

The Representation of Alevis in Turkish Cinema

Ceren Selmanpakođlu

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The political circumstances in Turkey during 1923 and later, in the name of 'nationalism', and also the very inaccessible nature of culture, constituted a situation where Alevi were not represented in social life and consequently they were represented insufficiently in Turkish film history. While around 1970s some films were made about Alevi in the genre of religious film, which were mostly Islam based and far from expressing the Alevi understanding, the ones made on 2000s – *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa* (Elisabeth Rygard, 2000), *O da Beni Seviyor* (Barış Pirhasan, 2001)- can be mentioned in terms of representing the Alevi understanding with their rural daily life in 1970s and also poses the unconscious desire of being united with Sunnis.

In 1923, Turkish Republic was built over multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual empires' remains, which is reduced to Anatolia. Atatürk, founder of Turkish Republic, aimed to leave the imperial past and make Turkey catch up with the West. The groups –cultures- that live in this land were united under the concept of 'Turk', which was in practice still a Sunni rooted and preferably Turkish speaking population. Insistence on singular national identity under the notion of 'Turk' was an obstacle for the recognition of different ethnic, religious rooted groups.

Starting with the period (comprises before and after 1923) of the transformation of the Ottoman Empire to Turkish nation-state marks traumatic events on cultural groups especially when it is considered that this culture comprise various ethnic groups. The Kemalist state's task was to normalize the cultural homogeneity instead of the existing cultural diversity. But this normalization generated resistance by the groups –

cultures- due to the factor of perceiving change within culture as menace. Because “to possess a culture means having at our disposal a pre-arrangement of the world... which permits us to orient ourselves within it” (Robins and Aksoy 203). This world that Alevis possess is an articulation of some components from heterodox one-god religion traditions with pantheistic¹ beliefs. From stone to sun everything is sacred. Alevis oriented themselves in a world where God is brought down to earth’s surface by the union of God and Men. They possessed a culture where the distinction between the creator and the created didn’t exist and Men become divine because he was the cause of existence. This culture where they are permitted to be themselves represents belonging in a group, existing together, existing only as existing together.

The transformation followed the program of eliminating the communities of identification and building a cultural unity, which constituted the base of Turkish nationalism. Later this nationalism gained a new aspect by invention of tradition. Now the ideal nation had to become modern and traditional at the same time. “The need for ‘synthesis’ has been constantly articulated, but the conditions for fusion have never seemed achievable” (Robins and Aksoy 208).

Due to the Sunni rooted discourses and practices of the state Alevis showed their tendency to move to the left wing for the secularist discourses and they supported Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party). But for the fear of slander and/or divisive treatment Alevis had to exhibit Sunni identity in public space. This pretension inherited from one generation to another.

¹ Pantheistic religions involve believing that God is in everything in nature and the universe.

In 1950's the migration from rural areas to big cities and to Europe was an important factor in the society that Alevis were a part of this migration too. In 1960's and '70's the opposition to the regime of the state turned into left-right conflict and led to sort of a civil war. The historical division between Sunnis and Alevis constituted the base of their left-right opposition. In this period -1970s- the most serious clashes between Sunnis and Alevis took place where culminated anti-Alevi pogroms in Malatya '75, Kahramanmaraş '78 and Çorum '80. "The local police, infiltrated by the extreme right, did little to protect the Alevis, which resulted in an increasing alienation of Turkey's Alevis from the state" (Bruinessen)². Later on in 1993 in Sivas and in 1995 in Istanbul in Gazi Osman Paşa these events have continued.

As in any groups in Alevi cultural group the continuation of belonging and togetherness is maintained by two factors: the repression and the idealization of the group's own self. The repression of the traumatic events occurred against Alevis lead them to silence in order to protect each other. They have positioned themselves in a defensive location. This protection endured from one generation to another. This belonging and experiencing the traumatic events together emerged the idealization of the group's own self where no one outside would enter-in to contaminate. The idealization of the collectivity and the identity mechanism are causes of an imaginary state, which will be mentioned more specifically during the analysis of the films.

When we look at the film examples since 1923 in the Turkish cinema history Alevis have been represented in films insufficiently. Due to the conditions mentioned above this situation is not surprising: while Alevis had to hide their identity and for the

² "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi revival in Turkey" by Martin van Bruinessen at http://www.let.ruu.nl/oriental_studies/mvbalevi.html

conditions created this concealment the representation of Alevi culture in films during this period cannot be expected. With not certain records the amount of films about Alevis since then are about 15. The ones made until 1973 can be put in the category of religious and mythic storytelling. When the formulation of national cinema in Turkey began to take off in 1965 a new cinematic movement initiated in the name of *Yeni Sinema* (New Cinema), which followed a westernized logic. But due to concerns on promoting local values contrary movements emerged: *Ulusal*³ *Sinema* and *Milli*⁴ *Sinema*. *Ulusal Sinema* “aimed to draw on cultural elements from the Ottoman period, and also on the style and motifs of popular Anatolian culture.” In addition to these *Milli Sinema* concerned on the emphasis on religious facts. While *Ulusal Sinema* faded in short time *Milli Sinema* continued on religious circle and gave rise to ‘White Cinema’ in 1980’s. The films made related to Alevis during the *Milli Sinema* period are mostly based on Islamic historical facts during the aim of dissemination of the Islam and thought. In this category *Hacı Bektaş Veli* (Fikret Uçak, 1967) and *Ali ile Gül* (*Ali and Gül*) (Asaf Tengiz, 1973) can be mentioned. In these films the stories take the Alevi thought and Hz. Ali in center but in a religious matter instead of an understanding. They are far from expressing and representing the core of Alevi perspective about life. They are more in a mythic manner that these thoughts –like in any religion- are based on mystical, magical and supernatural events. Through dissemination of Islam people in these films are represented as if they start believing in God and Islam belief in a second and Hz. Ali and Hacı Bektaş Veli have supernatural powers. Ironically in Alevi understanding magic or such powers does not take part. The stories told about such events symbolize a meaning lying underneath the event itself. Like Hacı Bektaş Veli’s leaving in the body of a bird symbolizes him

³ ‘*Ulusal*’ is the modern Turkish word for ‘national’.

⁴ ‘*Milli*’ is the Ottoman Turkish word for ‘national’.

forwarding peace to other places, not his supernatural powers. While *Hacı Bektaş Veli* can be put in religious and mythic branch, in addition to these *Ali ile Gül* can also be held in the genre of melodrama. We can say that since during this period Yeşilçam melodramas were the most popular films, in *Ali ile Gül* two genres were intermingled. When the imaginary contradictory state of these films are considered in terms of the oppositions -good and bad, rich and poor etc.- the similarity between melodramas and religion can be observed. The dominant power in both genres is located in an evil position and has to be conquered by the good. While in melodramas two lovers have to conquer the evil who tries to separate them, in religious films the believers have to conquer the idol worshippers. When the route followed by Turkish politics and consequently the Turkish cinema is considered, the similarity between the religious films and melodramas can be put in the manner of a concealment of the periods' clash and nausea in practical and political life. The created identities, which feel that they exist only by being together, had to play a different role than they are. So, religious films in terms of an explanation to the very existence in the imaginary state and melodrama as constituting stabilized oppositions again in the imaginary state are perfect tactics for maintaining the identity of united 'Turks' which was, too, constructed in the imaginary state. As in Lacan's articulation of the Imaginary order; this state can never be transmitted to the symbolic order, meaning the imagination of uniting the multi-cultural empire's remains and Anatolia's tradition with modernization in one can never take place in symbolic order. As a matter of fact this constitutes the very core of cinematic language. Cinema occasionally tells the stories of what cannot be in symbolic order. That is the base of melodramas and religious films where neither one is telling the story of a symbolic order.

In addition to the factors mentioned above the censorship on films play an important role in Turkish cinema and consequently the representation of Alevis in cinema too. The regulations started in 1939 lasted until 1986 and “spoke the language of nationalism”, meaning they were “proscribing films which made propaganda on behalf of political, economic or social ideologies that damage to the national regime” and public morality (Robins and Aksoy 212). Other than representing Alevis in religious films might have damaged the national identity. Also, it is crucial to point that while the community has to conceal its identity how can it be represented in films in such circumstances?

In 1980’s with the military coup the Alevism starts entering to public space as a new identity. The new communication technology and media plays an important role in 1990’s in the public space. With the ability to speak with this communicating technology Alevis starts breaking their silence and combining with the branch in Diaspora, in the period of the rise of Islamic and Kurdish nationalism, Alevis will start representing a new public movement.

What actually forms the national identity is just the opposite of a singular cultural homogeneity: as Homi Bhabha says, what constitute it are the fragmented, hybrid identities. The fragmented identities in films communicate with their own bodies. These bodies have communicated with their living and imaginary old people. The memory of them reminds them their history. In Alevi culture oral tradition plays an important role. This tradition forms a bridge between the generations. The old people make this bridge possible with the tradition of telling stories. The appearance of Alevis as social movement emerged disagreements inside Alevi community in terms

of their political opinions, future goals and definition of Alevi culture. And the basic problem was how to adopt the tradition of oral tradition in rural areas -in terms of its importance on transferring the religious and traditional values through generations- in this new world of urban life.

The films about Alevis have stopped after 1973 until *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa* (Elisabeth Rygard) in 2000 and then in 2001 *O da Beni Seviyor* (Barış Pirhasan). In these films Alevis are being represented in more natural way in terms of their way of living, daily lives and rituals. In both films the notion of ‘journey’ –real or imaginary- is taking place. In addition to the actual journey in the main narration, in *O da Beni Seviyor*, also this journey represents to something unknown –access to a foreign understanding, Alevis- and in *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa* it is the journey to past to settle old scores.

Both films take place in rural areas and around same years. The atmospheres created in both films are 70s’ rural life that we can observe all of its features like drying vegetables, views of arable fields, adobe houses, carpet loom, the costumes and the decoration of the houses with carpets, divans, cushions and old traditional objects. These features contribute to the main story in terms of plausibility. As it is mentioned before around 70s with the migration and modernization the rural traditions were on the way to transform into urban life. But these films, which were shot in 2000 and 2001, preferred to look into those years. This nostalgic journey creates a virtual distance by time. This is the desire to the nostalgic other times. More distant means more absent, meaning, this distance to the imagined times in these films occurred by time represents these times’ absence and loss. It is the “desire for a homeland yet to

come” (Naficy 14). When we think of 70s, we observe that just after those years the tradition they followed was about to change more radically without their will and they were about to experience more traumatic events other than their concealment of their identities. The division between Alevis and Sunnis were about to turn into more deep political sphere and the events they were about to experience will cost many lives. Obviously, although these films take place just before these events, they have been shot today, meaning, what is going to happen after the times of these stories are known by the directors. This future radical division and the utopian will –desire- of continuing as united are represented in the sub-text of the stories. The division and the claustrophobia it emerges, is represented in closed spaces, which are captured spaces where communication is lacking. The lack represents as Edward Said says: “the loss of something left behind for ever” (Naficy 27). And the utopia –desire- of being united is represented in open spaces like open geographical land views where time and bounds constructed by the dominant intervening power are unleashed. It is seen that in both films in these steppe open land scenes there is communication between each other and to the other. So, it can be said that while closed places with gloomy light represent claustrophobia of future events, the open spaces are the desire of being united yet to come or already lost.

In films space is a process, which makes it a third space where reality, imaginary and hyper-reality are bond in together. In this space, culture and identity are reconstructed by being the subject of their own history and experience, which is written by them. This new constructed identity in films shows us that while Alevis are telling their stories, a new narration emerges in a self-reflexive manner showing the impossibility of expressing this identity. Unconsciously they are representing the imaginary state of

an imagined culture and effect of the fragmented identity posed on them. As Walter Benjamin says: “Language... can only exist in the space of its own foreignness to itself, the ‘original’ text is always already an impossible translation that renders translation impossible” (Chow, 187).

O da Beni Seviyor is the story of a thirteen years old girl -Esma- who had a bad school report and sent to the village house of her fathers’ friend Kemal. In her journey in this village she meets with Hüseyin who is the son of her fathers’ friend Cafer. Her father, Kemal and Cafer -who is an Alevi- are old friends and in order to stay united they have bought a common land. Cafer dies recently so Hüseyin has the right on this land and he wants to sell it in order to go to Collage. When Esma arrives to the house she find out that her aunt Saliha is there too and it is said that her husband has died. Saliha and Esma have an intimate relationship that she learns that actually her husband is not dead but Saliha wants to sell the land in order to start a new life in Ankara. The two families -one Sunni the other Alevi- have a close relation as they are family and Esma is sent to Hüseyin’s house in order to stay there for a while. During this time she starts experiencing the daily life of Alevis. She participates to a Cem ceremony and she listens to the old storytellers stories. During this time her interest on Hüseyin rises and starts having feeling for him. Eventually Hüseyin and Saliha’s will of selling the land, is accepted by the grandmother and two families go on a picnic, they sing traditional songs, play traditional games but Esma finds out that Hüseyin is actually interested in her aunt Saliha and meanwhile Saliha’s husband shows up. He reminds that Saliha as a woman has no right on selling the land officially. Ironically in Anatolian villages and in Alevi culture old woman of the house is the one who gives the decisions but on the law it’s the man’s word counts. So, Saliha injures her husband and he gets a

negative report on her sanity and she has to leave for the hospital. After she leaves Esma's family arrives to the village to take her home and the two families come together one last time with giving the clue of there will be meetings again in the future.

Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa is the story of a seven years old boy –Osman- who makes his father confront the events that happened when he was in that age after seven years later they have started living in Denmark as worker migrants. His father has the inheritance of his brother and wants to go back to his own land while Osman doesn't want to. So, they both start remembering the time when Osman was seven when they were evicted from his grandfathers' village house by the grandfather and they started living in a tent. During the period of trying to build a real house they witness serious economic problems. Although they are an Alevi family the grandfather is an imam, which is a rare situation in an Alevi community. Osman is forbidden to visit his grandfather for his cruelty but Osman secretly visits him and meantime he gets into an intimate relationship with Aşık⁵ Emre who teaches, shows him the right and becomes a confident. He wants to learn how to play saz but his father postpones making a saz for him for economic problems. Osman likes being with both Aşık –who represents the Alevi tradition- and his grandfather –who represents ironically Sunni belief or in other terms the outside- and although they represent two opposite poles he cannot give up either one. His mother had a miscarriage before and this event affected the mother deeply. Due to economic problems the father –Ali- gives their land as mortgage for the loan he gets. A hurricane demolishes their unfinished house and later Osman's sister gets an accident in the remains of the house and dies. The death of his

⁵ Aşık's are traditional poets who sing with their saz, which is a traditional stringed instrument. They are like minstrels.

grandchild softens the grandfather and lets his family to sell the bigger land he owns but Ali does not accept it. After these events the family gets into deeper problems that this situation will lead them to move to Denmark as migrant workers. But Osman is not allowed to go with his family because of the law for migration.

Daily life comprises the elements of cultural memory -religion, language, politics, economics etc.- that translated in these films, let us understand the contradictions of the world of social reality. Although the daily life of the tradition requires settlement of these contradictions especially with modernism it is witnessed that this settlement is fragmented. The religious structure is within daily life. So, while mentioning the daily life in these films we must keep in mind that the understanding of God, universe and life relation is inherited in Alevis' daily space. This space is divided from the religious-social outside structure with Dede's⁶ and in some occasions with Aşık's. Dede, who forms the core of the oral cultural structure, represents the memory and togetherness of the community. "Tradition itself is nothing if it is not a transmission. How is tradition to be transmitted, to be passed on, if not through translation?" (Chow 183). Dede's and Aşık's are the ones who translate the tradition.

When Dhomnaill mentions about rural speech –oral tradition-, he says that speaking and hearing means remembering. Dependence on writing weakens the memory (Neyzi 158). When we consider that Alevis deny to be tied to the sacred book it should be said that oral narration constitutes the essence of this culture. The old

⁶ Dede is the old scholar in Alevi communities. He informs, teaches the right, reconciles the cross ones and finds solutions for the problems. Since during the birth of religion and Alevism there was no law made by states, Dede's were fulfilling this task.

people teach the right with their stories and the understanding of tolerance forms the base of them.

The general narration of *O da Beni Seviyor* is constituted with three following marks –three photographs-: in the beginning Esma’s father shows an old photograph (1) of him with his friends Kemal and Cafer and asks if she recognizes them. She calls Cafer *kızılbaş*⁷, which is a term used for humiliating Alevis. But her family condemns her for using the word. While leaving her house she takes a photograph (2) but even her mother and sister supposed to be in the picture she cuts the scene and just takes her father’s and Kemal’s photograph where leaves a blank space on the side. The old photograph of three friends turns to two friends with an empty space –which represents the Alevi friends’ space- and in the end of the film Hüseyin will fill that space with another photograph (3) Esma shoots. This three links between photographs is the metaphor of two different aspects: on the one hand, while Alevis are a part of the culture, nation and religion they have been left outside and then in the final as a will they have been accepted to enter again. The film actually contrarily takes place in the manner of this division never happened because they both have a common and shared life with tolerance to their religious and traditional differences but outside this rural life the two were tried to be divided and the photographs’ narrative construction is the metaphor of this outside life. On the other hand, the construction of the photographs represent Esma’s entering to the *other* –Alevis- gradually in terms of entering to ones own self and at the same time to the other. It is ‘at the same time’ because the both community is actually two halves of one, which shows us that when one self enters to one ‘at the same time’ it enters to the other. But this entrance cannot

⁷ *Kızılbaş* is a term used for Alevis in the meaning of ‘rebellious to God’ in order to humiliate Alevis.

be put in the position of entering literally to the other because if so it won't be other. This situation is more in the sense witnessing or trying to understand. As it is seen in neither of the films the access to the other is not accomplished. Although Esma enters to the Alevi culture and connects with Hüseyin and tries to understand his situation still she is looking from the outside. Even in the very title of the film 'O' referring to 'other' – Hüseyin or Alevi- takes its place. While Esma and Hüseyin gets closer after his truck accident Hüseyin shows affection to her and she kisses him and runs away. When she comes across with her aunt while running she tells her: 'O da beni seviyor' (He loves me too) where 'O' or 'He' is representing the very other. But she wants this other to love her referring accepting her.

In *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa* similarly there are three marks constructs the general narration. The moon has three phases between the events. The half moon (1) appears just before the mother –Elif- tells Ali that she has a bad feeling, like a lump inside and like something bad is going to happen. She says that maybe because she had a miscarriage. Then we see Osman walking with his sister on the open, infinite sensed steppe land and they see a dead horse. Later when Aşık talks to Osman about how adults forget listening he says: "God is seen on blackberry, on wind. Gives light and receive light. But people have too much pain in their heart that they forget to listen", we see the half moon almost getting full (2). Just after the hurricane, which demolishes the house, we see the full moon (3). In this triple mark we can say that it represents Osman's reaching closer to the understanding of Aşık and consequently to Alevi thought meaning to ones own self. But also it represents the rising traumatic events about to occur in the outside world where their culture is going to be torn and fragmented more deeply. Like in *O da Beni Seviyor* this duality of one and other in

terms of oppositions like inside and outside are inevitable structures of self. The self comprises both, where in our case, Alevis and Sunnis are actually two halves of one. As Naficy says: “The double is sometimes a projection of the self, the externalization of the unconscious, the internalization of an outsider” (Naficy 270). So, the literally entering to the other is not taking place here too because even with his softening the grandfather of Osman is still looking from the outside and not accepting Osman to be a musician. The grandfather has internalized an outsider. As it is mentioned earlier, the fictional ideals like ‘one nation under the name of Turks’ emerged this constructed division. Of course we cannot say that this division directly occurred after 1923 because such oppositions are in the very nature of differences, but this situation had its radical rise starting in that time. In *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa* this division is represented in the very beginning while the family is leaving the grandfathers’ house. Elif uses the carpet loom and sells the carpets she makes but the grandfather while leaving the house obstructs her and Elif says to the grandfather, pointing the carpet loom, “are you going to divide this loom in to two?” We can say that the division of the loom is the division of the two cultures.

As it is mentioned Osman finds himself in between the Aşık and his grandfather. But it is shown as he is in between his father and his grandfather and Aşık is the middle voice who tells Osman to love them both. Aşık is the mediator by saying that “there is only one religion and it is love” but he is not approved by the grandfather in terms of telling Osman not to be a gipsy musician like his father or Aşık and go to school and get a regular job. In *O da Beni Seviyor* the mediator is the aunt, Saliha, who tries to teach Esmâ the right and listens her like Aşık listens Osman. As it is mentioned the oral tradition in Alevi culture constitutes the base of its understanding and the

communication between Saliha and Esma and Aşık and Osman represents this kind of communication.

In *O da Beni Seviyor*, the oral traditions' continuation in the rural areas is seen in the scene where the old man tells a traditional story. During this time, reciprocally with the story, Esma imagines that the characters in the story are Hüseyin, herself and a gipsy girl who shows affection towards Hüseyin. In the stories, which carry a rich oral tradition, the land is described with all its features in such a way that the land becomes sacred. Transferring these stories from generations to generations makes the sacred land be identified with the legendary personalities. Also these stories address personal existential problems too. These sacred personalities and land is identified with the communities' idealization. As it is mentioned before this is one of the factors makes the culture continue its 'togetherness'. This idealization can also be observed similarly in the Cem ceremony. While the traditional ritual takes place she falls asleep and sees Hüseyin and herself in her dream as he rescues her from drowning. In both situations we can observe the metaphor of reaching what is imagined can happen in dreams or in fantasy, not in symbolic order. And also, this can be translated as Esma's entering to something foreign but something actually already inside in her dream. And this dream takes place in a Cem ceremony, meaning it is possible to enter the other's world in the other's world. Also it can be mentioned that the utopia of being united can only happen in the imaginary order.

Music, costume and the atmosphere created in these films play an important role for both main story and the sub-story. The sub-stories with music create a multi layer structure that they actually confess the impossibility of the access to that imagined

journey. In *O da Beni Seviyor*, where Esmâ and the Alevi girl are fishing during the picnic, while the two families sing one song the Alevi girl sings another song, which has the word 'Hüseyin' in the lyrics. While the Sunni family jokes about playing a song that does not have the words Ali or so in it, referring to playing a non-Alevi song, the girl sings a classic Alevi song which tells the story of Hüseyin who is an important character in the Alevi history. In one case we can say that making such a joke and requesting such a song is the traditional tolerance of the rural areas where Alevis and Sunnis live together. In the other case singing over that song simultaneously such a classic Alevi song represents again the togetherness and the unreachable nature of it. It stays in the sub-text where access to the other is not possible. When we consider the nature of music in general we can say that such traditional songs that have a history with the culture itself is already something other. So, the inaccessible and untranslatable nature of such songs already contribute to the main argument, in terms of, looking to the other from outside even if you are inside. In *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa*, the music has a more unconcealed place that even the film's name is quoted from Aşık Veysel's lyrics who is an important, well-known Aşık. The main narration is also based on being such a musician. Osman wants to learn how to play saz and be a musician where he ends up being one in Denmark, which also represents his choice between his grandfather and his father- or Aşık-. In addition to these, Aşık Emre plays his songs while making explanations to Osman and makes contribution to the narration of the story.

To conclude, we can borrow the 'land' metaphor from the two recent films. In Anatolia the land symbolizes the identity. When one has a land then he/she belongs there. Which is why Osman's father wants to turn back to his land and at the same

time Esmâ's and Hüseyin's families do not want to sell the land. Although selling the land or leaving the land metaphors symbolizes leaving and abandoning the identity and what constitutes that identity, Hüseyin and Saliha want to sell the land in order to start a new life where they will belong and Osman doesn't want to leave Denmark because now he belongs there with his wife. This is why the grandmother lets them to sell the land and she says "the land is for man too." While *O da Beni Seviyor* starts with mentioning about the common land which has been bought in order to stay together turns in to division but this division of the land is uniting them on the same purpose in terms of a new life. In *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa* while it starts with being evicted from the grandfathers' house and trying to build a new house, which they won't be able to succeed on, in the end turns into another house, a house outside their land but following their identity with performing their music –for Osman- and planting flowers and vegetables –for Ali-. So, we can say that the constructed identities and cultures are again constructed with division and again constructed in terms of uniting. This uniting is not 'taking place' in social life or in political spheres but they do in the imaginary order, which actually constitutes the bases of these films and also of political spheres.

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