He told Bun to perform that evening for all the guards and prisoners. He did. From that day on he was secretly supplied with food, and called 'Ta [Elder] Hanuman' by the KR. About a month later, the twenty men who were still alive were released. Why these particular prisoners had been taken, and why those surviving were set free remained destabilizing mysteries.

Given the KR's claim to have erased thousands of years of history and given their excoriation of feudal (including royalist) thought and action, as well as their need to orchestrate people's every move, one may wonder how it is that in the above examples the peasantry and the local cadres helped a sick or imprisoned person who would have been expected to be expendable, seemingly simply because he or she danced, and dance of the royal tradition no less. And one may wonder why someone who made and played a flute without permission wasn't punished. Only ten to twenty percent of the country's professional artists survived the regime. Yet, here are some who are alive because of their art.

These stories, which muddle the public picture usually presented by and of the KR, in no way minimize the horrors and crimes they committed. The evil becomes even more inexplicable than it already was if they could save Hanuman and continue to kill those on either side of him in the prison. Such inhumane and disorienting capriciousness forms part of the very complicated canvas under study. It was the very nature of some KR violence to be completely arbitrary.

Being confronted with things that we now recognize to be symbols of pre-revolutionary "Khmerness" -- Hanuman, classical dance, a lullaby played on a *khloy*, and so on -- peasants in the good stead of the KR or cadres themselves made choices about how to react. The choices they made in these cases were politically and "aesthetically oriented commentar[ies]" (Bull 1997:270) which contradicted expectations and which illustrate a key element of Pol Pot's totalitarianism. Certain tales or characters, such as Hanuman, as well as physicality, spirituality or music of a specific sort resonate with many people in Cambodia, including, apparently, some members of the KR. These pre-revolutionary resonances coexisted with the KR contention that history had started anew with their rule.<sup>16</sup> Were we to try for an ethnography that brings to light more such contradictions, our understanding of the Khmer Rouge regime would be all the richer.

Terror haunts the constantly shifting ground upon which the inexplicable and the unspeakable dwell side by side. The extreme confusion and intimidation experienced under the KR helped lay the groundwork for the emotional, physical, social and spiritual scars lodged in Cambodia and her people.

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<sup>16</sup> On music, the Nazis and concentration camp inmates, see "The Rosner Family " chapter in Brecher (1994), and Laks: "When an esman [SS man] listened to music... he somehow became strangely similar to a human being... Could people who love music to this extent... be at the same time capable of committing so many atrocities on the rest of humanity?" (1989:70)

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