

The Antinomies of Transgressive Gender Acts in Professor Jay's Rap Music Video "Zali la Mentali" in Tanzania

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Summary

This article examines the transgressive gender acts in a rap music video by Tanzanian musician Professor Jay entitled "Zali la Mentali". It argues that, on the one hand, this music video subverts established gender norms and the dominance of the male figure by representing a female character who displays more power and agency in comparison with her male counterpart while, on the other hand, it also participates in maintaining and propagating male centred gender norms.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel neem oorskrydende geslagsoptredes onder die loep soos wat dit in 'n kletsrym-musiekvideo genaamd "Zali la Mentali" deur die Tanzaniese musikant Professor Jay uitgebeeld word. Dit voer aan dat, aan die een kant hierdie musiekvideo die aanvaarde geslagsnorme en die oorheersing van die manlike figuur ondermyn deur 'n vroulike figuur uit te beeld wat meer mag en agentskap openbaar in vergelyking met haar manlike eweknie, onderwyl, aan die ander kant, dit ook deelneem aan die handhawing en bevordering van mangesentreerde geslagsnorme.

Introduction

This article examines transgressive gender acts in a rap music video in Tanzania namely, Professor Jay's "Zali la Mentali" (hereafter referred to as "Zali") and discusses various antinomies of these transgressive gender acts.¹ The video challenges and subverts various established gender norms and the dominance of male figure in society. The music video represents the female character as one who possesses more power in comparison with her male

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1. The name "Professor Jay" is an artistic nickname. There is a widespread culture amongst musicians in Tanzania to use artistic names which are different from (although most often derived from) the artists birth names. Professor Jay's birth names are Joseph Haule.

counterpart. It also shows that this female character possesses most of the features that have traditionally been used to define maleness such as being strong, brave, self-assured and being in control. For this reason, the music video participates in transforming viewers' perception of maleness and femaleness. However, the article observes that the same music video also performs various acts that uphold traditional gender ideals and male-centred gender norms. This is especially the case when at the end of the music video we learn that the wealth that made her a powerful person, and perceived as such by us the viewers and by Jay, were given to her by a male figure, her father. Thus the article argues that this rap music video plays two contradictory roles at the same time.

Rap music began in Tanzania in the 1980s, first as imitations of African-American rap and then as a localised musical form by incorporating local tune, rhythms and rhymes, use of Kiswahili and other Tanzania's local languages, and by addressing current Tanzania's social, political and economic issues (Remes 1999: 1-26; Perullo 2007: 250-256, 2011: 88-89'; Suriano 2011: 118; Clark 2012; Sanga 2013: 386-387). The music is also known as *muziki wa kizazi kipya* (the music of the new generation) which points to the fact that most performers and fans of this music are youths and incorporates widespread use of street slang (*lugha ya mitaani*) as it is evident in Professor Jay's song "Zali" (Mangesho 2003; Stroeken 2005; Suriano 2006 Sanders 2008; Ntarangwi 2009; Omari 2011, 2013; Clark 2013). As Maria Suriano points out, through this music, young artists involved in this music genre express their "youthful views and aspirations as well as agency, contradictions and (sometimes) common interests" (2011: 114). Sometimes the music is also referred to as *bongo fleva*,² the term that highlights the localisation of many global musical styles (or flavours) such as R&B, hip hop, rumba, reggae, rap, raga and zouk by blending them with tunes, rhythms, musical instruments and performing styles from Tanzania (Perullo 2011: 363; Ntarangwi 2009: 129). At other times, rap music is distinguished from *bongo fleva* as the later seems to be shaped in order to attract a wider market and to draw the attention of the media whereas rap is seen to be more critical against various establishments such as government and even the media industry. For this reason, rap music does not enjoy the same media attention as *bongo fleva* (Clark 2014: 1115-1117). However, in practice the line that separates these musical genres is not only narrow but also permeable. A number of musicians perform both genres and at times they also integrate rap sections in their *bongo fleva* songs. Some other times the integration is achieved by the common practice of recording in collaboration with featuring artists. Hence, a number of songs by *bongo fleva* singers such as Lady Jaydee include rap

2. A Kiswahili slang word "*bongo*" is often used to refer to Dar es Salaam. Sometimes it is used more broadly to refer to Tanzania or Africa. The term "*fleva*" is a swahilised form of an English word "flavor" and it is used to refer to musical taste. It is sometimes spelled "*flava*".

sections by rappers such as Mangwea, Professor Jay and Mwana FA and vice versa. In the same way, the staging of maleness and femaleness in Professor Jay's rap music video "Zali" draws its reference from and also challenges both the global rap music practices and the local Tanzanian gendered cultural practices (see also Reuster-Jahn & Hacke 2014).

Born in Songea, Ruvuma region in 1975, Joseph Haule (famously known by his artistic name Professor Jay) began to be involved in Tanzanian rap since its inception in 1994. He was a member of one of the early rap groups known as Hard Blasters. In 2001 Professor Jay began to shine as a solo artist after releasing his earliest songs including "Nikusaidiaje" (How Can I Help You) and "Zali la Mentali" (The Story of Mentali). The latter song, "Zali" was subsequently included in his second album entitled "Mapinduzi Halisi" (Real Revolution),³ the name that speaks to the transformative aspect of the theoretical concept used in this article. Among his well-known songs is "Ndiyo Mzee" a political song that exposes political leaders' false promises that they make during electoral campaigns and mocks the people's uncritical acceptance of these lies as they respond in unison "Ndiyo Mzee", or Yes! Elder or boss (see Perullo 2005: 84-86; Suriano 2011: 121). In 2015 Professor Jay contested and was successfully elected a member of parliament representing Mikumi constituency through one of the opposition parties namely CHADEMA (Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo). He became the second rap artist in Tanzania to serve as an MP following Joseph Mbilinyi (famously Mr. II or Sugu) who is serving as an MP representing Mbeya Town constituency through the same party (CHADEMA) since 2010. Perhaps, this testifies not only to the popularity these young musicians and their music command in society but also to the recognition of how their songs address important issues.

Theorising Transgressive Gender Acts

A Nigerian philosopher and feminist art scholar, Nkiru Nzegwu, defines the concept of transgressive gender acts as verbal utterances, bodily actions and other cultural practices that challenge, put into question or dissolve gender categories and make it possible for marginal gendered subjects to participate in the prohibited practices for ones gender. Nzegwu gives examples of female sculptors in Nigeria who decided to become professional sculptors, a profession that, until the time of her research, was still "perceived as an exclusively male preserve". In so doing these female sculptors crossed traditional gender "categories and adopted a self-empowering language that

3. His other albums include: "Machozi" (Tears) "Jasho na Damu" (Sweat and Blood), "J.O.S.E.P.H", "Aluta Continua" (The Struggle Continues), and "Kazi Kazi" (Work).

recasts history and tradition” (1998: 105). She views the work of a Nigerian female sculptor, Dike on female sages as disrupting stereotypical male centred narratives and trying to voice and highlight the presence of women sages as chronicles of culture (2000). Dike and her work are represented as subverting the male dominance in the practice of cultural chroniclers. As Nzegwu writes:

Long marginalized in the process of historical narration, Dike’s sculptural counter narrative stress that modern Nigerian women of all ethnic groups have come into awareness of their history at both the personal and public level. They hint that the articulation of this history has to begin with the oral retrieval of social and political events that preserve women’s participation in and the naming of, historical events. Thus women’s writing of *uli* is a writing of voice that entails the writing back of agency into historical narratives.

(1998: 117)

Since the construction and the sustenance of traditional repressive gender norms depend on the reiteration of gendered practices and utterances in or through various cultural productions, the reiteration of these transgressive gender acts in and through similar media (the arts and other cultural productions) participates in the undoing of such gendered constructs (Butler 1990: 40-43).

This article shows that Professor Jay’s music video, “Zali”, is in many ways a transgressive gender act. It represents a female character who breaks the confines of traditional gender categories and performs more empowering acts. The music video challenges established male-centred gender norms. The analysis that follows examines ways through which this music video uses sounds, song lyrics, performing techniques, as well as cinematic and narrative techniques to perform these transgressive gender acts. It also shows how the same music video upholds some of the male-centred gender norms, norms that are antithetical to the transgressive gender acts it propagates.

To be sure, a number of studies of the music of Tanzania discuss how music participates in either challenging existing traditional gender norms (Fargion 2013; Rosenberg 2014; Perullo 2011; Ntarangwi 2009; Sanga 2007) or sustaining them (Ntarangwi 2007; Sanga 2011). The analysis presented in this article extends these perspectives and conclusions by showing that the transgressive gender acts in this music video are dialectically linked to the notion of masculine power which they also challenge. In this dialectical relationship, the negative aspects of the dialectic (i.e. upholding traditional gender norms, roles and a subordinate position of female subjects) are not alien or external intruders to the liberating qualities of the transgressive gender acts. But they serve as foundational reference point in structuring the transgressive gender acts themselves. The power that the female subject possesses is shown to be defined in terms of male power or drawn from male subjects (e.g. father). Hence, recontextualising the concept of dialectic drawn from Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002: 1-34), I argue that the

antinomies in these transgressive gender acts are caused by the fact that this music video plays two contradicting roles at once, i.e. it participates in reinstating, propagating and instituting the very male-centred gendered order which it subverts.

Antinomies of Transgressive Gender Acts in Professor Jay's "Zali"

Professor Jay's "Zali" is crafted in a narrative form with a clear plot, a narrator and characters. The slang Kiswahili word *zali* also refers to an incident worthy to be a subject of a story. The artist, Professor Jay performs two roles in this music video. First, he appears as a narrator performing the song alone or in company of other musicians and he wears nice Jeans and a T-shirt. When this is the case, I refer to him as Professor Jay. He also appears as the main character in the story of the song who is involved in the narrative's events and relations. His appearance changes as the story progresses. At the beginning he appears as a poor young man in torn clothes while at the end of the story he appears as a rich young man wearing expensive clothes. I refer to this character as Jay because in the story he introduces himself as such. The former (i.e. Professor Jay) refers to the actual musician whose biography is given above whereas the latter (i.e. Jay) refers only to the character in the story that this song narrates. Hence, a cautionary remark is necessary: My commentary on this character, as the song (and the music video more generally) represents him, should not be taken as comments on the musician, Professor Jay.

The story's plot with a clear beginning, middle and end can be reconstructed as follows. In the first section (beginning), a young man who introduces himself as Jay lives a poverty-ridden life without a reliable source of income. He rides *mkokoteni* (a handcart) to win his daily bread. He lives in one of the poorest areas of Dar es Salaam. The place is derogatively known in Kiswahili as *uswahilini* (lit. an area for Swahili people). The term *uswahilini* is used to refer to places that are characterised by overcrowded neighbourhoods with very little and poor provision of social services such as schools, roads, medical clinics or dispensaries and water, among other things (Lewinson 2007: 206). This name reflects its roots in the colonial racially motivated spatial stratification of the city into three areas: *uzunguni* (areas for Whites or colonisers), *uhindini* (areas for Indians who occupied a middle rank in the colonial racial stratification) and *uswahilini* (areas for local blacks who occupied the lowest rank in the colonial racial stratification) which are characterised by limited or poor provision of social services such as roads, clean water, and hospitals (Potts 1995; Lewinson 2007; Kironde 2007; Brennan 2007; Smiley 2010). It should be noted though that today, over fifty years since independence, this spatial segregation is mainly based on class and level of income. Thus places such as Msasani and Mbezi Beach are now

occupied mainly by rich business persons, high government officials, experts employed in various sectors of economy and international organisations as well as a few expatriates working in Dar es Salaam (Brennan 2007; Sanga 2013). Because of his poverty, Jay is rejected by a girl he first meets and approaches to try to establish friendship with her. Then in the middle section of the narrative, a rich girl named Vicky approaches him. She introduces herself as a girl from a rich family and she lives in a place called Mbezi Beach. This is one of *uzunguni* areas in Dar es Salaam along the Indian Ocean. It is at this juncture that a major life-changing event happens in Jay's life. Vicky who loves him despite his poverty and their social class differences, requests Jay to leave his current job and come to live with her in her place in Mbezi Beach. There is a small obstacle to this proposal. Jay is worried that because of their economic and class differences, love between them will be impossible. For the same reason, he also worries that Vicky's parents will not allow their daughter to enter into such a relationship. The song presents this obstacle as something that happens only in Jay's mind. In the final section of the narrative (end), the two characters live a happy life together and marry. The life of Jay is shown to have changed drastically as now he lives as a rich man in Mbezi Beach.

The greatness of the life-changing event in Jay's life is constructed by showing that the gap between the two social classes in which the two characters first belong is a significant one. A number of figures are used to achieve this. First, the figure of *mkokoteni* (a handcart) is used to represent poverty. This figure is represented in opposition to the figure of expensive cars such as Toyota Surf and BMW. In fact, the first girl who rejects Jay because of his poverty explicitly tells him: "*maskini koma, tafadhali hii ngoma ya gari*" which can generally be translated as: you poor man stop, I am of the level of someone with a car. She says these words while in the video we see Jay with his *mkokoteni* (handcart). It is as if she is saying, I am not *mkokoteni* type. There is a Kiswahili adage that reflects the binary opposition between poor and rich people using the figure of *mkokoteni*. It says: *Tajiri na mali yake; maskini na mkokoteni* (lit. a rich person with property or wealth; a poor person with his/her handcart). The adage serves to underscore the widespread use of the figure of *mkokoteni* among the Kiswahili speaking people of East Africa and it is this usage which we find in this music video.

The second figure is that of *uswahilini* which is used in opposition with the name of the place Mbezi Beach. In *uswahilini* we see Jay sweating with heat and hard work but Mbezi Beach is represented as a cool place where residents enjoy sea breeze and air condition in their houses. In fact, when Vicky requests Jay to come to her place, she evokes this figure of sea breeze. She says: "*Acha kubeba mizigo; Twende Mbezi Beach kwangu upepo unapovuma*" (Stop carrying these luggages on the handcart; Let us go to my place in Mbezi Beach where there is a good flow of air or sea breeze). The song shows that it is only through Vicky's true love that the gap between the two social classes

dissolves. Only Vicky's true love makes the union of the two characters possible. The strength of Vicky's love is conceivable because the gap between the two social classes is portrayed as significantly wide, such that one cannot cross it easily. Through these figures (i.e. *mkokoteni* and *uswahili*) we perceive Vicky's declaration of her love to Jay as a truly significant event.

There are a number of transformative gender acts in this music video. First, it is a woman (Vicky) who occupies a position of power relative to the man (Jay). It is a woman who is financially stronger than a man and she is the one who supports Jay with money to meet his daily needs before and after they marry. It is Vicky who initiates love affairs and she is the one who proposes that the two should live together and marry. It is in the woman's house in Mbezi Beach where the two live together. In other words, it is a man who moves into the woman's house when they decide to live together under the same roof. All these acts reverse, subvert and put into question traditional gender norms in Tanzania according to which it is a man who is expected to provide for the financial needs of (heterosexual) lovers or the couple. It is a man who is expected to take the active role of initiating a love affair and proposing marriage. Under normal circumstances, the married couple or lovers live in a man's house. Hence, it is a woman who is expected to move and go to live in the man's house.

Second, the attitude of the narrator of this story throughout the song is one that approves this subversion of gender order. This reversal of power position between the characters is presented not as a misnomer but as one of possible order of life. The narrator does not reprove the subversion of gender norms carried out by Vicky. The extraordinariness of Vicky's character presented in this music video is shown to depend on the strength and sincerity of her love. Vicky's love is positively presented as a true love, one that transcends class and economic differences.

Throughout the song (and music video presentation), the story is presented from the angle of vision of Jay. It is from his standpoint we are made to see and perceive all other characters, events and relationships in the story. In the language of narratology, Jay is the focaliser of this story i.e. the agent that sees and through his vision the "object" is presented to the readers (Bal 2009: 147-165). All other voices that we hear from other characters in the story help to reinforce Jay's vision and voice. Hence, when I acknowledge that this song performs transgressive gender acts, I do acknowledge Jay's transformative acts. He is the one who imagines and accepts the possibility of female masculinity. It is him who does not present female power and agency as a misnomer. It is him who presents it as a good act done by someone with true love, one who does not see class differences as a hindrance of her love.

Despite these transformative efforts, however, in many ways the song "Zali" also maintains the traditional gender norms and the associated dominance of a male figure. First, it portrays a woman as an object of male gaze. This happens when Jay is still in *uswahilini* pushing his *mkokoteni*. He meets with

the first woman (unnamed). Jay praises the beauty of this woman. The woman is so attractive that Jay fails to hide his fascination and finds himself trying to exchange greetings with her. As pointed out above, this woman realizes Jay's intention and rejects his advances because he is poor. The camera starts to show her buttocks as she walks in Jay's direction. Then, as Jay tries to talk to her, we see another close-up now focusing on the woman's chest with a clear view of her breasts. As the woman walks away, the camera pans left following its "object" with a focus on the woman's buttocks again. This shot is then represented in a slow motion which augments the woman's swish movement. At times, these close-ups are interrupted by close-ups focusing on Jay's eyes staring at the woman. At other times, the view of the woman seems not to target Jay but the screen viewer. In these occasions, the viewer is enticed by the video to look at the woman or the focused eroticised parts of her body as a visual sexual object.

A metaphor that Jay uses to describe his gaze at this woman, magnifies the objectification of the woman through male gaze. He says that, having been disappointed with his inability to seduce this woman, "*nilikula kwa macho*" (I ate her through my eyes). Let me comment on the phallocentrism of this metaphor. The metaphor "to eat" (in its verb form) is usually used to describe a man's sexual act with a woman. It is a man who is active and performs the act on a passive woman. Note that this is true even with many other Kiswahili euphemisms for a sexual act. And there are many euphemisms for sex since it is a sign of indecency to directly mention it publicly. This metaphor reflects the representation of a woman as an object of male gaze in the video. Having failed to actually draw the attention of the woman, he says he decided to let her go because he feared that he could commit a crime of rape and be punished. However, instead of letting the woman go, Jay engages himself in an imaginary sexual act accomplished through his eyes. It should be noted that in many societies sexuality has become an integral part of the expression of masculinity in rap music (Armstrong 2001; Weitzer & Kubrin 2009). In her article concerning rap music and masculinity in Gabon, Alice Aterianus-Owanga also reports a number of incidents where male rappers use the metaphor of "eating" to refer to having sex with young women. She argues that women in the discourse of these rappers are viewed as conquests or trophies to be won by a strong male rapper (Aterianus-Owanga 2013). In the case of Professor Jay's "Zali", Jay's metaphor exposes the cannibalism of his visual sexual act, the act he performs to the unnamed woman. In her now classic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey uses the concept of "scopophilia" to refer to a pleasure or erotic enjoyment one obtains by looking at another human being as an object. She writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and

displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle.

(1999: 837)

Jay's gaze (and it should be remembered that the Jay referred to here is a character of the story and not Professor Jay, the musician although in this music video he plays the role of Jay), the associated camera angles and camera movements, and the metaphor of "eating" with his eyes can be understood as visual rape or even scopophilic cannibalism, to recontextualise Mulvey's concept. Perhaps, what is more dangerous in Jay's scene, is the invitation it makes to the viewer to look at this woman or parts of her body, not only through Jay's eyes, but also with their own eyes. As noted above, using various cinematic techniques, there are moments when the scene presents this woman not to Jay (who is in the scene) but to the viewers (the character who are not part of the cinematic narrative). In other words, the scene entices the viewers also to become scopophilic cannibals.

Second, towards the end of the music video (or the story) Jay reveals to us that all the wealth that we thought belongs to Vicky is not a product of her own labour, strength and creativity but they are provided to her by her rich father. In other words, if the wealth made us to perceive Vicky as a powerful woman who possesses and displays masculine traits then all that powers and masculinity are finally revealed to be not her own but to belong to her father. I posit that in spite of its transgressive gender perspectives, the song does not lead its audiences to imagine another independent form of masculinity. Male masculinity seems to be the only true form of masculinity even in such a transgressive work. Thus even the source of Vicky's power must be shown to come from a true masculine person, the father. In this way, the female masculinity that the song has presented to us so far is shown to be founded on male masculinity. It is this same deeply rooted gender norm that seems to force Jay also to take himself as a man who has to take care of Vicky. When Vicky's parents perform an act of giving their daughter to Jay in marriage, they order Jay to take care of her. The Kiswahili word used here is "*kumlea*" (lit. to nurture). It is the same word which is used to refer to an act of raising and nurturing a child. The act involves providing food, shelter, clothes and protection, among other responsibilities. Paradoxically, we are told this when the song has already shown us that it is Jay who is dependent on Vicky. It seems to me that despite its transgressive quality, the song still maintains the traditional norm and represents an image of a man as winner of daily bread and this leads to the antinomy encountered in this music video: the co-existence of both the transformative act that undermines male dominance and the act of maintaining traditional gender order.

The song can also be read as an expression of Dar es Salaam urban polarisation between the *uswahilini* and Mbezi through fantasy. The young woman, Vicky, in this song acts as the fantasy object representing what the

subject in *uswahilini*, Jay is denied by local or global systems of social inequality. These systems of socio-economic inequalities play the function of a psychoanalytic “Father”. The “Father” in this psychoanalytic sense, prohibits and denies those who live in the margins from benefiting from the wealthy while he accumulates most of the wealth for himself. The song provides a fantasy through which poor young men imagine themselves as being able to obtain the objects of their desires. Only in and through fantasy one attains one's objects of desire without transgressing the “Law of the Father” or posing a threat to dispossess the “Father” his object of desire. In this psychoanalytic sense, fantasy enables the subject to imaginatively attain its object of desire; an object that in a real world is prohibited by the Law (Evans 1996: 56-61).

In his study of barbershop culture in Arusha, Brad Weiss observes that most of the time, young men's performance of masculinity through fantasies is a way of “articulating local social worlds as intrinsically grounded in global context” (2002: 112). The point I want to emphasise here is that this fantasy is expressed through the image of the man being loved by and finally marrying the rich woman. In itself this act wouldn't necessarily be interpreted as a performance of masculinity referred to in Weiss' quotation above. However, the song finally shows that the source of wealth of this young woman (Vicky) is her father residing in Mbezi Beach and hence presenting him as the true masculine person who really possesses the object of desire, wealth.

Therefore, despite its gender transformative quality, the song also joins an ensemble of songs that preserve traditional male-centred gender norms. In these songs, men who seem to put this norm into question by performing roles that are considered to belong to women and who behave in manners that are considered to be feminine are ridiculed. For example, a song by a famous female singer in Tanzania, Lady Jaydee,⁴ titled “Wanaume kama Mabinti” (Men who are like girls), criticizes men who depend on their women for their financial needs because, according to the traditional gender norm, it is women who are expected to depend on men for such needs. The song ridicules these men by comparing them with girls (Ntarangwi 2007: 53-54). Likewise, a song by Bushoke entitled “Mume Bwege” (Stupid Husband) criticises a man who is dominated by his wife. The unwelcome domination expressed here involves being forced to perform household chores such as dish washing, cleaning the house, cooking and washing clothes. Since, according to the norm, these house chores are considered to be women's activities the song ridicules this man by calling him a stupid husband (Sanga 2011: 363). Professor Jay's “Zali” joins these songs not only by presenting a woman as an object of man's scopophilic violence but also by showing that the power and agency in the female character, Vicky, actually is derived from a male figure.

4. Lady Jaydee is her artistic name. It is also spelled variously as Lady Jay Dee, and Lady J.D. Her birth names are Judith Wambura.

Conclusion

The article has shown how the transgressive gender acts in Professor Jay's "Zali" debunk established gender norms and participate in transforming people's mentality concerning maleness and femaleness. In this way the music video also helps to reshape women's gendered experiences and make it possible for them to inhabit the world of power and agency and furnish their lives with experiences that have previously been reserved only for male subjects. However, on the one hand, the music video transgresses traditional gender norms and subverts traditional male dominance, on the other hand, the same music video also participates in maintaining the male-centred logic. These acts are considered to be antonymous because the transformative aspects of this music video are intrinsically linked to or are interdependent with the more traditional male-centred aspects that it also propagates.

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