

Criticism of Colonialism in *Serat Kridawasita*: A Postcolonial Study of Traditional Javanese Literature

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ABSTRACT

Serat Kridawasita is one of the traditional Javanese literary works that contains criticism of colonialism. *Serat Kridawasita* is one of the traditional Javanese literary works that contains criticism of colonialism. This article aims to examine how *Serat Kridawasita* constructs a discourse of resistance against colonialism through a postcolonial approach, particularly its symbolic, cultural, and ideological forms of resistance. The analysis focuses on symbolism, colonial representation, and forms of cultural resistance contained in the text. The results of the study show that *Serat Kridawasita* becomes an ideological space where identity, nationalism, and veiled criticism of colonial hegemony are affirmed through its depictions of youth resistance, symbolic attacks on colonial authority, and moral appeals to collective identity. This study shows that *Serat Kridawasita* is not only a moral text, but a distinctive work that links ethical teaching with explicit criticism of colonial violence.

Keywords: Colonialism, Javanese Literature, *Kridawasita* Manuscript, Postcolonialism, Resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism in Java produced layered effects that extended beyond politics and economics into the everyday cultural life of Javanese communities. Dutch intervention reshaped local governance by reducing the authority of the *Kraton* and integrating Javanese elites into a colonial bureaucratic hierarchy, which gradually altered traditional power relations (Masbait & Triwahana, 2025). Rural society was also transformed through the Cultivation System, which redirected village labour toward cash-crop production and weakened the economic independence of agrarian households (Syahbuddin, 2018). These structural changes influenced cultural life as well, contributing to a shift in Javanese value orientations and the emergence of hybrid practices within colonial urban centres (Permana et al., 2023). Over time, these pressures generated forms of cultural dislocation, as communities negotiated between inherited traditions and the demands of colonial rule.

In facing colonialism, Indonesian society in Java did not only rely on physical resistance through warfare but also utilised literary works as a medium for criticism and a form of cultural resistance (Perkasa & Fahrizal, 2022). Literature became a symbolic space to express dissatisfaction,



voice the suffering of the people, and preserve local cultural identities threatened by colonial hegemony. Among the Javanese literary works that represent resistance to colonialism is *Serat Kridawasita*.

Serat Kridawasita was written in macapat verse and composed by R. Purbadarsana in Surakarta on 9 July 1946. Although produced a year after independence, it portrays the social conditions of the Javanese people under Dutch colonial rule. Through the geguritan structure, the author conveys moral advice and criticism of colonialism (Andina et al., 2020). *Serat Kridawasita* highlights various negative impacts of colonialism, such as the suffering of the people, the destruction of the social order, and the loss of national sovereignty (Bernadhi, 2017). The narrative of resistance in this text is not only explicit but also mediated through symbolism and ethical teachings that emphasise the importance of maintaining national identity.

Previous studies have examined *Serat Kridawasita* from the perspective of moral and cultural values. Nopah (2020) highlights the symbolization of moral values in the macapat pupuhs of *Serat Kridawasita*, showing how these values were intended to inspire the spirit of struggle during the independence era. Similarly, Octavia and Widiastuti (2024) analyse the text through a semiotic approach and identify eight essential Javanese inner attitudes, such as *pasrah* (surrender), humility, religiosity, and the use of spiritual strength, which function as moral guidance for the community. Both studies emphasize the ethical and spiritual aspects of the manuscript, positioning it primarily as a medium of moral education.

However, these studies pay less attention to the text's socio-political dimension, including how its moral and religious teachings are intertwined with an implicit critique of colonialism. To fill this gap, this article adopts a postcolonial perspective to examine how *Serat Kridawasita* not only conveys moral teachings but also constructs ideological opposition to colonial domination, as reflected in its references to Dutch cruelty and the British attacks mentioned in the *pupuh* passages. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the manuscript as both a moral guide and a symbolic space of resistance.

As a cultural product born in the context of colonialism, *Serat Kridawasita* contains a complex discourse of resistance structured in various layers of meaning. Using a postcolonial approach, this paper analyses how *Serat Kridawasita* constructs a discourse of resistance against colonialism through symbolic representations, character depictions, and ideological narratives.

The study of this text is important because it shows that traditional literature is not only a source of entertainment or education, but also a tool for shaping national consciousness, an idea widely noted in postcolonial literary scholarship (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Ashcroft et al., 2002). Through analysis of *Serat Kridawasita*, this study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how Javanese society reflected on their experiences under colonialism and how literature can be a medium for conveying social and political criticism of colonialism.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a postcolonial approach to examine how *Serat Kridawasita* embeds criticism of colonialism in its symbols, narrative choices, and language. This framework treats the text as a site where resistance to imperial power can be articulated (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Bhabha, 1994). The analysis draws on thematic and interpretive readings to trace how particular images, scenes, and word choices convey that resistance, following standard text-based qualitative procedures (Creswell, 2015).

The primary data for this study is the *Serat Kridawasita* text, using the 2017 transliteration and content analysis by Oktaviane Nancy Bernadhi as the basis for examining its meaning and narrative structure. In addition, supporting data sources in the form of secondary literature were used to strengthen the theoretical framework and analysis, including books and scientific articles discussing postcolonial theory (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Bhabha, 1994; Loomba, 2005) as well as studies of traditional Javanese literature. This secondary data serves as a conceptual basis for interpreting forms of resistance discourse and colonial representation in the text.

The data collection technique in this study was conducted through a literature review and hermeneutic reading of the *Serat Kridawasita* text in its transliterated version. The literature review included an examination of primary sources in the form of Javanese literary texts, as well as secondary literature relevant to postcolonial theory and traditional literary studies. This approach allowed the researcher to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the text's symbols and cultural narrative, including moral messages, social critique, and references to colonial experience (Creswell, 2015; Moleong, 2017).

Data analysis was carried out through thematic identification, particularly of colonial themes, symbols of resistance, and moral messages contained in the text. Furthermore, the findings were analysed using a postcolonial theoretical framework developed by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002), Bhabha (1994), and Loomba (2005), with a focus on key concepts such as resistance, hegemony, and colonial subjectivity.

This approach is used to understand how *Serat Kridawasita* constructs a discourse of cultural and symbolic resistance and maintains Javanese cultural identity in the context of colonial domination. Thus, this study positions traditional literature as an ideological space where negotiations of meaning, resistance, and the restoration of the collective memory of colonised peoples take place (Spivak, 1988; Fanon, 1963).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As one of the traditional Javanese literary works that appeared in 1946, *Serat Kridawasita* offers moral and ethical guidance while drawing on the colonial-era context that shaped its message. Although written a year after independence, the author used the lingering reality of colonial rule to urge and inspire those who were fighting for freedom, framing an ideal way of living in a period when its

influence was still deeply felt. Through the form of macapat poetry, this text contains implicit messages that contain social criticism of the colonial power.

Colonial hegemony

Colonial hegemony and ideological control strategies

In the transliteration of *Serat Kridawasita*, the sixth stanza of the Dandanggula pupuh reads:

*Akalira NICA lawan Inggris / wus kinêtog tinumplak sadaya / kurbane saya
wus akèh / mata-mata maèwu / sinêbar mrih kasiling juti / prandene boya
gampang / maju-maju mundur / angêbroki kutha mluwa / amrajaya wong
bumi dianggêp mimik / coba bacut-bacutnya//* (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

The NICA and British armies were running out of ideas / the number of victims was increasing / thousands of spies were deployed to ensure their cunning plan would succeed / but it was not easy / advancing and retreating, storming empty cities / killing the native people as if they were mosquitoes / and continuing to run rampant.

This quote describes a form of colonial power that did not rely solely on military force but also built an ideological control strategy through the deployment of spies and cunning propaganda. The phrase *mata-mata maèwu / sinêbar mrih kasiling juti* indicates that colonisation took place not only from the outside, but also infiltrated the social order of local communities, creating mistrust and internal disintegration. This reflects the concept of colonial hegemony as understood in postcolonial theory (Gramsci, 1971).

The phrase *wong bumi dianggêp mimik* (earthlings are considered mosquitoes) illustrates an extreme process of dehumanisation in which the people are considered equivalent to mosquitoes, small creatures with no value in life, showing how the colonisers not only oppressed them physically, but also destroyed the existential dignity of the indigenous people. Thus, this quote represents colonial hegemony as a symbolically and ideologically structured domination, making the people not only victims of military power, but also objects of colonial discourse control and manipulation.

Traitors

In *Serat Kridawasita*, the portrayal of traitors and spies serves as a crucial representation of the dynamics of colonial power, which functioned not only through physical force but also through the co-optation of local individuals into the mechanisms of colonisation. According to the transliteration of *Serat Kridawasita*, the first stanza of the *Gambuh pupuh* reads:

*Nambungi kang karuhun / rêhning maksih sajroning dahuru / kana kene
kataman ing propokasi / kiyanating wong kêpaung / dadi mata-mata
mungsoh//* (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

Continuing the previous story / because chaos still reigns / there are many provocations here and there / carried out by foolish traitors / willing to

become spies for the enemy.

This excerpt represents the colonial strategy of dividing society through a policy of divide and rule, namely by using indigenous people as traitors and informants to strengthen the colonisers' control. This action shows that colonial power had penetrated the social structure of the colonised society through the practice of hegemony. In the context of *Serat Kridawasita*, the actions of the traitors demonstrate the colonialists' success in establishing subordination from within, by turning the community itself into a tool for perpetuating colonial power.

Furthermore, the concept of *kinayating kepaung* illustrates the narrative resistance of the author of the text against the internalisation of colonial values. The word "foolish" here does not only mean uneducated but also has ethical connotations as someone who lacks national consciousness and morality. This demonstrates that the text functions not only as social criticism but also as a form of symbolic resistance against the colonial logic that set the people against one another.

From a postcolonial perspective, this idea aligns with Bhabha's notion of mimicry, where colonised individuals imitate the colonisers to gain acceptance. In doing so, they remain subordinate and end up reinforcing the very power structures they hope to escape. Thus, this section of *Serat Kridawasita* becomes a concrete representation of how colonial hegemony works, not only through weapons and military force, but also through betrayal, collaboration, and deliberate internal social divisions. Literature becomes a medium for articulating resistance, voicing criticism, and building collective awareness of the dangers of foreign domination that infiltrates through the cracks of the nation's own weaknesses.

Cultural Resistance and Ideological Opposition

Opposition and People's Strategies

Balik kula wus tan mudha malih / anèng têngah garising paprangan / èmêng gènnya nanjakake / atine ngêjak maju / otot balung nora nuruti / narima nèng pungkuran / urun adas sêmbur / gègamane kabatinan / pangèsthine ing Gusti Kang Maha Sukci / udani jêro jaba// (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

But unfortunately, I am no longer young / if in the midst of battle / confused about how to act / in my heart I want to move forward / but my muscles and bones are weak and unable / I must accept being in the rear / participating with advice and prayers / which are spiritual weapons / full of hope in the Most Holy One / until I can understand inside and out//

This quote reveals a form of non-physical resistance carried out by the older generation in the context of the struggle against colonialism. Although no longer able to participate physically on the battlefield, the figures in this quote chose to continue playing a role through spiritual weapons, namely prayer, advice, and spirituality. Within the framework of postcolonial theory, this quote demonstrates cultural resistance, namely the effort to preserve local values as a form of resistance against the hegemony of foreign powers (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). The concept of *gègamane kabatinan*

places spirituality and morality as the main forces that counter colonial domination, which has always emphasised the power of weapons and militarism. This is in line with Frantz Fanon's (1963) idea that the struggle of colonised peoples does not always have to be physical but can also take the form of affirming local values as the foundation for liberation.

Furthermore, this quotation also represents resistance to colonial ideology. In the colonial system, power was measured through military domination and physical control. However, *Serat Kridawasita* offers a counter paradigm: that true victory is not determined by weapons, but by inner strength and spiritual connection to noble values. In this case, the text voices an anti-hegemonic discourse (Bhabha, 1994), which is a counter-discourse to colonial values of power. By upholding prayer and blessing as part of the struggle, *Serat Kridawasita* rejects the view that only military force determines the fate of a nation.

Furthermore, in the *Kridhawasita* manuscript, there is a quote that describes the resilience of indigenous youth in facing colonial enemies through local-based war strategies, namely the *êmprit anêba* tactic.

*pra mudha wus mumpuni kridhaning / ulah gêlar anèng pabaratan / tatag
trangginas tan tlompe / najan karoban mungsuh / nora kewran malês
anggitik / dhasar prantine pêpak / cukup kanggo ngêpung / nganggo gêlar
êmpritnêba / manggalane mudha prawira tan wigih / mungsuhnya gila
buyar//* (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

Before dawn, the battle was already raging / The enemy's army was
advancing / Strong and fierce, they were relentless / Though they were many,
they were weak / They were not afraid to fight / Their weapons were sharp
and deadly / Enough to surround us / using the title of *êmpritnêba* / the young
warriors are brave and fearless / their enemies are scattered//

This quote represents cultural and ideological resistance through the depiction of young people as central figures in the struggle against colonialism. They are portrayed not only as brave and skilled, but also as possessing a unique local combat strategy, namely *êmprit anêba*, a guerrilla tactic based on agility and ingenuity. In a postcolonial context, this reflects cultural resistance, namely resistance based on local values and tactics against colonial military domination (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002).

Furthermore, the victory of the young army over the colonisers in this verse can be interpreted as a representation of the restoration of dignity, namely when the people are able to defeat the enemy not only physically, but also symbolically and psychologically. This reinforces the position of *Serat Kridawasita* as a literary text that functions as an ideological space for resistance against colonialism. The two quotations above show the form of intergenerational collaboration in the struggle. The young people went to war physically, while the elders supported them through spiritual strength. This narrative carries the view that the struggle for independence is a shared responsibility that encompasses all levels of society, a cultural principle that is the foundation of social cohesion in traditional Javanese society.

Criticism of Militarism and False Heroism

1. *sinome kang durung eklas / tinggal kabèh kang kaèksi / gumêlar nêng jagad raya / mundhak tiwas gawe isin / dudu watak prajurit / aluwung dhangira kimpul / yèn nyandhung sing wis tuwa / binakar rasane gêmpi / kathik dadak pêrangan dolanan nyawa //*
2. *yèku wataking wong sudra / mèlu grubyug angléboni / dadi prajuriting prentah / wus dilatih sabên enjing / wadhuke diwarêgi / disandhang rangkêp têlu / yèn libur gêmbelengan / adol corèk turut margi / barêng gilir mangkat prang thok-ethok lara //* (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

1. The young man who is not yet willing to leave behind all the glamour that lies spread out across the universe rather than bring shame upon himself is not a soldier. It is better to tend to the taro if you are lucky enough to get some that has been roasted and tastes delicious. Why should you go to war and risk your life//
2. That is the nature of a despicable person who becomes a soldier of the state, trained every morning, fed until his stomach is full, given three sets of uniforms, and during holidays, he flaunts his uniforms along the way. When it is time to go to war, he pretends to be sick//

The two excerpts from *pupuh Sinom* highlight sharp criticism toward a group of Javanese soldiers who enjoyed state-provided facilities but lacked the moral courage expected during wartime. The text describes them as men who cling to comfort well-fed, proudly wearing their uniforms, and unwilling to risk their lives yet pretend to be sick when they are called to fight. This portrayal reflects a social reality observed by the author: alongside dedicated young fighters, there were also individuals who failed to embody the values of commitment and sacrifice.

From a postcolonial perspective, this ambivalent behaviour can be understood as part of the lingering influence of colonial structures. Even though these soldiers fought for an independent nation, they had been shaped by a bureaucratic and militaristic system inherited from the colonial period, one that emphasised obedience, status, and outward discipline over ideological conviction. This fits Bhabha's (1994) idea of colonial ambivalence, in which subjects internalise the surface symbols of authority, uniforms, rank, state privilege without fully embracing the deeper values or obligations associated with them.

This depiction stands in contrast to traditional Javanese ideals of the *ksatriya*, who is expected to embody *wira*, *satya*, and *budi luhur* bravery, loyalty, and moral integrity. By showing soldiers who fall short of these virtues, the text not only critiques their behaviour but also exposes the cultural consequences of colonial influence on Javanese concepts of honour and duty.

Dehumanisation and Systemic Violence against Indigenous Peoples

akalira NICA lawan Inggris / wus kinêtog tinumplak sadaya / kurbane saya wus akèh / mata-mata maèwu / sinêbar mrih kasiling juti / prandene boya gampang / maju-maju mundur / angêbroki kutha mluwa / amrajaya wong bumi dianggêp mimik / coba bacut-bacutnya// (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

The NICA and British armies were running out of ideas / the number of victims was increasing / thousands of spies were deployed to ensure their cunning plan would succeed / but it was not easy / advancing and retreating, storming empty cities / killing the native people as if they were mosquitoes / and continuing to run rampant.

This quote from the pupuh *Dandanggula*, reveals the brutal and cunning face of colonialism. The colonisers (NICA and Britain) are described as using a covert strategy of spreading spies (*mata-mata maèwu*), which shows that colonial domination was not only military in nature, but also ideological and covert surveillance.

The phrase *amrajaya wong bumi dianggêp mimik* contains a symbol of extreme dehumanisation, namely that the indigenous people are considered to be on the same level as mosquitoes, despicable creatures that can be killed without consequence. This reflects a form of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988), in which the colonisers not only oppressed physically, but also degraded the value and existence of the colonised people. Furthermore, the expression *coba bacut-bacutnya* presents a cynical and satirical tone towards the colonisers who felt superior but failed to gain complete control. This is a form of discursive resistance, namely symbolic resistance through cultural language that satirises colonial power (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

Reaffirmation of Identity and Nationalism

Development of Nationalism Awareness

7. *bôngsa kita gènnya ananggapi / tan kadêrêng ardaning wardaya / ngupaya unggul jurite / nanging mawi pinetung / bécik apa akèh pêpati / dhasaring kamardikan / tan ngupaya mungsuh / sikêpe amung samêkta / nanggulangi kang sumêja gègidhuhi / jantraning paprentahan //* (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

Our nation faces everything not with lust / to win in battle / but with careful calculation / there is no point in many casualties / because the basis of independence is not to seek enemies / only to be prepared / to fight against all who would interfere with the running of the government//

This quote expresses a form of ethical and rational nationalism, built on the basis of collective consciousness and moral responsibility. The nation is described as a party that is not driven by ambition for power or hatred, but rather by a measured and thoughtful attitude of readiness, *nanging mawi pinetung*. The concept of independence raised here is not merely freedom from colonialism, but also sovereignty in thought and action, upholding the values of humanity and order. This reflects what Bhabha (1994) refers to as the rearticulation of national identity when colonised nations construct their own dignified definitions of nationhood, rather than those based on colonial constructs (Chatterjee, 1993).

The call not to seek enemies but to remain prepared to protect the government *tan ngupaya mungsuh, sikêpe amung samêkta* reflects a form of defensive nationalism, an independent nation must base its struggle on ethics and justice, not on replicating the violence of the colonisers.

Narrative of Resistance

8. *kiniyatkên ing jro sanubari / mung sumendhe kang murbêng bawana / asor unggul nèng astane / lamun tinakdir unggul / môngsa dadak Inggris Walandi / nadyan ngêbroki kutha / tan bakal angukup / tan wurung muhung kinarya / lesanira bêdhil miwah bambu runcing / dening mudha prawira //* (Oktaviane, 2017:26)

Translation:

8. Strengthened in our hearts / Surrendering to the will of the Almighty / Victory or defeat is all in His hands / If it is indeed destined to be a victory / Even if the British and Dutch invade the city / It will be impossible for them to take control / It will only be a place of conflict between rifles and sharpened bamboo spears / Fighting against brave young men //

This quote shows the process of reaffirming cultural identity and nationalism as a response to British and Dutch colonialism. In a postcolonial context, reaffirming identity is a crucial step for colonised peoples to assert their existence and dignity amid foreign domination (Hall, 1990). The attitudes of ‘strengthening the heart’ and ‘surrendering to the will of the Almighty’ illustrate the internalisation of spiritual and cultural values as the foundation of national and collective resilience.

The refusal to surrender to colonial forces, despite facing more sophisticated rifles, and the use of sharp bamboo as a symbol of resistance, reflects pride in local identity and distinctive methods of struggle. The contrast between simple bamboo weapons and the colonisers’ advanced firearms underscores the moral and cultural strength behind this resistance, showing that technological power did not automatically translate into legitimacy or authority. This affirms the narrative of nationalism born from the historical experience of the people's struggle, not merely political rhetoric (Anderson, 1991). This poem implicitly rejects the cultural and political domination of the colonisers and strengthens the bonds of solidarity among citizens as a sovereign nation. In this context, the reaffirmation of identity is not only a reaction to physical colonialism, but also a mental and symbolic struggle to maintain collective identity.

Spirit of Resilience and Patience in Facing Challenges

6. *wêlingku anak putu / aja grêsah nimbrung katut bingung / tah- bêtahna minôngka bêktimu kaki / ibu prêtiwi darbèkmu / rêgêmên ywa kongsi mrucot //*
7. *suwunên mring Hyang Agung / esuk sore siyang miwah dalu / ngiras namur wêtêng pêrih klambi angin / kanthi sabar nrimêng kalbu / jinangkung dening Hyang Manon //* (Oktaviane, 2017)

Translation:

6. My message to you, my grandchildren / do not complain or be confused /
be strong as a sign of your devotion / the motherland is yours / hold on to it
and do not let go //

7. Pray to the Almighty / morning, evening, noon and night / to satisfy your
hungry stomachs and clothe your ragged bodies / with patience and a sincere
heart / surely the Almighty will hear you //

The above excerpt contains a collective affirmation that can encourage patriotism and national pride. The phrase '*aja grêsah nimbrung katut bingung*' and the assertion that *ibu prêtiwi darbèkmu* indicate a reaffirmation of cultural identity and nationalism rooted in the homeland and local culture. In a post-colonial context, this *kridawasita* text serves as a medium to strengthen the emotional and spiritual bond of the children and grandchildren to the motherland as a symbol of sovereignty and a source of identity (Bhabha, 1994). The message emphasises the importance of the next generation's attachment to culture and homeland as a form of resistance to foreign influences that have the potential to weaken national identity.

Furthermore, the continuous appeals to Hyang Agung in the manuscript reflect the spiritual dimension of Javanese cultural nationalism, in which local beliefs become a source of strength and social resilience (Geertz, 1981). Patience and fortitude in the face of economic conditions described as *wêtêng pêrih klambi angin* show that nationalism is not just an abstract concept, but a reality of life that encourages citizens to continue to struggle and persevere in the face of challenges (Anderson, 1991). Thus, the *Kridawasita* manuscript not only strengthens Javanese cultural identity but also affirms an inclusive spirit of nationalism, based on culture and spirituality, as a moral foundation for protecting and developing the homeland.

CONCLUSION

The *Kridawasita* manuscript is a traditional Javanese literary work that voices resistance to colonialism through specific symbols and narratives found in the text, such as the contrast between rifles and sharpened bamboo as a metaphor for indigenous resilience, the critique of pseudo-soldiers who serve colonial interests, and the repeated calls for spiritual strength and loyalty to the homeland. *Serat Kridawasita* criticises colonialism both through its portrayal of brutality and through examples of ideological control, such as the deployment of *mata-mata maèwu* and the dehumanisation expressed in *wong bumi dianggêp mimik*, showing how domination worked on physical and psychological levels.. Through a postcolonial lens, *Kridawasita* presents scenes of physical defiance and spiritual steadfastness that function as cultural resistance within the narrative. These elements provide the textual basis for interpreting the work as emphasising nationalism, loyalty to the homeland, and the shared responsibility of different generations in the struggle. By highlighting everyday acts of courage, exposing the hollowness of colonial-aligned soldiers, and reinforcing a shared moral framework, *Serat Kridawasita* shows how Javanese literary tradition helped sustain communal strength under foreign

rule. The text demonstrates that its contribution lies not in grand declarations, but in shaping the values and resolve that supported the wider struggle for freedom.

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