



SECOND LIFE OF BODIES IN NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT: The aim of the paper is to analyze and interpret uses of human remains in traditional cultures of New Guinea. The author discusses four groups of artifacts: ancestor cult, war trophy, items of everyday needs, and body adornments. The author provides detailed information from selected cultures of New Guinea. It is shown that artifacts made from human remains were not an isolated phenomenon, but were an integral part of cultural customs and way of life in particular cultures.

KEY WORDS: human remains – material culture – artifact – Papua-New Guinea – death

There is a growing consciousness about discussions surrounding the ethics of displaying human remains in an exhibition and keeping them in museum collections. Jenkins (2016) has summarized arguments for both sides; the museums, as well as indigenous people asking for repatriation of artifacts belonging to their cultural traditions. The argument of indigenous people is strong; many of the items in museum collections were obtained, in fact, in colonial situations and, as a result, of colonial power. However, there is a question of provenance; it is well known that natives in many cultural areas traded their artifacts or directly offered its replicas (or fakes) to willing traders. However, it is also an indisputable truth that many artifacts were obtained illegally. For example, Hurley exported stuffed heads from the Fly River under hardly acceptable conditions (see Young – Clark 2001). So, it is hard to define the provenance of artifacts in many cases today. Museums mostly argue that they protect cultural heritage of humankind, provide professional care for the artifacts, and give the opportunity for scholars to study the collections. However, that is an argument better left for discussion for a later paper. Nevertheless, what I do see as important is that artifacts, including those

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manufactured from human remains, are key for understanding the culture that produced them. This is because they are a very integral part of understanding the way of life for the people belonging to that particular culture. The crucial problem is the fact that these human remains mostly play a role in giving examples or specimens; in spite of the fact that we are dealing with body remains of individuals, whose identity was very often forgotten or lost in the course of time.

My intention in this paper is to demonstrate examples from New Guinea and how the human remains that are transformed into artifacts are an integral part of a particular culture, its symbolic system and institutional arrangements. Therefore; the particular aim of the paper is to provide an overview of using body parts as artifacts in New Guinea traditional societies. It had been common in New Guinean societies to use parts of the human body for manufacturing different types of artifacts. It is possible to sort them into four distinctive groups: cult of ancestors, head-hunting trophy, items of everyday need, and body adornment. It is well known that New Guineas indigenous people developed rich material culture with many distinctive styles. The paper is focused on selected examples of cultural groups from New Guinea which exemplify the four mentioned types of use of parts of human bodies [Table 1].

Table 1. Types of use of parts of human bodies in New Guinea

Type of Use	Cultural Group / region	Artifact
Ancestor cult	Iatmul	Over-modeled skull
	Fly River	Ancestor skull
Trophy	Marind-Anim	Mandible
	Asmat	Ancestor skull
Everyday item	Boiken	Lime spatula
Body adornment	Asmat	Mandible
	Asmat	Necklace

Cults of ancestors have existed in many ethnic groups of New Guinea. In many cases, the worshiping of ancestors was somehow related to harvest, men's cult, and to warfare. For example, Roy Rappaport had reported that Tsembaga Maring asked their ancestors for support in warfare. They had sacrificed their herds of pigs to the ancestors (Rappaport 1984). Mary Reay (1959) showed that the Kuma people of Wahgi Valley believed in two human souls. Representation of *minman* is a shadow and is identical with consciousness. *Kibe* is an immortal spirit living near their relatives. They had to provide them pork to satisfy their hunger for pigs. Cults of ancestors mostly comprised of a preservation worshiping human remains, mostly skulls or whole heads (skin and skull). Human skulls were preserved for ritual or religious purposes in many cultures of the world (for an overview, see Wiczorek – Rosendahl 2011). Preserving human heads was related to head-hunting and cannibalism in many New Guinea ethnic groups. However, it is not a general rule that cannibalism was practiced and heads of victims were kept. For example, cannibalism was practiced in Sepik communities, but its members rarely stored human heads as trophies. If natives of New Guinea practiced

head-hunting and cannibalism, they were very often manufactured items of everyday need and body adornments from the victims' skeletons. It is a rule that they never manufactured things for everyday use from the relatives' skeleton. The next three sections will provide detailed information on selected examples of artifacts from all defined types.

Skulls as War Trophies

Head-hunting had been common in many New Guinean communities in the pre-colonial period. Colonial officers and missionaries made an effort to eradicate this custom because they saw it as being in contradiction with positive values of civilization. New Guinean communities had been slowly abandoning head-hunting and related raids since the establishment of colonial governments on the islands in 19th century. However, Papuans had practiced head-hunting in some regions until the 1960s. The custom especially prevailed in the societies depending on sago (Oliver 1989: 426); it is a subsistence strategy in the south coast of New Guinea and in the basin of Sepik. It is worth noting that head-hunting was widespread in all other cultural areas of the world with records available from: African Igbo people (Okwu 2010), South American Mudurucú people (Murphy 1960), North American Basketmaker people (Feldman 2008: 131–132), Asian Naga people (Oppitz *et al.* 2008) or Polynesian Maori people (Robley 1896), as an example. Regarding New Guinea, diversity of both motivations for acquiring and the crafting of heads and bones developed on the island. Headhunting had been especially related to an initiation or to other social processes such as eligibility to marriage. In other words, a common motivation was to demonstrate an ability to be recognized as an adult man.² In fact, headhunting was practiced in nearly all cultures of non-Austronesian-language-speaking people along the south coastal area, with one exception; the Elema-speaking people had not taken the heads of their enemies (Knauff 1993: 25).

Head-hunting was a common practice in the region of the Papuan Gulf and the Fly River. Men of the Suki group of the Fly River region entered colonial records as headhunters. The most complex narrative of their repeated attacks on the Weredai group had provided colonial officer, Jack Hides (1938), who was charged (in a company with others) to investigate the attacks and to arrest the attackers. The Suki people practiced headhunting as a part of marriage customs. They manufactured a head of a slaughtered enemy in a specific way. After decapitation, they removed the skin from the skull, then they stuffed and shaped the dried skin and remodeled the head of enemy. They used a particular rattan holder attached in the nose and on the backplate (Baxter Riley 1923; Haddon 1923). Gunnar Landtman also reported this custom after conducting research amongst the Kiwai people. He described the Kiwai motivations for warfare and also provided detailed information about the handling of slaughtered enemies. They had been cutting off enemy heads using special beheading knives, which had been commonly used in the area, and the enemy head was then transported to the home village using a bamboo head-carrier consisting of a rattan loop with the ends mounted to a cross-piece. The loop was pushed through the mouth and neck, so it was possible to transport the head using the loop as a handle. The cross-piece worked in a similar way as a horse bit (Landtman 1916; 1933). The reason for this head-hunting

² A custom of headhunting was dominantly practiced by men.

practice by the Kiwai people was probably really simple, they loved human flesh. However, it is not only human flesh, anthropologist Alfred Haddon recorded an expression of one of the Goaribaris:

The man looks fine with his bleeding head in one hand and with a bamboo knife in the other (Maiden 2003: 23).

Head-hunting was reported in many other cultural groups of the region. The Goaribari islanders had a reputation as head-hunters and cannibals as they practiced head-hunting for the love of human flesh. The Goaribari were responsible for the death of reverend James Chalmers, whom they killed, alongside his whole company on Easter Monday in 1901. A subsequent investigation revealed that they had clubbed him in a man's house called a *dubu* in the village Dopima. They ate him and his mission helpers in the same day. The Goaribari men used a special knife for cutting off his head; it was a combination of a beheading knife and funnel, then they drank the enemy's blood, which was channeled directly to the mouth (Maiden 2003: 57). Missionary Harry Daucey reported that the Goaribari people stored thousands of enemies' skulls in their men's houses. In fact, the skulls of head-hunting victims were commonly displayed in men's houses in Papuan Gulf. The Kerewa people, for example, stored the skulls around a carved board called *Agibe* in a men's house (Newton 1961).

Asmat is a well-documented cultural group of Western Papua whose distinctive decorative style has demanded the attention of collectors for a long time. The whole culture revolved around head-hunting and related cannibalism, which was reflected in their material culture and its symbolic expression. Symbolism on war shields, trumpets, drums, poles, paddles, and many other types of artifacts reflect key cultural activities corresponding with head-hunting and cannibalism (see Smidt 1999; Huber 2009). The most complete information about Asmat head-hunting was provided by the missionary Gerard Zegwaard (1959), who had lived among the Asmat people after World War II. The headhunting was related to the initiation system. The initiation ceremony took place shortly after a boy's first successful head-hunting raid. Removed heads were a core part of the ritual. For two to three days, the groups of boys meditated with the victim's heads in front of their penises. There was a strong believe that the power and vital strength would pass to the boys. Each boy also received the victim's name. Their bodies were smeared with the victim's blood and ash from their burned hair. The Asmat men broke the skull in order to gain access to the brain. They removed it and mixed it with sago, and sago worm before the mixture was ritually consumed. The victim's skull was stored in a man's house or in a sago grove. They manufactured rattan suspension which was pierced in the nasal hole and back around the maxilla [Pl. 1].

Similar initiation praxis was an integral part of the culture of the Marind-Anim people, who were also headhunters. In comparison with the Asmat people, they had been going around and collecting human heads in a distant area outside their territory. Historical records show that they often traveled to the Trans-fly region, which is hundreds of kilometers from their homelands. Several villages normally participated in the raid. The aim of the raid was to secure the heads and the names of the victims. Marind-Anim smashed an enemy's head (male, female, or child) with the hunting club called a *pahui*. The idea was to break the *pahui* over the head of victim but not directly kill him or her. The raider had to find out the name of the victim before he killed him or her. It was obvious that they did not collect real names because they could not understand the language of the attacked people; so, they memorized any pronounced



Pl. 1 Asmat war trophy. Jan Rendek's private collection (Photo: Jan Rendek).

words. They did not transport the head as a whole because the fleshy parts would quickly start to decompose as they were a long distance from home. They removed the skin placing it on a coconut in order for it to be dried by the sun. They subsequently scratched off the meat and removed the eyeballs and brain because those parts were useless to them. Later, the head was reconstructed. The eye holes were filled with the soft part of sago palm-leaf. It was also necessary to reconstruct the cheeks with clay and the mandible was fastened with rattan to the rest of the head. Then, the skin was threaded on the skull (Baal 1966: 746–747; see also Knauff 1993). The Marind-anim people manufactured not only victims' heads, but they also collected the mandible which they mounted on a stick [Pl. 2].



Pl. 2 Marind-anim war trophy. Jan Rendek's private collection (Photo: Jan Rendek).

Cults of Ancestors

Ethnographers and missionaries documented a cult of ancestors in many New Guinea societies, which had been mostly based on worshiping skulls or bones of deceased members of a community. Mummification of the deceased relatives was also common in many ethnic groups of New Guinea. However, the custom is rarely practiced nowadays. The Anga people of Eastern Highlands occasionally still mummify the bodies of deceased persons. Detailed information was provided by anthropologist Beatrice Blackwood, who conducted fieldwork among them in the mid-1930s. She had witnessed several mummifications during her stay among the Anga people. The corpse was placed in a chair-like construction made of cane which was suspended from the roof. The bottom of the chair ended about one foot from the floor. The body was in a sitting position, firmly secured to the construction. The head was upright with the mouth and eyes open, and the tongue was between the teeth. Fire was made under the body, which was slowly smoked. When the mummification was completed the mummy was placed on the burial platform in the village (Blackwood 1978: 134–135). The Dani people also mummified their dead ancestors in a similar way in the past; they dried the

body in a sitting position. The Dani people prefer cremation of the corpse at the present time (Heider 1970: 152; Gardner – Heider 1974: 95).

Fredrik Barth (1987: 3) had argued that skulls and bones are “concrete symbols”. He had conducted a research amongst Baktaman people in the 1960s and 1970s. He especially focused on their initiation system. They worshiped ancestors in sacred houses called *katiam* and *yolam* in which they stored bones and colored skulls of deceased ancestors. The temple *katiam* was residential, and the men located war trophies and sacrifices for successful cultivation of taro in the building. In the building there were also fingers, clavicles, breastbones, and mandibles of clan ancestors in string bags. A non-residential temple called *yolam* was dedicated to the ancestors and was linked to the cult of taro and warfare. It normally contained two groups of ancestor skulls. On the right side were rowed skulls related to the cult of taro; the forehead was decorated by a white line. The opposite side was lined with skulls dedicated to warfare, where the forehead of each skull was colored by a red line. Among the Baktaman people it was also a common custom to worship skulls in a natural state, without decoration. Barth pointed out that there were no rigorous rules of the cult because he recorded significant differences between the Baktaman villages.

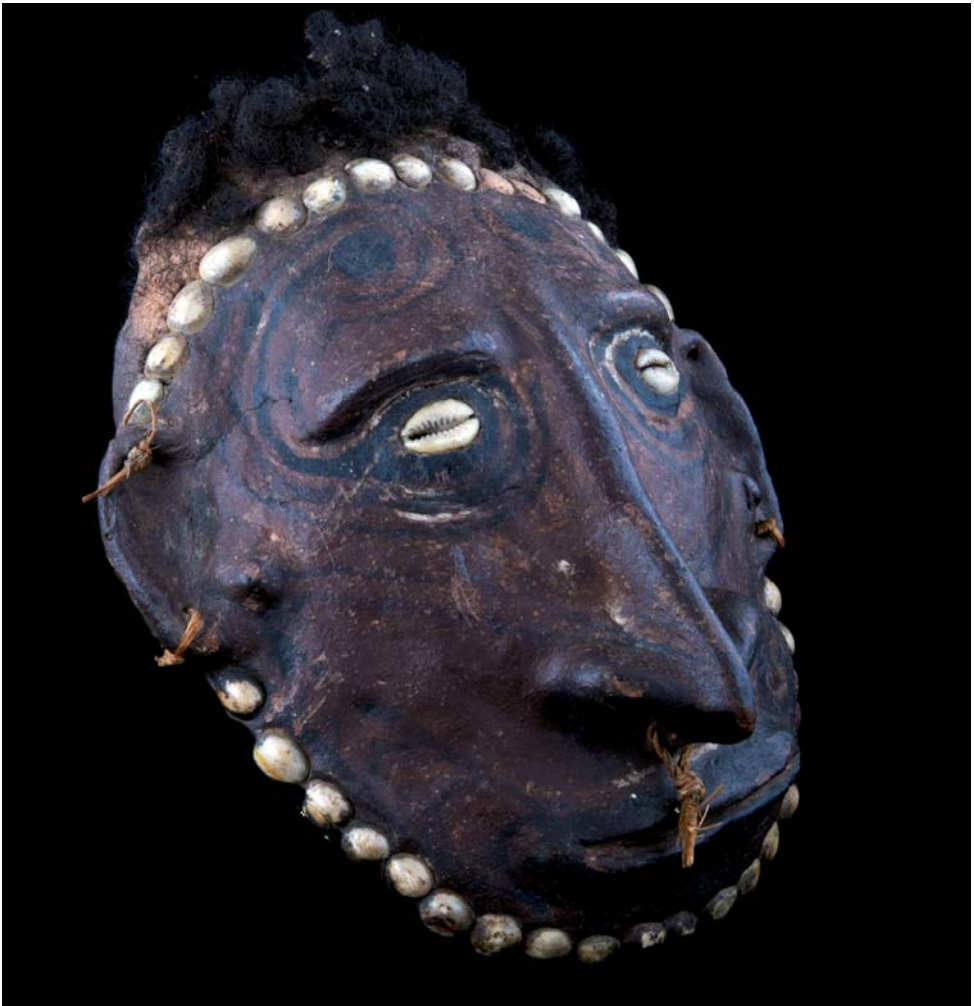
However, worshiping undecorated skulls is known from other parts of the island such as in the Geelwinkbay region, which is famous for the korwar style. A figure commonly called korwar represented the soul or spirit of deceased ancestors, as it had been believed that the spirit or soul of the person dwells in the korwar. Korwars were mostly made of wood and, very often, of light wood. They are typically disproportionate in regards to the size of a head and body; the head was robust in comparison to body. A korwar figure mostly stands or squats and most of the figures hold a shield in front of them. The people of that region had been producing several types of korwar. However, in regards to the topic of the paper, the important one is called the skull korwar. The undecorated skull of the deceased person was set inside the head of the korwar; which was rare for this type of figure. The korwar had been functioning as a mediator between the living and the deceased relative whom the korwar represented. It was believed that dead persons are still interested in family and community affairs so people had been consulting korwars in important issues (see Baaren 1968).

In many New Guinean cultures, practicing cult of ancestors were skulls of relatives that were highly decorated. We already discussed people from the Fly River in relation to head-hunting and cannibalism; however, they also practiced various cults of ancestor and typically worshiped decorated skulls which had been stored in men’s houses. The mandible was fixed to the maxilla by a rattan string and the forehead of the skull was decorated by a carving with typical Papuan Gulf design, in this case, representing the human figure [Pl. 3]. In fact, there were regional variants of style in decorating skulls in the Papuan Gulf and adjacent interior regions. Different types of decoration of the ancestor skulls were common in the region. The best examples originate in the Bamu River and other tributaries of the Fly River. That type of trophy-skull had been greatly decorated. The skull had an expanded nasal orifice with a wooden oval which was garnished with a feather. The face was covered with Job’s tears. Long sockets were mounted to the eyes; the sockets were also decorated with Job’s tears and on the top with red mucuna beans (see Newton 1961: 92). However, many other variants of that pattern of decoration existed in the area.



Pl. 3 Ancestor skull from Upper Fly River. Jan Rendek's private collection (Photo: Jan Rendek).

The last way of manufacturing ancestor skull was its over-modeling. It was a common practice in middle Sepik and was a part of mortuary ritual. Over-modeling could be done after decomposition of the body. Cranial openings were closed by wood. The nose was shaped using rattan. A key part of the manufacturing was modeling the face of the deceased ancestor. A skilled man prepared a special mixture called *yiba*. It consisted of red clay, lime, and tigasso oil. The man covered the skull with the mixture and he shaped the face of the ancestor in the men's house where the skull was drying for few days. He colored the face with natural pigments in the final phase. Finished over-model was displayed in important rituals. Occasionally, they mounted the over-model on a representational figure (see Bateson 1958). Many Melanesian collections also include the face of ancestors modeled on animal skulls or turtle shells [Pl. 4]. However, it does not mean that these types of artifacts were faked. In the case that the original over-model was destroyed, lost, or stolen, men modeled a new one.



Pl. 4 Remodeled face of an ancestors on turtle shell. Martin Soukup's private collection (Photo: Marek Smejkal).

Everyday Items, Gifts, and Body Adornments

New Guinea natives had also been using human bones for manufacturing everyday items and body adornments. The variability of using human bones for those purposes was so broad that it is necessary to limit the scope of that part of the paper. Nevertheless, the paper discusses selected examples of using human remains in New Guinea traditional cultures.

Museum and private collections display items of everyday need manufactured from human bodily remains. It is possible to generalize that what was made from animal bones – commonly pig and cassowary – was also produced using human bones if the people practiced head-hunting and cannibalism. So, the spatulas, daggers, and arrows were sometimes manufactured from human skeletons. The custom to chew areca nut is still widespread across New Guinea and the custom is known as *kaikai buai* in tok pisin. In fact, there are areas where people did not use areca nuts, which was especially true in relation to groups of the south coast of New Guinea (Asmat, Marind-Anim or Fly River groups). People of New Guinea chew a mixture of areca nut, lime, and pepper leaf or pepper catkin. The custom was accompanied by equipment consisting of a spatula and a lime container. A spatula was normally made from wood or animal bone, but there are exceptions. The Abelam people produced spatulas from human bones. For example, they have been using the ulna bone for manufacturing spatulas [Pl. 5]. The Abelam people are well known for manufacturing artifacts from animal bones; typical artifacts were highly decorated cassowary daggers (see [Pl. 6]). However, they also produced daggers from human bones. Human bones were also used for manufacturing war arrows. An example of this is a collection of arrows from the Bensbach River where tips of the arrows were made from human bones [Pl. 7].



Pl. 5 Spatula and lime container from Abelam region. Jan Rendek's private collectionn
(Photo: Jan Rendek).



Pl. 6 Cassowary bone dagger, Boiken people. Martin Soukup's private collection (Photo: Martin Soukup).



Pl. 7 Arrows from the Bensbach River. Jan Rendek's private collection (Photo: Jan Rendek).

Michael Leahy was one of the very first Europeans who had penetrated the island interior. He reported a strange custom he had observed in the Eastern Highlands where native men and women had mutilated their fingers; they had one or more fingers cut off. He realized that the mutilation was an integral part of a funeral ceremony (Leahy 1991: 9), which had been common practice in many Highlands communities. Anthropologist Karl Heider (1970: 238–240) provided a detailed description of the custom among Dani people. Heider had underlined that a prevailing number of women



Pl. 8 Necklace made from mandible. Martin Soukup's private collection (Photo: Martin Soukup).

and girls had mutilated hands; only daughters of prominent men did not have to undergo that operation. Dani had mutilated fingers of young girls between the ages of three and six. The girls were close relatives of a deceased person. A girl lost her finger or two during the funeral of her own clan member who was killed by an enemy in a war in order to placate the ghost. Dani explained that it is a gift to the ghosts of killed people. The operation was an easy process. The hand was deadened by hitting the funny bone and the finger was immediately cut off with a single blow by stone adze. Because the finger was a gift for the ghost, it was hanging in a long cook house where the important part of the funeral ceremony normally took place. In other words, ghosts expected to find removed fingers there. The fingers were burned without a ceremony after the funeral was finished, and the ashes were discarded. It is worth noting that Dani people sometimes also had been slicing the upper edge of their ears during funeral ceremonies. Men also, from time to time, lost their fingers during funeral ceremonies. However, it was not an integral part of the funeral ceremony; they did it in deep emotional reaction to an unexpected death of a relative.

Human bones were also used for manufacturing bodily adornments in New Guinea. It was mostly related to head-hunting. Going back to Asmat head-hunting, which was already discussed in the first part of the article, Asmats not only stored the skulls of slaughtered enemies, but they also used parts of the skeleton for manufacturing body adornment. For example, they typically used a mandible for creating a necklace [Pl. 8]. The mandible was decorated with cassowary feathers and was mounted on a string. The mandible was symbolically related to head-hunting and cannibalism because the Asmat people developed a specific way of butchering the human body. The head of an enemy was removed without a mandible. So, the mandible and skull were used separately for producing artifacts. They also used neck vertebrae for manufacturing a specific type of necklace. The necklace consisted of vertebrae and bamboo plaque. Asmat men had been beheading enemies by bamboo knife, so bamboo plaque in the necklace was a sign of head-hunting [Pl. 9].



Pl. 9 Necklace made from neck vertebrae, Asmat people. Jan Rendek's private collection
(Photo: Jan Rendek).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested four main groups of artifacts manufactured from human bones. It is evident that it is possible to reduce them to two. There are, in fact, human remains of relatives and enemies. The discussed examples prove that human remains of enemies were used in ways which humiliate them and their living relatives. Different New Guinean groups used bodies of enemies for producing tips of arrows, spatulas, body adornments, or had the remains displayed in important sacral places. Ancestor cults in New Guinean cultures often included worshiping human remains, especially skulls which were very often highly decorated.

As a high level of cultural diversity developed on the island, it is hard to provide a generalization about cultural phenomenon. However, in the case of cannibalism, with related head-hunting, it is possible to define a general pattern. On the island, there existed two cultural areas where headhunting and cannibalism developed as an integral part of the culture; its south coast and Sepik basin. In both cases, an abundance of sago and good opportunity for safe travel for long distances existed due to the number of inland channels (see Knauff 1993: 218) as well as social organization, which consisted of numerous clans living in long houses or men's houses, allowing them to manage coordinated raids. There were also other communities practicing cannibalism or head-hunting, but it was not so prolific.

For ancestor cults, it is hard to find a general pattern because ancestors were worshiped in many different ways in most New Guinea cultures. Ancestors were represented not only by decorated or unadorned skulls, or by parts of their skeletons; deceased ancestors had been represented by carved figures or masks as well. In some

communities, people believed that the souls of their relatives still live unseen with them, so they fed them with pork. I also cited examples of Tsembaga Maring, who called ancestors for support in warfare and sacrificed pigs for them. The worshiping of ancestors is nothing unusual in the human world as we also care for the graves of our ancestors, celebrating them on All Souls' Day. In exploring these different examples of how human remains link with culture, this paper considers the issue with keeping and exhibiting artifacts made from human remains. After all, it is not only a matter of handling the remains of human beings; we are also dealing with their individual identities.

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