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ARTICOLO

## Breathing new life into dance traditions: *kūttu* and *bharata nāṭyam* among Sri Lankan Tamils

di Cristiana Natali

### Abstract – ITA

Il *kūttu* e il *bharata nāṭyam* rappresentano i due principali stili di danza dei tamil dello Sri Lanka. Negli ultimi decenni, molti coreografi hanno cercato di realizzare una sintesi tra i due stili, con il duplice obiettivo di far rivivere i repertori tradizionali e di valorizzare queste pratiche coreutiche, precedentemente mantenute separate sulla base delle differenze di casta. In tal modo le hanno rivitalizzate e modernizzate come forme di comunicazione intrinsecamente legate sia alla storia dei Tamil sia alle questioni contemporanee.

### Abstract – ENG

*Kūttu* and *bharata nāṭyam* stand out as the two main dance styles in use among Sri Lankan Tamils. Over the last decades, attempts have been made by many choreographers to yield a synthesis of the styles, with the twofold aim of reviving traditional repertoires and reassessing the value of the dance forms, previously separated along caste lines. In this way these forms of dance have been revitalized and modernized as forms of communication intrinsically linked both to the history of the Tamils and to contemporary issues.

ANTROPOLOGIA E TEATRO – RIVISTA DI STUDI | N. 12 (2020)

ISSN: 2039-2281 | CC BY 3.0 | DOI 10.6092/issn.2039-2281/11662

Iscrizione al tribunale di Bologna n. 8185 del 1/10/2010

Direttore responsabile: Giuseppe Liotta

Direttore scientifico: Matteo Casari



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

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## Breathing new life into dance traditions: *kūttu* and *bharata nāṭyam* among Sri Lankan Tamils

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*The art of kūttu, which at one time was looked down upon and derisively referred to as a low type of art by the educated and the urban-based people, has now received recognition at the university level. It has been proved that this is not a cheap village art but a highly developed art constituting dance sequences like bharata nāṭyam*  
(Thiagaraja, 1997: 3)<sup>1</sup>.

What the Minister of Education K. Thiagaraja writes in the introduction to *The Art of Kūttu* – a small volume published by the North-Eastern Province Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka – summarizes the transformation process that *kūttu* has undergone in recent decades. The transformation was made possible by the work of teachers and choreographers who wanted to enhance its artistic components, emancipating it from a subordinate position compared to other dance forms, in particular to *bharata nāṭyam*. *Kūttu* is a dance form characteristic of Sri Lanka and India. Its difference from *bharata nāṭyam* is effectively summarized in the 1999 Tamil-language film *Sangamam (Encounter)*, by director Suresh Krishna, set in India, which tells the contrasting love story between a boy belonging to a family group practicing *kūttu* dance and a girl, daughter of *bharata nāṭyam* artists. What clearly emerges from the screenplay is the profound diversity of social backgrounds of the two groups, with the resulting economic, professional, eating and choreographic practices. The artists of *kūttu* and those of *bharata nāṭyam* are identified through a series of oppositions, the first of which concerns caste belonging: the performers of *kūttu* are of low caste, while the dancers of *bharata nāṭyam* are of high caste. Secondly, there is a difference in lifestyle linked to economic possibilities: the former are land workers, and are therefore poor, they travel on oxen-drawn carts, they have worn-out clothes; the artists of *bharata nāṭyam*, on the contrary, are rich, they have no need to work because they live on income,

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to A. N. (to whom I assured anonymity) for translating the text from Tamil.

they travel in chauffeur-driven cars and wear elegant clothes. The way of life includes eating practices related to the different castes: the *kūttu* dancers have a meat diet, while those of *bharata nāṭyam* are strictly vegetarian. Finally, the dance performances reflect the differences between the two groups: in *kūttu*, the costumes are simple and cheap, the shows take place in the squares, and at the end of the performance, offers are collected; in *bharata nāṭyam*, the clothes are expensive and elaborate, the performances take place on stage and the spectators pay for tickets.

Another fundamental difference between the two dance styles, in addition to those illustrated in the film, concerns the codification of gestures (*mudrā*) and facial expressions, as well as the articulation of the choreography. Hanne M. De Bruin and Clara Brakel-Papenyzen, explaining the characteristics of Indian *kūttu*, underline:

Dance steps, choreography and facial expressions, though indispensable to every *kuttu*<sup>2</sup> performance, are less elaborate and not so rigidly codified as in other art forms such as *bharata natyam* or *kathakali*. Gestures (*mudra*) – aside from those gleaned from daily life – are not frequently used [...]. Most members of traditional *kuttu* audience do not have any opportunity to become familiar with a complex system of codified gestures. They would therefore have difficulties in interpreting the *mudra* used in, for instance, *bharata natyam* or *kathakali* (De Bruin – Brakel-Papenyzen 1992: 39, 66).

### *Kūttu and bharata nāṭyam in Sri Lanka*

In Sri Lanka, *kūttu* and *bharata nāṭyam* stand out as the two main dance styles in use among Tamils<sup>3</sup>. For historical reasons, *kūttu* is today mainly performed in the Eastern territories of Sri Lanka. In Jaffna, in the north of the country, in fact, the puritanical reform of Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879) confined the *kūttu* to the low castes, while in Batticaloa, in the east, where Navalarism did not gain ground and the caste hierarchy was less strict, “the *kūttu* tradition was preserved among all castes, from the fisher castes to the artisan castes” (Sivathambi 2005: 254). The *kūttu* teacher and choreographer Tharcisius explains:

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the quotations do not include diacritical marks as they are absent in the original edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Bharata nāṭyam* is also widespread among Sinhala. Susan Reed, author of a study about the so-called “national dance” of Sinhala, the Kandyan dance, observes that while the Sinhala dance forms are performed almost exclusively by Sinhala, “the Tamil-identified form of *bharata nāṭyam* is performed in Sri Lanka by both Tamil and Sinhala women of the urban upper class. The appeal of *bharata nāṭyam* for Sinhala women is largely due to its feminine style, which contrasts with the more forceful, assertive character of Kandyan dance” (Reed 2010: 229).

During the middle of the last century when English education was catching up in Jaffna, there were Christian schools where a person called a Saivaite saint called Arumuka Navalar was bringing a sort of Hindu revival. That guy happened to be a very caste-minded creature... All the Tamil arts took a back seat because of him – he said, get rid of all these because *kūttu* in rehearsal or performance, we have a lot to drink, a lot to eat – he wanted to cut this drinking habit. Palmira palm wine. That is how the *kūttu* in Jaffna took a back seat. He was a sort of an anti-cultural something<sup>4</sup>.

In the Eastern territories of Sri Lanka, *kūttu* was in the past an extremely widespread form of dance, practiced in the villages by a large part of the population and lasting all night:

The art of *kūttu* is the traditional wealth of Eastern Lanka, in particular the Batticaloa District. In the past, *kūttu* dance used to be staged through the nights in all villages of the province. The sound of music, drums and various instruments<sup>5</sup>, which echoed in our villages in those days, remains evergreen in our minds. There was a time when these *kūttu* dances staged in the north and south and the artists, musicians and conductors were held in respect in society. So much so that those artists were known by the names of the characters they enacted on stage and became well-known (Jeyasankar 2008: 3).

In Sri Lanka, the learning of the two dance techniques shows many differences<sup>6</sup>: *bharata nāṭyam* is taught in dance schools, while traditionally the learning of *kūttu* was, and is, a collective process involving the whole village and focused on a musical and dance specialist, the *aṅṅāvi*. As Sivagnanam Jeyasankar writes, “*Kūttu* is not only the art of the individual artist in the modern sense, but also reflects processes within a community. The basic process in *kūttu* is learning by doing it collectively, and the primary source for the performance is in collective memory” (Jeyasankar 2008: 15).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Tharcisius, database of the *In Place of War* project, Manchester University, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The instruments characterizing the *kūttu* are: *rabanam* (tambourine), *salari* (cymbals), *parri* (a drum that is played on the right end with a stick, on the left with thimbles), *maddalam* and *udukku* (drums that are played with the hands), and *dampadam* (drums that are played with two curved sticks) [author’s note].

<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Sri Lankan context, in the film *Sangamam*, the two groups have in common the tradition of teaching dance art within the family: children are trained to follow in the footsteps of their fathers, who are considered not only parents but also teachers (*gurus*). This allows them to appeal to their role to make demands on their children (the girl’s father, for example, asks her to give up her lover not as a daughter, but as a disciple).

When I conducted my fieldwork in Sri Lanka<sup>7</sup>, an elderly man born in Jaffna, in the north of the country, explained to me:

I'll tell you my experience when I was a child, fifty years ago. *Kūttu* used to go on all night, and men performed female characters too.

**Question** - What was it like?

**Answer** - When in a village they wanted to celebrate a festival, they need *kūttu*. Then they called the expert, the *aṅṅāvi*<sup>8</sup>, who spent some months in the village. He selected some young people and trained them for a specific show.

**Q.** - Which kind of shows?

**A.** - The *aṅṅāvi* had written texts, four or five, and he would do the texts the village chose. They were not printed books.

**Q.** - Did they follow the texts rigorously?

**A.** - No, he adapted them.

**Q.** - Then the *aṅṅāvi* didn't come with a group?

**A.** - No, no, absolutely, he taught the boys of the village [...].

**Q.** - For him, was this a job?

**A.** - Yes, it was his job. He had a wife, a family, and he went into the villages to work<sup>9</sup>.

Tharcisius also witnessed the collective learning process of *kūttu*:

I will give you a picture of the evening that we had. I was inducted into the *kūttu* theatre at the age of seven – at the age of five what we would do is... I come from a village... We start going down the lanes of the village in the evening, the youngest of the crowd, and we start singing the *kūttu* songs and the people will know because there is no bell... no public announcement system to rally the people. We go singing and then the people, the parents know, the eldest know it is time for the *kūttu* rehearsals. They come there and we don't

<sup>7</sup> In Sri Lanka, a civil conflict erupted in 1983 between the government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), a separatist movement which controlled vast regions of the island. These territories, located in the north and east, constituted a true state within a state. The LTTE were defeated by the government army in 2009. My fieldwork in Sri Lanka was conducted over the following periods: July-September 2002, November-January 2003, July-October 2005, and December 2005-January 2006. Most of the research was done in the LTTE-controlled area of Vanni, with some periods also spent in the districts of Batticaloa and Trincomalee, in Vavuniya, Jaffna and Colombo. I carried out participant observation, conducting both qualitative interviews and informal talks with civilians and fighters.

<sup>8</sup> My interlocutors used *aṅṅāvi* or *aṅṅāviar* (*ar* is an honorific suffix, cf. Sivathamby 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Santhyapillai, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2002, Batticaloa.

have electricity – electricity to Jaffna came after the '50s. The rural areas they still don't have – not because of the war... When we go into that general area of training *kūttu*, the people who are actually participating will be there with the *aṅṅāvi* or the teacher learning their *kūttu*. What we do is build up a fire with wood or – you know – the palmira leaves, the dried ones. With them we set the fire and then we have the training. The younger ones will be in a place where they will not disturb this, but at the same time watching this. And one of the acolytes of the *kūttu* teacher will be there supervising them and helping them get the right rhythm and get the right steps. So while the training is going on here, the children are learning there. So in two years time, one by one the acolytes will find the talented ones there and bring them in one by one. And the women folk are also there sitting and watching the rehearsals. Because the man who is learning there – I mean – [in] day time he works and he may not remember the words because most of them are not that educated to learn from a book and the books came only very recently... Otherwise, we had a palm frond... or it would be from just one written book from which they teach. The womenfolk – the wives, the mothers, the sisters – they come in for the rehearsal and they learn them by heart quickly. When they go home they teach their husbands. The words. The dancing is taught here. So it's a real communal participation there. The children are learning, the husbands are learning their steps, the wife is learning the words. When the *kūttu* is performed, the playback singing, those days the whole village, the whole community is singing the playback. So for example, I sing a line as an actor, the line is repeated after I sing on a very light-footed dance, the line is given to the singers to repeat it loud, and I'll be performing a very prominent dance. So that singing back is done by them, by the whole village<sup>10</sup>.

The association of *kūttu* with lower castes and of *bharata nāṭyam* with higher castes and elites was generally spread among Sri Lankan Tamils. As Sivagnanam Jeyasankar observes, “Traditionally *kūttu* was considered crude, unsophisticated, primitive and the art of the illiterate and drunks. This was because those who were involved in the *kūttu* process in the community were not educated in colonial institutions nor did they consume imported spirits” (Jeyasankar 2008: 15).

The distinction between the two dance styles is also perceived by some interpreters of *kūttu* as a difference in religious membership. As a musician in Batticaloa explained,

They were dancing, it was devotional, but distinct for Lord Śiva and other gods. Some gods went to the higher class, other gods went to the depressed class. So there was a little fighting. And from that, the depressed class started to feel good about their type of gods, and feel bad about Śiva. So there was a caste difference and even religion [...]. So, by doing that – the god also, you know... Have you prayed to this god, right? – [so]

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Tharcisius, database of the “In Place of War” project, Manchester University, accessed 7 July 2007.

they think [you are] ok. By praying to this [god], you belong to this type of different [caste]<sup>11</sup>.

The elitist dimension of *bharata nāṭyam* is after all connected to the history of the discipline. The *sadir* of South India – typical of the *devadāsīs*, the temple dancers – was institutionalized in the '30s of the last century by Rukmini Devi. This dancer, who initially studied classical ballet, rehabilitated the Indian dance, which had declined due to the bad reputation of *devadāsīs* in the context of the puritanical society of the time. On the one hand, Devi “domesticated” the dance (Natali 2012) by removing its erotic elements (she eliminated choreographies where the devotion, *bhakti*, was expressed with clear sexual metaphors), and in this way *bharata nāṭyam* became an activity not only possible but even desirable for high-caste girls; on the other hand, in 1936, in Madras (Tamil Nadu), she institutionalized the new dance style by founding the Kalakshetra school, which became the institution *par excellence* of *bharata nāṭyam*<sup>12</sup>. Thus began the diffusion of the dance outside of the temples, thanks to both the *devadāsīs* – although few – who converted to being teachers, but above all to the successive development of a category of non-hereditary dancers who spread *bharata nāṭyam* in theatres and schools.

At Kalakshetra, “respectability” was achieved by using two strategies, which were not only related to dance style and repertoire. First, Devi fulfilled a sanskritization of the pedagogical approach<sup>13</sup>: in her school, high-caste practices, such as vegetarianism and the worship of Śiva<sup>14</sup> on the stage, were adopted (Mathur 2002). Secondly, she decided not to use the *naṭṭuvaṅṅārs*, the hereditary dance teachers, and to substitute them with members of high-caste families. Rukmini Devi wrote:

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a musician who expressed the desire to remain anonymous, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2002, Batticaloa.

<sup>12</sup> The *bharata nāṭyam* performed today is largely the result of the codification carried out by Rukmini Devi. There exists another tradition, headed by the *devadāsī* Balasaraswati (1918-1984), also the founder of a school and an internationally famous dancer. Her real impact on *bharata nāṭyam* is not however comparable to Rukmini Devi's: there are few teachers today who follow her style and the officially recognised canon is that of Kalakshetra.

<sup>13</sup> The term “sanskritization” was introduced by the anthropologist M.N. Srinivas to refer to the tendency for the lower castes to adopt behaviour typical of higher castes in order to improve their status (e.g. vegetarianism, fasting and ritual ablutions).

<sup>14</sup> The figure of Śiva Naṭarāja, which today we typically associate with *bharata nāṭyam* shows, did not appear in any systematic way until the period of the revival (Allen 1997). Since the *devadāsīs* repertory was substantially based on the relationship between the devotee and the god in amorous terms, the gods impersonated in the choreographies were above all Krishna and Murugaṅ (Ganeśa's brother), and the mythology surrounding them centred on their virility and beauty, their youthfulness, and also on the playful nature of their relationship with the devotees – exemplified by that between Krishna and the *gopīs* (shepherdesses) whose clothes, for example, the god stole while they were busy bathing. Śiva Naṭarāja became not only the patron of dance, but also a part of the performance. Rukmini Devi and other artists choreographed songs about Śiva Naṭarāja which had previously never been danced, since the vigorous character of the god's dance did not match the *devadāsīs*'s own expressive manner.



One great new thing that has come as a result of these difficulties is the complete separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers. It is a well-known fact that they are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody else to conduct a dance performance. I have always had a determination that this must go. They used to think that, except for the usual class of people, no one else would be able to dance. Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers. The second aspect is to train *naṭṭuvaṇārs* [dance teachers] from good families. I'm happy [...]. I was able to prove that we could do without them (cit. in Allen 1997: 64-65).

The relationship between the dancers and the *naṭṭuvaṇārs* was thus completely subverted: having for so long been respected teachers, Devi's *naṭṭuvaṇārs* were students at the school who were limited to keeping time on the stage, with the result that they were ironically nicknamed *naṭṭuvaṇārs*, from *taṭṭu*, meaning to beat sticks. This revolution in the teacher-disciple relationship is, on the other hand, very evident in the biography of Devi herself: when she decided to make her debut in 1935 as part of the Theosophical Society's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, Devi went ahead despite the adverse opinion of her maestro, Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai, who believed his student was not yet ready. This was the behaviour which challenged the canonical system, in which it was the maestro who decided the date of the *araṅgētram* (debut). An important consequence of Devi's choice was that, with the elimination of the *naṭṭuvaṇārs*, the figure of the dancer took on the roles of both teacher and interpreter.

### *The development of kūttu*

In June 2002, in Batticaloa, I had the opportunity to witness a festival promoted by Professor Mounaguru, Director of the Department of Fine Arts at the Eastern University. Mounaguru organized the *World Drama Festival*, dedicated that year to the creativity of Sri Lankan traditional dances, and specifically to *kūttu*. The day started with a parade in which *kūttu* musicians and dancers paraded from the university entrance to the theatre (cf. Sykes 2013). In the opening speech, Mounaguru underlined the necessity to "revitalize the tradition" and eliminate its negative aspects, such as the "slavery of the woman", which was reflected in the impossibility for women to dance in the *kūttu* performances<sup>15</sup>.

The two-day festival started with a play intended for elementary school children. The interpreters were students

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<sup>15</sup> Also in Jaffna women could not perform *kūttu*. As Jaffna artist explains, "In the *kūttu* of our village, females don't participate. Females who take part can't be sold [i.e. given in marriage]. It is only now that in your schools you have started mixed education" (Canagarajah 1995: 206).



of Fine Arts, who also acted in the second performance, a series of revised *kūttu* dances, among which a dance illustrating the heavy work of the peasant women. In the afternoon, a traditional *kūttu* performance took place. A group of inhabitants from a nearby village presented the *Mahābhārata*<sup>16</sup>; only some parts were chosen, since normally the performance was staged through the night till the morning. The performance took place in a pavilion. Children and women sat around the circular elevated platform. The drummers were in the centre of the stage, and the dancers moved around them. The first to enter was a child, who announced the king. Then Arjuna, Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa and Duryodhana arrived. At the end, the women cried for their relatives fallen in battle. The characters were easily recognizable for their dress and make-up, and men, exhibiting very accurate coiffures, embodied the female characters. The performance was concluded by a circular dance including all the interpreters. Finally, Professor Mounaguru asked a six-year-old child from the village to play a drum, the *maddalam*, to show how traditions can be transmitted in contemporary society.

The second day was distinguished by the presence of two ancient *kūttu* teachers. While one of the two *aṅṅāvis*, although unsteady, was able to attend the whole ceremony, the second, being bedridden, was taken on stage on a chair for the prize-giving, and then brought outside to go back home. However, after a while, to the amazement of the audience, the *aṅṅāvi* was taken on stage once more. He refused in fact to go home since he had not sung a song. Immediately the staff arranged a microphone for his sprawled position and called a drummer to accompany him. Mounaguru said, “All his life was *kūttu*. Even when he dies, he will be thinking of *kūttu*”. The festival concluded with a performance of the *Mahābhārata* by some students from a women’s college. The importance afforded to *kūttu* in the cultural political sphere of the Eastern University of Batticaloa was due to the desire to re-evaluate a dance tradition marginalized by the low status of its interpreters. As Mounaguru underlined, “*Bharata nāṭyam* is a matter of prestige. If you know *bharata nāṭyam*, it means you belong to high society”. In re-evaluating *kūttu*, the decision to mix this traditional dance form with *bharata nāṭyam* has proved to be particularly effective. As a musician explained:

First, in the ancient time, they had only this dance [*kūttu*] for the Sri Lanka people and women. They’re doing that this one only. Then after, from India, they took that *bharata nāṭyam*. So the high-caste people teach this rather than *kūttu*. So they dropped this dance to the low-caste people [...] This *bharata nāṭyam* came from India, and only a high-caste person danced *bharata nāṭyam*, not these, right? So, it is a problem. [...] Because *bharata nāṭyam* is only for high, he was made for high-caste, follows caste. So bringing both together, they

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<sup>16</sup> The *Mahābhārata* (fourth century C.E.) is a great epic poem, written in Sanskrit, describing the war between two cousins’ families, the Kaurava and the Pāṇḍava.

made a more democratic way of dancing, both sides can do [it]. Then they join this *kūttu* and *bharata nāṭyam*, took some of that, some of this and there's also a mix<sup>17</sup>.

The need to find effective tools from a communicative point of view led not only to the fusion of local dance styles, but also to the adoption of other performance genres, also from beyond South Asia. As Professor Mounaguru explained,

In 1965-1969, I used *kūttu* to talk about the oppression of the working class. After that in 1980, this Tamil national movement emerged; they used, and I also used, *kūttu* for that, feminism, nationalism. Then I used *kūttu* in a different form, I mixed *bharata nāṭyam* and *kūttu* traditions to give new ideas to the audience. That's the first development of *kūttu*. Then new dramatists took Brecht's ideas from Germany and also the theatre of the oppressed. And they mixed the *kūttu* tradition and they gave another kind of theatre to the people. This is another *kūttu* development<sup>18</sup>.

This process confirms the assumption that the vitality of a dance form is intrinsically linked to its ability to incorporate history (Jackson – Shapiro-Phim 2010, Wulff 2005). Mounaguru's words echo those of the choreographer Tharcisius:

I found the easiest and most powerful form. If the Tamil form was not very powerful, I used the other. Brecht was influencing me quite a lot... because I was in the production of at least five or six Brecht plays then, and then Shakespeare was there because I was in the production of Shakespeare plays there, and Pirandello was there, even Godot was there... I mean, my play did not have pure Tamil form, it had theatre form, theatre is no more a language, it is a communication<sup>19</sup>.

At the end of the two-day festival, Mounaguru explained to me that I had had the opportunity to observe the evolution of *kūttu*, from the *kūttu* of the village, which narrated epic stories, to today's *kūttu*, which put contemporary themes on stage. And, since I had explained to him that in Italy Sri Lankan Tamils performed *bharata nāṭyam* dances, he added: "When you go back to Italy, show this video to the Tamils who are there. This, and not *bharata nāṭyam*, is the real traditional Tamil dance".

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a musician who expressed the desire to remain anonymous, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2002, Batticaloa.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mounaguru, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2002, Batticaloa.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Tharcisius, database of the *In Place of War* project, Manchester University, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

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