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## CONVERSING WITH THE COSMOS

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*Pis siyabet from Jolo Island, Sulu Archipelago. Interlocking tapestry weave of silk. Warp 36", weft 34". Private collection. Photograph by Mike Zens for Material Possessions.*

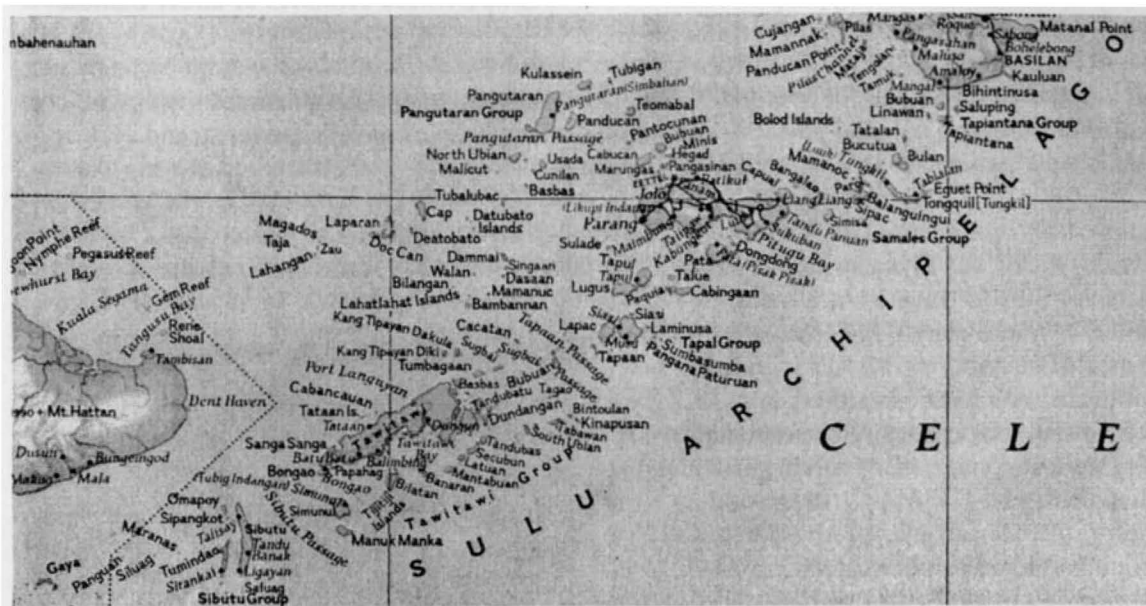
### CONVERSING WITH THE COSMOS

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This paper focuses on the silk tapestry headcloths woven by Tausug peoples from the Philippine Sulu Archipelago. Called *pis siyabet*, they captured my attention because they diverge so wildly from the cotton or *abaca* warp ikat weaving one associates with indigenous peoples from the Philippines and Indonesia. Their material, structure, motif and color fly in the face of local tradition. The dense complexity created by their interlocking square, triangle and diamond motifs suggests cosmic mazes – treasure maps to the unconscious. *Pis* puzzle us and compel our imaginations.

Some history is in order. The Philippine Archipelago was first peopled during the Pleistocene when it was connected by land bridges with the Southeast Asia mainland. What became the Sulus offered a warm climate, access to water trade, fertile volcanic soils. It wasn't surprising that more people followed: voyagers in outrigger canoes from the Indonesian islands in 3000 B.C., Malay headhunters beginning in 300 B.C., and Chinese trader-adventurers in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

About 800 years ago the people we now know as Tausug (“people of the current”) migrated from northeast Mindanao southwest into the Sulus, perhaps in response to increasing Chinese trade in that area. There they encountered Samal peoples of Malay origin on neighboring islands and shortly came into contact with Muslim missionaries and Arab traders who were establishing footholds. Those meetings bore fruit: the first Sulu Sultanate was founded in 1450.



**The Sulu Archipelago in the southern Philippines stretches from the southwest tip of Mindanao to the northeast coast of Borneo. National Geographic Society map.**

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Tausug peoples living on Jolo – the Sulu island where they concentrated – were cosmopolitan even by today’s standards. They were connected with Africa, the Persian Gulf, India, Southeast Asia and China through trade. The Sultanate sold pearls, tortoiseshell, birds’ nest, hardwoods and spices. In return it wanted cloth and arms. Tausug did not hesitate to take what they wanted by force; they supported piracy and slave trading throughout the region.

From their historical beginnings in the Sulus, women wove. Philippine textile authority Marian Pastor-Roces indicates that weaving is documented from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and that early Tausug settlers adopted neighboring Samal dress and color preference, adding green and blue to their original palette of black, white, red and yellow.<sup>1</sup> While we don’t know what they were weaving, we do have records of what textiles Tausug were buying and wearing. Fourteenth century Yuan Dynasty annals describe Sulu natives dressed in turbans and trading their pearls for “Pa-Tu-La cloth.”<sup>2</sup> Magellan’s diarist reported the ritual use of patola in the southern Philippines in 1521.<sup>3</sup> As late as 1837, American Charles Wilkes relates that Tausug wore patola as protective “cumberbands” or thrown across their shoulders.<sup>4</sup>

The fabulous double ikat silks from western India that were traded as ritual and status objects throughout insular Southeast Asia were important to the Tausug as well. We’ll see examples of patola motifs incorporated into Tausug weaving later on.

Trade with China was quickly formalized, and by the early 15<sup>th</sup> century the Sulu Sultanate was sending tribute to the Ming Emperor. When three kings from Sulu visited the Chinese court in



1417, the Emperor bestowed gifts of silk clothing upon them.<sup>5</sup> Chinese trading junks sailed under the Sultan's protection, so were spared from piracy and slave raids. In return, Sulu received vast quantities of Indian and Chinese trade cloth. Silk was first traded from China in these early centuries, and it's likely that tapestry weaving also was introduced by imitating Chinese examples.<sup>6</sup> Robyn Maxwell points to striking examples of brightly-colored tapestry cloth made by Bajau, Yakan and Tausug peoples of the Sulus who experienced centuries of direct Chinese trade.<sup>7</sup>

This commerce flourished for over 400 years – sometimes augmented, sometimes thwarted by the trade with European colonial powers – until the Spanish achieved naval superiority and established a garrison at Jolo in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Explorers and commercial diarists have left us compelling descriptions of Tausug dress from very early days. A Yuan Dynasty annual compiled by Kiang Si in 1349 states that both the men and women of Sulu "...bind a black turban..."<sup>8</sup>

Another Chinese diarist, Ma Huan, describes the men of neighboring Malacca wrapping their heads with square kerchiefs in 1433.<sup>9</sup> By the time English civil servant Alexander Dalrymple negotiated trade privileges with Sultan Muizz ud-Din of Sulu in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, fine Coromandel cloth – particularly "brightly colored handkerchiefs" – was bringing 100 to 200% profit when traded in the Sultanate.<sup>10</sup>

Indian textiles from the Coromandel were still popular in J. Hunt's account of an 1814 expedition. "As a head dress," he noted, "most of the Sulo men prefer the pulicat red handkerchief; a few only the fine Javanese handkerchief; which they wear tied round their heads, after the Malay fashion...they wear an immense long cummerband, generally a Surat patoli, which they throw across their shoulders or wrap round their waists...The lowest slave, in this respect, vies with the datu in splendor of apparel."<sup>11</sup>

This sartorial exuberance is repeated in British traveler John Foreman's description of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Sultan: "His Highness was dressed in very tight silk trousers, fastened partly up the sides with showy chased gold...buttons,...a red sash around his waist, a kind of turban, and a kris at this side. His general appearance was that of a Spanish bull-fighter with an Oriental finish..."<sup>12</sup>



*Early 20<sup>th</sup> century photograph. Three men in the front row wear tapestry-weave sashes, called kambut. The man on the left appears to be wearing a pis headcloth. Previously unpublished image by an unknown photographer.*

Let me backtrack to consider headcloths generally. From at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century the custom of tying meter-square cloths – as opposed to wrapping long lengths of cloth turbans around one’s head – spread throughout insular Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> This was an Islamic practice that linked the Muslim’s modesty before God with indigenous veneration of the head. The older Southeast Asian tradition of *adat* – or customary law – regards the head as the seat of a person’s power, creativity and soul force. Headhunting originated in an effort to capture that energy for oneself, and many peoples of the Philippines honored the successful warrior by allowing him to wear a square, red-saturated headcloth.<sup>14</sup> When this early idea of the head’s potency was married to later Islamic injunctions forbidding an uncovered head, headcloths assumed critical significance.

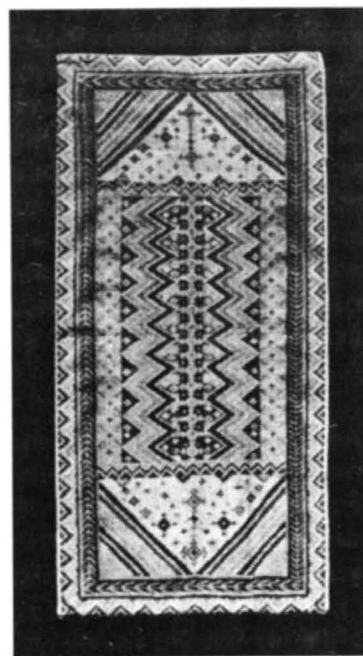
Areas of insular Southeast Asia where Islam overlays *adat* embraced the square headcloth enthusiastically. One sees it in Sumatra, in Java, in Malaysia and throughout the Muslim Philippines executed in different materials and techniques. In Sumatra men wear square headcloths ranging from simple black cotton through elaborate silk ikat. In Malaysia gold *songket* cloths achieve Byzantine artistic heights as specific color, design and methods of fold designate one’s region and status. On Java, square cotton headcloths batiked with writings from the Qur’an protect their wearers from harm.

So we see that, while status and identification are important elements of binding one’s head in a square cloth, spiritual invocation is also a critical component of the practice.

We know, too, that square headcloths were important to the Tausug from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Less clear is when Tausug women began to weave silk into the tightly geometric, border-within-border, carpet-like motifs we today associate with *pis* or what sources might have inspired their designs.

The first question – when were *pis siyabet* first woven on Jolo – is intriguing. Given the relatively detailed verbal descriptions and images that survive from the past 500 years, it is odd that not one mentions such a distinctive piece of wearing apparel or depicts it accurately until the turn of the last century. One can see that all three men in the front row of this early 20<sup>th</sup> century photograph wear tapestry woven sashes. The man on the left also seems to be wearing a *pis*. In another detail from the same photograph, the men on both the left and the right in the first row are wearing *pis* headcloths twisted and wrapped in headband fashion.

Linguistic evidence also suggests a comparatively recent introduction for these weavings. Pastor-Roces tells us the Tausug words for sash (*kambut*) or the longer cloth (*kendit*) – pieces of apparel that were also woven in silk interlocking tapestry – pre-date the tapestry-weave cloths we are familiar with today.<sup>15</sup> That is, the words describe older textile forms. Again, we remember that many 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century diarists mention the “red sashes” or *patola* that Jolo men used to wrap around their waists. None, however, mention polychrome sashes that might describe the *kambut* we think of now, nor do they refer to the other distinctive garments Tausug women produced in silk tapestry weave: the *patadyong* tube skirt or the rare prayer mat pictured here. Both the absence of such



*Tausug prayer mat (?) of silk tapestry. Photograph by Linda Beeman.*

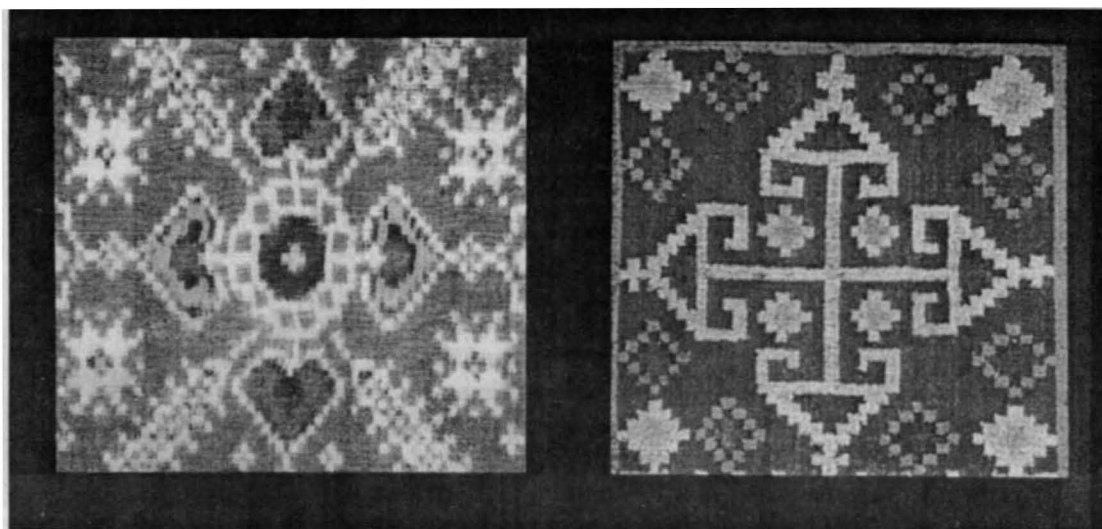


descriptions and the linguistic data point to a relatively new introduction of locally-made silk tapestry cloth in the Sulus. It's conceivable that the *pis*, *kambut* and *patadyong* we see today began to be woven as recently as the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The gaps in our knowledge are extensive. Political and economic strife in the Sulus have made travel there difficult. What research has been accomplished has not focused on textiles. Still, we might infer that breaks in trading patterns caused by political and economic shifts stimulated Tausug women to imitate the technique of tapestry weaving and to incorporate motifs from important textiles that were not as widely available as they once had been. During the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century period we are considering, the Spanish colonial government in Manila did disrupt Tausug trade by stepping up its efforts to bring the Muslim south under its control. These efforts included an attack on Jolo in 1851, a maritime blockade of the islands beginning in 1871, and the eventual capture and establishment of a garrison at Jolo in 1876. The shortages associated with this siege may have inspired a renaissance in Tausug weaving to replace trade cloths that were becoming increasingly scarce.

Later disruptions were caused by World War II, when silk yarns became difficult to obtain, and by tighter Philippine government border controls imposed after that war. It has been thought that more easily available cotton was introduced for the warps of Tausug weaving about this time. However, early 20<sup>th</sup> century examples in Seattle's Wing Luke Museum and Santa Fe's Museum of International Folk Art indicate that cotton warps were used as early as 1917 and 1927 respectively.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the Spanish-imposed economic pressures also forced the looser weave and larger design motifs we begin to see at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The pieces from the International Folk Art Museum were collected in the Philippines in 1927. All employ magnified motifs in a more loosely-woven structure and brighter colors than earlier examples. We see yellow and blue added to the older palette of orange, purple, green and pink. Greens become more bluish in the



**Details of pan leaf motifs from (left) a Vohra gaji bhat patolu sari and (right) a pis siyabet showing Tausug weavers copied patterns from Indian trade cloths. Left photograph by Linda Beeman. Right photograph by Don Cole for UCLA's Fowler Museum of Cultural History.**

20<sup>th</sup> century pieces. While it's unclear whether natural dyes were used in earlier textiles, organic sources for pinks, purples, fuschias and oranges were certainly available in the Philippines in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> The later cloths are striking textiles, but they show us that Tausug weavers had reduced both the cost of their material and the time they spent at the loom.

Earlier I alluded to the importance of *patola* in the Sulu Archipelago. *Patolu* motifs like the heart-shaped *pan* leaf seen in the image on the left are mirrored in the detail from a Fowler Museum *pis* on the right. This is the same leaf, incidentally, that betel chewers use to wrap their mildly narcotic areca nut and lime. The stepped cross and its "snowflake" elaboration that are documented by Alfred Buhler<sup>18</sup> are also readily apparent in Tausug *pis* headcloths. Finally, the eight-point star appears in both textile forms.

It's important to remember that 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Sulu nobility wore their *patola* over their shoulders or wrapped round their waists for protection. This practice was also followed by neighboring Samal, Yakan and Maranao peoples. Yakan men wrap a sash of red cotton – up to 25 meters long – round their waists. This bulk protected the vulnerable parts of their bodies in combat.<sup>19</sup> A Maranao epic poem, the *Darangen*, describes square, embroidered cloths called *mansala* that were ordinarily worn over the shoulder, but would be tied around the waist during battle to cover the navel – site of the warrior's spirit. *Mansala* could even restore life to a fallen hero.<sup>20</sup> The pre-eminent cloth in these old stories, however, is the *patola* ' *kaorayan* from Maranao mythology which flies of its own accord, makes its wearer invisible and may transform itself into a deadly snake.<sup>21</sup>

Tausug men also wear their *pis siyabet* this way. In addition to their use as headcloths, men of Jolo fold the square *pis* on a diagonal and wear it to cover one shoulder or wrap it as a sash to bind their *kris* blades tight to their bodies.

Many contemporary writers have mentioned a connection between *pis* spacial arrangements and mandala, implying another spiritual dimension. If we think of mandala as Hindu-Buddhist representations of the cosmos, characterized by concentric configurations of geometric shapes, Tausug headcloths might qualify as square interpretations. Their symmetrical visual focus leads us through a series of outer borders into the meditative center of the textile. Then, too, the similarity between the Maranao word *mansala* to describe their mystical, square headcloths and the word *mandala* lends some credence to the idea. Further, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist figure unearthed on Mindanao following a 1917 flood suggests the early presence of Buddhism in the region.<sup>22</sup> Again, we have no proof that mandala influenced Tausug weaving, but the theory certainly merits future research.

*Telia rumal* from Andhra Pradesh State on India's Coromandel coast have also been suggested as a source of inspiration.<sup>23</sup> However these cloths were not produced in any quantity until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when they became popular trade items in the Deccan and Middle East. Their general layout resembles spacial arrangements of Malay headcloths worn throughout Southeast Asia. It is possible that an earlier Coromandel design prototype influenced Tausug weaving, and an 18<sup>th</sup> century *sarasa* documented in *Woven Cargoes* supports that idea.<sup>24</sup>

Another possible source for the small, kaleidoscopic images we see in Tausug *pis* are talismanic garments from Islamic tradition called *antakusuma* on Java.<sup>25</sup> These, like their Buddhist *kesi* counterparts, were originally made from fragments of clothing once worn by important spiritual leaders, patched to form a prestigious new garment. For Buddhists, the patchwork symbolized humility, the acceptance of poverty and a rejection of worldly affluence. In the Islamic context, the fragments – whether patched from actual original garments or recreated in a new context – connote magical, protective qualities. If we think of *pis* as 'quilts' from a variety of sources –

Gujarat, Sumatra, Java and Malaysia – interpreted by Tausug sensibilities, their layout and motifs begin to resolve themselves from fragmented randomness into some kind of ritual coherence.

Finally we must ask who made these headcloths. This, too, is a cloudy issue. Anthropological studies in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century tell us that little weaving was still being done at that time. By the late 1960s, the weaving of *kambut* sashes had disappeared entirely, and only a few women from the Jolo village of Parang were still producing square headcloths according to UC-Berkeley anthropologist David Szanton.<sup>26</sup> Frank Lebar and David Baradas report similar findings in the mid-1970s and 1990s. Pastor-Roces confirms that *pis* headcloths are still being woven today, but “...not with the mastery that was part of this tradition in the past.”<sup>27</sup>

If we project backward, we can infer that the earlier *pis* – the tightly woven, small patterned, all-silk textiles – must have been costly. One would imagine they were luxury cloths accessible only to the nobility. As such, they might have been woven by wives of the Sultan or the *datus*. However Professor James Warren indicates that between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Tausug women were primarily involved in administering Jolo’s trade.<sup>28</sup> Thus occupied, they may have delegated weaving to slaves or retainers talented in this work. Warren reinforces this idea by stating that Visayan women were valued as slaves for their superior weaving skills.<sup>29</sup> UCLA Fowler Museum’s Roy Hamilton also suggests captured women may have been employed in the Sulus to weave cloth used in bartering for yet more slaves.<sup>30</sup> Again, these are conjectures. Perhaps future scholars will gain access to the area in time to research the questions posed by *pis siyabet*.

In the meantime, we can appreciate these headcloths as art works that reflect a long history of intermingling cultures, religions and commerce. Tausug *pis* are repositories of a people’s political and spiritual aspirations. They speak to us in colorful images of status, power and wealth. They harness magical powers to protect their wearers and address themselves to Allah with humility and supplication. Truly, they converse with the cosmos.

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<sup>1</sup> Pastor-Roces 1991:17 and 114. Another early Sulu oral history cites Sultan Abu Bakr’s (1450-1480) efforts to convert non-Muslim hill dwellers on Jolo by urging his followers to make rice cakes and clothing for them. See Patanne 1996:159.

<sup>2</sup> The *Tao I Chih Lueh* describes turbans worn by natives of Sulu. See Wang 1964:304.

<sup>3</sup> Casino 1981:180.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkes 1973:169.

<sup>5</sup> Wang 1964:312. Also Majul 1966:349.

<sup>6</sup> Guy 1986:5. John Guy points out that the sharp reduction of Chinese trade goods in Southeast Asia during the early Ming period may have stimulated the growth of local ceramic sites to supply the region’s demand. It is conceivable that the same might be true of tapestry weave textiles in areas that had imported them.

<sup>7</sup> Maxwell 1990:288-291.

<sup>8</sup> Wang 1964:304.

<sup>9</sup> Huan 1970:110.

<sup>10</sup> Warren 1981:44-45.

<sup>11</sup> Wilkes 1973:169.

<sup>12</sup> Foreman 1890:153-4.

<sup>13</sup> Alliaia 1989:65-80. Alliaia cites 10<sup>th</sup> century T’ang annals describing Malaysia in which “...the noble rivalry between *kuan-t’ung-t’ien*, these cloth crowns with their enormous protuberances, began in the most remote times, before Buddhist pilgrims and merchants of the Celestial Kingdom arrived on that mythical peninsula ‘where men build extravagant hoods on their heads with their skirts.’” Also see Wang 1964:304 and Huan:1970:110.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton 1998:28



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- <sup>15</sup> Pastor-Roces 1991:139.
- <sup>16</sup> Museum of International Folk Art Accession Nos. FA.1972.24-20 and 22. Wing Luke Asian Museum Accession Nos. 1987.005.003, 4 and 7.
- <sup>17</sup> Ruurdje Laarhoven describes vegetal sources (orange derived from the bark of the *nara* tree, red from imported *curcuma*, and purple made from resin of the *lipau* tree) for many vibrant colors in Maguindanao weaving in the southern Philippines. See Hamilton 1998:147 and 152. It's also intriguing to note that Mexican cochineal was exported to Manila via Spanish galleons and may have been used in the southern Philippines for the bright pinks in Sulu textiles. See Schurz 1939:59.
- <sup>18</sup> Buhler and Fischer 1979.
- <sup>19</sup> Hamilton 1998:86.
- <sup>20</sup> Scott 1994:167.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.:69.
- <sup>22</sup> Zaragoza 1995:333.
- <sup>23</sup> Pastor-Roces 1991:124.
- <sup>24</sup> Guy 1998:172.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. 1998:102-3.
- <sup>26</sup> Szanton 1973:32 and 65.
- <sup>27</sup> Correspondence with L. Beeman, 3.3.00.
- <sup>28</sup> Correspondence with L. Beeman, 8.20.00.
- <sup>29</sup> Warren 1981:201.
- <sup>30</sup> Hamilton 1998:84.

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