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Outed: A painful Reality: The Trickster Mode as a Strategy of Claiming Space for Difference

2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2918>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Joseph, Christopher Odhiambo; Ngum, Yvette: Outed: A painful Reality: The Trickster Mode as a Strategy of Claiming Space for Difference. In: *ffk Journal* (2017), Nr. 2, S. 206–217. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2918>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<http://www.ffk-journal.de/?journal=ffk-journal&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=28&path%5B%5D=27>

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Outed: A painful Reality

The Trickster Mode as a Strategy of Claiming Space for Difference

Abstract: This paper interrogates how the film *Outed: A painful Reality* by Ugandan filmmaker Hassan Kamoga either consciously or unconsciously plays with the trickster mode to advocate for sexualized identity perceived as aberrant and despicable in Ugandan society and which have to face discrimination, stigmatization, torture, imprisonment and murder from their immediate communities, the state and beyond. Consequently, the filmic text that is scrutinized in this paper has taken a particular trajectory, which could be referred to as acting as the *voice(s)* of the perceived *marginalized others*, participating overtly in the advocating for their rights by privileging the torture and brutalization of their bodies without bringing into the frame of the film their alternative acts of sexuality to solicit for sympathy from the viewers. This paper is interested in the advocacy project of the film *Outed: A Painful Reality*, more particularly, in the manner in which the filmmaker employs explicitly the filmic mode to communicate his message. The paper as such scrutinizes how this film grapples with the complex issues of sexual identity and how it is negotiated in spaces that already define and frame themselves as alienating, marginalizing and othering differences.

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ISSN 2512-8086

1. Introduction

Outed: A Painful Reality is a film directed by Hassan Kamago and set in Uganda that grapples with challenges of discrimination, alienation and exclusion that people go through in an attempt to be integrated into their national or ethnic communities as a result of belonging to a particular identity category or geopolitical space 'none acceptable' by the hegemonic ideologies. Produced in 2014, the film is a true-life story of an outed homosexual person in Uganda. The narrative plot unfolds with the protagonist Vida, a gay person, an employee in one of the leading advertising companies in the capital city Kampala. He encounters disenchantment from his boss, housekeeper, family members and community when his name and photo appear among other homosexuals in a newspaper tabloid, calling for the expunction of homosexuals. Vida's boss terminates his work contract on reading the newspaper without questioning the validity of the 'statement'. He immediately requests the services of his secretary who drafts a termination letter and thus, Vida's career at the work place comes to an end as he is chased away. Whilst he enters his apartment, he finds a letter from the housekeeper terminating his stay at the building. Still in his pensive and confused mood, Vida starts receiving calls from an unidentified caller who claims that the call is related to his friend Solomon who got involved in an accident and needs immediate attention. Unfortunately, these unknown callers are detective officers who go under the guise of a Good Samaritan. They lure Vida into a trap. Vida is taken to a secluded cell where high profiled criminals are tortured, to disclose the whereabouts of his colleagues, how they recruit young people into the LGBT community and how they promote homosexuality in the Ugandan society. Unable to prove his sexuality, Vida is released from detention on orders from the states commissioner.

Ironically, Vida's release from the cell is more painful as the outside world turns to be crueler to him than the bloodstained prison walls. His father is prepared to machete him if he returns home. Not finding a place to call home, Vida starts moving from one guest house to another. He encounters challenges with people who try to con him as he looks for safety. Vida finally meets the end when he is identified in the community as gay. He is mobbed and lynched using stones by people who claim he is recruiting children. In line with the above synopsis, the analysis of the filmic text will be anchored in subtle ways on the ideas Michel Foucault advances, especially on discipline and punish as well as concepts of power and knowledge in addition to theories on sexualities. The central foci of the film are a projection of various forms of existing stereotypes, stigmatizations, anxieties, nervousness and tensions emanating from the perspective of those who have lived, experienced and/or witnessed alternative sexual identity exclusion.

The film seems to have been consciously produced to expose the torture of the alienated bodies of the characters, their state of mind and prolonged persecution experienced within certain defined spaces. The visualize images of the condemned bodies of Vida and his partner Solomon in cell serves as a central site for reflection on the nation's pressing problems and a pivot to reconsider acceptance and integration among diverse groups, be it ethnic, gender, racial or geopolitical groups. They are both tricked and lured into cell by the state detectives who think the way out to arrest those accused of homosexuality and who 'may appear not guilty of their crime' would be to outsmart them. Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish*, allures our understanding to questions of torture and the body, how subjects construct difference within self-representation and the representations of those in power when he argues that:

[...] the punishment was thought to equal, if not to exceed, in savagery the crime itself, judges murderers, [...] to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration.¹

The above quote explicitly lambasts the harsh punishment given to people, unequal to the crimes committed. Those called upon to execute the punishment like the state detectives in this film passionately carry on the task, unconscious of the victim's crime. The audience is in repel with the manipulations and indirections the detectives are using to achieve their objectives. In the quest to bring justice to the Ugandan society, they execute their actions of torture without being thoughtful of the implications on the victims. Thus, they become the symbol of power over the minority through physical torture. The following dialogue between Vida and the state detectives captures the existence of inequalities, manipulation and exercise of power as torture over the minorities. The state detectives apply a trickster tactic to achieve their lot:

1st Detective: Is this Vida?
Vida: You don't sound like Solomon, who is this?
1st Detective: Do you know the owner of this number?
Vida: Yes! This is Solomon's number and who are you?
1st Detective: I am the Good Samaritan. Your friend or brother Solomon has got an accident.
Vida: What!!! How did this happen? I mean, when and where are you right now?
1st Detective: He has been hit by a motor cycle here at Makindye. We have given him first aid, but his condition is too bad. He needs to be transferred to a bigger hospital.

¹ Foucault 1995: 9.

- Vida:** Ok Sir. Can you please do me a favor? Can you please take him to Nsambya Hospital? I am going to compensate you as soon as I am there.
- 1st Detective:** Sir, we have already done enough to save your brother. He is unconscious and he needs urgent medical attention, not conversations.
- Vida:** Okay. I am on my way..... So you are the Good Samaritans? Where is Solomon?
- 1st Detective:** Relax, he is fine.
- Vida:** What do you mean he is fine? You called and told me he was hit by a motorcycle!
- 2nd Detective:** We are from the Special Investigation Department. We have been tracking you for a very long time. You need to come with us for questioning.
- Vida:** I think I need to talk to my lawyer.
- 1st Detective:** If you know what is good for you [*opens his jacket as the camera zooms on a pistol in his inner jacket*], come with us!²

The detectives literally tricks Vida into a meeting and eventually turns him into a prisoner within moments of this conversation. The detectives ensure that he cannot manage to contact Solomon or escape. Finding himself in the midst of two detectives and in a cell meant for people who commit crime, Vida realizes the danger he stands to face. He has no power to defend himself and his request for a lawyer is vehemently denied. Rather, he gets a slap from the detectives for trying to find out why he is kept in a cell for over 12 hours without contact with the outside world. The 1st detective insert his fingers into Vida's rectum to verify if he is a homosexual. This act of belittlement towards Vida prompts him to realize that his life is in danger and the solution would be to go in hiding (as will become clear later in the preceding discussions).

The film seems to deliberately set out as its project the intervention and advocacy agenda on stigmatization of an *abnormal* sexualized body/identity. The body is an embodiment of the character's identification, which the audience through visualization is able to relate with the kind of "cinematic performativity" that allows the possibility to define the detectives as depicted in the film. They are able to restrain Vida and Solomon from performing their sexual desires and affirming their identities. Butler argues that, it is absolutely not a possibility for an individual to think that he/she can be free from certain cultural constraints by making decisions that will exclude part of their identity. Identity to an individual or group remains a form of oppression that marginalizes their personal or collective interest because of cultural processes of ex-

² Outed: A Painful Reality.

clusion.³ This is visible for homosexuals and other minority groups in society who are marginalized on basis of their sexualities, practices of desire or gender. With this identity, the individual sometimes loses hope, values, is abused, shunned and oppressed. The film focuses its gaze on these homosexual bodies and identities and the various responses of the 'normal' sexualized bodies and identities towards them. As such, *Outed* is an exploration of a criminalized sexualized body/identity of homosexuals in the Ugandan society. For example, Hassan Kamoga reveals in an interview that:

Gay acts are unacceptable in Uganda and about 90% of the Ugandan society condemns people who are actively involved in homosexuality activities. Actually, you can even be imprisoned if you are not gay, because you will also be at risk if you know a gay and you don't report to the authorities, so that is how bad it is. Moreover, we don't have a law in place because our Ugandan parliament was trying to pass a law and they wanted to imprison [sic] people who are involved in activities like homosexuality or even deny access to [sic] like hospitals if you are sick. They wanted to pass something like a draconian law which was criminalizing gay people. The gay community went to court to challenge this bill but it was later dismissed by the High Court. So, the law is not in place but it does not mean that everything is ok for the Ugandan LGBT community. A lot of people are still (being) [sic] hostile and gay people cannot even come out in the society.⁴

The two detectives symbolize the way of power of 'governmentality' over the weak bodies of the minority. They represent the Ugandan government applying strategies to exclude homosexuals from the society. Vida and Solomon are being pressured by the detectives to confirm that they are gay by applying interrogation techniques that involve the sight of sharp objects such as knives, pair of scissors, nails, pair of pinchers, hammer to trick the victims to expose their relationship. This act of continuous threats and demonstrations with sharp objects in front of Solomon, ravage his motivation to keep his silence about his gay identity. This devastation is concretized with Solomon revealing to the detectives his identity and proposing to testify in court as illustrated:

Please stop! Let me tell you the truth. We are both gay, and I can testify that in the courts of law... I will even tell you other people I know. We

³ Butler 1991: 15.

⁴ Interview with Hassan Kamoga by Yvette Ngum at Iwalewaha, Bayreuth, Germany. The interview was conducted during Cinema Africa Bayreuth, 23th November 2015. The Interview is available on demand.

...they hangout in Kabalagala, in a bar called Musana... Please, I promise to tell you everything.⁵

It is this realization that sets another path for the detectives. They intensify the search for Vida whom, by now has been released from the cell for lack of enough evidence to back up his case in court. The filmic narrative at this point engages the artistic mode of intervention and advocacy, and how it re-imagines the sense of nationhood and citizens (ir)responsibility in engaging with the marginalized, alienated and stigmatized bodies and identities. In a sense one would argue that the filmic narrative is involved in a conscious interventionist project of confronting stigmatization framed by normalized cultural hegemonic predispositions and suppositions about sexuality. In this paper, therefore, we attempt to show how the filmic mode is used to negotiate for an understanding of these marginalized and stigmatized bodies and identities through various strategies: exaggerations, tragic mode, coincidences and chances, recurring motifs and reversals, grotesque and shocking images, time lapse and space(s). Techniques deployed to confront the audience to different ways of seeing and interpreting the reality through the bodies and conversations of both the victim and the victimizers.

One clearly unintended impact of a trickster payout on Vida's identity is in one of his escapes. He gets into the Gatitu Guest House for safety but meets the manager who immediately recognizes him from the tabloids. Vida stylishly escapes from the guest house. In a conversation between the two, the manager calls him 'Sir' or 'Madam' in the process of verifying his identity. This 'double' identity instigates fear in Vida especially as the manager point out to see his Identity Card by telling him that his face looks familiar but "not for a good cause". Realizing that his mission might be jeopardized, Vida tricks the manager by pretending to get his Identity Card from his jeans. Realizing that the manger is not attentive, he seizes the opportunity and dashes out of the guest house into the quarters. The film, in this scene zooms on other aspects of the manager's and receptionist's relationships towards Vida as unfriendly and opportunistic (Vida tips off the receptionist at the guest house when she recognizes him). Although Tammy Grimshaw argues that homosexuals exclude themselves from the predominantly heterosexual communities when their identity is challenged, such acts of bribery exhibited by the receptionist could bind gay people in exclusion with those from the "larger communities"⁶. This analysis explores the negotiation of complex issues of social identities across and within spaces that already define and frame themselves as alienating, marginalizing

⁵ Outed: A Painful Reality.

⁶ Grimshaw 2006: 325.

and othering differences. Embedded within these spaces are the bodies, torture room/cells, filthy toilets, rooms and abject slums in Vida's community. However, what stands out as most important in the reading of this filmic text is the consciously continuous interplay of internal and external conflict between those in authority and the minority groups.

2. *Outed*: Point of View of the filmmaker and the Motivation for the Intervention and Advocacy

In 2000, the first anti-homosexual law was proposed in Uganda.⁷ In 2009, another anti-homosexuality bill, which included the death penalty, was proposed to the Ugandan parliament with its objective to protect traditional family and cultural values from being destroyed by any form of same sex relationship or promotion of same sex marriages in public institutions by human right activist, NGOs or international organizations within and outside Uganda. The bill's claim insinuated that the culture of homosexuality was new in Uganda, influenced by cultural behavior from the west where vulnerable children and youths are exposed to sexual abuse, and that it as deviation from African moral values. Contrary to this bill, many critics opine⁸ that homosexuality is a culture practiced in Uganda and Africa in general far back before the Christian missionaries came from Europe and America and not a culture from the West or "corruption by Western cultural imperialism"⁹ as Yoweri Museveni, the President of Uganda argues. However, before the missionaries, Africa had many cultural practices contrary to the western religious doctrines but issues of homosexuality were never discussed and many people lived silently with it.

In 2013, the Ugandan parliament passed the anti-homosexual bill substituting the 2009 death penalty that was proposed with life imprisonment. At this time, the hate against people of same sex relationships had increased and many faced more discrimination and social injustices from the police which should be employed to protect citizens against social injustices and crime. The 2013 bill was later approved into law by President Museveni in February 2014 criminalizing same sex relations in Uganda.

This law has been criticized as one of the worst anti-gay laws in the world.¹⁰ Therefore, activities of the Ugandan government in promoting

⁷ Unknown Author (2014a): "Uganda: Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014"; Unknown Author (2009): "Bill Supplement Nr. 13"; Buturo (not dated).

⁸ Herman 1997; Epprecht 2008; Hamson 2010.

⁹ Golooba-Mutebi 2014.

¹⁰ In the interview carried out with the filmmaker Hassan Kamoga on 23rd of November 2015 in Bayreuth, he mentioned that the anti-homosexual law has

anti-homosexuality cannot easily be compared to some African countries like South Africa, Burkina Faso, DRC and Chad who consider LGBT as a minority group and accept their activities such as Gay Pride. But it can however be compared to other African countries that condemn homosexuality in similar vein such as Nigeria, Sudan or Mauritania.

According to the filmmaker as gathered from an interview, his main intention of making the film was to influence and alter the perceptions and attitudes of the Ugandan government and its citizens against the discrimination and criminalization of non-heterosexual bodies and identities. His second purpose with this film was to create international and transnational awareness by using the film as a catalyst to open up conversations on the violation of homosexual and gays rights in Uganda and internationally. In Kamoga's view the locals in Uganda are still hostile towards these sexually discriminated bodies and are not allowed to participate in social activities compared to some other African and European countries for instance, where people with different sexual identities usually organize "Gay Pride" events. Reflecting on this situation during the interview in Bayreuth, he says:

In Uganda when we have such events, the police come and disrupt everything and arrest people, sometimes they even take our musical instruments and take gay people to prison. When you asked them why they are doing that, they don't just say why they launch the arrests: rather, they say that gay is something that is unacceptable and not an African culture. They associate it with so many bad things; like when you are gay they think that you have "AIDS" and want to pass it on to other people.

Kamoga notes that Uganda's perception to human rights and justice has deteriorated to the extent that the maltreatment of persons with same sexual desires or orientations has been normalized. He asserts that as a human right activist, his goal is to ensure that everyone finds comfort within their respective borders or nationality. In producing this film, he hopes that the situation will change someday even so he is currently considered to be a state's enemy for promoting homosexuality and homosexual rights.

been condemned by the Ugandan gay community because the law criminalizes consensual same sex/gender sexual activity, criminalizing aiding, procuring and promotion of homosexuality; See also Unknown Author (2014): "Oloka-Onyango & 9 Ors v Attorney General".

3. Criminalized Body: The politics of Alternative Sexualized identities

The film is about the criminalization of homosexual bodies and identities. It is instructive to note that the film begins with the signature shouts and screams in the Kiswahili language associated with the chasing of common criminals in poor urban areas: *Huyo, huyo mshike mshike mwizi mwizi* – meaning “that one, that one, catch him, catch him, thief, thief, thief”. The camera cuts and the audience is introduced to images of Vida being chased by a mob. The next scene introduces Vida decently dressed in his work place looking relaxed and contented but later dejected when the boss fired him. Images from scenes on the streets and office confirm to the gender related acts which culture/society compels an individual to perform. The street representation of Vida’s image is perturbed, confused and rejected: portraying a man faced with societal limitations because of his sexuality. The circumstances surrounding his life is significant to the fact that homosexuality is ‘unacceptable’ in his society, and his being gay does not only affect his sexuality but regulate his life by reducing his personal freedom. These societal regulations against homosexuals in a Foucauldian way is that people of same sex are beginning to have very affectional relationship with each other, which is very “intense emotional ties”¹¹. These ties might be a setback to other categories of relationships with the opposite sex. An interesting dimension to the societal relationship that develops into a struggle in Vida's personal life when the company’s secretary encounters his picture on the front page of the tabloid newspaper and immediately brings it to the attention of their boss. The boss is livid and does not want his company to be associated with a homosexual and dismisses him on the spot. Despite the fact that a moment earlier before this information about his sexuality, he had promised to promote him for his diligent commitment and contributions to the company. Being *outed* marks the beginning of his problems.

The word *outed* is a corruption of the English word *out* which in ordinary employment, means simply bringing into the open. In Uganda though, it means to expose the gay person to the public gaze especially by the tabloids. In Uganda unlike say, in South Africa or Kenya, homosexuals do not voluntarily *come out*. So, to be *outed* is to be busted, to be exposed to the public gaze, to be displayed, exhibited and made visible without consent and therefore made vulnerable. The notion of outing in homosexual communities is not applicable in Africa only, it cut across societies where people behave in a certain manner that contravenes societal moral values. Homosexual persons in most societies with dominant

¹¹ Foucault 1994: 136.

cultures are humiliated and discriminated. Grimshaw's essay on "The Gay 'Community': Stabilising Political Construct or Oppressive Regulatory Regiment?" explores the paradoxes of critics on gay community and its struggles against exclusion from a heterogeneous society. In deploying Anderson's and Bauman's views on the nature of community, the gay community operate on basis of individual relationship, choices irrespective of how small the community might be, members may not know "most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them"¹² but there is that acceptance of belonging and performing in the same manner that "would make them truly hold"¹³. Film as an intervention and advocacy project speaks back to the risks of *outing* homosexuals and gays. The film uses hyperbolic images of brutality and suffering to solicit for the audience empathy and sympathy towards homosexuals in society. These images overemphasize Vida's suffering as a man in pursuit of freedom. He undergoes torture in the cell, is disowned by his father, chased in a guest house and called a thief. Moreover, he falls short to see that his life is in danger after being outed. These limitations in his character predicts a sign of inescapable doom approaching the audience. Also, as a gay, Vida is not given the slightest opportunity to explain himself. He is immediately dismissed from his job, in fact literally chased out of the office. This marks the beginning of his *outedness* – his stigmatization, his alienation and life as a castaway. Vida's name is also significant as it is symbolic. It is predominantly a girl's name and has its origin in the Spanish language. In regards to Vida, the main character in this film, it gestures towards his ambivalent sexual identity. His identity is homosexual and it is this identity that he has been concealing that the tabloid discloses to the public. In the film, Vida's figure and configuration, though does not betray his sexual orientation at all. It therefore comes out as a big surprise to the viewer(s) when he gets *outed*.

But the question that one would want to pose is: how does the filmmaker solicit and elicit the sympathy and empathy of the audience? The filmmaker appears to astutely, like the trickster of the traditional oral African narratives,¹⁴ deploy the tragic form in this film. Vida like other eponymous tragic figures is not in control of whatever is happening to him. It looks as if there are invisible forces that are manipulating him like a puppet. He seems to be a victim of fate. The film completely leaves out any overt signs and activities that would associate Vida with homosexuality or gayism. The closest signature of homosexuality is his phone's ringtone. Back in his apartment hours after reading the tabloid

¹² Anderson 1991: 6.

¹³ Bauman 2001: 99.

¹⁴ M'Baye 2009: 4–7.

headlines and the unpleasant encounter with his boss in the office, he gets into a pensive mood. His phone rings and, symbolically, the song signifies love disappointments and betrayal. The sound describes his “painful” love relationship, the circumstances surrounding his love life. The song insinuates that he is curtailed of freedom to express love-life like any other citizen in his society. Whereas his body and mind are desirous of his coming out publicly, the current circumstances in his environment are not conducive.

The tragic vision in the film (ala Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*) gets explicitly dramatic and reflects a moral vision as every effort that Vida makes to escape from the inevitability of his outedness and death, paradoxically leads him more closely to death. When he escapes from the state spies he ends up in the hands of the mob; when he runs to his mother’s house she sends him away because she fears that the father will kill him; when he goes to hide in the guest house, the manager recognizes him and shouts out that he is a criminal and once again he gets exposed to the angry public that bays for his blood. He ends up in an abject lodging and once again naively exposes himself when he pays 8000 Uganda shillings for a room that usually goes for 3000. This makes the boyfriend of Shakila the care taker, who himself is a common criminal to suspect him for a fellow criminal with a lot of money. He insists that he must share the loot with him. He lies to him that he had hidden the money in some bush. But before this he had already exposed himself by giving Shakila his identity and mobile phone to go withdraw money for him. This helps the state security agents to trace his whereabouts through Shakila. However, he gets away with Shakila’s criminal boyfriend before they get him. He finally kills Shakila’s boyfriend in self-defense. In all these instances the film portrays him as naive and innocent: a victim of circumstances beyond his control like all archetypal tragic figures. As such he becomes both a subject and object of pity and sympathy.

The other way that the filmmaker elicits pity and sympathy is through the exaggeration of criminalization of an *innocent* body that is subjected to excessive torture and indignity. In fact, the state security agent inserts his hand in Vida’s rectum as a test of confirming his homosexual orientation. Like a common criminal Vida and his friend Solomon are sought out by the state agents. When they are found, they are taken to an isolated place and tortured so that they can confess that they are actually gays and to expose other gays and mention the organizations that sponsor the homosexuals in Uganda. However, Vida adamantly refuses to mention anyone. He is eventually released but remains under strict surveillance of the state’s criminal investigation officers. He is thrown out of his house by his landlord. As a castaway, he lacks any anchorage either in family or friends. Nobody wants to associate with him. He is

considered a pariah, a filthy and taboo body/identity. His own mother advises him to run away because his father will not accept him in the same house as he is an object of shame and embarrassment. The camera follows him in his attempt to look for succour but all is in vain. Everywhere he goes to he is recognized from the tabloid picture and he must keep on running. As such running away and attempting to hide are major motifs of vulnerability in this film. The irony in this film is that though the gay body is under the surveillance of the state's spy agency the real common criminals are freely walking around with guns and threatening the lives of ordinary citizens.

Because of self-belief in his own innocence, Vida emerges as a very naive character, a character trait that leads to his tragic death. One is left to wonder why a man whose identity has been splashed on the front page of a popular tabloid read by a mass of the citizens, does not even attempt to disguise his identity. He is finally lynched by the public after they identify him with his picture on the tabloid newspaper's front page.

4. Conclusion

The fact that the filmmaker chose arts to point out this political questioning of homosexuality in Uganda is important to speak about its relation with some other countries in African and Europe concerning the question of violence. What is interesting in this film is how the narratives unpack queer stories without necessarily laying bare the sex life of the homosexuals. As such what remains imprinted in the mind's eye of the viewer is an image of an individual that has been victimized by society without being given opportunity to explain oneself. Though this film participates in an interventionist and advocacy project, exposing the trauma and suffering of homosexuals and gays in Uganda, the plot lacks suspense, the characters lack credibility and the camera, as a unique system of signification, has not been deployed appropriately and imaginatively to enhance the impact of the story.

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