

T'NALAK AS THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF DREAMS AND MEMORY: A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE ON T'BOLI CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the art of T'nalak, a sacred cloth woven by T'boli women from their dreams, as a vessel of cultural memory in their community. The study aimed to identify and interpret the symbolic elements of T'nalak and analyze the denotative and connotative meanings of its designs using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The researcher employed a qualitative design and secondary data analysis drawn from existing documentaries, articles, photographs, and visual materials. Findings revealed that designs such as the zigzag or sigul, the tricolor combination of black, red, and white, eye motifs, animal figures, and geometric patterns are deeply connected to the dreams, spirituality, and cultural memory of the T'boli people. The study also highlighted that T'nalak can be considered a form of visual literature and a cultural text that functions as a medium for transgenerational knowledge transmission. The research recommends more inclusive studies that incorporate the perspectives of the dreamweavers themselves to deepen the discourse on indigenous art and identity.

Keyword: T'nalak, T'boli, semiotics, dream, indigenous art

1. INTRODUCTION

In the heart of the mountains of South Cotabato resides the T'boli tribe, an ethnolinguistic group rich in art, belief systems, and cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation. One of the most prominent and revered symbols of their collective identity is the T'nalak, a cloth woven by women known as dreamweavers, believed to be guided by visions from the spirit of dreams, Fu Dalu (Nabayra, 2020). But beyond being a visual artifact, the T'nalak serves as a vessel of cultural memory, spirituality, and collective remembrance of the T'boli people, a form of art that gives voice to an indigenous worldview often marginalized in the national narrative.

This study aims to examine T'nalak as a semiotic representation of the cultural existence of the T'boli through existing documents, photographs, and interviews from published sources. Instead of direct interviews with the weavers, the researcher utilizes previously recorded voices of the T'boli from earlier studies, documentaries, and digital archives. Through the lens of semiotics particularly the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, this research highlights the symbols, colors, and patterns of T'nalak to determine their denotative (literal form) and

connotative (cultural meaning) interpretations. According to Barthes (1972), symbols are not merely arbitrary signs but are vessels of ideologies a proposition that holds great value in understanding indigenous art forms.

Despite efforts to preserve tradition, an increasing number of studies have begun to address the commodification of T'nalak in the context of tourism and globalization (Casiño, 2000; Abreu, 2018). However, there remains a scarcity of research that examines the semiotic meanings of T'nalak designs from the perspective of the weavers themselves the women who serve as carriers of dreams and culture. Most existing studies focus on ethnographic documentation or the economic aspect of T'nalak as an indigenous product, but lack analysis of how it serves as a keeper of the tribe's cultural memory (Del Rosario, 2019). Hence, this research seeks to fill that gap through a textual and semiotic reading of T'nalak as both art and a medium of collective memory.

In the face of commercialization and cultural change, challenges arise in preserving the authentic spirit of T'nalak. How does this art form embody the dreams, beliefs, and spirituality of the T'boli? How is it transformed, deconstructed, or revitalized within contemporary society? By

focusing on these questions, this study hopes not only to contribute to the discourse in ethnolinguistic research but also to propose a new perspective on the interconnection between art, culture, and collective memory.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two primary theoretical lenses Semiotics and Cultural Aesthetics to closely examine T'nalak as a vessel of cultural memory for the T'boli people. Given the limitations in conducting direct interviews or participatory engagement with the community, the analysis will rely on documented and published photographs, videos, and interviews available in books, articles, and digital sources. In this way, the voices of the T'boli are still honored through previously recorded accounts and representations of their art and beliefs.

The central analytical lens is the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. According to Saussure (1916), a sign is composed of two elements: the signifier (form) and the signified (concept or meaning). Barthes (1972), on the other hand, emphasized two levels of meaning: denotation, or literal meaning, and connotation, which refers to cultural or ideological meaning. Through semiotic reading, the study analyzes the designs of T'nalak as signs that encapsulate the tribe's collective memory, spirituality, and dreams. The symbols, colors, and patterns of the fabric are treated as "visual texts" that can be interpreted using the structure of semiotic theory.

Also included in the framework is Cultural Aesthetics, which refers to how art expresses identity, subjectivity, and collective experience within a specific culture (Hall, 1997). Viewing T'nalak not merely as a product but as an artistic expression, this study examines how its designs communicate the social and cultural values of the T'boli. Themes such as spirituality, dreams, and tribal history are reflected in the visual composition of the textile, where cultural aesthetics play a crucial role in interpreting indigenous art from within its own worldview.

In summary, these theoretical perspectives allow for the analysis of T'nalak as more than just a physical object it is a living sign of T'boli culture. Although the study relies on secondary data and visual analysis, it aims to contribute a deeper understanding of indigenous art and the meanings

that persist and resist within the flow of colonial narratives.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This research aims to critically examine T'nalak as an art form of the T'boli that embodies signs of their spirituality, beliefs, and cultural memory. In line with this, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the symbolic elements of T'nalak that are associated with the T'boli's dreams, spirituality, and culture?
2. What are the explicit and deeper meanings of T'nalak designs based on a semiotic reading?

Through this research, the study hopes to deepen the discourse on T'nalak as a living repository of the T'boli's cultural identity, and to contribute to a broader understanding of the role of art in preserving the collective memory of indigenous communities in Mindanao.

4. SCOPE AND DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on the semiotic analysis of T'nalak, the traditional woven cloth of the T'boli people from Lake Sebu, South Cotabato. The research investigates how the designs, shapes, and colors of T'nalak function as a visual language of dreams, spirituality, and the collective memory of the community.

The study utilizes the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes to interpret both the denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural) meanings embedded in the textile's designs. The research covers visual representations of T'nalak found in documentaries, research photographs, videos, articles, and academic publications. The analysis is based on these documented sources, as the researcher did not conduct fieldwork within the T'boli community. Instead, existing narratives, interviews, and documentation from digital libraries, cultural organizations, and other credible sources were used.

The study does not include firsthand interpretations based on interviews with T'nalak weavers, nor does it involve ethnographic immersion in the community. It also does not address the technical processes of weaving or the economic aspects related to the cloth's production

and commercialization. Rather, the study remains focused on unpacking the symbolic meanings of the art based on existing records, statements, and representations.

Despite these limitations, the researcher hopes that reading the cultural signs within T'nalak will contribute to a deeper understanding of the art, culture, and identity of indigenous groups in Mindanao.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design centered on semiotic analysis. Its objective was to identify and interpret the symbols and designs of T'nalak as vessels of cultural memory among the T'boli people. Using the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, the analysis was conducted by examining images, documentaries, and recorded information from existing literature. The study relied on textual and visual analysis rather than direct interviews due to the researcher's physical limitations in accessing the T'boli community.

6. DATA SELECTION

Data were selected based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. The researcher employed purposive sampling in choosing both visual and textual sources. Research materials were gathered from credible online databases and digital libraries, ensuring the reliability of the sources through authorship, institutional affiliation, and year of publication.

7. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Data collection was conducted through desk research or research using existing sources. Visual representations of T'nalak, particularly its designs, colors, and shapes, were gathered from documented and published references. In addition, interview transcripts from previous studies and documentaries were analyzed to provide contextual meaning to the designs. All data were compiled, organized, and prepared for analysis according to cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic themes.

8. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The primary instrument used in this study was an analytical framework derived from the semiotic theories of Barthes and Saussure. A guide for analysis was developed consisting of three

components: Denotation, referring to the physical or literal form of the T'nalak design; Connotation, referring to the cultural meaning or symbolism based on the T'boli context; and Intertextual connections, which link the designs to narratives of dreams, rituals, and spirituality as found in literature.

9. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Data analysis was conducted in two main stages. First, a thematic textual analysis was performed, wherein the collected textual data were categorized according to themes related to dreams, spirituality, and cultural memory. Open coding was used to identify recurring topics and symbolic representations in interviews and design descriptions.

Second, a semiotic analysis based on Barthes' model was conducted, applying both denotative and connotative readings of the T'nalak designs. The study considered the structure of form, color, and symbols as signs bearing cultural meaning. Each design was individually examined and compared with explanations found in existing documents and prior research.

10. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a secondary research study that relied on existing data such as documentaries, photographs, videos, and textual reports, the researcher ensured that all sources used were properly and appropriately cited in accordance with the standards set by the American Psychological Association (APA), 7th edition. Due credit was strictly given to the original authors, documentarians, and source institutions to avoid any form of plagiarism and to uphold the integrity of the academic work.

The use of visual materials, interviews from documentaries, and video content was conducted under the principle of fair use. This principle was applied within the context of educational, non-commercial, and academic purposes, ensuring that no copyright laws were violated. The researcher did not alter or claim ownership of any of the materials used and maintained faithful interpretation aligned with their original context.

Moreover, the research took into account the sensitive nature of the T'boli's cultural identity as an indigenous group. In interpreting their art and symbolism, the analysis was conducted with deep



respect for their beliefs, way of life, and worldview. The researcher emphasized that the aim of this study was not to adapt T'boli knowledge to an outsider's perspective but to explain and highlight the significance of T'nalak within the T'boli's own cultural context, based on data that originates from the community itself.


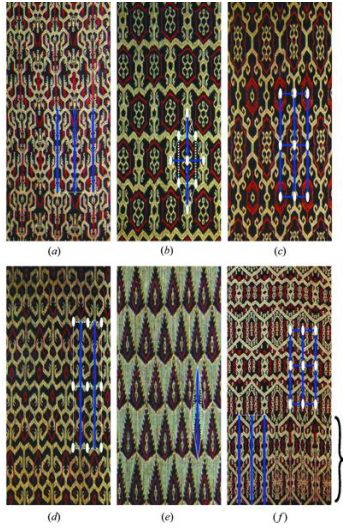
In summary, this study ensured that all information was used with ethical responsibility, guided by academic purpose, and with respect for the culture and intellectual rights of the original authors and knowledge holders.

12. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the analysis based on the research objective: to identify the symbolic elements of T'nalak and interpret their denotative and connotative meanings. A semiotic lens was applied in reading the designs to uncover the deeper significance of the art form as a bearer of dreams, spirituality, and the cultural memory of the T'boli people. The goal is to demonstrate that T'nalak is more than just cloth, it is a living text of their collective identity.

Table 1: Symbolic Elements of T'nalak and Their Connection to the Dreams, Spirituality, and Culture of the T'boli

Design Element	Visual Description	Connection to Dreams / Spirituality / Culture	Primary Sources
Zigzag (“Sigul”) 	Wave-like or spiral lines, often repeated in patterns	The sigul is believed to have first appeared to the weaver in a dream and serves as the “path of the spirit” crossing from the physical to the spiritual realm. It also acts as a guide for Fu Dalu (goddess of abacá) in imparting the sacred designs.	Pressbooks (2020); PIA News (2023)
Tricolor (Black, Red, White) 	Black background, white as the main motif, red as an accent color	These three colors hold religious and cultural meanings: Black symbolizes earth or the origin of life; Red represents the blood and sacrifice of ancestors; White signifies purity, used in rituals. The combination reflects the sacred cycle of life, death, and spiritual harmony with nature.	Emily Lush (2017); del Mundo (2021); Pinas Culture (2023)
Eye Motif	Circular design with a central point, resembling an “eye”	Regarded as the ancestral eye that protects the weaver. In dreams, the motif represents spiritual guardianship. It signifies continued connection to ancestral spirits, especially to Fu Dalu.	Pinas Culture (2023); PIA News (2023)

			
<p>Geometric and Animal Motifs</p> 	<p>Naturalistic forms such as triangles, circles, pointed shapes; animals like frogs, sharks, and shields</p>	<p>These motifs are often revealed in dreams. Frogs symbolize prosperity and fertility in rituals; sharks/triangles denote courage, strength, and danger; shields represent familial protection against evil spirits. Such designs serve as spiritual shields or ritual markers for weddings, harvests, or journeys.</p>	<p>T'boli Cultural Center (2018); Festivalscape (2023); Pinas Culture (2023); CCP (2020); Esteban (2017)</p>

The T'nalak is a sacred woven cloth of the T'boli people of Lake Sebu, South Cotabato, traditionally crafted based on the dreams of women weavers known as dreamweavers. According to T'boli belief, the designs are revealed through dreams with the guidance of a spirit named Fu Dalu, revered as the goddess of the abacá plant and the source of sacred weaving patterns (Del Mundo, 2021; PIA News, 2023). Prominent designs in the T'nalak include the zigzag or sigul, the eye motif, the tricolor scheme (black, red, white), and geometric or animal shapes such as frogs, sharks, and shield-like forms. While these appear as physical textile patterns, each carries a deeper meaning rooted in the T'boli community's spirituality, dreams, and cultural memory (NCCA, 2020; Gaspar, 2015).



From a semiotic perspective, these design elements are not merely decorative but visual texts that signify deeper cultural and spiritual meanings. For instance, the zigzag literally a wavy or spiral line also symbolizes the path of the spirit and serves as a bridge to Fu Dalu's realm, a design often revealed in the weaver's dream (University of Washington Pressbooks, 2020; Lineatextil.com, 2023). The tricolor scheme carries cultural codes: black symbolizes the earth and origins of life, red stands for ancestral blood and sacrifice, while white represents purity of intention and is often used in T'boli rituals (Lush, 2017; Del Mundo, 2021). The eye motif is seen as a symbol of spiritual guardianship, believed to represent the watchful gaze of ancestors who protect the dreamweaver during the weaving process


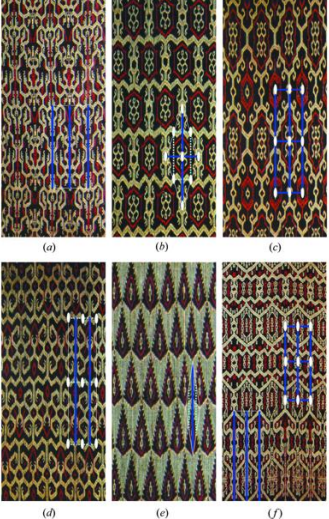
affirming the T'boli's ongoing connection to the spiritual realm (Pinas Culture, 2023). Meanwhile, geometric animal motifs such as frogs, sharks, and shields, embody specific meanings: frogs symbolize abundance and fertility, sharks symbolize courage, and shields stand for familial protection. These motifs serve practical purposes in rituals, weddings, and community blessings (Festivalscape, 2023; NCCA, 2020).

In sum, the T'nalak may be viewed as a cultural text a visual literature that is not merely an artistic product but a vessel of collective memory, belief,

and spiritual tradition of the T'boli. Its designs serve as transgenerational knowledge, passed down from ancestors to the present generation, reinforcing their identity as an indigenous community. Drawing from the semiotic theories of Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure, the T'nalak functions as a signifier that conveys a signified, serving as a bridge between dream and reality, past and present. Far from being a mere decorative item or tourist commodity, the T'nalak is a living custodian of T'boli cultural identity a testament that within every fiber and pattern lies the history, dream, and soul of an entire people.

Table 2: Denotatibo at Konotatibong Kahulugan ng mga Disenyo ng T'nalak

Design Element	Denotative Description	Expanded Meaning	Connotative	Primary Sources
Zigzag (“Sigul”) 	Wavy or spiral lines often repeated at the center or edge of the fabric's design.	The zigzag symbolizes the spiritual path from the world of dreams to the human realm. It is considered a "sacred passage" revealed by Fu Dalu in the dream of the dreamweaver. It conveys themes of journey, sanctity, and connection to the goddess who guides the weaving. Its repetitive pattern also reflects the T'boli belief in the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth.		Gaspar (2015); Pressbooks (2020); PIA News (2023); LineaTextil.com
Tri-color (Black, Red, White) 	Combination of three colors: black as the background, white as the main design line, and red as the accent color.	These colors bear sacred symbolism. Black represents the earth—the origin and return point of all beings. Red symbolizes ancestral blood, sacrifice, and the line of spiritual connection. White signifies purity and goodness, often used in rituals. This combination implies harmony and the interconnectedness of life, spirit, and nature. Color is regarded as a “sacred language” woven into the textile.		Emily Lush (2017); del Mundo (2021); NCCA (2020); Pinas Culture (2023)

<p>Eye Motif</p> 	<p>A circle with a center resembling an eye; commonly repeated throughout the design.</p>	<p>This motif symbolizes the eye of the spiritual guardian—Fu Dalu or the ancestors. It is used to express constant vigilance during the weaving process and within the dream of the weaver. The eye represents a deep spiritual sensitivity, empowering the weaver, and serving as the community's spiritual vision.</p>	<p>National Museum Notes (2021); Pinas Culture (2023); <i>Dreamweavers</i> documentary (2014)</p>
<p>Geometric and Animal Motifs</p> 	<p>Triangular, tapered, circular shapes; naturalistic forms of frogs, sharks, shields, and others.</p>	<p>These animals and geometric figures also originate from the dream of the weaver. Frog – symbol of abundance and fertility, often featured in wedding and harvest weaves. Shark/Triangle – signifies courage, danger, and bravery; used in warrior or chieftain garments. Shield – represents spiritual protection against evil spirits. These shapes act as visual codes of history, beliefs, and identity of each clan.</p>	<p>Festivalscape (2023); T'boli Cultural Center (2018); Narrastudio (2020); CCP (2020); Esteban (2017)</p>

Through a semiotic analysis of the primary designs of the T'nalak, several symbolic elements were identified: the zigzag or sigul, the tri-color scheme (black, red, white), the eye motif, and the geometric animal motifs such as the frog, shark, and shield. These elements appear repeatedly in the physical design of the cloth, narrated through lines, shapes, and colors that are meticulously arranged in symmetrical patterns. According to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA, 2020) and del Mundo (2021), the designs of the T'nalak are not merely decorative but are derived from the dreams of the so-called dreamweavers, women believed to have a sacred connection with the goddess Fu Dalu. Based on the works of Gaspar (2015), Lush (2017), and Pinas

Culture (2023), each design element has a particular function and meaning in the rituals, spiritual beliefs, and social structure of the T'boli.

Using Roland Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory, each T'nalak design can be read as a visual text composed of a physical form (denotation) and a deeper cultural meaning (connotation). For example, the zigzag or sigul may appear as a simple wavy or circular line, but in the dream of the dreamweaver, it represents the spiritual path or a bridge between the human and spirit worlds. The tri-color scheme consists of black (symbolizing the earth or origin), red (the blood of ancestors or sacrifice), and white (purity and ritual), which are commonly used in events such

as weddings or ancestral commemorations (del Mundo, 2021; Lush, 2017). The eye motif, though visually just a circle, signifies the ancestral gaze or spiritual vigilance over the weaving process (Pinas Culture, 2023). Meanwhile, the geometric animal forms such as the frog (abundance and fertility), shark or triangle (bravery and assertiveness), and shield (spiritual protection of the family) directly relate to the tribe's ritualistic and societal beliefs (Festivalscape, 2023; NCCA, 2020).

The T'nalak is more than just cloth; it is a sacred artform woven from dreams and spirituality. According to Esteban (2017), each design is a manifestation of the dream of a female weaver who serves as a conduit between the mortal and divine realms. Through its symbols, the T'nalak transmits stories, beliefs, and memories of the T'boli, forming a mode of transgenerational knowledge (Gaspar, 2015). Each strand holds meaning: it is a story, a dream, and a cultural narrative preserved in textile. Through the lens of semiotics, the T'nalak is not just art, it is a vessel of memory and tribal identity, a living form of cultural literature that expresses connection to nature, the spirit world, and history. In the face of modernization and commercialization, the art of the T'nalak serves as a reminder that culture can remain alive and meaningful, if it is truly understood, protected, and honored.

13. FINDINGS

Through a semiotic analysis of the T'nalak art of the T'boli using available documentaries, articles, photographs, and other visual sources, it was discovered that the T'nalak is more than just a textile. It serves as a living narrative of the T'boli community's culture, dreams, and spirituality.

First, several key design elements were identified—such as the zigzag (sigul), tri-color (black, red, and white), eye motif, and animal/geometric forms (e.g., frog, shield, shark)—which are not only aesthetically significant but also culturally profound. These elements are said to originate from the dreams of the weavers (dreamweavers) and are regarded as sacred, believed to be imparted by the spirit Fu Dalu through dreams.

Second, using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, both the denotative and connotative meanings of these symbols were revealed. For instance, the zigzag is not merely a wave-like line but represents a spiritual path; the tri-color

symbolizes the sacred balance of earth, blood, and purity; and the eye signifies the spiritual guardianship of the ancestors. These designs embody the tribe's collective memory, enriched in every strand of the fabric.

Third, it was found that the representation of T'nalak within the contexts of tourism and commercialization presents both opportunities and challenges. While it facilitates recognition of T'boli art, it also runs the risk of losing its original meaning if its spiritual and cultural origins are not properly conveyed. Thus, a critical reading of indigenous art is necessary to preserve its authentic cultural essence and prevent its dilution in the eyes of external markets.

Overall, T'nalak is a visual text capable of narrating the history, beliefs, and spirituality of the T'boli. It serves as a vessel of collective memory, with each design strand intricately connected to the spiritual and cultural identity of their community.

14. CONCLUSION

Based on the conducted semiotic analysis of T'nalak art, it is clear that this textile is not merely a traditional handicraft or decorative fabric, but a cultural text that serves as a medium of dreams, spirituality, and collective memory for the T'boli people. Each design, color, and shape found in the T'nalak carries the capacity to articulate the community's history, beliefs, and faith symbols born from the dreams of the weaver and guided by the spirit Fu Dalu.

The identified elements such as the zigzag (sigul), tri-color, eye motif, and animal or geometric forms hold both denotative and connotative meanings that enrich the global discourse on indigenous art as a carrier of identity. Through the lens of semiotics, the deep relationship between visual form and intangible culture wrapped in every thread of the textile has been demonstrated.

Moreover, the study revealed that while T'nalak gains wider visibility in the tourism and commercial sectors, it also faces the risk of being decontextualized if its true significance is not explained. Therefore, there is a pressing need to create spaces for critical engagement, representation, and education to ensure that recognition of the T'nalak remains faithful, respectful, and grounded in its cultural roots.

Ultimately, this research illustrates how art—such as T’nalak—can serve as a powerful language of history, identity, and dreams of an indigenous community. The T’nalak is far more than fabric; it is a living bearer of the soul and memory of a people.

15. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to further advance the discourse, understanding, and appreciation of the T’nalak as a cultural text of the T’boli:

1. **For researchers and scholars:** It is recommended to pursue deeper investigations using interdisciplinary approaches such as ethnography, interviews with dreamweavers, and comparative semiotic analyses of other indigenous textiles in the Philippines. Including the perspectives of the T’boli themselves is essential to produce more inclusive and ethical interpretations of their art.
2. **For cultural and educational institutions:** The development of curricula and academic programs—literary, visual-arts-based, or sociocultural—that discuss T’nalak as a cultural language is encouraged. This would promote cultural literacy among youth and students and deepen their understanding of the importance of indigenous art.
3. **For tourism and commercial advocates:** It is vital to use T’nalak in products and tourism-related activities with caution and responsibility. This should be done with consent, collaboration, and acknowledgment of the T’boli as the rightful stewards of the art. Upholding cultural sensitivity and integrity must be a priority to preserve the original spirit of the fabric amid commercialization.
4. **For the T’boli and indigenous communities:** Continued transmission of knowledge across generations is highly recommended through community education, oral history, and active weaving practices. The recognition of dreamweavers as cultural bearers of their

people’s history and spirituality must be strengthened.

5. **For educators and teachers:** T’nalak can be used as a compelling example in teaching literature, art, history, and Philippine culture to help students understand the value of indigenous knowledge in shaping national identity.

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