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Beyond empire and nation

Writing history is a political activity. Generally speaking, history follows power, and the history of decolonization is no exception to this rule. Whether told from the perspective of colonizer or colonized, popular narratives of decolonization often reflect national historical frameworks, geographical boundaries, and chronologies, though motivation, logic, morality, and much else likely differ. Former colonizers had to adjust to the changed political geographies, which involved forgetting the nascent and hybrid identities of the late imperial era. The colonies that had been understood as part of the national destiny gradually became foreign. Decolonization, accompanied by the loss of colonial clout and sometimes as well by military and diplomatic defeat, set in motion a process at times characterized as wilful forgetting or selective memory. The most common word in the analyses of postcolonial memory in the metropolitan countries is 'silence'.[1]

In the newly-founded countries too, a kind of wilful forgetting was at work, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes encouraged by policy. Public representations in the postcolonial states tend to conceive of decolonization as a common struggle against foreign rule or as the consummation of a national destiny. The coming of independence constituted a rupture, both in political discourse and in leadership; this often resulted in imposing a rigid national framework that eschews the confusing dynamics of societies in the period up to and during decolonization. To a large extent, nationalist leaders have encouraged the veiling of historically and morally unpalatable realities such as institutional continuities, collaborations, and violence. In former colonized and colonial countries alike, it was in many national politicians' interests to see independence as a new start, a clean slate, more the fulfilment of a promise than a process that would mark an enduring legacy.

[1] The literature on the remembrance of empire is large and growing. For France, see, for instance, Stora 1991; Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire 2005a, 2005b; for the Netherlands: Raben 2002; Oostindie 2010; for Italy: Pinkus 2003; Andall and Duncan 2005; interestingly, historiography of British postimperial images puts much less stress on amnesia and silence, but more on persistence and reenactment: Ward 2001.

Languages of decolonization

National histories strongly endorse the narrative of decolonization as a clear rupture. But coming into one's own was less determined and trouble-free than was often assumed in the public representations of the time. Not only were there uncomfortable legacies and continuities of colonial practices, but the acceptance of and adaptation to the new political realties did not occur as the new leaders had hoped for or planned. To capture the nuance, complication, and contradiction as lived by those who went through decolonization, we have to turn to arts and letters. A dip into the literary output of Africa and Asia produces a wide array of visions based on hopes and dreams, but also on the awkwardness and disillusionment of decolonization. Poets and novelists explore perspectives and point to ambiguities that politicians and historians have tended to obscure or neglect. As novelist Chinua Achebe (2009:39) (born 1930) put it in his recent memoirs: 'Nigerian nationality was for me and my generation an acquired taste – like cheese'. In order to capture the decolonization process and to describe how the 'consciousness of self' (Fanon 1961) was obtained, many literary authors have analysed the phases they went through in order to mentally unravel double loyalties and to overcome the intellectual and emotional ambiguity between two or even more worlds. They testify to the dilemmas of the postcolonial era and often disclose the feelings of disappointment when expectations remained unfulfilled.

Naturally, the changes of power deeply affected the lives of writers and intellectuals. With only few exceptions, most indigenous authors welcomed the end of colonial rule. But the political changes also constituted a source of confusion. Toety Heraty (born 1933), an Indonesian philosopher and poet of Javanese descent, offers insight into the different stages of the complicated process of dissociation from the former colonizer. She belonged to a small, modern, educated elite of about one-and-a-half million people, who in the 1950s represented the less than two percent of the Indonesian population who had been educated in Dutch – a result of Dutch policy deliberately not introducing Dutch on a large scale (Groeneboer 1998:7). Reflecting on her memories of historical events over the past fifty years, she gives an account of the way she herself experienced decolonization 'since personal and public events are closely intertwined' (Heraty 1996:71). She labels the process of untying the threads between Indonesians and the former colonizers as amnesia. This loss of memory was caused by the traumatic rupture between the Netherlands and Indonesia, which started during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia when the use of Dutch was forbidden, and was galvanized at the declaration of independence in August 1945. Later the fissure deepened. Compelled by the circumstances and under social pressure, in the 1950s the Dutch tongue became 'a language to be forgotten, a mentality to be forgotten' (Heraty

1996:68). Indonesian was the language of the new nation and its institutions, the unifying tool to realize the new ideals: Dutch and regional vernaculars were no longer tolerated in the schools or in the press.

Thus, untying and being untied, in a continuous reorientation to the changing political, economic, and social fabric, Toety Heraty gradually detached herself from the Dutch and their influence, while growing into Indonesian surroundings. But this process could never be complete: however conscious the distancing, traces of the past remained. Many years later the author opted for further study in the Netherlands, as the country and the language were familiar to her (Heraty 1996:68-9). It proved impossible and ultimately not desirable to completely expunge the intellectual and cultural legacy of colonialism, but its meaning in daily life changed and its power diminished considerably.

If Toety Heraty only gradually accommodated to the new nation, others 'forgot' more abruptly. Kenyan novelist, essayist, playwright, journalist, editor, academic and social activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986:xiv, 9, 12) (born 1938) made a radical decision in 1977 to abandon writing in English and only compose in his native tongues: 'From now on it is Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili all the way', he explained, since '[l]anguage was the means of the spiritual subjugation' and English was 'the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom'. According to Ngũgĩ (1986:xii), 'Africa needs back its economy, its politics, its culture, its languages and all its patriotic writers' in order to decolonize the mind. Ngũgĩ was neither the first author to realize that the choice of language was a political position nor to make such a radical break with the colonial tongue. In the intellectual wave of 'Africanization', Chinua Achebe had already decided to publish in his native language from 1962 onwards, and earlier in the twentieth century Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) chose to write in Bengali and urged his compatriots to do the same.

These accounts demonstrate the significance of language in the development of new identities in the twentieth century, showing how the colonial past had taken root through language and engendered feelings of a deep ambivalence in colonial days, but also thereafter. The colonial heritage could not easily be discarded, as much of the changing lifestyles, cultural forms, and the language of modernity had entered under the cloak of colonialism. The Indonesian foreign minister Subandrio characterized the conflict between the colonial heritage and the new nationalism as ´two souls, two minds in one person´ (Dolk 1993:11). Interestingly, in a recent book on Indonesian intellectuals' memories of their youth in colonial times, Rudolf Mrázek (2010:xii, 125-86) likened the colony to 'a big classroom' where the brightest Indonesian boys, and a few girls, were educated and where they were imbued with certain visions of modernity. An entire generation of Indonesian intellectuals faced this 'cultural and historical hybridity' (Goenawan Mohamad 2002:184),

which was above all a product of the introduction of the colonizers' language as the instrument not just of administration and trade, but of learning and education (D'haen 1998:10). As such, it became the chief means of expression for the educated elites. It was in a sense a borrowed language, the language of the foreign oppressor, but at the same time it was internalized (D'haen 2002 I:439-440), and had become part of Indonesians' 'colonized selves', just as the French language had penetrated the brains and spirit of the Martiniquans (Chamoiseau 1997:37).

In actual fact, the situation was often even more complicated, as colonial and nationalist linguistic pressures added to the polyglossia that characterizes most societies. For instance, Senegalese film director and literary author Ousmane Sembène (1923-2007) learned to speak French at a French school and Arabic at a Koran school, while Wolof was his mother tongue, one of the about 36 vernaculars of Senegal. Bilingual or more often multilingual environments typify colonial and postcolonial societies, each language constituting a window to different worlds. Like the language, the colonial experience had become part of the confusing postcolonial present, which often was less 'post' than the vagaries of political change dictated.

The people that are never mentioned

Literary authors have brought attention to the richly diverse perspectives of the people, often doing this in a much more subversive way than historians, who have focused on the events at a national level and settled into the moulds of national chronology. The African and Asian writers make us aware of the innumerable tensions created by the twentieth-century transition to independence. Their plots, topics, and concerns are innumerable, but some subjects recur: the relations to the West, visions of modernity, the intrusions or ineffectiveness of the central state, and social inequalities and tensions connected to political independence and the task of reordering society. The appearance and popularity of social themes and the attention given to the lower classes in the writings of Asian and African authors – and in the works of other artists – illustrate changing world views in the mid-twentieth century. These concerns were not the product of independence; they occurred earlier but gained in force after colonies achieved self-rule. Moreover, because of their attention to the development of labour organizations, to strikes and demonstrations, to protests against injustice and oppression by fellow countrymen and the new elites, these literary works represent realities that differ widely from the world of 'homogenized people' (Duara 2004:7), the kind of people nationalist ideologies of the new authorities were propagating. Tunisian-French author Albert Memmi (1957:121, 123) (born 1920) stated the following:

La carence la plus grave subie par le colonisé est d'être placé *hors de l'histoire* [...] 'il est hors de jeu. En aucune manière il n'est plus le sujet de l'histoire; bien entendu il en subit le poids, souvent plus cruellement que les autres, mais toujours comme objet. Il a fini par perdre l'habitude de toute participation active à l'histoire et ne la réclame même plus.

The colonized had not been allotted their due place in history, nor had the people in postcolonial states. For accounts of their everyday lives, the works of literary authors and film makers are more relevant than those of historians. In their stories and films, the artists paid attention to 'l'héroïsme au quotidien' and 'ces gens dont on ne parle jamais et qui font bouger l'Afrique'.[2]

Bearing witness to 'people that are never mentioned', many novelists have engaged in describing the fate of the lower social classes. For instance, Indian-Pakistani author Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) in his short stories (1987, 1991), written in Urdu, looks at the changing world through the eyes of those directly involved, and depicts the devastating disillusion and confusion brought about by Partition. India's and Pakistan's inhabitants did not only have to adapt their mental map to the new situation, but also had to learn how to make sense of the sudden appearance of two different worlds that before Partition belonged to one country with multiple cultures and languages. In *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Ousmane Sembène (1960) gave a gripping account of West African railway labourers' fight for justice during the 1947-1948 railway strikes on the Dakar-Niger line. And Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) portrays life at the lowest rungs of society in many of the short stories he wrote in the 1950s, and shows how the poor struggle and toil for basic food and shelter in a hostile and threatening metropolis (1957). The novelists' penchant for addressing social issues preceded independence, and reflected the hopes for social emancipation, the mass mobilizations, and the discourses of social justice that circulated in the late colonial period. They demonstrate how closely visions of independence were connected to ideals of equality and social justice, and therefore had a strongly modernist slant. Pramoedya also criticized his fellow Javanese for maintaining the feudal tradition. 'Mahluk dibelakang rumah' (Creatures behind houses), for instance, is an indictment against the new elite's attitude towards servants.

After independence, the social agenda of intellectuals and artists often brought them into conflict with the national regimes, demonstrating the sensitivities of the new leadership. Postcolonial regimes have been particu-

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[2]   Ousmane Sembène in an interview, published 14-5-2004 on http://www.afrik.com/article7295.html.

larly distrustful of their intellectual elites. Authorities often responded to the criticism, satire, or political preferences by trying to mute their voices, ban their works, and jailing them or driving them into exile. In Indonesia, novelist and journalist Mochtar Lubis (1922-2004) was jailed in 1956 for criticizing President Soekarno's inclination towards communism and again by Suharto in 1974 for denouncing the mismanagement of Indonesia's state oil company (Lubis 1980). Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who had a leftist orientation, was imprisoned three times: once by the Dutch for assisting the revolutionary effort, once by Soekarno for criticizing the discrimination of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, and again by President Suharto for his alleged communist sympathies. This was the fate of many artists in the decolonized world (but not only there). In Kenya in 1977, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was imprisoned by the government, which was enraged by the performance of his play *Ngaahika ndeenda* (I will marry when I want). Addressing the concerns of the local poor and performed in Gĩkũyũ by members of the local community, the popular production led to Ngũgĩ's arrest and imprisonment by Kenyan authorities. In 1982 he was forced into exile. Likewise in Cameroon, the colonial administration and, later, the independent regime tried to silence Mongo Beti (1932-2001) for his critical attitude. His novel *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956) was banned by the French governor of Cameroon. After a long exile, Mongo Beti returned to Cameroon in 1972. His *Main basse sur le Cameroun; autopsie d'une décolonisation* was again banned, both in Cameroon and France for its biting criticism of politics in his land of origin, and the continuing French influence there (Arnold 1998:356).

The tensions between intellectuals and the state and the ambiguous benefits of independence point to the fundamental characteristics of many decolonizing societies – the unfulfilled hopes, the complexities of identity, and the problems of governance. The lives and works of the novelists and artists exemplify the profound insecurities that beset a large part of the world in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Colonial powers had introduced or incited the creation of novel forms of organization, but they did so in pursuit of their own interests, not to build an integrated state or a harmonious nation – those are tasks for state and nation-builders. The national regimes that succeeded the colonial ones were often unable to create legitimacy and adequately include all sectors of society in the new national project. The decolonization that novelists have chronicled was much more chequered, diverse, and contentious than the history offered by nationalist accounts. In ways that official accounts cannot, imaginative writing explores the nuances of history, the complex richness of daily lives, and reveals the deeply ambivalent rewards of decolonization, how life improved for elites but for many people little changed, except for the worse.

Histories of retreat and retrieval

On both sides of the colonial divide, among the political elites decolonization was represented either as a sudden closure or as an epiphany. The term decolonization was minted in the West and continues to stress the concerns of the West. It emphasizes the undoing of the colonial relationship and is usually described in these terms, as a withdrawal and a dispossession. Indeed, the study of decolonization started as a problem of the West. This Western trope of decolonization is one of a retreat, the 'last call' sounding, the lowering of one flag and the raising of another. It signals the end of empire. Seeing decolonization as 'the process whereby colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally sovereign, nation-states' (Duara 2004:2) is the predominant perspective in the study of decolonization (see, for instance, Rothermund 2006; Shipway 2008; Thomas, Moore and Butler 2008). For colonial powers, the departure from the colony created a sudden shift of focus, a reformulation of the metropolitan position in the world.

However, from the newly independent regimes beams the image of restoration of an indigenous order, typically propped up by the nationalist successor governments. Retreat by the colonial powers meant a retrieval of national destiny for the indigenous peoples. In few countries has the image of total reversal been as absolute as in Indonesia, where history has been reformulated around the creation narrative of the 1945 Proclamation of Independence (Frederick 1999). But even if independence elsewhere came with less of a bang, there too the birth of independence or at least the advent and triumph of nationalism have become the umbilicus of national history.

Nationalist visions of independence have dominated the production of history in the decolonized world. Understandably, nationalist representations of the process of independence have often thrived on an organized amnesia. As Benedict Anderson (1991:199-201) explains, the formation of a national identity was based on forgetting as much as on remembering. In order to create the image of a unified nation and a common struggle against the colonial regime, alternative visions of the new society under construction and discomforting continuities had to be obscured. The need for a new start stimulated the image of a clear break with the past. Thus, both in the colony and the metropole, the perception of a rupture gave logic to the new situation. The process of distancing from colonial times was both political and moral as colonialism had ceased being an acceptable form of political organization. Now it was commonly associated with economic exploitation and inequality, and understood as incompatible with the principle of self-determination and the ideal of the nation-state.

The colonial image of decolonization as a retreat, and the nationalist

representation of independence as national destiny both emphasize the event as a rupture, and both have dominated the debate on decolonization. But there are some good reasons to look beyond Western temporalities, which, in an inverse way, became those of the nationalists, and to move away from the strict breaks and established chronologies of the state.

Whose decolonization?

One reason to look beyond accepted temporalities concerns the old question of whose history is being told. If decolonization is primarily a change of guard, colonial power structures being appropriated and continued by the new nationalist leaders, we might ask what was in it for the majority populations. In the words of Southeast Asian historian Wang Gungwu (2004:268): 'What did those who found themselves decolonized actually get?'. What did national freedom mean? In the actual reality of being decolonized, freedom was followed by an increasing sense of discontentment. In many aspects of life, decolonization did not bring the sea changes that historical traditions and nationalist discourses have assumed. One poignant example is the continuing reliance of many rural Filipinos on mutual assistance organizations (Greg Bankoff in this volume). Likewise, slum dwellers in Bombay or Abidjan, although joining the festivities after achieving national independence, often experienced little difference in their livelihoods, or even a downward turn.

Indonesians in the 1950s almost collectively vented their frustration with the failure to fulfil the promises of emancipation. Indonesia's President Soekarno received innumerable letters from concerned citizens complaining about the state of affairs in the country, and especially the new government's failure to enforce safety, guarantee legal security, fight poverty, and establish democracy.[3]

Not only in Indonesia, but also in many other new states, the people were confronted with inefficient rule, failing economies, and a repression of labour movements and other instruments and media of the people's voices. In many places, the countryside remained unsafe after the formal ending of the revolution, wages stagnated at colonial levels, and labour organizations were reined in. In his recent analysis of the fruits of decolonization, Albert Memmi (2004:17) wrote about what he called the 'great disillusionment' of decolonization:

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[3]   Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Archives Kabinet Presiden, contains hundreds of letters by Indonesian citizens to their president, complaining about the lack of justice, democracy, safety, and wages, among many other things.

La fin de la colonisation devait apporter la liberté et la prosperité [...] Hélas, force est de constater que, le plus souvent, dans ce temps nouveau si ardemment souhaité, conquis parfois au prix de terribles épreuves, règnent encore la misère et la corruption, la violence sinon le chaos.

It is impossible to write a history of decolonization without referring to its main failure: to bring about peaceful, stable, and thriving societies. This is not only accounted for by corrupt or incompetent successor regimes. Much of an explanation may be found in the historical transition into modernity: the peculiar exploitative and uneven character of colonial rule; the divergence of the pace of transformation in different parts of the country; the dominance of European business interests; and the social and political instability created by the liberation process. Often colonial legal frameworks remained in force, indigenous entrepreneurs had difficulties getting a foothold, and the activity of labour unions was restricted in postcolonial times almost as much as during European rule. All these issues have provoked debates since the late colonial period and have affected the process of disentanglement and the experiences of the peoples involved.

Times of decolonization

A second issue concerns the time frame of decolonization. That decolonization takes longer than lowering one flag and raising another is generally acknowledged, although most histories of decolonization take a fairly limited time frame. A 'light-switch view' of decolonization, as Frederick Cooper (2005:19) has called it, is not a feasible and is indeed a rarely used approach. Britain's escape from India may seem to come close to a turn of the switch, but even there the story of decolonization can only be told within a longer span. In most other cases, political decolonization was a drawn-out process, involving lengthy negotiations, intermediary stages of institutional reform, and experiments with autonomy, or sustained conflict. Periodization and temporal demarcation remain an uncertain business. Even if the completion of political decolonization is often easy to mark, its start is hard to date. Was it the first expression of the will to achieve independence, or the start of nationalist movements? Was it the onset of the Second World War that discredited Western imperial power and stirred up international principles of self-determination of all peoples? And was the formal achievement of independence the end of decolonization? Or the eradication of the European business interests? For this reason alone, it seems more logical to think in terms of a process of reorientation than of a clearly demarcated period of the colonial endgame.

Taking the issue to an extreme, Frey, Preussen, and Tan have emphasized the necessity to see decolonization as an extended process, starting already in the late-nineteenth century and stretching beyond the formal transfer of power (2004:viii). For them, it seems, decolonization forms a linear process from dependency to emancipation. But even if they account for the need to take a long-term perspective, they ignore the wider social changes that accompanied – and were partly triggered by – the expansion of state intervention since the early decades of the twentieth century. Here we invoke a more complicated vision of decolonization, not by looking at the transfer of power, at the intrinsic impossibility of an interventionist late colonial welfare state, or at the permutations of governance, but at a wide array of developments in society spanning from the late-colonial period to well after independence. In this comfortably undefined period, societies were being reshaped in response to increasing mobility and communication media, social and political tensions, changing living environments and infrastructure. These dramatic transitions triggered novel expectations and scenarios among the colonized that show a great continuity between late colonial and early independence years. This continuity was also evident in the survival strategies of the common people and their reliance on local and non-governmental networks to provide basic needs such as a home, health care, and security.

Reorientations

Our third reason to question the standard perspective on decolonization is connected to our conception of what constituted colonialism and therefore also decolonization. If colonization was about more than the political ramifications of foreign rule – which is undeniable – then decolonization too should be viewed in a broader perspective. In the background of the political changes looms a much larger and much more diffuse movement of reorientation and reorganization of society, which continued after the formal achievement of independence. It is not our aim, nor would it bring much clarity, to let decolonization correspond with a concept of modernization. But there is a strong functional relationship between the two concepts. Political decolonization, we would argue, was part of a much larger and profound process of reorientation and change, of an invention of oneself in a rapidly changing world. Decolonization was not the driving force behind the societal changes occurring in most of the world in the mid-twentieth century, but one of the results – if doubtlessly the one most prominently displayed and most loudly heralded – of this process under pressure of intensifying governance, expanding institutionalization, widening horizons, and increasing mobilization.
        The moment of political emancipation was, in other words, one point in

the dynamics of social transition. This change was for a great part induced by Western agents – and colonial governments taking a predominant role – but the indigenous strata were as instrumental in picking up the seeds of change and shaping society according to their developing needs and visions. Colonial societies – especially urban environments – have experienced an astoundingly swift change since the early 1900s, when urbanisation took off and modernist urban planning emerged (Freund 2007:65-101; Heitzman 2008). New types of organizations, such as housing associations and health care agencies, became involved with people's daily lives. In this period too, the mobilization of labourers started, beginning at the turn of the century in the major colonies in Asia, and a bit later in Africa (Chandarvarkar 1998; Ingleson 1986; Cooper 1996). Streets became stages for demonstrations by political parties but also by other organizations representing the communal interests of workers, women, and others. Although often limited to urban areas, public discussions arose, and increasing numbers of people were mobilized for ideological or political purposes. The convergence of these major transformations had an enormous impact on people in the colony, who in a myriad ways responded to the challenges of 'modern' times, and not necessarily in terms of adherence to a nationalist ideal.

Colonial states faced increasing difficulties in channelling the mounting complexities. In the words of John Darwin (1999), the late-colonial polity gradually evolved into a 'dense' state, characterized by the proliferation of parapolitical institutions, centralizing tendencies, and an increasingly interventionist government, and ultimately into a 'self-destruct' state, which envisaged and prepared the transition to self-rule. Colonial governmentalities found themselves challenged by the rising volume of demands by society. Though not inevitable, it is evident that the forces of change and the limited possibilities of colonial occupation made political independence desirable and possible. The change of regimes cannot be seen in isolation from the fundamental transformation of colonial societies. Only by viewing decolonization in this basic perspective of urgent renewal and adaptation can we account for the meandering routes of change, the range of options open, the variety of outcomes possible, and the fundamental continuities between colonial and postcolonial times.[4] It also explains why debates and experiments – as well as protests and violence – continued after independence, and why processes of change were so similar in colonized and noncolonized countries (such as Thailand, China, and Ethiopia).

[4] For Indonesia, this has been the ambition of the research programme 'Indonesia across orders: The reorganization of Indonesian society', run by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation in Amsterdam over the years 2002-2008. Some major publications coming from this project are Bogaerts and Raben 2007; Lindblad 2008; Colombijn 2010; Keppy 2010.

One problem we encounter concerns the use of the term decolonization. If decolonization is to be understood as the disengagement between colonizer and colony, the question what was being decolonized remains. Because colonization was not only about a power relationship, but about a large range of interventions varying from administrative institutions to businesses, education, and lifestyles, we should look for a wider framework of analysis. Political decolonization becomes part of a large and complicated complex of social change, up to a point that the term decolonization becomes a misnomer. It might well be that, by using such a broad approach, according to Wang Gungwu (2004:270) 'the word "decolonization" might be overworked and made to do too much'. Wang's caution is certainly justified, but rather than proposing a neologism, it may be rewarding simply to avoid the restricted views of the colonialist or nationalist interpretations. If one agrees that decolonization involves more than a fairly abrupt political transition from colony to independent state, one is simply left searching for a better term, but the processes remain the same.

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