

# GERARD SEKOTO'S PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED CHILDREN'S BOOK, *SHORTY AND BILLY BOY*: THE WORK OF A SOUTH AFRICAN IN PARIS

ELWYN JENKINS

Department of English Studies  
University of South Africa, Pretoria  
ejenkins@mweb.co.za

## ABSTRACT

*Shorty and Billy Boy* (2013) is a children's picture book that has been edited and published from the original created by the artist Gerard Sekoto in Paris in 1973. This article evaluates it as a picture book and places it in the context of South African English picture books, concluding that it is of a high standard. Secondly, the book is examined for its South African content, since the nature of Sekoto's continued ties with his mother country is of central interest in the study of his art. Thirdly, the article evaluates the contribution of the book to Sekoto studies by examining the editorial apparatus that is appended to the book. Its scholarly standard is shown to be poor. The article concludes by placing the book in the context of Sekoto's life and work.

## KEYWORDS

Gerard Sekoto, picture books, South African children's books, South African artists, South African children's book illustrators

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The publication of Gerard Sekoto's children's picture book, *Shorty and Billy Boy: A Tale of Two Naughty Dogs*, in 2013 was an important event for South African children's literature and for studies of Sekoto. The Gerard Sekoto Foundation (hereafter the Foundation) has published it as a children's picture book and, as such, it takes its place in a time-honoured genre. At the same time, the Foundation claims on the back cover that 'the story was clearly written and illustrated as a personal exercise and possibly a sentimental souvenir of his own childhood memories'. In this respect, it is part of Sekoto's artistic oeuvre and deserves close scrutiny as the artist attracts ever-growing critical attention.<sup>1</sup>

This article has four aims. Firstly, in order to evaluate the book as a picture book *per se*, it explores the quality of the text and illustrations, and places the book in the context of illustrated South African children's books. Secondly, by considering the contents of the text and illustrations and comparing the art work with the rest of Sekoto's art, the article analyses to what extent the book is South African in content. Thirdly, the article evaluates the volume, which includes extensive editorial apparatus, as a contribution to scholarly studies of Sekoto. It concludes by placing the work in the context of Sekoto's life and work and assessing what the book reveals about him and his relationship with his mother country at the time that he created the book.

## 2 BACKGROUND

When Sekoto died in Paris in 1993, he left behind a rich legacy in the arts that includes not only his paintings and drawings but also his musical compositions, recordings and writings. It took seven years of negotiations for the Foundation to accomplish the repatriation of his papers from France to South Africa. Among them were four foolscap pages containing an original children's story, with illustrations attached by sticky tape (Smith 2013). In the Sekoto archive there are other unfinished stories, but none as complete as this one (Jacana 2013). As part of the festivities to mark the centenary year of his birth in 1913, the Foundation arranged with the support of various sponsors for Jacana Media to publish a handsome version of the story in April 2013. The book, called *Shorty and Billy Boy: A Tale of Two Naughty Dogs*, saw the light of day 20 years after his death and 40 years after it was created in 1973. It has also been published in five other South African languages, namely Afrikaans, Sotho, Sepedi, Xhosa and Zulu, and in French. At the same time, a retrospective exhibition of Sekoto's art, along with documents and photographs, entitled *Song for Sekoto 1913 – 1993: His Life and Times*, opened at the Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg. It included documents and photographs in order, according to the exhibition's curator, Mary-Jane Darroll, 'to illuminate the artist's thoughts and ideas, thereby offering "a means of understanding the man behind the images"' (in Classicfeel 2013:39).

## 3 THE BOOK

*Shorty and Billy Boy* is in typical large-scale children's picture-book format, with full-colour reproductions of Sekoto's watercolours and black-and-white sketches on the cover and each page. The back cover bears a striking self-portrait of the artist in oils and a concise Editor's Note on the text and its history. The last seven pages contain a biography of Sekoto and notes on the Foundation and the editing of the text, illustrated by photographs of Sekoto and reproductions of some of his paintings (Gerard Sekoto Foundation 2013).

The story tells of the adventures of two dogs which live in a ‘small village’, Grasslands, which they terrorise with their thieving. When things get too hot for them, they take the train to ‘the far-away town’ of Porcupine Hills, where they plan to renew their criminal ways. On the train they meet Miss Piggy, who alights at Mamba Ridge station, and Mrs Cow, the wife of a policeman in Porcupine Hills. They receive a friendly welcome from Mother Hen, but return her hospitality by stealing her eggs. Mr Cock reports them to the police, who set a trap for them and capture Billy Boy. In jail he dreams that Mrs Cow tells him the villagers will welcome back into their community a thief who came from Grasslands when he is released from jail, now that he has learnt his lesson. Taking this generosity to heart, he resolves to invite Shorty to join him in turning over a new leaf when he is released. On hearing of this, Mr Cock squawks and crows in celebration.

Sekoto’s story, as published, is an accomplished children’s picture book. It has lively characters, humour, action and excitement, leading to a satisfying conclusion with a moral lesson. The page design marries the text with the lively illustrations. In his paintings of the two dogs, Sekoto has contrived to make them look like wise guys, with their flashy clothes and cloth caps, stalking on their hind legs. Mother Hen would have been well advised to avoid them rather than feel sorry for them. Young readers, with a thrill of anticipation, would know better than her what was in store after their arrival in town.

*Shorty and Billy Boy* is a welcome extension to what is known about Sekoto’s interest in children. Writing of his career as a teacher in his early twenties, his biographer Manganyi (1996:25) says, ‘He appears to have loved children then in much the same way he was to cherish women in future. From his perspective, both had an aesthetic appeal and could be taken seriously – provided they remained someone else’s responsibility.’ Among his early works are some intense portraits of children and young people, such as *Children Playing* (Lindop 1998:107), *Young Boy Reading* (Lindop 1998:180) and *Young Boy* (Lindop 1998:206), painted in the 1940s and 1950s. In his will, according to Wakashe (in Smith 2013), one of the Foundation’s trustees, ‘he addressed himself specifically to South African children and the issue of their access to artworks’. Smith (2013) writes, ‘The Foundation, which is publishing the book in six languages, hopes it will help to increase awareness of Sekoto and his work and address some of the challenges of illiteracy.’

## 4 THE BOOK IN THE CONTEXT OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

*Shorty and Billy Boy* falls into a long international tradition of illustrated children’s books about talking animals with names like ‘Miss Piggy’, but in certain respects it is unusual. In the context of South African English children’s books, it is remarkable in that until the 1980s very few were written, let alone illustrated, by black writers.

Furthermore, although for the first 60 years of the 20th century South African books included a great many stories about talking animals, they were nearly all animals of the wilds, not town dogs (Jenkins 1993:27–45; 2006:69–72).

Before Sekoto created his book, many South African artists of note had illustrated children's books, though not picture books. They include Gerard Benghu, Sydney Carter, Walter Battiss, Ivan Mitford-Barberton, Ernest Ullman, Francois Krige, Jane Heath, Gwelo Goodman, Townley Johnson, Papas, wildlife artists Hilda Stevenson-Hamilton and C.T. Astley-Maberly, and botanical artists Sima Eliovson and Cythna Letty. For the most part, these artists' illustrations were in black and white on small pages. The drawings by Benghu, the only black artist among them, which illustrated Phyllis Savory's *African Fireside Tales* (1982), are documentary and awkwardly static. Compared with these chiefly journeyman illustrations by artists who took on any work to keep the wolf from the door, Sekoto's *Shorty and Billy Boy* is a spontaneous artistic *jeu d'esprit*. It was not done on commission, and after he had had his fun he apparently put it away without attempting to have it published.

In addition to illustrated story books, picture books with full-colour, full-page illustrations had been published in South Africa previously, but Sekoto is probably the first established South African artist to have made one. The earliest ones in English were *Field Mouse Stories* by Annette Joelson, illustrated by 'Max', published around 1926, *Minnie Moocow and her Friends on the Veld* by JAC and MAC (1932), and *The Story of the Little Moo-Cow* by Madeleine Masson (c. 1944), illustrated by Ernest Ullman.<sup>2</sup>

Masson's story did indeed feature an urban animal called Little Moo-Cow, but nothing could be further from the gritty characters of *Shorty and Billy Boy*. Compare, 'So Little Moo-Cow ran to the tearoom, and she was hungry and thirsty, and she did sit down and say, "Bring me a glass of milk and a big bun," and they did bring it to her and she did eat and eat her bun to the last crumb,' with "'I am disembarking at Porcupine Hills," moo-ed Mrs Cow, peering down her nose at them. "I'm on my way to visit my husband. He is a policeman in Porcupine Hills, you know.'" Indeed, the language of *Shorty and Billy Boy* may be seen as rather intemperate for a children's book: "Did they tell you what pushed them out of Grasslands?" Mr Cock squawked crossly. "Why did those suspicious-looking swines come to Porcupine Hills when they don't know anybody here?"

The texts and illustrations of the early picture books are, by modern standards, old fashioned, mawkish and rather naïve. As far as his text is concerned, Sekoto broke free of their mawkishness and was well up to date compared with late 20th-century juvenile fiction. As for the illustrations, more worthy of comparison with Sekoto's book is *Kana and His Dog* by Jessie Hertslett, illustrated by Katrine Harries (1946), which tells a fine, action-packed story about a brave little African boy. This was the first book illustrated by Harries, who went on to become the leading children's book illustrator in South

Africa. The charcoal illustrations, especially of Kana's dog, actually bear a resemblance to some of Sekoto's work in their lively movement.

Since *Kana and His Dog*, many children's picture books have been published in South Africa. Their illustrators have experimented with diverse styles and media, represented in the exhibition of children's book illustrators, *Doer-Land-Y/Far Far Away*, held in the South African National Gallery in 1986 (Hölscher 1986) and documented by Van Zyl and Botes (1994), Kruger (1991), Wybenga and Snyman (2005) and Heale (1994). *Shorty and Billy Boy* compares well with the best of them. In particular it anticipates the *Jamela* series by Niki Daly, the first of which, *Jamela's Dress*, appeared in 1999. This series has enjoyed immense international popularity, especially in the United States (US). Daly's books are large-format, colourful picture stories about a little girl. Many scenes are set in townships in which the highly energetic action in the foreground takes place against a backdrop of multifarious details of township life.

## 5 HOW SOUTH AFRICAN IS THE BOOK?

While the consideration of Sekoto's place as the South African author-illustrator of a children's picture book is an aspect of Sekoto studies that is new, occasioned by the publication of the book, Sekoto's place among South African artists in general has often been discussed. Although a number of other black South African artists were working at the same time as Sekoto in the 1940s, 'Sekoto vehemently rejects any suggestion that his work was influenced in any way, by any artist, including any South African artist', according to Spiro (1989:45), who curated the exhibition of his work at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989. Nevertheless, says Spiro (1989:45), there are 'stylistic correspondences' between his work and some South African artists such as Maggie Laubser and Alexis Preller.

The pictures in *Shorty and Billy Boy*, therefore, were not entirely unusual as works by a South African artist when they were created in 1973. But is the book a South African story? Although the Editor's Note on the back cover says, 'The South African context of the tale has been accentuated and obsolete language and minor inconsistencies have been removed', it is not clear whether it had any South African content before editing. Only a few features in the text give it a South African flavour. Two of the place names are Mamba Ridge and Porcupine Hills (Grasslands could be anywhere). The country around Porcupine Hills 'was dry and barren, unlike their green, fertile hometown of Grasslands. There were dried-up dongas in the road, and the fields were dusty and bare. It seemed like not a drop of rain had fallen in years'. On the opposite page is a painting captioned 'Mr Cow and the dryness of Porcupine Hills', showing a jaunty-looking Mr Cow, dressed in shorts and a hat with a feather, riding a bicycle, against a background of reds and yellows. The bottoms of the wheels disappear into a whitish yellow that might be construed as dust rising from the road. No further reference is made to this dryness – it has no bearing on the story. In the lexis of the text, only a few South African

words occur, such as 'dongas' and in sentences describing how the dogs 'sneakily stole oranges and naartjies' and 'eggs, oranges, naartjies, mealies and money'. These sound suspiciously like modern add-ons.

Furthermore, nothing specific in the illustrations in *Shorty and Billy Boy* is identifiably South African. After Sekoto left South Africa in 1947, he continued to paint pictures set in South African townships for many years, so there is no reason why he could not have painted graphic South African settings. Smith (2013), in an article on the book written for the *Sunday Times*, says that the illustrations are 'evocative of early township life', but this is wishful thinking. Porcupine Hills itself is described as a 'town' with at least one 'suburb', which is not how the townships of Sekoto's youth were usually described. Compared with the townships in Daly's *Jamela* pictures, the physical settings, consisting of tiny buildings and vague greenery which appear in the backgrounds, are generic. In fact, at least three buildings in the cover picture are multi-storeyed and therefore atypical of township residential areas. The only notable feature which could be 'African' is that most of the outdoor scenes have a sun shining above with rays emanating from it.

The features in the illustrations that *are* location-specific are French. A couple of pictures show the dogs wearing long-sleeved garments with broad horizontal stripes of stereotypical French appearance (they feature in kitsch paintings of Frenchmen walking on the banks of the Seine and sitting at Parisian sidewalk cafés). In the painting and the sketch of the bovine policemen they are not wearing either the blue or khaki uniforms that South African policemen wore in those days but appear to be wearing what must be *French* police uniforms and headgear.

This is, in a way, surprising, because memories of the South African police loomed large in Sekoto's memory. Manganyi (1996:9) records in his biography:

Police brutality was common at the time [when Sekoto was a young child]. White police officers came from the little town of Middelburg on horseback. ... In later life, Gerard painted vivid pictures, in words and on canvas, of police brutality against local black people.

Corrigall (2013:6) takes a different view from Manganyi, though she appears to be referring only to Sekoto's work done while living in South Africa: 'Police appear in a few of Sekoto's paintings, most notably in *The Roundup* (1939), but they are not involved in violent skirmishes. Sekoto seems largely to be registering their presence rather than the impact it may have had.' In her book on Sekoto's art, Lindop (1988:119) includes several paintings of this kind, such as *Prisoners Carrying a Boulder* (c. 1939–1947), but she does also reproduce (1988:10) *Prisoner Being Led in Front of a Mounted Horse* (n.d.), an early sketch of the cruel practice of the Middelburg police that had made such an impression on Sekoto as a boy, whereby the horse's hooves would cut the feet of the prisoner.

In his book, Sekoto neither depicts South African police nor shows police brutality of the kind referred to by Manganyi or illustrated by Lindop. The French police and Billy Boy's incarceration are handled lightly, without violence. It is evident that he was not writing and illustrating social commentary to match other pictures of his illustrating life in racist South Africa.

I can conclude that unless the few South African names and words in the text were in Sekoto's original version (and some appear too awkwardly inserted for that), this was not originally a story set in South Africa. The Editor's Note on the back cover speculates, 'Sekoto may well have composed it as a gift for children of friends as he was often engaged in making greeting cards with accompanying illustrations.' Perhaps the 'children of friends' were French, and he painted the pictures to suit them.

## 6 THE BOOK AS A CONTRIBUTION TO SEKOTO STUDIES

Whether or not the text and pictures are set in South Africa is not an irrelevant issue. By placing a statement on the back cover that the book is 'for children as well as art lovers and collectors', and including seven pages of information and discussion after the thirty pages of the text, the Foundation has marketed the story in a package that is not only a children's picture book but also a serious contribution to Sekoto studies. However, in doing so the Foundation leaves questions unanswered, and it is consequently impossible to ascertain exactly who it envisaged as the readers of the book and what Sekoto wrote or drew as illustrations for the text.

Perhaps the Foundation lost its way by giving the book the appearance of a standard children's picture book but then switching readership by devoting the last seven pages to material addressed to adults. This will confuse potential purchasers of the book. The confusion is compounded by what appears to be a media release or a paraphrase of a media release by the Foundation that was published by the French Institute of South Africa (2013), which contains the extraordinary statement, 'It is hoped that in the process of learning to read, the reader is also drawn into looking at the images, to encourage observation and appreciation of Sekoto's artistic originality, and the magical process of creativity.' Even Heale (2013), a leading reviewer and bibliographer of South African children's books, concludes his review on his website, 'Certainly, a book that should be in every library – probably shelved in the art category.' Heale, therefore, has abandoned the notion that the book is intended for child readers. Yet, he need not have been taken off guard. In clumsily adding to a children's book a peritext aimed at adults the Foundation was following a practice in South African publishing that goes back a hundred years (Jenkins 2012:14–24). Notably, collections of folktales for children, ranging from *Native Fairy Tales of South Africa* (McPherson 1919) to *San Tales from*

*Africa* (Delle Donne 2007), carry scholarly material in incongruous conjunction with the texts.

It is not unusual for a rare book or manuscript, even a children's book, to be published in an edited edition intended for adult readers. In such cases, the editorial apparatus should meet certain scholarly standards, but these have not been met in Sekoto's book.

The Editor's Note opens with the resounding statement, 'Gerard Sekoto (1913–1993) is acknowledged to be the father figure of contemporary South African art, and is widely thought of as an iconic and inspirational figure.' While I sympathise with the sentiment, is the hyperbole necessary? Perhaps the terms 'father figure' and 'contemporary art' are so vague that they can absorb any meaning.

The name of the editor is not given, and although the Editor's Note (Gerard Sekoto Foundation 2013) gives some information about how the book was created, it is inadequate:

The Gerard Sekoto Foundation has approved a number of editorial changes to Gerard Sekoto's original text. The aim has been to preserve the integrity and flavour of the unpublished story while making it more accessible to present-day readers. The South African context of the tale has been accentuated and obsolete language and minor inconsistencies have been removed. ... Sekoto's watercolours are reproduced as he created them in his original document but other related sketches and paintings have been introduced to add richness and vitality to the story. Details of some of these artworks have been highlighted to draw attention to Sekoto's dexterity and fluidity with pen and paint.

This does not give details of the textual alterations and the additional illustrations. Only the pictures that, rather endearingly, bear traces of yellowing sticky tape on the edges are plainly from the original script. We do not even know if the title was given by Sekoto. Smith (2013), after interviewing three of the trustees of the Foundation, reports that the book 'has been heavily edited', which is more than the Editor's Note suggests. For the serious adult reader, there is no way of knowing what this editing entailed.

There are some bad editorial lapses. It is irritating that the book has no page numbers. Shoddy scholarship also makes a bad impression. Under the heading 'A Life of Achievement', the Editor's Note (Gerard Sekoto Foundation 2013) states:

In 1988, a book called *Gerard Sekoto* was published, which allowed South Africans to re-connect with this forgotten genius. In 1990, the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg awarded him an honorary doctorate, and the South African government posthumously awarded Sekoto the Order of the Ikamanga [*sic*], the highest award the country offers for achievements in the arts.

The Editor's Note does not supply the author and publishing details of the book it mentions.<sup>3</sup> The honorary degree was awarded in 1989, not 1990. And the correct wording and spelling for the name of the Order are 'the Order of Ikhamanga'.



## 7 WHAT THE BOOK TELLS US ABOUT SEKOTO

It is commonplace to remark that Sekoto continued to paint South African subjects for the rest of his life. The subtitle of Lesley Spiro's catalogue to the 1989 exhibition in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, 'Unsevered ties', emphatically characterises his life's work in this way. Critics maintain this judgement of the work he produced even when his style noticeably changed. Corrigan (2013:7), for example, observes of his later 'blue period', 'In a way he was channelling Africa through the European gaze.' Consequently, the work executed in Paris is considered inferior to his earlier work because it was not executed at first hand. As *Classicfeel* magazine (2013:37) puts it,

The work produced by Sekoto throughout these [South African] years – scenes of township life, and portraits of his family and others – is thought to be among some of his best, drawing as it does on direct observation and his immersion in the world he depicted.

Corrigan (2013:7) points out that this opinion is reflected by the fact that 'the works produced in South Africa before his departure in the late 1940s fetch much higher sums at auction'. Where does that leave *Shorty and Billy Boy*, executed in the middle of his life in Europe?

Until the exhibition at the Wits Art Gallery in 2013, Sekoto's reaction to his life in Paris was known through his art and personal testimony, much of it recorded by Lindop and Manganyi. The documents in the exhibition add new information, and no doubt there is more in the unpublished archive. *Shorty and Billy Boy* now contributes new testimony in a unique art form, the children's picture book.

In *Shorty and Billy Boy*, he created both a story and illustrations that are original. Six years before creating the book, in 1966 he spent a year in Senegal. His watercolours for the story reflect the change in style that followed his visit. Instead of the heavily moulded, often squat, figures of his early South African work – what Spiro (1989:52) calls the 'purity' of the 'bulbous shapes' – the animal figures of the book are more impressionistic, lighter and filled with lively movement, giving an impression of height. Smith (2013) draws attention to the difference: 'The drawings in *Shorty and Billy Boy*, while evocative of early township life, are closer in style to much of the less critically appreciated, almost jazz-inspired works that he made in the 1960s and 1970s following a year spent in Senegal.' De Klerk (2013) describes the illustrations as being in 'Sekoto's fluid, minimalist style'. They bear out Sekoto's own comments (quoted in Lindop 1988:231, 232) on his paintings of Senegalese women such as *Woman in the Street* (1971) (Lindop 1988:247) and *Three Dancing Figures* (1968) (Lindop 1988:229) – 'slender and tall ... my looser and freer lines'. The two men in *Striding Through the Township* (1971) (Lindop 1988:250) resemble the two dogs striding along on their hind legs in *Shorty and Billy Boy*. The contrast can be appreciated by comparing the illustrations with three early paintings reproduced in the Editor's Note to *Shorty and*

*Billy Boy: Song of the Pick* (c. 1946), *Yellow Houses* (c. 1942–1945) and *Vegetable Cart* (c. 1946–1947).

I hesitate to use the word 'exile' to describe Sekoto's life in France, as he emigrated voluntarily to explore the artistic life of Paris, though later his stay took on that character when the South African government withdrew his passport on his return from Senegal and he refused to return to apartheid South Africa to receive his honorary doctorate from the University of the Witwatersrand. As the work of an exile, *Shorty and Billy Boy* might be compared with the expressions of exile of other writers, for example the poetry of his fellow expatriate in Paris, Breyten Breytenbach, and the world wanderer, Barend Toerien. Breytenbach, in his poem '*Die hand vol vere*' ('The hand full of feathers' 1969), imagining his return to his South African home, evokes details of what he will find there, especially the people, the old dog, the music playing. Toerien, in '*Terugkoms*' ('Return' 1973), explaining why he has come back, turns the South African names of places, roads, plants, grasses and much else into physical entities that he can taste, roll in his fingers and rub his back against.

If, as the Editor's Note on the back cover speculates, *Shorty and Billy Boy* was created as 'a sentimental souvenir of his own childhood', it lacks these poems' specificity. Although the book is not in detail South African, it is the product of the blend of African and international experience that made up the character and work of the older Sekoto. Manganyi (1996:126) writes:

A synthesis of this kind meant that he had to use his South African past in a more sophisticated way in his painting. There had to be some transformation, and it is this change which Sekoto described as the search after rhythm. By 'rhythm' he seems to have meant a uniquely South African quality which he needed to express in his art in an innovative way.

## 8 CONCLUSION

What can we learn from *Shorty and Billy Boy* about Sekoto's attachment to his mother country in the 1970s? Sekoto's memories of criminals terrorising townships and of the ubiquitous police are ameliorated and transposed in the story for children, which has a moral message and a happy ending. Sekoto was enacting in words and illustrations what he spelled out in a lecture he gave at the Second Conference of Negro Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959: 'Without renouncing their personalities, they [blacks] fortified them by searching in their past for the link which bound them to their origins while at the same time remaining with the rhythm of the international modern world' (Sekoto in Mangayi 1996).

There is something poignant in Sekoto imagining a happier world than that of the South Africa of his childhood, which was still the norm when he wrote this story – a world where police do their job without brutality and where bad guys have the space to change

into good guys. His pictures, too, are not like those in which he depicted township life. They have been liberated from mass and dance lightly across the page.

The Foundation would do well to consider publishing a proper scholarly edition and leave the children's book to make its own way into the hearts of South African children.

## NOTES

1. For example, Manganyi's 1996 biography of Sekoto was reprinted in 2004 under a different title.
2. Heale, in his bibliography *From the Bushveld to Biko* (1996:15), says that Masson and Ullmann's book *The Story of the Little Moo-Cow* (c. 1944) 'is the earliest example I can find of a children's book published in South Africa and printed in full colour', but the books by Joelson (c. 1926) and JAC and MAC (1932) antedate it.
3. The book referred to is *Gerard Sekoto* by Barbara Lindop (1988).

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