Alexander Ross's "Translation" of the *Koran*: Its Cultural Motivation and its Ideological Functions in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England and After

Bouteldja RICHE
Mouloud MAMMERI University
Tizi-Ouzou - ALGERIA -
massriche@gmail.com

Many critics have already bothered themselves with the criticism of the first English "translation" of the ***Koran*** into English by Alexander Ross in 1649. One of the most outstanding essays in the critical literature about this work is the one presented by Nabil Matar in 1998. Matar throws new light into the context and political circumstances in which this "translation" of a "translation" of the ***Koran*** took place trying in the process of analysis to answer questions usually raised in translation studies of this kind. However, by the time we finish reading Matar's study, we are overtaken by the desire to go over the issues treated in it by taking a larger historical perspective than the one Matar has taken in his study, and by bringing in politics, ethics and poetics as determining factors in Ross's derivative "translation" of the ***Koran***. In doing so, we do not need to go to the usual blame put on Ross for the inferior quality of his "translation." We consider that traditional translation studies issues like fidelity to the original, the non-mastery of the language of the first source text (Arabic) and the second source text (French) as well as questions of equivalence are secondary for us. Trying to answering them will be similar to trying to prove self-evidence by breaking the open doors of the "translated text". In other terms, there is no need to rehash the self-evidence that the author's attitude to the ***Koran***, like that of his European contemporary translators, is not reverential but adversarial. Looked at closely, the notion of the sacred with which Ross

approaches the ***Koran*** does not belong to that positive sacredness associated with his own system of Christian beliefs but the negative one associated with the Other religion (Islam) linked with subversion, impurity and danger. (See Douglas Mary, 1984).

Critics of Ross's "translation" have already demonstrated that its author gives up himself to the use of body language, profanities and the grotesque. Without contesting what we consider as self-evidence and without passing judgement on the produced text (the written "translation"), we would argue that the resort to such language and grotesque representations is made with the purpose of tipping over the ***Koran*** into carnivalesque literature, for which François Rabelais' ***Gargantua*** stands as the best example that Mikhail Bakhtin analyses in ***Rabelais and his World***. We would contend that the carnivalisation of the ***Koran*** by Ross at once demotes the sacredness of the ***Koran*** in the best mode known for the reader of the time, and develops at the same time an overt polemics with Cromwell's political regime, a regime that beheaded his patron Charles II in January 1649, just 3 months before Ross published his "translation". In what follows, we would not presume to have the calibre to do a better work than those critics who have already preceded us to the study of the body text of Ross's "translation." So we shall stick, instead, to the analysis its the front and back matter assuming that it is in prefaces and appendices that authors and translators generally speak about the poetical and political agenda behind their authoring and translation of books. By translation here we do not refer solely to translation as a written product and a process of transfer of written text from a source language to a target language within a specific socio-cultural context but also to the cognitive, linguistic, and especially cultural and ideological phenomena underpinning translation both as product and process (Hatim Basil, 2001).

Accordingly, this study falls into three sections. In the first section, we shall try to sketch the historical background against which Ross "translated" the French version of the **Koran**, adopting a larger perspective than the one that Matar has taken in his article on Ross. In the second one, we shall examine the front and back matter of the "translation" paying close attention to the intersection of Ross's "poetics" and "politics" with the cultural politics of his time, an intersection that we hold as an explanatory factor for the kind of "double-voiced" translation that Ross served for his contemporary readers and their political leaders. In the last and third section, we shall discuss the strange career that this "translation" enjoyed in other political and cultural contexts, both English and American.

So, what is peculiar about the historical context of mid-seventeenth century England that makes of Ross's "translation" of the Frenchified version of the **Koran** a relevant political and cultural exercise? To sketch this historical context, we shall go back to the beginnings of the Reformation in England. The Reformation contributed to a large extent to the shaping of "things" English in the social and cultural history of England. History books tell us that England turned protestant when the Pope refused the Tudor King Henry VIII his demand for divorce from the Spanish-born Queen Catherine of Aragon on the grounds that she was not able to give birth to a male heir. The same history books also tell us that Henry VIII even tried unsuccessfully to negotiate his divorce for his participation in a European holy league against the Ottomans in the 1530s (See Godfrey Fisher Sir, 1974). Against this Papal resistance, Henry VIII finished proclaiming himself Head of a Protestant Anglican Church, after which he divorced Elizabeth of Aragon and remarried with Anne Boleyn. For some historians it is Anne Boleyn who acted behind the scene to bring out the whole process of

Reformation in England. This point still remains controversial point in English history. But what can hardly be doubted is that her daughter Queen Elizabeth I was the one English Queen to consolidate the Anglican Church with her accession to the throne in 1563. This consolidation happened against Spanish military presence in the Channel engaged in the *reconquest* of a country lost to Protestantism.

During her forty-year long reign during which England was opposed to Catholic Spain, Elizabeth I formed strategic alliances, sometimes undeclared, with the Sublime Porte and the Regency of Algiers in what was then called the "Barbary shore," to combat and push back the Spanish threat. Historians like Sir Godfrey Fisher suggests that the commercial advantages accorded by the Porte to English merchants in the 1580s, the opening of Algerian ports to English ships for refuelling and commerce, the Algerian containment of the Spanish fleet in the Mediterranean by the activities of the famous *Reis*, and other factors like the expenditure of the New World wealth by Spain in its war of attrition against the world of Islam on the Southern border of the Mediterranean explain to a large extent the success of England's resistance against the formidable re-conquering power of the Spanish Empire. There is no need to discuss in detail the mutual accusations in Spanish and English war and religious propaganda over betrayal to the profit of what is supposed to be the Muslim "common enemy." To the accusation of intimate political alliance with the "Turk," whose effects can be seen in English Churches turned into what the Spaniards described as Mosques because of their shared lack of religious paraphernalia English propaganda replied with a similar accusation pointing to the long history of Muslim occupation of Spain that turned Spaniards into "white Moriscoes"(See Dimmock Matthew, 2007).No matter the truth of these accusations, the fact remains that the cultural and

political influence exerted by the Sublime Porte at the global scale at the time was so great that "Turk" became a general term for qualifying any behaviour judged to be out of the ambit of "Christian" cultural norms (Mclean Gerald, 2007).

When James I came to the English throne in 1603, he reversed the Elizabethan policy of rapprochement with the Sublime Porte signing a treaty of peace with Spain in 1604. Subscribing to the view that political alliance with Muslims as "unholy," James I engaged in the re-unification of the fragments of Christendom into a new European cultural entity through the "scripture of romance" consisting of the marital policy of dynastic marriages in the European cultural space. Such policy resulted in the marriage of his only daughter Princess Elizabeth to the Elector Frederick V of the Palatinate, the leading Calvinist Prince of the Empire in February 1613 and in that of Prince of Wales Charles with Henrietta Maria of France in 1624 following the failure of an earlier attempt to match his elder son Henry, who had died in 1612 with the Spanish *Infanta* (Loades D.M.1979:352). In **The Tempest** (1611) William Shakespeare captures King James's re-political orientation when in the course of the play he drops out the exogamous romance of Claribel with the King of Tunis for the celebration of the endogamous romance of Miranda and the King of Naples' son Ferdinand. Written to celebrate the marriage of Princess Elizabeth with, Shakespeare reflects King James's attempt to reduce religious differences between European countries and to widen the existing cultural and religious gap between Muslims and Christians.

James's ecumenism found its best expression with King Charles I appointment of William Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury at his accession to the throne in 1625. Laud brought many Catholic practices back into the English Church emphasising their common points of doctrine while rejecting

with force the radicalism of Protestant "sectaries" like the Puritans. Laud's persecution of "sectaries" combined with King Charles I friendship with Irish Catholic rebels (1641) to have the city of London close its doors against the King in 1642 when he tried to arrest members of Parliament who opposed him. The English Civil War started. By 1645 the Parliamentarian army supported by the navy, by the majority of the merchants and by the population of London had the fighting edge over a financially reduced and unpaid royalist army at Naseby. The offshoot was King Charles's surrender to the Puritan Oliver Cromwell and his lieutenants. Nearly 4 years later, on 31 January 1649, Charles was executed. With the monarchy gone, there followed the turn of the Anglican Church whose demise was announced with the passage of the religious toleration act in 1648. It was against this immediate and remote historical context that Ross set out to translate and publish the ***Koran*** just 3 months after the execution of his royal patron.

What is remarkable about this context is the "rearguard action" against the relentless cultural penetration of the world of Islam into the English social fabric through commerce even after King James's renunciation of political alliance with the Sublime Porte. Mclean (2007) fully documents the fascination that the world of Islam represented by the Ottomans exerted on the English imagination through such commodities as carpets, coffee, sugar, and horses. With the entire world turned to the West today, it is hard to imagine that in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries English before imperial power relations shifted, it was the English who "looked East." England then was still a peripheral country trying to fight back cultural influence just as her postcolonial countries would do centuries later after decolonisation from her domination. National politics was as helpless then as it is today in its confrontation with the global market. Arguably,

among the imported cultural products and icons that found their way into England there figured the **Koran** and Arabic. Arabic was a big asset in doing business and conducting diplomacy both within the Ottoman world and outside it. As William Bedwell, the father of Arabic studies in England, writes so well, Arabic was then the "only language of religion and the chief language of diplomacy and business from the Fortunate Isles and [Sic.] the China Seas (Quoted in Nasir S. Sari, 1976:26)." Acting on his thought about the prestige of Arabic, Bedwell produced his **Arabian Trudgman** to vulgarise the Arabic terms then in circulation among merchants and travellers.

However, the self-same Bedwell, Josée Balagna (1984:53) writes, holds a significantly different attitude towards Arabic as a language of science and scientists and Arabic as the language of the **Koran**. He considers the former as worthy of being appropriated while he suggests the abrogation of the latter. This ambivalent view towards Arabic was not unique to Bedwell at the time. We hear the same ambivalent language in Peter Kirsten's introduction to his **Grammatices Arabicae** to explain his inclusion of the "Fatihah" in the same book (Cited in Ibid.50). On the whole, such ambivalent language was then meant to give a scientific, commercial and political legitimacy to an enterprise which in the context of the pre-modern times might well sound as recognition of the penetration of Muslim culture spearheaded by the Ottoman "Empire" into a fragmented Christendom. At the time when "Europe" hoped to have discovered in the Guttenberg's revolution a means of rolling back the advance of Islam into central Europe through the printing of polyglot versions of the **Bible**, publishing the **Koran** in Arabic would have certainly looked counterproductive to the enterprise of conversion, and at best subversive and seditious, especially in the eyes of theologians like Ross.

Matar tells us that Abraham Wheelock the first Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University tried his hand at preparing an Arabic edition of the *Koran* as early as the 1630s. He also reports, citing Samuel Hartlib, to the effect that two brother English printers attempted a similar enterprise, but failed to complete their project for lack of funds. The explanation for the failure of the venture may contain some truth in it, but we would argue that the ultimate cause seems to reside in the fact that it was not timely for the reasons that we have enumerated above. We may go so far as to suppose that if either Wheelock or the two unnamed English brother printers had put to the press an Arabic edition, it would have known a similar sad end as the edition that Paganino de Brescia is said to have produced around 1517 (See, Balagna,23-24). The acceptance of a printed European edition of the *Koran* in Latin and Arabic had to wait 1698 to see the light as part and parcel of its translation by the Italian priest Ludovic Marraci. By then, the power relations between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe had somewhat shifted, and as a consequence had timidly enabled the publication of the *Koran* in Arabic.

Anyway, the English ventures at the edition of the *Koran* in Arabic speak, as Matar rightly notes, of an undeniable interest in things Arabic. Whether seen as part of a general inquisitive spirit of Renaissance men, or as, we have already tried to put the case, as a recognition of the fascination that Islamic culture exerted on English imagination, this interest, which seems to be not only academic but also popular and commercial with due regard to the fact that it came from both academic and printing circles, ultimately confirmed the fears of the clergy. MacLean argues that the spread of the consumption of tea, coffee, sugar, carpets, horses, and other similar Oriental imported products speak of the firm grip that the culture had on the English way of life in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. Following MacLean, we would argue that the ***Koran*** was then just one such cultural icon that the English wanted to possess or at least to know of. The example of the Oxford Graduate John Gregory's praise of the ***Koran*** that Matar cites is another illustration of the high consideration that Muslim culture enjoyed in seventeenth-century England. Indeed, that such academics as John Gregory puts a case in favour of the ***Koran*** as an authentic standard for measuring the canonicity and truthfulness of the ***Bible*** in exegetical studies denotes the stature of the ***Koran*** as an iconic text in the English imagination. If intellectuals like Gregory did not manage to repress this iconographic impulse towards the Muslim sacred text, one can easily guess the large extent of the imaginative hold that Muslim culture had on the English society at large.

We agree with Matar's first suggestion that Ross meant his "translation" of the ***Koran*** from Du Ryers' French version to be read as a rejoinder to Gregory's praise of the ***Koran***, but we would also contend that Gregory's fascination was just a prominent case of a larger social and cultural phenomenon. In other words, we would say that Ross translated the ***Koran*** with the spirit of an iconoclast in the sense that he had the intention to destroy a prevalent "islamicised" or "Orientalised" cultural system in which the ***Koran*** stands as one cultural product among many others English people were interested in or rather enchanted with. This iconoclasm is evident in the English title of Ross's "translation": "The **Alcoran of Mahomet**, Translated out of Arabique [Sic] into French; By The Sieur Du Ryer, Lord of Malezair and Resident for the fire King of France, at Alexandria. And newly Englished [Sic] for the **satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish Uanities** [Sic] (Emphasis ours)." We skip Ross's attribution of the authorship of the ***Koran*** to the Prophet for the moment because this is the

usual fare that Christian theologian-cum-translators at the time served the reader whenever they spoke about this sacred text. We shall focus instead on Ross's ironic recognition of the existence of "the desire to look into the Turkish vanities," and which he proposes to satisfy or cater for by offering his own "translation" of the *Koran*.

The *Koran* is associated with "Turkish vanities," and is often referred to as "The Turkish Bible" because at the time the Ottoman power stood as the most representative cultural and political entity in the world of Islam. According to the *Macmillan Dictionary* the word "vanity" refers to the "fact of being too proud of one's abilities and or too interested in one's appearances, and to a complete lack of importance or value." If "Turkish' is attached to these "vanities," this is because it evokes the idea of cultural deviation or cultural foreignness that the term "Turk" called to mind then whenever applied to an English national who transgressed normative cultural norms (MacLean, 2007). Applied as a corrective interpellation, it also indicates the predominance and fear of cultural penetration of things "Turkish" into English society. As regards the verb "look into", which is often used in the sense of "investigate," it turns the "Turkish Vanities" into a crime, a sin, or a problem that Ross wants to expose to the English reader as a witness for prosecution. It follows that Ross's title of his "translation" expresses an inquisitorial and iconoclastic attitude to the cultural iconicity of the most important Book in Islamic culture.

Ross's "translation" contains a front and back matter, which, except for the "Epistle to the Reader" and " A summary of the Religion of the Turks," did not appear in Du Ryer's French version. It is in this quite substantial front and back matter that Ross sets out in explicit terms the cultural and political agenda behind his "translation." In addition to the

translation of Du Ryer's prefatory matter in the French version, Ross includes two letters wherein Du Ryer was highly praised by European consuls for his "translation" and a recognition pass delivered to him by the Grand Seignior for the safe passage between France and the Ottoman Empire. The purpose for the inclusion of this front matter is crystal clear. Ross wants the reader to put him in the same shoes as Du Ryer and to show him the respect he deserves in undertaking the same venture as his French fellow translator. However, there is another more significant front matter which shows that Ross does not simply seek recognition from the powers that be, even if that might well have been the initial idea with which he set out on his enterprise in the first instance. This front matter consists of a first unit laid down in the form of a preface addressed by the "Translator to the Christian Reader."

Like all prefaces, Ross's preface to the reader explains what motivates the "translation," the background of the venture, its scope and its purpose. Some of this information is implied and some of it is explicit. Taking it for granted that the "Turkish" religion is a heresy, Ross is deeply anxious that all the English might eventually "turn Turk" or "wear the Turban" under the religious and political conditions that prevailed under the Commonwealth regime. With no bishop and no King to impose a legitimate political and religious order, the ship of state is for Ross steered by a "batch" of "fanatics," "heretics" and "sectaries" spawning all kinds of sects and menacing society with impending ruin. Speaking from a Laudian and Royalist perspective, he regards religious democracy as equivalent to religious anarchy. When he comes to explain why the Commonwealth regime has initially banned the publication of his "translation" he tells his "Christian reader" to regard that as a sign of the lack of soundness in faith on the part of the Puritan leaders implying that if his royal patron was alive he would have allowed it without hesitation

in the same manner that the King of France had allowed Du Ryer to publish his in France. With the "orthodox" "Christian reader" in mind, Ross adds that

> *though some, conscious [of] their own instability in Religion, and of theirs (too like Turks in this) whose prosperity and opinions they follow, were unwilling this should see the Presse, yet am I confident, if thou hast been so true a votary to orthodox Religion [High Anglicanism], as to keep thy self untainted of their follies: this shall not hurt thee: And as for those of that Batch, having once abandoned the Sun of the Gospel, I believe they will wander as far into utter Darkness, by following strange lights, as by this Ignis Fatuus of the Alcoran.*

These concluding sentences take the reader back to the ironic and sarcastic introductory sentences of the preface wherein Ross draws barely hidden parallels between the Prophet Muhammed and Cromwell against the background of the Civil War. He tells the reader

> *There being so many Sects and Heretics banded together against the Truth, finding that of Mahomet wanting to the Muster, I thought good to bring it to their Colours, that so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou mayst the better prepare to encounter, and I hope overcome them. It may happily startle thee, to finde him so speak English, as he had made some Conquest on the Nation, but thou wilt soon reject the fear, if thou consider that this his Alcohran (The Ground-work of the Turkish Religion) hath been already translated into almost all Languages in Christendome … yet never gained any Proseylte where*

the Sword, its most forcible, and strongest argument hath not prevailed.

All the elements of anti-Muslim bigotry are mobilised and applied to the new regime to discredit it in the eyes of the public and to enlist it in what today is commonly referred to as the "war against terror". Islam as Jihad or holy war, Islam as the religion of the Sword and terror, Islam as a heresy, etc are some of the elements that Ross borrows from anti-Muslim propaganda to discredit the "God's Englishman" (Hill Christopher, 1990) and his rhetoric of religious republicanism as a foreign and heretic inspiration from the ***Alcoran***. Thus, the English "***Alcoran of Mohamet***" in Ross's title refers as much to the original ***Koran*** as to the political orientations of the Commonwealth government. Cromwell stands for the Prophet Muhammed in disguise speaking English, and vainly trying to propagate his "Turkish vanities."

This brings us to the rhetoric question that Matar has already asked in his study of Ross's "translation": Why has the Cromwellian government lifted the ban on the publication and circulation of Ross's "translation" just three months after having issued an interdict? Matar has sought the answer to this question by looking into Ross's front and back matter, and finished making his own Ross's argument that the Commonwealth government's move is just a way of clearing their names. While we agree with Matar's endorsement of Ross's answer to the question, we also argue that the Commonwealth government had other reasons to reverse its decision. Some of these reasons are also announced by Ross in the back matter which consists of a short biography of "The Life and Death of Mahomet," and "A needful Caveat or Admonition for them who desire to know what use may be made of, or if there be danger in reading the *Alcoran*." As Mattar argues these appendices might have been added to the

"translation" after Ross's brush with the law. However, we have to note that when Ross details what uses may be made of his "Englished *Alcoran*" he invokes uses that the Cromwellian regime might have thought of in lifting the ban on the "translation." Arabic as a language for access to the civilisation of the Arabs, Arabic as the language for commerce and a means for competition with other European countries, the translation of the *Koran* as a means for England of currying favour with the Muslims and knowing the laws of the Other are some of the uses that Ross either explicitly or implicitly adduces for his enterprise. Such uses could not escape the attention of a government whose merchant-oriented foreign policy turned out to be the most aggressive in British history as its enactment of *Navigation Acts* shows.

In addition to these uses which are very well-known in the literature of the time, there is there is the more important idea of the fascination of seventeenth-century England with Muslim culture that made it "look East" for political inspiration. For a government committed to complete religious freedom, the Ottoman Empire of the time stood as an example of a Muslim Empire that managed to make different religions and ethnic groups cohabitate and coexist peacefully as a political entity. It follows that Ross's "translation" might have been looked at as a necessary evil for the government to have access to the secret behind that political success. This is more likely in the light of the experience of the Ottoman Empire with regicide in the 1622 when the Janissaries executed Sultan Osman II. Evidently, except if the Cromwellian regime was politically blind, the parallels could not have escaped the Cromwellian regime which was then seeking for a mechanism for the resolution of political conflicts brought out by their execution of King Charles I. In this case, too, Ross's "translation" serves the disavowed political and cultural ends of a government in quest of political models to justify their

new political order. In spite of anti-Muslim bigotry of the time, the "Turkish" model was the most culturally visible and viable model in that period.

So, I would argue that Ross was not unaware of the political dividends that might accrue to the government from his "translation." This may explain the last-minute inclusion of the biography of the Prophet in the back matter as a further elaboration of parallels established between Cromwell and the Prophet Muhamed. The bigotry of the literature about the Prophet does not deserve to be spelt out here, but it serves Ross to displace the Cromwellian political and religious revolution further back in Muslim history from seventeenth-century England to seventh-century Arabia. In the manner of a proto-Orientalist, Ross undermines the ***Koran*** by exposing the so-called political and religious manipulations of the Prophet Muhamed, and in so doing casts similar doubts on Cromwell's political and religious project as a "false *Alcoran*," an anti-modern political project based on tyranny and injustice. One of the cultural facets of Cromwell's England was the closing of theatres for fear of political subversion. It seems that Ross's "translation" is meant to play that role by exposing the Cromwellian authorities who are obliquely depicted as being even worse than their Muslim counterparts in their lack observation of laws and respect of their religious and political leaders.

On the whole, this study of the front and back matter of Ross's "translation" leads us to the conclusion that it was motivated principally by complex political and religious considerations in Cromwellian England. We argued that by the time Ross published it, the ***Koran*** had already become a cultural icon in European imagination in general and in that of the English in particular as a result of the political and cultural power of the Ottoman Empire. As a client of William Laud

and chaplain to an executed King, Ross approached the "translation" from a double-fold ideological perspective. It aimed to discredit Islam as a religion and cultural political system, and in so doing destroy the ideological justification that may eventually help the Cromwellian government construct and legitimate an alternative political project. Ross's word-for-word "translation" of Du Ryer's sense-for-sense French version is an example of what Edward Said (1978) calls citational representation, and its author is a proto-Orientalist concerned with the confinement of Islam as a cultural and political system as well as the ***Koran*** as a holy book to the pre-modern age.

Matar tells us that Ross's "translation" witnessed a tremendous popularity at its publication. In support of this claim, he refers to the fact that it was re-edited during his lifetime and after his death at the eve of the Glorious Revolution in 1688. The Glorious Revolution witnessed the definite consecration of Constitutional Monarchy with the political demise of the restored Stuart Dynasty. For us, the re-edition of Ross's "translation" cannot be fully explained in terms of popularity without reference to its political function as a "pre-modern" or "archaic" foil to "modern" Constitutional Monarchism brought out by the Glorious Revolution. It was called Glorious because it was done without shedding blood. In this function as foil, Ross's "translation" was a stand-in for England or Britain's disavowal of its own pre-modernity (Ganim John M., 2007), the representation of everything that England refused to resemble in its quest for a modern political project. It contributed largely to the fashioning of that Western image of Islam and the ***Koran*** as antagonistic and refractory to modern life. The re-edition of Ross's "translation" in early independent America, in spite of the availability of a better English "translation" by George Sale in 1734, provides further proof as to its political and cultural potential to stand as an

Orientalized, "pre-modern" foil to the "modern" supreme law of the land, which is the Constitution. In the early 1930s, more than three hundred years after the publication of Ross's "translation," Adolph A. Weinmann carved an ivory marble statue of "a robed and bearded Muhammed with the curved sword in one hand and the ***Qu'ran*** in the other." It was placed in the central legal chamber of the U.S. Supreme Court together with seventeen other larger-than-life statues of similar material representing what is supposed to be the greatest law givers of history. The placement of such a marble statue of the Prophet Muhammed in that small museum of the central legal chamber in the twentieth century can be regarded as being partly the effect of the appropriation of such proto-Orientalist literature such as Ross's English "translation" to stand as a "pre-modern" foil for the emergence of what today is the most powerful modern nation in the world.

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