

COMMENTARY

A different future? Armenian identity through the prism of trauma, nationalism and gender

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As an Armenian-American, as the child of an immigrant from Iran and a refugee from Turkey, professor and director of a Women, Gender, Sexuality Program at a major university, and an anti-racist feminist I have thought and written about identity construction with emphasis on gender and its interaction with other social formations, particularly race/ethnicity/nation, for many years. While not all of this work focuses on my Armenian heritage, it is all informed by my experiences as an Armenian-American who grew up in an Armenian community in New York City in the 1940s and 1950s. The genocide and its denial are, of course, central to that experience. This commentary focuses on Armenian-Americans in the United States, with an emphasis on identity construction, nationalism, and gender from the perspective of observer, researcher, and sometimes participant. I am particularly interested in the genocide's central place in constructions of Armenian-American identity and community institutions, and the absence of a feminist voice in both scholarship and community debate. My thoughts about all of these issues are also informed by my participation in the Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop at Sabancı University in the May of 2009 and by subsequent discussions with Armenian and other feminists who trace their roots to Anatolia.

While well-known as the first state to accept Christianity in 301, and boasting an alphabet as early as in the fifth century, much of Armenian history since the fourteenth century is one of statelessness, dispersion, and diaspora. Beginning in the tenth century, Armenia was overrun by a variety of foreign invaders, forcing migration from the Armenian Pla-

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teau. Some founded the Cilician Kingdom (1080-1375), while others settled in Persia, Moldavia, Poland, and Italy.¹ The major immigration to the United States began in the late nineteenth century, during the period of the Hamidian massacres, and expanded greatly after 1915. Like other groups who have experienced genocide, Armenians in the diaspora focused on nation-building from a position of fragility. Would the people survive in their severely diminished number and dispersion in communities across the globe? Armenian refugees and immigrants in the diaspora set themselves to the task of establishing churches, schools, and other community institutions.

Using a strategy similar to other groups who were forced from their homelands by famine, political repression and other dire circumstances, Armenian immigrants migrated to communities where other Armenians had settled, often establishing communities whose members came from the same villages and towns in Turkey. These communities centered around churches, mostly Apostolic, and political parties. Men and even some women worked in factories and, in California, in agriculture. In the nativist atmosphere of the early twentieth century, Armenians—like immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—experienced discrimination, especially in Fresno, California, where they had established a fairly large community and where some acquired land and became leading growers, particularly in raisins and melons. Armenians' legal racial identification in the United States' racial hierarchy was ambiguous until 1909, when the Supreme Court handed down its decision that Armenians were white and could therefore become citizens, whiteness being a prerequisite for naturalization until 1952.² This decision did not overturn discrimination, such as restrictive covenants against Armenians in housing, which existed until the mid-twentieth century when the civil rights movement made such practices illegal.

By the 1950s many Armenians had climbed the economic and social ladder, and their very successful assimilation into US society brought new challenges. Would subsequent generations identify ethnically and support community institutions? All ethnic groups face these issues, but for a people who have been subject to an attempt to annihilate them, their cultural survival may depend on finding means to preserve communal identity. One common strategy is to look back to a golden, pre-genocide age, to discover the "essence" of the people as a guide for defining characteristics. Anthropologists have argued for years that cultures are creations

1 Robert Mirak, *Torn between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 6.

2 Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 205.

of social relations and, more recently, that they are not static. Over the last few decades, cultural studies scholars have theorized that cultures are fluid constructions changing over time and place, shaped by and shaping economic and social conditions. Identities of ethnic groups, thus, are a complex negotiation shaped by what their country of residence imposes upon them as well as by what they bring from their often oppositional cultures. Returning to an “authentic” past to construct ethnic identities or essences is a fiction generally created by dominant groups to serve the contemporary needs that they have determined as central.

This construction of the past, the essence of the people, reproduces dominant and subordinate social locations. Patriarchal Armenian history, for example, is assumed rather than problematized. If questioned at all, patriarchal practices in the nineteenth century—such as village women being kept in family compounds and not permitted to speak in public spaces—are blamed on what was imposed by those who conquered the Armenians, or on the need of Armenian families to protect their daughters from being taken by Turkish men.³ Armenians are represented as having neither responsibility nor agency. Contemporary Armenian-American churches and other community institutions continue to be patriarchal, often supported and maintained by the work of women, but male dominance is naturalized in this context as well. It is not considered an issue.

Another more overt and perhaps more effective strategy to bolster the ethnic identity of Armenian-Americans and to establish clarity about the mission of Armenian institutions is to focus on the genocide, its denial, and the struggle for its recognition. Sociologist Anny Bakalian’s 1993 work, the only book-length study on Armenian-Americans, has used a number of measures of assimilation in her research, including proficiency in the Armenian language, Armenian church attendance, endogamy, eating Armenian food, and traveling to Armenia, particularly after the establishment of the Republic in 1991.⁴ She found a substantial decrease in all of these measures in each subsequent generation; yet, even in the fourth generation of her sample, over 87% of her respondents reported feeling pride in their heritage, 75% identified as Armenians, and the same percentage would disagree with Americanizing their names. In addition, 85% have strong feelings about Turkey’s denial of the genocide.⁵

3 Susie Hoogasian Villa and Mary Kilbourne Matossian, *Armenian Village Life before 1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 92.

4 Anny P. Bakalian, *Armenian Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 414.

5 *Ibid.*, 418.

The genocide and its denial by the Turkish government along with the complicity of the U.S. congress and presidents over the last two decades take up enormous space in the Armenian American community and, I would argue, this issue is manipulated to shore up ethnic identification, while it detracts from other discussions vital to the growth and health of the community.⁶ Organizing around the genocide also serves to bolster the identities of subsequent waves of immigrants who might be more accurately called diasporan, rather than ethnic Armenians. Coming to the United States after 1965 when immigration laws became less restrictive, they did not arrive from Turkey, but from countries in the Middle East to which their ancestors had fled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when life became too dangerous for Armenians in Turkey, from Armenia after the establishment of the Republic, and from Azerbaijan in the 1990s. Having established thriving communities in countries where assimilation is not the norm, diasporan Armenians in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and other countries in the region maintained loyalty to their language, history, and culture, with institutions to bolster these connections. Those who immigrated to the United States found themselves in a context in which Americanization was expected, and keeping the cohesion they experienced in the Middle East proved to be more difficult. Genocide and its denial, and the historical and ongoing injustice, are important for Armenian-American group and individual identities just as it was for earlier immigrants.⁷

My critique of this focus on the genocide is not meant to question the need for continued research and political activism around its recognition by both Turkey and the United States. The genocide and its denial are central to both Armenian history and individual as well as group identity. What I am questioning is the almost singular, perhaps obsessive, focus on this topic, of resources being spent on continuing to pile up evidence for what most scholars and many governments have now accepted. Who is still to be convinced? Obviously, Turkey still actively denies the genocide, and the United States is complicit. Do we really need Turkey's admission to validate Armenian history? On what other scholarly and political issues would we Armenians spend our time and

6 Since the establishment of the Republic of Armenia, Armenian organizations have rallied around the young and fragile state, and there has been an enormous debate about the republic in the community. I will not address this issue here.

7 I am grateful to Hourig Attarian for raising the issue of the differences between ethnic and diasporan Armenians. This issue needs to be explored much more thoroughly, both theoretically as well as with empirical research.

resources if we were not beating this drum? And what impact would a change in direction have on communal and individual identities?

Enormous energy and resources are spent on this past, on Armenians' victimization, and the assumption is that Turkey's admission of culpability will change everything. Genocide denial is constructed as the problem and Turkey's admission to it as the panacea, while contemporary issues within the community are consistently subordinated. Even the discussion of the genocide is limited. Vital questions are ignored or marginalized. What, for example, are the psychological effects of the genocide on subsequent generations and community institutions? How has the continuing denial compounded the effects of the original trauma? What was the effect of this gendered genocide on constructions of masculinity and femininity in the post-genocide generations? How did the rape and abduction of Armenian women and girls impact conceptions of and the practice of sexuality among subsequent generations? How is gender implicated in the ongoing constructions of Armenian-American notions of the nation or in our ethnic and diasporan identities?

Scholarship on the psychological and social effects of other genocides explores both the effects of the trauma on victims and their descendants, as well as the coping mechanisms that they develop. While various Armenian institutions and individual researchers have undertaken and preserved the oral testimony of survivors, scholarship on the impact of the genocide is scant. In the 1980s, Levon Boyajian and Haigaz Grigorian published an article arguing that, like other genocide survivors and their descendants, Armenian survivors and their children do exhibit psychological issues related to the genocide.⁸ They state that the genocide continues on a psychological level and posit that recovery is not possible until the genocide is recognized both by the perpetrators and the world community. Focusing on women's experience and the recovery of the genocide, Flora A. Keshgegian has deployed Judith Herman's theory on trauma and recovery to argue that looking to the perpetrator to validate the trauma continues the victimization. What is needed to move to recovery is for victims to tell their stories of pain, have them witnessed, recognize their agency, mourn the loss, and finally integrate the totality of that experience into the self, with others in the community, and in the larger culture.⁹ The commemorations of the genocide on April 24 do the

8 Levon Boyajian and Haigaz Grigorian, "Psychosocial Sequelae of the Armenian Genocide," in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard Hovanessian (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987), 178.

9 Flora A. Keshgegian, "Struggling for Life: The Legacy of Genocide and Armenian-American Women," in *Armenian Women in a Changing World: Papers Presented at the First International Conference of the Ar-*

work of communal remembrance, but they do not focus on the continuing trauma. Their focus is primarily on continued Turkish denial.

The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation has taken important steps to start this vital discussion. The institute sponsored a conference in Yerevan on Comparative Genocide and included a section on Genocide and its Consequences with one presentation by a psychologist.¹⁰ In the 1990s, in an attempt to initiate a discussion within the Armenian-American community, the institute held a day-long conference near a large and active Armenian community, on the inter-generational social and psychological effects of the Armenian genocide, which included talks by Keshgeghian and Grigorian on their research. It also facilitated workshops for participants to explore their own histories and feelings about what their parents and/or grandparents had experienced and transmitted to them either verbally or non-verbally. Despite extensive publicity and the prestige of the Zoryan Institute, attendance was very low. The crucially important discourse among scholars and community members about the long-term psychological effects of the genocide is not taking place, and I would argue that it has been stunted by the exclusive focus on genocide denial. Armenians were victimized, but unlike other groups with a traumatic history, we do not consider the psychological consequences of that history. Admission of the genocide is an end in itself. Or, as Boyajian has posited, the effects will be overturned once Turkey takes responsibility. Communal neglect of these issues is another kind of denial and may have even more serious consequences than Turkey's denial. We may not have had a Nuremberg, but we could have agency in our own healing, like other victims of genocide whose histories have not been recognized or only recently acknowledged, such as Native Americans.

Another major aspect of the genocide that has been missing from both scholarly and community discussion is the effect of the treatment of women and girls. The genocide was very clearly gendered. Men were killed, and women and children were sent on forced marches. Women and girls were raped and abducted, some were forced into prostitution, both during the genocide and in its aftermath, as a way to survive. These

menian Women's International Association, ed. Barbara J. Merguerian and Doris D. Jafferian (Belmont, MA: AIWA Press, 1995), 180-81. Keshgeghian's ideas are developed further especially in the chapter "'Never Forget': The Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust" in her book *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

10 The proceedings of this conference have been published as *Problems of Genocide: Proceedings of the International Conference on "Problems of Genocide" April 21-23, 1995, National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan, Republic of Armenia*, (Toronto: Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1997).

aspects of the genocide were recognized by contemporary observers, but until very recently there has been very little scholarly attention to this central feature of the genocidal process.¹¹ Reading the Armenian press from the period after the genocide, Lerna Ekmekçiöğlü has found that the reintegration of these women and their children, who were fathered by Turkish men, was the topic of a heated debate. She has argued that this debate was central to reconstructing the nation and Armenian identity. Researching the same period, Vahe Tachjian has recovered the stories of many women survivors and examined the dichotomy between positive attitudes towards orphans on the one hand and, on the other hand, the uneasiness or blatant negativity towards women and girls who had become prostitutes, who had lived in Turkish households and whose children had been fathered by Turkish men. He has argued that images of nations targeted by genocide become “sacralized”; in this context, victims and survivors were “draped in the martyr’s unique, immaculate and innocent mantle,” and these women and girls “desecrated” that image.¹² Most recently, Ayşe Gül Altınay and Fethiye Çetin have published a book on women and children who stayed in Turkish households, adopting Turkish identities while keeping their Armenian identities to themselves. Unfortunately, the book has not been translated into English, and I do not read Turkish, but earlier work by both authors is centrally important to our understanding of the genocide, the survival strategies, and both Armenian and Turkish ethnicity.¹³ We need to know these stories as much as the stories of those who survived and died on the marches. They are also victims and survivors who ought to be honored, and researching them from a feminist and ethnic perspective can provide

11 Matthias Bjornlund, “a Fate Worse Than Dying: Sexual Violence During the Armenian Genocide,” in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century*, ed. D. Herzog (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Lerna Ekmekçiöğlü, “Approaching the Unlucky Sister and Her Child: Sexual Violence as a Boundary Marker During and after the Armenian Genocide” (paper presented at the Society for Armenian Studies Conference, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, March 2009); Katherine Derderian, “Common Fate, Different Experiences: Gender Specific Aspects of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005); Vahe Tachjian, “Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide,” *Nations and Nationalisms* 15, no. 1 (2009).

12 Tachjian, “Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion,” 76.

13 Fethiye Çetin and Maureen Freely, *My Grandmother: A Memoir*, trans. Maureen Freely (London: Verso, 2008); Fethiye Çetin and Ayşe Gül Altınay, *Torunlar* (İstanbul: Metis, 2009); Ayşe Gül Altınay and Yektan Türkyılmaz, “Unravelling Layers of Silencing: Converted Armenian Survivors of 1915,” in *Untold Histories of the Middle East: Recovering Voices from the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Amy Singer, Christoph Neuman, and Selçuk Akşin Somel (London: Routledge, forthcoming); Ayşe Gül Altınay, “In Search of Silenced Grandparents: Ottoman Armenian Survivors and Their (Muslim) Grandchildren,” in *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern, die Türkei und Europa / The Armenian Genocide, Turkey and Europe*, eds. Hans-Lukas Kieser and Elmar Plozza (Zürich: Chronos, 2006).

vital insights into how post-genocide efforts to rebuild the nation and Armenian identity were gendered and how those conceptions continue to shape both our ethnic and gender identities.

What replaces this kind of enormously fruitful exploration is a stultifying nationalism. While factionalism within the Armenian community is well-known, it exists alongside a notion that we all know what it means to be an Armenian. Important scholarship over more than two decades has exploded many assumptions around questions of nationalisms and identities. Once conceptualized as determined by blood and, in some cases, a deity, nations were assumed to be static over time and place; those who were part of the nation naturally shared identities. Formulations from the left denounced nationalism as a destructive force or a pathology unless deployed in the struggle to overthrow a colonialist power, in which case it was championed. An important critique of both positions came in 1983 from Benedict Anderson who theorized nationalism as a cultural phenomenon and nation as an imagined community in which a people's sense of nation is not based on face-to-face interaction but on the idea of such a connection. While Anderson's work freed the discourse from both the essentialism of a nation based on blood and from characterizations that dismissed nationalism as pathological, it was not until 1989 and the publication of the edited collection *Women, Nation State* that gender and race were positioned as central to constructions of nationalisms and identities; in 1992 the collection *Nationalisms and Sexualities* added sexuality to these theorizations.¹⁴ Since then scholarship from a variety of disciplines has established this connection in many locations.¹⁵

Like our patriarchal past and present, Armenian nationalism is not problematized either in the Armenian press or in scholarly work.¹⁶ Instead of a discussion of who the "we" is and what that construction

14 Andrew Parker et al., eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Nira Yuval-Davis et al., eds., *Women, Nation, State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

15 The literature on nationalism and gender is now voluminous. Selected titles include: Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Alev Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

16 *The Armenian Forum: A Journal of Contemporary Affairs* 1 (Spring 1998) devoted much of an entire issue to these questions with articles focused around the documentary "Back to Ararat: A Forgotten Genocide; A Dream of Return" and Parker, et. al., *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. Articles included Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian, "You Have to Want to be Armenian Here: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Problem of Armenian Diasporic Identity," H. Aram Vesser, "International Nationalism - Living Lack, Muzzled Cohort: Most at Home When Farthest Abroad," and Arlene Voski Avakian, "Validated and Erased: A Feminist Views 'Back to Ararat.'"

means, Armenian community discussions continue to focus on the vilification of Turks while limiting open discussion of contemporary issues. Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, issues such as feminism and sexuality are almost universally absent from lectures and conferences presented by Armenian institutions, and when brave souls do raise them, they are met with silence or denunciations. When I venture into Armenian events, even those which self-identify as progressive, I am taken back to the beginnings of the women's movement in the early 1970s, when frustrated feminists met at the back of lecture halls, in the aisles, or in women's restrooms to share their outrage at women's issues not being included or trivialized by conference presenters. The genocide and its denial are center stage, and anything else is a distraction.

My research with Armenian women and Armenian feminists indicates that some women left Armenian communities because they could not find within them a place where they were taken seriously as adults.¹⁷ College professors, judges, and other professional women were assumed to be subordinate to men and expected to take notes and provide refreshments at meetings of community organizations. Young Armenian feminists who identify as Armenian and feel very close to the culture do not consider being part of Armenian institutions because of the latter's conservatism related to gender as well as other social issues (such as race, class, and sexuality). Women who are in mixed marriages, for example, are concerned about not having acceptable means to bring Armenian culture into the lives of their children. As feminists they are unable to participate in either religious or community organizations because these are so male-dominated, even though they want their children to have some connection to their heritage. While many Armenian feminists and other progressives do not want anything to do with Armenian organizations, others are pained by their alienation from the community.

There is no feminist voice in the community; not surprisingly, feminist issues are not part of the community discourse. I do not know of any Armenian feminist organization, except for a group of women who have been meeting regularly for many years in Cambridge and several small

17 Arlene Voski Avakian, "Took Hye Geener Eck? Armenian American Women's Ethnic Self-Identification and Community Involvement," in *Armenian Women in a Changing World: Papers Presented at the First International Conference of the Armenian Women's International Association*, ed. Barbara J. Merguerian and Doris D. Jaffarian (Belmont, MA: AIWA Press, 1995); "Surviving the Survivors of the Armenian Genocide: Daughters and Granddaughters," in *Voices of Armenian Women*, ed. Barbara Merguerian and Joy Renjilian-Burgy (Belmont: AIWA Press, 2000); "Shish Kebab Armenians? Food and the Construction and Maintenance of Ethnic and Gender Identity," in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

Armenian gay and lesbian organizations on either coast.¹⁸ I know of a number of Armenian feminists, some of whom have made connections with feminists in Armenia around women's as well as gay and lesbian issues. One of these groups, the WOW project, will publish correspondence between women in Armenia and the diaspora about gender and sexuality. Perhaps feminist groups do exist, but as someone who is well-known to other Armenian feminists through my memoir, *Lion Woman's Legacy* and my published scholarship on Armenian-American women, I would most likely know about such groups.¹⁹ Over the last few decades, there have been some short-lived efforts to raise feminist issues, including a few workshops on gender roles sponsored by the Zoryan Institute in Boston, Toronto, and Montreal, as well as several articles on feminist and other contemporary issues in publications such as *The Armenian Forum* and *Armenian International Magazine*, neither of which have continued to publish. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, more than forty years after the beginning of the women's movement in the United States, Armenian-American discourse does not include feminism.

Armenians cannot blame Turkey for the lack of serious discussion of contemporary issues within Armenian-American communities, although the unexamined and still festering wounds from the genocide may be related to this lack. Armenian-Americans are not willing to take responsibility for any of the problems within our communities: for factionalism; for a community which is not welcoming to young people; for a community whose resistance even to ideas that are no longer new, such as feminism, is almost laughable, were it not so tragic. Is this inability to change, this need to hold on to a past to validate one's identity the final result of the genocide that occurred almost a century ago? If Turkey admits the genocide, these problems will not disappear. We Armenian-Americans have projected our problems onto the Turkish denial of the genocide rather than doing our own work of healing and moving forward. Further, in attempts to solidify group identification by focusing on the genocide denial, other issues are continually deemed outside the parameters of legitimate discussion. Contemporary issues such as gender relations have no place within the community discourse, alienating young and old, women and even some men.

18 AIWA is women's organization which probably includes several feminists among its members, but it is not an organization that identifies itself as feminist, and while it does address women's issues, it rarely does so from a feminist perspective.

19 Arlene Voski Avakian, *Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian American Memoir* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1992).

I find it deeply ironic that I am writing this commentary about the genocide and the lack of a feminist voice in the Armenian-American community in a journal published in Turkey and that the Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop of 2009 whose focus was "Gender, Ethnicity and the Nation-State: Anatolia and Its Neighboring Regions" provided an amazing space for Armenian feminists from the diaspora, those who trace their roots to the region, and Turkish feminists to find each other.²⁰ In addition to a plethora of papers on feminist issues at the conference, many of us gathered informally for very fruitful discussions, our similarities and differences giving us rich insights into our shared histories and contemporary contexts. While I look forward to attending the workshop again, I wish I could imagine such a conference taking place on the other side of the ocean. I wonder what it would take to make that possible. What is the relationship between the narrow focus on the genocide recognition I have discussed and the lack of a feminist voice? What are the connections between the ongoing neglect of the psychological effects of the genocide on Armenian-Americans' inability or refusal to address gender roles? Perhaps when we are able to have serious discussions about these issues we can finally mark the beginning of our recovery from the genocide.

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20 The first panel of the conference included two papers (one by Hourig Attarian and the other by this author) which focused on women's stories from a feminist perspective. The first comment was from a prominent male Armenian-American historian of the genocide who questioned our use of feminism in our talks. He stated that he had written about women survivors of the genocide and questioned whether his non-feminist accounts of these experiences would be any different from those written from a feminist perspective. He further questioned whether these stories by women would have been any different from ones about men. His question denied not only the validity of our presentations, but the now almost universally respected field of women's studies.

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