Research article

Uncovering the Formula of Classical Javanese Literary Works: Structural Analysis of Power, Religion, and Subaltern Resistance

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Abstract	Classical Javanese literature is traditionally defined by its profound synonymy with religious authority and the royal court (power), a duality long observed but structurally underexplained. This research utilizes a qualitative descriptive method, synthesizing existing studies of canonical texts—including Negarakertagama, Pararaton, Arjuna Wiwaha, and Sutasoma—to reveal the tripartite sociological formula determining literary inception. The analysis establishes that classical literature was overwhelmingly produced by eloquent individuals monopolizing broad knowledge, typically religious leaders, kings, and royal scribes. This structural control resulted from three interlocking factors: 1) Caste, wherein literacy and intellectual production were restricted primarily to Brahmins and Kshatriyas; 2) Knowledge, disseminated through the elite Kadewaguruan education system, which prioritized religious ethics before statecraft, functioning as an ideological apparatus to generate loyal state officials and authorized literary works; and 3) Culture, which utilized mythical elements (Smita) to glorify kings as divine incarnations, thereby legitimizing political narratives. The overarching function of this literature was to perpetuate power and spread sanctioned religious doctrine. While groups outside the palace provided resistance, notably through accessible oral literature and written counter-narratives like Serat Gatoloco, this opposition often failed to fundamentally displace the dominant hegemony. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial perspective, the findings demonstrate that while resistance existed, the systemic control over authorship, knowledge, and dissemination ensured the literary output remained fundamentally focused on centralized religious and political control. This research clarifies that the enduring characteristics of Javanese classical texts are directly rooted in the political and educational policies of the past.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Many Javanese mythological figures come from ancient Javanese literature. For example, *Sabda Palon,* who appeared in *Serat Gatholoco* as the guardian spirit of the island of Java or as an advisor to Brawijaya V (Purnamasari & Soegeng, 2024), and *Semar*, who appeared in several classical Javanese literature from the late Majapahit era, temple reliefs, and oral traditions (C. Nugroho, 2023). Javanese society considers the characters in literary works to be historical, real figures who can provide protection. People think several places in Java are sacred and use them as pilgrimage sites for figures, such as in Madiun and Banyumas, where there are similar places called *Tapak Bima*. The local community considers the places to be where *Werkudara* (*Bima*) in *Kakawin Mahabharata* received revelation (Hilman & Aziz, 2019).

Religious figures and rulers wrote literature in ancient Javanese and classical times. The authors of the *Merapi-Merbabu* manuscripts belonged to the Brahmin caste (Kurniawan, 2017). Mpu Kanwa, who wrote *Arjuna Wiwaha*, also belonged to the Brahmin caste during the reign of King Airlangga (S. Nugroho, 2024). Mpu Tantular, who wrote *Sutasoma*, was also a Buddhist from the Hayam Wuruk era. Sunan Bonang and Sunan Kalijaga, Islamic clerics, wrote many *suluk* to teach Islam (Fitriyah et al., 2022). Sultan Agung, a Mataram king, also wrote books (Ricci, 2023). People consider these literary works to have power because religious figures or rulers had written them.

Literary works (*sastra*) are one of the most valuable cultural heritages of a nation (Hakim et al., 2023). It contains many written records of events, life advice, customs, and history. Literary works provide lessons for their readers, both implicitly and explicitly. Indonesia has a vast cultural heritage in the form of literary works (Suyasa, 2022). While the exact number of literary works within Javanese community remains unknown, some descendants of the authors still preserve specific works. Others have suffered damage due to poor care and lack of attention, and many others have been even digitally preserved, even though those are not necessarily complete.

Classical literary works generally refer to the early days when humans knew writing and used written media to express their ideas (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022). In the early days, they wrote them on papers crafted from animal skin, palm leaves, tree bark (*dluwang*), and so forth. Literary works teach moral, religious, social, and other good values. Kosasih said that classical literature paves the way for learning the original character of the nation, teaching it through an imaginative adventure toward the truth in the past (Kosasih, 2008). In addition, literary works are not limited to written works; there are also literary works delivered orally, especially among lay people who cannot

read and write. They enjoy literary works verbally and seek the values taught through oral literature. Both oral and written literature have the same characteristics: palace-centric (*keraton*) and religion-centric (*wali*).

Scholars rarely discuss the reasons for the palace-centric and religion-centric themes. Among the few are Misbahus Surur, who conducted a study on the *Babad Alit* and *Babade Patjitan* (Surur, 2024), Sutika, who studied the language variety of speakers in *Satua Bali* (Sutika, 2020), and Andi Inayah Soraya's research, which discussed the social values in the folklore of *Pangeran Barasa* of the palace of the Gowa Kingdom (Soraya & Anjanette, 2022). However, the reasons for the affinity to the palace-centric or religion-centric characteristics in literary works are unclear, despite the shift between them having existed since the arrival of Islam in Java, as the works were used to teach Islam (Syahrazad et al., 2023).

Therefore, this research was conducted to reveal: 1) the reasoning of religious figures and nobles; 2) the reasons for the literary works' affinity toward either religion-centric or palace-centric; and 3) the position of oral literature in society at that time. Finally, this research was conducted to examine the reasons why religion and power have a strong influence on the birth of old literary works in Indonesia.

2. METHOD

The qualitative descriptive method is used, as in social phenomenology studies, to answer research questions in the form of data descriptions and their impact. This method describes the experiences in the field until the discovery of patterns that appear in the event (Kim et al., 2017). The instruments in this article use a literature study of previous research results. The author observed the findings of these studies, which included the authors of literary works, the year of writing, and the content of the manuscripts. Data collection using literature studies is carried out by collecting data through literature sources in primary and secondary forms (Darmalaksana, 2020), which refer to Slamet Muljana (1979) in *Negara Kertagama dan Tafsiran Sejarahnya*, R.M. Mangkudimedja and Hardjana (1980) in *Serat Pararaton Ken Arok*, Sanusi Pane (1978) in *Arjuna Wiwaha*, and I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa (1984) in *Sutasoma.*

After obtaining the data, the author analyzed the background behind the creation of literary works. The method collects, evaluates, verifies, and synthesizes data to reveal facts and obtain conclusions (Haryanto, 2017). The author also analyzed other writers' resistance to literature using Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial perspective, in

which Spivak placed the lower society as a subaltern who was able to provide resistance to the domination of power (Spivak, 1993).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Influential Classical Javanese Literary Works

Negarakertagama was written by Mpu Prapanca in 1365 (Alit et al., 2022). This book, which also known as *Desawarnana* (Muljana, 1979), tells the story of the Majapahit Kingdom during the reign of Hayam Wuruk, including the king, his family, the genealogy, the kingdom territory, and so on. Written in the form of *kakawin* or *kidung* (Pradita & Jendriadi, 2023), Prapanca provided a wealth of information about the political, social, religious, cultural, and customary life of the Majapahit era (Alit et al., 2022).

The *Pararaton* manuscript was written in 1535 by an unknown author (Mangkudimedja & H.P., 1980). The book, which was first studied by J.L.A. Brandes, tells the story of the kings of the Kadiri, Tumapel, and Majapahit eras, mainly on the stories of Ken Arok. Generally, the book focuses more on politics than anything else.

The *Kakawin Arjuna Wiwaha,* which was written by Mpu Kanwa during the reign of King Airlangga (1019-1042), is an adaptation of the popular epic of the *Mahabharata*. Mpu Kanwa carved *Arjuna Wiwaha* on a temple and told Arjuna's life history, mostly about matters on religion and politics (Pane, 1978).

The *Sutasoma,* which Mpu Tantular wrote in the 14th century as a dedication toward Rajasanagara, tells the story of Sutasoma fighting Sudanda, who transformed into a man-eating giant (Sugriwa, 1984). The name *Sutasoma* itself is taken from a character in the story. The *Kakawin Sutasoma* is an adaptation of the *Purusada*, which is also depicted in the Borobudur reliefs (Suhariyanto, 2022). The story of Sutasoma is also depicted in the reliefs of the Jawi Temple (Adhitama, 2023).

3.2. Formula of the Classical Javanese Literary Works

Java comprised several large Hindu kingdoms from the 5th to the 16th centuries, from the establishment of Medang Kamulan in the 5th century to the birth of Demak in the early 16th century (Mahamid, 2023; Sukatman & Taufiq, 2017). During that time, many literary works were written and cannot be separated from the role of the education system at that time, known as *Kadewaguruan* (Santiko, 2012). *Kadewaguruan*

developed independently and produced intellectuals, poets, kings, government officials, and palace guards. *Kadewaguruan* gave rise to the development of religious, social, and political dynamics. For instance was Majapahit which had an education center called *Mandala Kadewaguruan* (Sueca, 2021). In this study center, *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* as pupils learned many matters, including on government, religion, social life, architecture and engineering, health and medicine, and culinary (Wahyudi, 2015). The education center is located in forests, mountain slopes, and other places remote from residential areas. Its buildings are made of huts arranged in an orderly manner. Each hut had a porch and a relief. The pupils read the literary works, books, and *Kakawin* on the porch (Sueca, 2021).

The teaching method provided through listening, writing, and discussion will make learning not monotonous. Pupils listen to the knowledge conveyed by the *Dewa Guru*, and then are asked to rewrite the book to immerse their understanding. Pupils might understand the content of the literary works by rewriting the book. That is why there are many copies of a single literary work, such as *Negarakertagama* and *Pararaton*, which spread out in various places. This condition led to the emergence of the Javanization of Mahabharata (Mulder, 2013; Supomo, 2021).

The education system in *Kadewaguruan* was also adapted to *Pesantren's* education after the coming of Islam. The name *Kadewaguruan* was changed to *Pondok Pesantren*, which means the house of people who study the book (Mahdi, 2013). Islamic religious books are studied in *Pesantren* to explore Islamic knowledge. Before teaching other subject of sciences, *Kadewaguruan* and *Pondok Pesantren* teach pupils religious knowledge and manners as the basic knowledge.

All records written on paper and palm leaves can be studied philologically and categorized as literary works (Wellek & Warren, 1993). Those recording are why medical literature discusses the science of medicine in old literature, while spice or kitchen literature also discusses culinary recipes and spices (Salam, 2021).

Maelasari (2018) argued that literary works were born from three factors: nation, era, and environment. This research discusses the background of the creation of classical literature in Java, which is characterized as palace-centric and religious-centric themes. Referring to Maelasari's opinion above, the author needs to date the creation of literary works to the time classical literature was conducted. The author needs to open the historical records of the literary work's inception. Based on the historical background above, religion and power dominated Javanese literature in the

past. These three things can be classified as caste, knowledge, and culture. They shaped and influenced the inception of classical literary works in Java.

A. Caste

Caste strongly influenced the inception of literature in Java, especially during the Hindu period. Many literary works were born from the hands of Brahmins. Although there was no caste during the Islamic period, the influence of castization also affected the production of literary works during the Demak period and after. The poets of the Islamic period were stillborn in palaces and religious circles, not among the common people.

Caste in Hinduism is divided into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Waishas, and Sudras. Academia gave birth to scholars from the Brahmins and Kshatriyas groups. Sariani (2023) argued that education at that time was only owned by the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The Brahmins, as the foremost intellectual people in the caste system, taught new Brahmins from the Brahmins caste, then the Kshatriyas learned it from the Brahmins who held Kadewaguruan or by inviting them to their house to teach the children, and so on. Through the system, Rani (2005) explains that the Brahmins were those creating cultural values in society, conveyed both verbally and in writing. The *Kadewaguruan* system were able to develop and spread the culture. In addition, the highest caste was those mastering the Palawa letters, so they could study the scriptures and connect to the God (Mardiani et al., 2019). Brahmins, as the teacher, taught knowledge by writing the literature book emphasizing religious teachings in the form of ethics, wisdom, laws, and so on (Maelasari, 2018).

The new Kshatriyas trained from *Kadewaguruan* will continue the throne of Kshatriyas in the country. They would fill the posts of king and other nobles, while some others fill the post of soldiers. Thus, the relationship between *Mandala Kadewaguruan* and the continuity of government at that time was very close. The government was building education centres to produce a generation of outstanding human resources (Marsono & Rahayu, 2023). Each *Kadewaguruan* produced literary works as education tools in that place. That is why the influence of caste gave birth to literary works related to both kingdom and religion. While Brahmins themselves initially produced religion-centric literature, together with Kshatriyas, they created palace-centric literature.

In addition, the literatures used an element deliberately created in the form of *Smita* or *Pasemon* to glorify the king. Chakim (2007) proposed that literary works are mixed by inserting mystical and mythical elements in the form of powerful kings who are incarnations of gods to glorify the position of the king. For example, Airlangga's coronation as king was full of mystical and mythical nuances in the form of an incarnation of both Hinduism's Lord Vishnu and Buddhism's Avalokiteswara (Setiyawan, 2021). Nevertheless, it was done to create legitimate position before the eyes of the people. The incarnation story was not born from the idea of the kings or brahmins in Java. The author suspects that it was influenced by Indian culture that kings are incarnations of God, as in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* stories. For example, in the *Ramayana*, Sri Rama is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Sri Krishna is also told to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu in *Mahabharata*. After all, those stories simply supported the typology of palace-centric model of literary works.

B. Knowledge

The second factor, knowledge, is the cause of the palace-centric and religion-centric characteristics. Knowledge taught to pupils gradually, started from learning and mastering religion and ethics as the means to know the purpose of life, then followed with broader matters such as on government, architecture, medicine, and so on (Sueca, 2021).

The knowledge gained is then practiced after graduating. For example, a prospective king (*pangeran*) should learn the government matters so he or she could one day take care of the kingdom. Positions to serve the king were also created, starting from *Patih*, *Adipati*, and so on; such methods were carried out to produce an established kingdom. Because of this practice, *Kadewaguruan* had an important role in giving birth to many famous kings in Java.

People who know will readily share their knowledge with others. It is different with people who do not know. As mentioned above, religious people have more religious knowledge than others. He can read and write because he has the right to learn to read and write. The habit of writing and copying the book makes him understand the contents of the book. The habit of discussing the contents of the books that have been studied makes him rich in insight. This ability is then used to develop the book into a new book with a new title. That is why there are many intertextualities in ancient books in Java. For example, the Mahabharata book gave

birth to the *Arjuna Wiwaha* book, the *Gatotkaca Craya* book, and the *Bharatayudha* book. The book's development is not to destroy the content of the old book but to enrich the literary repertoire. Intertextuality in old literature is also not a form of plagiarism. The author develops the story at a moment. The Punakawan characters in the *Mahabharata* story in the archipelago do not appear in the Indian version of the book. The addition of Punakawan characters in Javanese literature creates new characters. For example, it is identical to the Javanese king, who servants with disabilities surround. Many Punakawan characters have developed in Javanese literature. However, the most recognizable Punakawan are Semar, Bagong, Gareng, and Petruk, who became the Pandawa punakawan.

Furthermore, *Kakawin Nirarthaprakerta* teaches society about morals. Of course, it was written by someone who had sufficient knowledge in that field. The *Kakawin* was written by a Buddhist religious leader during the Hayam Wuruk era, Dang Acharya Nadendra or populary known as Mpu Prapanca. The knowledge given to pupils or to readers is to form humans who are not only for survival but also become truly human beings who are virtuous and knowledgeable. It is reflected in many works that present moral and religious messages. They might have romance or love stories, but it is merely a wrap to cover the messages; and the core of the work is in the form of moral value teachings for the community.

C. Culture

The Brahmins and Kshatriyas disseminated information through written and oral traditions. Written traditions were carried out by people who could write, and oral traditions were generally carried out through generations by people who cannot write. They told stories to children, conveying moral messages through stories or folklores. Despite oral traditions were born from non-Brahmin and Kshatriyas circles, however, it does not mean that the Brahmins and Kshatriyas did not help spread it. It could be that the primary source was through the highest caste. The Brahmins conveyed stories orally to the community; then, the community spread them orally to their children and other communities, for example, through prayers, folk tales, and songs. This distribution pattern formed a literary culture that can be seen nowadays.

Brahmins and Kshatriyas groups spread knowledge through *Kakawin*, which is written on palm leaves, animal skins, and *dluwang*. The *Kakawin* was later copied by students and people who wanted to immortalize the message. Copying was

done so that the copyist would not forget the message being conveyed. The copyist would save it and read it from time to time. These copies would be taught from generation to generation.

The Hindu-Buddhist era in Java experienced a golden age by giving birth to written literary works through the hands of Brahmanas and Kshatriyas. Brahmins devote themselves to God through religion. Spreading religious teachings orally and in writing is one of the duties of this caste. Brahmins have a special position in the social strata of society (Sen, 2024). Brahmins, as religious leaders, represent God on earth (Zapart, 2023). Brahmins also have privileges in politics, which bring them close to the king as advisors to the state (Shah, 2024). The community gives alms to religious leaders to support *agrahara* so that they do not think about worldly matters (Lubin, 2023). Brahmin women are responsible for the household and preserving culture (Chickerur, 2021). The privileges of Brahmins allow them to have plenty of time to write religious teachings. The writings of this group of religious leaders also discuss the political life of their time.

Like Hindu-Buddhist figures, Islamic religious figures also produced works with religious ambiance. Manuscripts were written on *lontar* and *dluwang* materials (Supomo, 2021). *Ulama* as Islamic scholars wrote literature during the Islamic era to teach Islamic teachings to students and the general public. Similar to Hindu-Buddhist era, Islamic era also witnessed copying works by rewriting them to spread knowledge, especially on papers made of *lontar* and *dluwang* materials (Supomo, 2021). For example, Sunan Bonang composed the book *Al Shidiq* by Abu Sa'id Al Khayr into *Suluk Wijil*. This composition was carried out to make conveying messages to the public easier through *suluk* (songs).

The book's composition in *Suluk* made it easier for the general public to understand its message because most of the community, which were comprised of Sudra and Waisha, were unfamiliar with the script. The delivery in the form of songs made it easier for the community to memorize. After listening to the song, the community will be explained about the meaning behind the song. Oral literature developed more in society with the birth of performances such as *wayang*, *jemblung*, *janengan*, and *terbangan*.

3.3. *Literature as a Tool for Hegemony and Doctrine*

Learning through *Kadewaguruan* teaches the knowledge at that time. However, the learning was limited to certain groups only. Religious doctrines and the rules of the Dewa Guru limit how much anyone can learn and teach their thoughts. Especially among the lower classes who cannot get an education. Gayatri Spivak (1993), suggested that the subaltern as an oppressed group is unable to exercise critical will to oppose power. In classical Java, the palace-centric dominance during the kingdom era closed off the literary space of society. Literature during the kingdom period in Java conveyed religious and social knowledge to society, the main aim of which was to perpetuate the king's power. For example, Mpu Prapanca's work excessively glorified the king and taught the doctrine of the unification of Shiwa and Buddha to prevent division in Majapahit because of its multi-religious society. Literature teaches rules in the name of religion because the Brahma group is God's representative, and the kings are God's hands (Agustin, 2014). Finally, while truth is established and practiced within society itself (Allan, 2006), the power of Dewa Guru and the palace was then able to give positive effects on the level of passion and also on the level of knowledge (Spivak, 1993).

As mentioned above, not all castes were allowed to learn to read and write, except for the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Knowledge was then mostly taught orally to the community for generations. Religious doctrine and the legitimization of power through literature were perpetuated by the community, with the control of the palace and religious leaders. Literature was taught through *tembang* melodies to be sung as teaching, told in the form of fairy tales, and through *Kakawin*. This habit evolved a sustainable literary culture in the community at that time. Literature creates doctrine through the subconscious because it is delivered continually.

The virtually visible possibility of opposition between palace literature and religion was constructed through oral literature that developed in the lower classes. However, this opposition did not distance the story from religion and the court. The *Merapi-Merbabu* manuscript is an example of resistance by the lower classes against religion and the authorities. This resistance took the form of cultural preservation through written literature. The people living on the slopes of these mountains preserved their pre-Islamic culture from the influence of the Mataram government's Islamization (Kurniawan, 2017). Geographically, while the Merapi and Merbabu mountainous community is not far from the center of Mataram, they chose to be both distinct from Mataram court system and also did not close itself off from the outside

world through hundreds of *Merapi-Merbabu* religious literary manuscripts (Kriswanto, 2019). The community kept up with the times through the *Pegon* script introduced during the Islamic period in Mataram, but they still hold on to their old culture. Even the Darmawarsa text is still used on the slopes of Merapi-Merbabu to call for rain (Sumarno et al., 2020).

Resistance to the dominance of the palace and religion was also expressed in temples. The *Sukuh*, *Kethek*, and *Cetho* temples are evidence of resistance in the form of buildings and oral literature. The reliefs at *Sukuh* Temple depict Durgaranini as a giant woman. This differs from previous depictions of Bathari Durga, who was depicted as a beautiful woman. This story is a visualisation of the story in *Kidung Sudamala*, which is estimated to have been written in the 15th century (Kasanova et al., 2023; Tanudjaja, 2022). At the same time, there was also *Tantu Panggelaran*, a prose work that tells the story of the origins of the Javanese ancestors (Nurhajarini et al., 1999). *Tantu Panggelaran* was used as a guideline for temple construction in Java. Although both manuscripts tell stories about religion and kings, they teach another side of the teachings in previous literature. *Tantupanggelaran* and *Darmogandul* are similar. Both tell the story of the origins of the island of Java and were written during the decline of a kingdom.

Resistance to religious and palace-centred views began to appear in written literature in the 19th century. The story of the lower-class society's resistance through literature is also recorded in *Serat Gatoloco* and *Serat Darmogandul*. Both Serats were written by anonymous 19th-century authors, challenging the dominance of Islam in Java (Furqon & Busro, 2017). In addition to these two texts, there is also *Babad Kadiri,* a chronicle, which also brought an anti-Islamic stance (Ricklefs, 2012). The literary work reflects the Javanese community's disgust with the teachings of the *santri* who displaced the Javanese ancestral teachings (Ulum, 2019). This resistance was not physical resistance by the lower classes against the royal and religious groups, but rather ideological resistance instilled through writing.

For Spivak, the history of colonization applied by the ruler, in this case, the king and religious leaders, has given rise to knowledge inequality (Spivak, 1993). People became accustomed to the doctrines of religious teachings and the palace. The resistance becomes meaningless because it loses power. That moment makes the literature, which was initially resistant, then perpetuates what was previously resisted. Teachings through oral literature are taught starting in the family environment. For Foucault, the family is part of the system that prevails in a culture. The family is in the name of moral education and maintaining ancestral rules that have been in place for

years (Larmour, 1997). There are punishments for violations of ethical rules from both family and society. The power of complete control over the rules to form discipline (Suyono, 2002). The lower classes and groups outside the palace used oral traditions to instil good morals in their families from childhood.

The resistance to religious teachings and obedience to power through literature is not comprehensive. Although initially the communities on the slopes of Mount Merapi and Mount Merbabu maintained Hindu-Buddhist teachings during the rapid development of Islam in the 16th century, they actually continued to study Islam. The existence of Arabic manuscripts, Arabic-language texts, and the emergence of Islamic texts in the Merapi-Merbabu scriptorium indicate that Islamic teachings once took place there (Kurniawan, 2017). The subaltern position against religious domination and power in Javanese old literature remains subaltern. It does not shift the power it fights against, but only forms resistance with new power.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the data analysis described above, the author concludes that religion has a strong influence on the birth of old literary works in Java society because religious groups were interested in conveying knowledge to the people. Power has a strong role in the birth of old literary works in Indonesia because the state is interested in writing history, perpetuating power, and preserving the myths of kings. Oral literature was born and developed in society to convey moral and social values to society through oral media. Groups outside the palace and religious leaders wrote literature as a form of resistance against the palace and religious literature. People who could not write conveyed literature through oral tradition.

This research contributes to solving the puzzle of literary studies, namely, why ancient literature is always related to the lives of kings and religious teachings. In the past, literature was a medium for teaching science and religion to the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The Brahmins played a vital role in the history of Javanese literature by writing and teaching knowledge for generations. Nevertheless, this research lacks the strength of the data sources used as a basis for the study, as the author did not examine primary historical sources, namely the authentic classical literary manuscripts that constitute historical literature.

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