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**MISREPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN ISLAMIC FILMS:
ANALYSIS OF KEY INCIDENTS OF *THE MESSAGE* (1977)***Kesilapan Gambaran Mengenai Islam dalam Filem Islam: Satu Kajian
terhadap The Message (1977)*Osama Kanaker, Rosidayu Sabran, Suria Hani bt A. Rahman & Salah
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Abstrak

Film is a medium that depicts human activities. It visually portrays ideology and culture as well as empowers knowledge and the understanding of civilisation. The most concern is about the misrepresentation of media content, particularly concerning Islam and Muslims in films. *The Message* (1977, dir. Moustapha al-Akkad) is one of many made-in-Hollywood films that portray Islam and Muslims livelihood in Mecca during the revelation era of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and His migration from Mecca to Madinah. This paper intends to focus on how Islam is being represented in this film and how it portrays Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions. The main question that this paper attempts to answer is: are the actions and incidents of *The Message* film authentically portrayed? Identification of scenes containing actions and key incidents were done through the lens of content analysis. Based on the analysis of key incidents, findings indicate that the film supports the propaganda against Islam that Islam is a terrorist religion and Muslims are aggressors.

Keywords: Islamic films, misrepresentation, Islam, media propaganda, media representation.

Abstrak

Filem ialah medium yang memaparkan aktiviti manusia, seringkali memaparkan ideologi dan budaya secara visual yang memperkasa ilmu serta pemahaman mengenai tamadun. Apa yang paling membimbangkan adalah mengenai representasi yang salah terhadap kandungan media, terutamanya berkaitan Islam dan Muslim dalam filem. *The Message* (1977, dir. Moustapha Al Akkad) merupakan satu daripada filem buatan Hollywood yang menggambarkan Islam dan kehidupan Muslim di

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Mekah pada zaman kewahyuan Nabi Muhammad (SAW), dan penghijrahan baginda dari Mekah ke Madinah. Kertas ini bertujuan untuk memberi tumpuan kepada bagaimana Islam digambarkan dalam filem dan bagaimana filem tersebut menggambarkan Nabi Muhammad (SAW) serta para sahabat baginda. Adakah aksi dan insiden dalam filem tersebut digambarkan dengan sah? Pengenalpastian adegan-adegan yang mengandungi aksi serta insiden utama dilaksanakan menerusi kaedah analisis kandungan. Berdasarkan analisis adegan- adegan utama, dapatan menunjukkan filem *The Message* mengandungi propaganda mengenai Islam, iaitu Islam adalah agama penganas dan Muslim adalah penyerangnya.

Kata kunci: Filem Islam, silap gambaran, Islam, propaganda media, representasi media.

INTRODUCTION

From the advent of still photographs to the motion pictures, films engage us in a complex way and allow audience to experience ‘images and sound larger and louder than life’ (Grant, 2012, p. 133). As part of a myriad art form, film’s ability to magnify reality in different ways and modes explains its potential to convey ideologies and to make a statement (Turner, 2006). Thus, films share a fraction of popular culture which offer not only empowerment to various cultural groups, but also sites of ideological struggle rather than mere purveyors of the status quo (Grant, 2007). In a similar notion of ideological representation and struggle, Neale (1990) argues that the ideological significance of any text, or any genre, is always to be sought in a context-specific analysis.

In extending this realm to filmmaking operations, Turner (2006) observes the contrary idea with regards to the linkage of film and culture, i.e. how films do not reflect reality, but represent their image of reality within the meaning systems of culture (within which the films are produced). Film analysis, in this context, views representation as a social process of making images, sounds and signs stand for some meanings (Turner, 2006) and how the audience interprets those conveyed meanings.

This paper focuses on how Islam is represented in the film of *The Message* (1977, dir. Moustapha Al Akkad). It analyses the key incidents of the film to discover the scenes that contain cruelty and offensive discourses. It also discovers the attribution of the cruelty and offensive discourses whether to Muslims, non-Muslims or both of them. This paper addresses the authenticity of the key incidents in the modern-day representation of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions in *The Message* film.

REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN FILMS

Since the focus of this paper is on the representations of Islam in *The Message* film, it draws on Stuart Hall's (1982) discussion of the discourses of representations and ideological power. Hall (1982) discusses how media messages are encoded into texts; the audience members decode texts, and the meanings that they take from them reflect their social roles and identities, which may influence the interpretations of the audiences, as different individuals can interpret cultural products differently. Thus, the medium is not merely reproducing 'reality' but defines it (p.64). Hall (1982) also elaborates that representation implies an active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping, i.e. not only transmitting an already-existing meaning, but making things mean. It is the practice of meaning production that is being defined as a 'signifying practice', with the media as a signifying agent (Hall, 1982, p. 64).

In this review of the related literature, focus will be given to the connection between films and their representation of religion in film, in particular of Islam. In the case of the representation of Islam in various media, several discussions note that these representations are often negative and passive (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Gardels, 2006; Abu-Lughod, 2006; Hussain, 2010). The ways in which Western cultures have been deemed to portray Islam in various works of scholarship is largely through what is termed Orientalism, i.e. a historically situated construction of non-Western cultures as the Other: as alien, distant, antiquated, irrational, sensual and passive (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005). Windschuttle (2000), in his review of Said's work on Orientalism (originally published in 1978), emphasised that Orientalism - known as the traditional body of scholarship on 'the East' - leads the West to see Islamic culture as static in both time and place, as "eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself" (2000, p. 2). Although Said discusses Orientalism mainly with respect to literary works, the discourse also permeates various art forms including film, as the common threads of a film's text and its context certainly relate to the representation of ideology (Turner, 2006; Khatib, 2006).

In describing ideology, Turner (2006) explains that the term is used to denote a system of beliefs and practices that is produced by what he simplifies as a theory of reality; this motivates its ordering of that reality into good and bad, right and wrong, them and us, and so on (p.181). Khatib (2006) justifies ideological matters further through various depictions of Middle Eastern landscapes as seen through Hollywood action lenses. For example, the film *Three Kings* (1999, dir. David O.Russell) portrays the American soldiers confront several incidents in desert areas – e.g. killing and bombing scenes, especially during the rescue missions concerning Iraqi civilians in a post-Gulf War. The 'desert' has been portrayed as a common image for Arabia, and represents a binary of wilderness versus civilisation (2006, p.22) as well as nature versus science (Rose, 1992, as cited in Khatib, 2006).

Furthermore, Comolli and Narboni (1971) argue that every film is political, in as much as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing) and mobilizes powerful economic forces; it is a commodity that possesses exchange value, which is realized by the sale of tickets and contracts, and is governed by the laws of the market (1971, p.24). As part of a signifying agent, film is a product that is manufactured within a given system of economic relations - the production and distribution of the films - and involves labour to produce it. On the other hand, film is also an ideological product of the system, for ‘cinema’ and ‘art’ as they are branches of ideology (Comolli & Narboni, 1971). For Turner (2006), the term ‘ideology’ is itself continually being redefined, contested, and explored within cultural theory. He refers to the work of Levi-Strauss (1966), which discusses how narratives set up binary oppositions that are resolved at the end; the oppositions themselves are composed of representations of competing ideological positions for dominance (for example, political divisions, or the inequalities between classes). So, if narratives work to resolve social contradictions symbolically, Turner claims that films, as systems of representation and as narrative structures, are rich sites for ideological analysis (2006, p.181). In addition, Hall (1982) argues that the content of the media reflects a particular ideological account of phenomena. Certain events are recurrently signified in particular ways; this is especially the case with events or issues that are problematic, where powerful social interests are involved or where there are starkly opposing or conflicting interests at play (Hall, 1982). For example, the negative depiction of Islam in the Western media (e.g. Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2006; Hussain, 2010) demonstrates that a meaning does not refer to how things “are”, but to how things are represented (Hall, 1982).

In addition, Abu-Lughod (2006) explores a different account of religious representation, such as the representation of the Islamist political groups of the Middle East in popular Egyptian television serials. In the case of a television serial called *The Family/al-‘a’ila*, the idea for this drama is to counter the religious fundamentalist ideology that surrounded Egypt during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Abu-Lughod (2006), there was a sharp sense in elite circles and a widespread discourse disseminated through popular media that Egypt was in danger of being torn apart from within. The state was portrayed as facing a political-cultural crisis, one that it dealt with mostly by force, through arrests, executions, and the arbitrary powers of a continually renewed state of emergency. The problem was represented publicly as religious extremism and, as expected, the villains were the members of Islamic groups. In addition, this television drama also illuminates the state’s concerns about the place of religion in society and in the nation (ibid, p.6).

THE MESSAGE FILM

The Message film was initially released in 1977 in New York City. It was directed by the Syrian Muslim director, Moustapha Akkad. The film attempts to portray the Prophethood period of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It focuses on limited but prominent incidents that took place at the time such as revelation, migration to Medina, the battles of Badr and Uhud and the conquest of Mecca. The film does not depict the prophet himself, but rather outlines his story through the lives of certain cardinal figures that Akkad was approved by religious bodies to depict. Akkad did not depict the ten companions promised paradise following the decision of religious bodies that he sought approval from.

Akkad in a television interview stated that he consulted Islamic clerics in a thorough attempt to produce an Islamically accepted film that portrays the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He received Approval from al-Azhar in Egypt which is a university associated with al-Azhar Mosque. It is Egypt's oldest degree-granting university and renowned as Islam's most prestigious university. However, *The Message* was rejected by the Muslim World League in Saudi Arabia which is one of the largest non-government Islamic organizations worldwide.

To put his plan into action, Akkad had to obtain financial support. He had to go outside the United States to get the financial support needed to produce the film as the film is a Hollywood production. Akkad stated that financing for the project finally came from the governments of Kuwait, Libya and Morocco, but when it was rejected by the Muslim World League, Emir of Kuwait withdrew financial support. King Hassan II of Morocco gave Akkad full support for the production. The Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi provided financial support too.

In addition, Akkad in a television interview stated that the film was shot in Morocco and Libya. It took four and a half months to build the replica cities of Mecca and Medina as they looked in the Prophet's era. The production of the film took one year. The first six months was done in Morocco, but Akkad had to stop when the Saudi government exerted great pressure on the Moroccan government to stop the project. Akkad went to al-Gaddafi for support in order to complete the project, and the Libyan leader allowed him to move the filming to Libya for the remaining six months. *The Message* was produced in two versions: Arabic and English. Akkad filmed the Arabic version of the film with an Arab cast for Arabic-speaking audiences. He felt that dubbing the English version into Arabic would not be enough because the Arabic acting style differs significantly from that of Hollywood. The actors took turns doing the English and Arabic versions in each scene. The actors and actresses of the Arabic version are Arabs except the non-Arab characters and the actors and actresses of the English version are English except the foreigner characters.

ACTIONS IN *THE MESSAGE* FILM

Action is the process of doing something or the performance itself. The series of events that constitute the plot in any literary work is referred to as action. It includes what the characters say, do, think and in some cases, fail to do. In drama, especially during performance, you see the characters moving around to perform certain tasks, talk to one another, laugh, cry, fight, shoot or do anything according to the needs of the moment. All these are dramatic actions. Iwuchukwu (2008) argues that Drama is the only genre of literature in which the story is presented in dialogue from the beginning to the end. However, dialogue alone does not constitute dramatic action. What makes it drama is the action that is involved. Dramatic action includes facial expression, gestures and movements. So, what makes dialogue dramatic is the presence of action. The action in drama is usually organized in a climatic order with the scenes increasing in interest by increasing suspense and emotional intensity.

Iwuchukwu (2008) points out that there are three types of actions. They are physical actions, reported actions and mental actions. First, physical action in drama refers to the movements made by a character in the play. It is visible and may or may not involve dialogue. This includes the steps taken by the character while he is speaking or in the process of undertaking other tasks. Movement is used to describe mainly the actual movements like walking, running, pacing, kneeling, lying down, standing or sitting. Closely related to movement is gesture. Generally, gesture refers to body movements like position, posture, and expressions. Gestures are used by characters to express their thoughts, feelings, or as a rhetorical device. Second, reported action is sometimes not possible to present every action on stage. This could be as a result of the prevalent convention or because the action cannot be realized on stage. In the Classical Period, for instance, violence was not presented on stage. The playwrights were expected to maintain single settings indoor actions and violence were reported on stage. Third, mental action is an action that takes place in the character's mind. In most cases, mental action is manifested in facial expressions.

The incidents or actions portrayed in films that represent special incidents in history should be realistic and bound to historical facts. However, depicting Islamic incidents should be performed with credibility but not breaching the Islamic law. This issue can be controlled through the cinematography of the film. For example, scenes of intoxicants and dancing which are not allowed to be clearly portrayed on the screen should be produced in a way that does not contradict the Islamic rules. An approximately three-hour film cannot represent a period of twenty-three years of Prophethood. The focus on some incidents more than others, and totally ignoring others shape the messages sent to audience. Even though the script is approved by some Muslim parties, a big chance of manipulation can be done through the cinematography of the film.

ANALYSING FILM NARRATIVE

In light with film text and its symbolic meanings, the term narrative presents information in a connected sequence of events, from the most basic linear narrative sequence (Lacey, 2000) to non-linear storytelling. Narrative is described as international, trans-historical, and trans-cultural; it is simply there, like life itself and is present in every genre, at every age, place and in every society (Barthes, 1997/1966 as cited in Gillespie, 2006). Thus, film and its narrative are analysable on the basis of their inherent form and structure, although the structure is not immediately visible in itself (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002).

This paper emphasises narrative analysis, as it is vital to understand the flow of the story or plots in order to identify the particular ways of making the whole storytelling process a success (Gillespie, 2006). The flow of storytelling will result in the meaning-making of the film, as Ryan and Lenos (2012) indicate, “all movies contain meanings of this sort that are historical, political, cultural, psychological, social and economic. Movies refer to the world in which they are made in a variety of ways” (2012, p. 6). Therefore, narrative analysis is important for this study in order to understand the power of narrative in shaping perceptions of reality, as well as in reflecting and communicating continuities and changes of perceptions within society (Gillespie, 2006). In the same way, this study assumes that the analysis will demonstrate how the narrative signifies the authenticity of events and actions portrayed in *The Message*.

The analysis begins by examining the narrative structure to identify the sequence of the plot for the film (Gillespie, 2006). At this stage, the structure will help to identify how Islam is represented in the sequence of film. The narrative details that will be analysed in the film focus on the presentation of causality i.e. plot, events/incidents and the actions of the characters. A proposed narrative structure is adapted from the plot schema shown in the following Table 1 (Gillespie 2006, p. 97, expanded from Todorov’s narrative pattern).

Table 1: Plot Structure

Exposition ↓	The initial equilibrium, a state of normality, stability, social order (the introduction/beginning of the story)
Disruption ↓	A causal event by an agent of change (i.e. characters and situations), creates a de-equilibrium, creating a problem or a quest
Complication ↓	A series of obstacles occur
Climax ↓	Dramatic highpoint of the conflict, excitement or tension; followed by release
Resolution and closure	The main protagonist resolves the problem, obtains their goal and fulfils their desire; this instigates a revised equilibrium as the story ends

The process of identifying the representation of specific values and perspective in film text can be reiterated from the ideological concept proposed by Hall (1982), which illustrates the work of signifying events in media texts. This process will facilitate in identifying events and actions of the characters throughout the plot of *The Message* and subsequently contribute to the construction of underlying meanings. By mapping the plot structure of the film, the analysis will reveal particular features in the plot that create certain meanings, including meanings that serve the interests of power (Gillespie, 2006). The discussion of events and actions in the film is focussed on the character's quest that highlights the dichotomies of 'good' and 'bad' which includes cruelty and offensive discourse, as well as actions in scenes attributed to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This paper intends to answer some questions pertaining to the representation of Islam in *The Message*. How does Islam being portrayed in Islamic films? Are the incidents presented in *The Message* authentically portrayed? As such a qualitative and quantitative content analysis was chosen to answer the questions. A coding sheet was established to break down the film into scenes. Having the film into scenes, a second coding sheet was established to find out the percentages of cruelty and offensive discourses presented in the film. It is also meant to find out whether the cruelty and offensive discourse are attributed to Muslims, non-Muslims or both of them. Purposive sampling was also implemented to choose three (3) scenes that elaborate the misrepresentation of Islam in the film.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Apart from the opening scene, opening credit and closing credit, the film contains sixty six (66) scenes. Eleven scenes (16.66%) of the film contained cruelty. Twenty three scenes (34.84%) contained offensive discourse. Thirty scenes (45.45%) were attributed to Muslims. However, non-Muslims got fewer chances on the screen with only twenty three (34.84%) scenes were allocated for them. Thirteen scenes (19.69%) were attributed to both Muslims and non-Muslims as shown in Table 2.

Based on the Table 2, only three (3) cruelty and seven (7) offensive discourse scenes were attributed to Muslims. These numbers might be plausible to readers, however the misrepresentation was not only carried out through the number of scenes, but through the discourse, accents, attitudes and actions. Scenes 13, 21, and 24 were among significant scenes selected to elaborate the misrepresentation carried out in the film.

Table 2: Percentages of Cruelty and Offensive Discourse in the Film

Scene	Time code		Cruelty	Offensive discourse	Scene attributed to Muslims	Scene attributed to non-Muslims	Attribution to Muslims and non-Muslims
1	5:45	11:46		*		*	
2	11:47	12:36			*		
3	12:37	13:31			*		
4	13:32	16:24			*		
5	16:25	17:35		*		*	
6	17:36	18:26			*		
7	18:27	18:48				*	
8	18:49	20:01		*	*		
9	20:02	23:14			*		
10	23:15	26:52		*	*		
11	26:53	29:26		*			*
12	29:27	32:32	*	*			*
13	32:33	32:50	*	*	*		
14	32:51	38:52	*	*			*
15	38:53	39:55				*	
16	39:56	41:56	*	*			*
17	41:57	44:38			*		
18	44:39	48:06					*
19	48:07	48:49				*	
20	48:50	50:04				*	
21	50:05	58:36		*	*		
22	58:37	59:05		*		*	
23	59:06	59:54	*	*			*
24	59:55	1:00:27			*		
25	1:00:28	1:01:49				*	
26	1:01:50	1:02:44	*		*		
27	1:02:45	1:04:16		*			*
28	1:04:17	1:06:01			*		
29	1:06:02	1:08:13		*		*	
30	1:08:14	1:09:22	*			*	
31	1:09:23	1:10:04		*		*	
32	1:10:05	1:12:40				*	
33	1:12:41	1:18:30			*		
34	1:18:31	1:24:18			*		
35	1:24:19	1:26:19		*		*	
36	1:26:20	1:26:44	*	*			*
37	1:26:45	1:28:01			*		
38	1:28:02	1:30:00		*	*		
39	1:30:01	1:31:42		*	*		
40	1:31:43	1:33:16			*		
41	1:33:17	1:33:52		*		*	
42	1:33:53	1:34:48				*	
43	1:34:49	1:37:16				*	
44	1:37:17	1:40:12				*	
45	1:40:13	1:53:40	*		*		
46	1:53:41	1:54:04				*	
47	1:54:05	1:56:01		*		*	
48	1:56:02	1:56:42			*		
49	1:56:43	1:58:39			*		
50	1:58:40	2:01:34		*		*	
51	2:01:35	2:02:23			*		
52	2:02:24	2:14:37	*				*
53	2:14:38	2:16:15		*	*		
54	2:16:16	2:21:36					*
55	2:21:37	2:24:32					*
56	2:24:33	2:25:25			*		

57	2:25:26	2:25:44			*		
58	2:25:45	2:27:59			*		
59	2:28:00	2:29:57			*		
60	2:29:58	2:31:06	*			*	
61	2:31:07	2:34:09					*
62	2:34:10	2:35:00			*		
63	2:35:01	2:36:00				*	
64	2:36:01	2:40:27				*	
65	2:40:28	2:49:55					*
66	2:49:56	2:54:00			*		
Total			11	23	30	23	13
Percentage			16.66	34.84	45.45	34.84	19.69

Note: The red highlights are the cruelty and offensive discourse attributed to Muslims.

The first selected scene is the announcement of public da’wah. Zaid, the adopted son of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), announces the beginning of public da’wah to his fellow Muslims who were hiding inside a house. Suddenly exclamations of exalting God “*Allahu Akbar*” go higher and higher. Muslims started the attack and a severe hand-to-hand fight broke. This representation confirms the current propaganda against Islam that Islam is a terrorist religion and Muslims are the aggressors. This representation, to the contrary, is unauthentic.

According to Sheikh al-Ardh (2003), when Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received the command the Almighty Allah, he remains at home for about a month figuring out a wise and adequate way to fulfill the command of God. The Prophet’s aunts assumed that he was sick. Yet, upon visiting him, the Prophet (PBUH) declared that he was not sick. He was thinking how to fulfill the command he received from Allah (SWT). The aunts advised him to prepare a feast and invite his close clan. Then he can explain to them the command he received from God. The Prophet (PBUH) adhered to the advice he received.

The second selected scene is at the Negus Palace. After migration to Abyssinia (Ethiopian Empire), the leaders of Mecca sent two Meccans the Negus, the King of Abyssinia, to bring Muslims back to Mecca. Muslims were distressed because they were not free to worship the God they choose even outside Mecca. Add insult to injury, the Negus send them words to meet him. Muslims became flustered. They were afraid of being sent back to Mecca, but they agreed that they run away from Mecca for freedom of belief. Their belief bans telling lies. So the companions decided to tell the Negus what they learned from the Prophet no matter what even that will cause them to lose once again their freedom of belief, to be tortures or be sent back to Mecca.

The verbal discourse between the Negus and Ja’far Bin Abi Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and the representative of Muslims in Abyssinia, is authentic. However, the film failed to portray the accent and body language of Muslims authentically. Muslims were portrayed as very barbarians. Muslims were answering the questions of the king in a harsh intonation staring sharply and frowning at him. On the contrary, Amr, the

man sent by Meccans to the Negus, logically and politely speaks to the Negus. The implementation that audience get is that Muslims are barbarians and non-Muslims are polite and logical people.

This misrepresentation is against the teaching of Islam. Good conduct is the main mission of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who said:

"إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ صَالِحَ الْأَخْلَاقِ"

"I was sent to perfect good manners."

Besides, based on the knowledge of the researchers, there is no narration in the books of *sirah* that Muslims were rude to the king. Logically, the nature of human beings is to pretend politeness and courtesy when asking favor from others especially when others are holding great powers. If they had been impolite with the Negus, he would not have protected them.

The final selected scene is the ban where Muslims were gathered together in Abu Talib's Vally. Non-Muslims banned them all means of life including food and marriage. The ban lasted for three years, and Muslims suffered a lot. The three years period of agonizing and oppressing Muslims seems to be purposely minimized to 32 seconds of narration with some photos of the desert. The misrepresentation emerges when this scene is compared with scene number 44 that represents a single night before the battle of Badr. Scene 44 lasted for two minutes and fifty-five seconds. This is an indicator of purposive representation of incidents and lack of authenticity of historical events.

CONCLUSION

The three selected scenes do not represent the total misrepresentation of Islam in *The Message*, however, they are examples to shed light on the fact that *The Message* is not an authentic source of education about the period of Prophethood. The forms of misrepresentation can be summarized into lack of authenticity, manipulating intonation and body language and minimizing the incidents where Muslims got oppressed.

No matter the misrepresentation was purposive or out of ignorance, it alters reality and ran Muslims down. In addition, this study also acknowledged that the work to represent the 23 years of Prophethood in a three (3) hours film is a challenge for filmmakers, as *The Message* is deemed to misrepresent the life of Prophet and his companion. Since films are adequate to represent specific short incidents only, it is recommended to portray the life of the Prophet in drama series.

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