



The Barzanji Ritual in the Malay Tradition of the East Coast of Sumatra: Meanings, Symbols, and Local Variations

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the Barzanji tradition among Malay communities in Riau, Jambi, Rantau Parapat, Aceh, and Deli Serdang in order to examine variations in practice and local specificities from the perspective of Islamic anthropology. Employing a qualitative method with a comparative approach, the research draws on participant observation, in-depth interviews with tradition and religious figures, and documentary analysis of Barzanji texts and ritual practices. The findings indicate that although Barzanji is grounded in relatively uniform textual structures, its enactment is adapted to diverse social and cultural contexts. In Riau, Barzanji functions as a symbol of Malay–Islamic tradition legitimacy; in Jambi, it reflects cultural flexibility and hybridity; in Rantau Parapat, it reinforces Islam–Malay identity within a multiethnic society; in Aceh, it demonstrates ritual institutionalization and collective performance; while in Deli Serdang, it represents a synthesis of sultanate traditions and community-based religious practices. These findings position Barzanji as an adaptive form of cultural da’wah and contribute to scholarship in Islamic anthropology and Islam Nusantara by illustrating how religious rituals operate as arenas for negotiating identity, cultural authority, and the continuity of local Islamic traditions.

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INTRODUCTION

The Barzanji tradition constitutes one of the religious–cultural expressions that continues to thrive and develop widely among Malay communities along the East Coast of Sumatra. Barzanji, which consists of praises and narratives of the life of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, functions not only as a devotional religious practice but is also deeply integrated into various customary rites and ceremonial traditions. This practice demonstrates that Islamic teachings do not exist in isolation; rather, they are interwoven with local systems of values and cultural symbols. Within this context, Barzanji serves as an important medium that connects Islamic teachings with Malay cultural values, traditions, and identity. Accordingly, Barzanji can be understood as a representation of cultural Islam that is actively lived and enacted within the social space of Malay society (Miskahuddin & Zuherni, 2021).

In Malay society, the performance of Barzanji is commonly found in a wide range of customary ceremonies, including childbirth rituals (such as *aqiqah* and *turun tanah*), circumcisions, weddings, commemorations of the Prophet’s birthday (*Maulid Nabi*), as well as thanksgiving rituals and rites intended to ward off misfortune. This practice underscores that Islam has developed through a dialogical process with local culture, giving rise to contextual forms of religiosity. Through the recitation of Barzanji, Islamic values such as love for the Prophet, moral exemplarity, social solidarity, and collective spirituality are transmitted symbolically and ritually. This process highlights the role of Barzanji as a means of internalizing religious values within the social life of the community. In this sense, Barzanji functions as a vehicle for the formation of both individual and collective piety (Adam et al., 2023).

Every element within the Barzanji rite—ranging from the modes of recitation, seating arrangements of participants, the use of *rebana* or *marhaban*, to the selection of time and the presentation of customary offerings—contains symbolic meanings that reflect the worldview of Malay society. These symbols affirm that Islam is understood as an integral component of Malay cultural identity. This perspective aligns with the principle “*tradition bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah*”, which underpins the relationship between religion and custom. Through Barzanji, Islamic doctrines are translated into cultural expressions that are socially accepted and transmitted across generations. Thus, Barzanji functions as a bridge between the normative teachings of Islam and local cultural expression (Batubara et al., 2022).



The practice of Barzanji is not uniform across the Malay regions of the East Coast of Sumatra. Variations in its performance are shaped by local histories, social structures, and interactions with other ethnic cultures. In Jambi, Barzanji is generally performed in a simple manner within the tradition of communal feasts (*kenduri kampung*), with a strong emphasis on togetherness and prayers for safety. In Riau, Barzanji is often combined with *marhaban* and *rebana*, highlighting aesthetic dimensions, linguistic refinement, and symbols of Malay customary nobility (Suhaila et al., [2024](#)). Meanwhile, among the Mandailing Natal community, Barzanji is adapted into an Islamic-oriented customary system with a more formal ritual structure (Harahap et al., [2021](#)), whereas in Aceh, the tradition is institutionalized collectively as an integral part of large-scale *Maulid Nabi* celebrations (Miskahuddin & Zuherni, [2021](#)).

Among the Malay community of Deli Serdang, Barzanji displays distinctive characteristics as a cultural legacy of the Deli Malay Sultanate. The tradition is conducted with strict adherence to customary etiquette, the use of classical Malay language, and symbols of customary grandeur that reflect the historical relationship between Islam, political authority, and Malay identity. Its performance not only emphasizes religious devotion but also reinforces social hierarchy and customary legitimacy. In this regard, Barzanji functions as a site of convergence between religion, tradition, and symbolic authority. This practice demonstrates that Barzanji is not merely a religious ritual, but also a space for negotiating the cultural identity of the Deli Serdang Malay community (Ningsih et al., [2025](#)).

Previous studies on Barzanji among Malay communities on the East Coast of Sumatra have generally positioned it as an expression of cultural Islam that serves to strengthen religiosity and social solidarity. Such studies tend to emphasize historical aspects, da'wah functions, and its role in life-cycle celebrations. However, most of this scholarship remains descriptive and normative in nature. As a result, the ritual structure, customary symbols, and cultural power relations embedded in the practice of Barzanji have not been examined in depth. This situation opens space for more analytical and context-sensitive research.

In the context of the Deli Serdang Malay community, existing studies tend to view Barzanji as a religious ritual that is largely uniform with practices in other Malay regions. Such approaches have not fully situated Barzanji within the framework of Deli Malay tradition, which is rooted in sultanate traditions. Consequently, symbolic dimensions such as customary etiquette, social hierarchy, the use of classical Malay language, and the roles of tradition leaders and ulama receive limited analytical attention. Yet these elements are integral to the cultural meaning system of the Deli Serdang Malay community. This limitation indicates a significant research gap (Lestari, [2022](#)).

Meanwhile, studies of Barzanji in other regions demonstrate varying emphases in accordance with local contexts. Research in Riau highlights the aesthetic and performative aspects of the ritual (Sara et al., [2022](#)), while studies in Jambi foreground its communal function and social solidarity (Wahyuda et al., [2024](#)). In Aceh, Barzanji is generally framed within normative and institutionalized Islamic practice. These differing emphases underscore the unique position of Barzanji in Deli Serdang, where a relatively balanced negotiation occurs between Islamic symbols and customary symbols. This distinctiveness reinforces the importance of a comparative approach in the study of Barzanji.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study focuses on a symbolic and comparative analysis of the Barzanji tradition among Malay communities on the East Coast of Sumatra, with particular emphasis on the Deli Serdang Malays. The study aims to reveal how the Barzanji rite functions as a medium for integrating Islam, tradition, and the historical identity of the sultanate. By employing a symbolic anthropological approach and cross-regional comparison, this research offers a new perspective on understanding Barzanji as a symbolic arena. Through this approach, Islamic values and Malay culture are understood as the outcomes of ongoing processes of negotiation, legitimation, and social transmission. The findings of this study are expected to enrich the field of Islamic anthropology and contribute to broader discussions on Islam Nusantara.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a comparative study approach aimed at comparing the Barzanji tradition and its implementation in the social life of Malay communities (Rofiah, [2022](#)). This approach is considered the most appropriate for interpreting Barzanji practices as socio-religious phenomena that are not limited to acts of worship, but are also deeply integrated into customary systems and cultural identity. The primary focus of the research is directed toward Barzanji practices in Deli Serdang, with comparative analysis conducted among Malay communities in Riau, Jambi, Rantau Prapat, and Aceh. This cross-regional comparison is intended to identify variations, shared patterns, and

local specificities in the performance of Barzanji. Accordingly, the approach enables a contextual and comparative reading of the Barzanji tradition (Al-Farisi & Syauqii, [2025](#)).

The research locations were selected purposively among Malay communities that continue to actively perform Barzanji rituals within various customary and religious rites. The observed rituals included commemorations of the Prophet's Birthday (*Maulid Nabi*), weddings, circumcision ceremonies, customary feasts (*kenduri tradition*), and other religious activities. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of approximately six months in order to obtain sufficient and repeated data. This timeframe allowed the researcher to directly observe more than one Barzanji performance in each research site. Through this strategy, social dynamics, ritual structures, and customary symbols could be examined in depth within their respective social and cultural contexts.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary study. In participant observation, the researcher was directly involved as an observer in the performance of Barzanji rituals. The observation focused on documenting the sequence of events, the roles of ritual actors, the use of language and customary symbols, and patterns of social interaction during the ritual. Observations were conducted repeatedly across different ritual contexts in each research area. This approach was intended to ensure consistency of understanding while simultaneously enabling systematic cross-regional comparison.

In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with 20 key informants, consisting of tradition leaders, ulama, Barzanji ritual leaders, and community members who were actively involved in the tradition. Informants were selected based on criteria that included possessing in-depth knowledge of Barzanji, direct involvement in ritual practices, and social recognition within their communities. The interviews were designed to explore informants' interpretations of the symbolic meanings, social functions, and cultural as well as religious values embedded in Barzanji practices. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility in probing informants' experiences and perspectives in greater depth. In this way, the data obtained were not merely descriptive but also reflective.

Data analysis was carried out through stages of data reduction, categorization, and thematic interpretation. Data from observations and interviews were coded into major themes, such as ritual structure, customary symbols, the relationship between Islam and tradition, and variations in local practice. Subsequently, the data were interpreted using a symbolic anthropological approach to read Barzanji as a system of meaning. This approach enabled the researcher to understand Barzanji as an arena of negotiation between Islamic values, Malay cultural identity, and local social contexts. Documentary sources were employed as supporting data to strengthen interpretation, including Barzanji manuscripts, tradition archives, photographs, audio-visual recordings, and relevant literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Genealogy of the Barzanji Tradition in the Deli Sultanate and the East Coast of Sumatra

The *Barzanji* text may be understood as a product of religious culture that emerged from a specific geographical and intellectual milieu. The designation *Barzanji* derives from the region of Barzinj in Kurdistan and was subsequently attached to the name of its author. The original title of the work is *Aqad al-Zawahir*, while the appellation *al-Barzanji* became more widely used within oral traditions and Islamic devotional practice. From its inception, the text was intended as a means of cultivating deep affection for and reverence toward the Prophet Muhammad SAW through narratives of his life journey and the exemplary virtues of his character (Khoiri & Faristiana, [2021](#)).

The contents of the *Barzanji* text present a chronological account of the life of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, beginning with his childhood and lineage and culminating in his appointment as a Messenger. These narratives are enriched with descriptions of the Prophet's noble qualities and key events that serve as moral exemplars for the Muslim community. From an aesthetic perspective, the *Barzanji* text is distinguished by its refined language and literary strength, which evoke emotional and spiritual resonance among its readers and listeners. As such, the text does not merely convey historical information, but also functions as a religious medium imbued with profound symbolic meaning (Natuna & Pratiwi, [2023](#)).

The Barzanji tradition in the Deli Sultanate and among Malay communities along the East Coast of Sumatra cannot be separated from the long process of Islamization of the coastal regions, which unfolded from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. *Barzanji* refers to the *maulid* text authored by Sayyid Ja'far bin Hasan al-Barzanji, which

recounts the birth, life, and moral virtues of the Prophet Muhammad SAW in the form of prose and laudatory poetry. From the outset, this text was designed as a medium of collective devotion to be recited communally. In the Malay world, *Barzanji* was readily embraced due to its poetic and narrative style, which could be easily integrated with local oral traditions and musical sensibilities (Suhaila et al., [2024](#)).

The introduction of the Barzanji tradition to the East Coast of Sumatra occurred through networks of *ulama*, merchants, and preachers connected to major centers of Islamic learning in the Haramain and Hadramaut. Under the authority of the Deli Sultanate, Islam was not only embraced as a belief system but also served as a foundation for political legitimacy and cultural identity. Consequently, religious practices such as the recitation of *Barzanji* occupied an important place in palace life, sultanate mosques, and Malay settlements. The tradition subsequently became firmly rooted in Deli Serdang and the city of Medan, before spreading widely throughout the eastern coastal regions of North Sumatra (Dewi & Utari, [2024](#)).

Within the social life of the Deli Malay community, *Barzanji* functions as a religious ritual accompanying various social events and life-cycle ceremonies. The recitation of *Barzanji* is commonly performed during celebrations of the Prophet's Birthday (*Maulid Nabi*), childbirth, weddings, circumcisions, as well as thanksgiving rituals and customary feasts. In these contexts, *Barzanji* is not merely understood as a devotional recitation, but also as a means of strengthening social solidarity and kinship ties. The collective presence of religious figures, tradition elders, and community members reflects the role of *Barzanji* as a medium of social integration within the structure of coastal Malay society (Ali & Putri, [2025](#)).

From a performative standpoint, the Barzanji tradition along the East Coast of Sumatra exhibits distinctive characteristics in its modes of practice. The recitation is carried out collectively and led by individuals possessing recognized religious authority, following specific melodic patterns transmitted across generations. In many Deli Malay communities, the recitation is accompanied by *rebana* or *hadrah*, which provide a religious musical ambiance without diminishing the sacredness of the text. These musical elements reflect a process of acculturation between Islamic teachings and Malay aesthetic traditions, whereby religious expression is articulated through vocal art and characteristic rhythms (Lubis et al., [2023](#)).

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the Barzanji tradition within the Deli Sultanate functions as a symbol of Malay-Islamic identity. This practice affirms a collective identity grounded in the principle "*tradition bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah*." Through the repeated recitation of *Barzanji*, the exemplary values of the Prophet, social ethics, and Islamic morality are continuously instilled in the collective consciousness of the community. Accordingly, *Barzanji* serves as an effective medium of informal religious education, particularly in periods preceding the development of modern educational systems (Khoiri & Faristiana, [2021](#)).

The Barzanji Ritual in the Social Life of the Deli Serdang Malay Community and the East Coast of Sumatra

In the socio-religious practices of Malay communities, the recitation of the *Kitab Barzanji* has developed into a living religious tradition, particularly during commemorations of the Prophet Muhammad SAW's birthday (*Maulid Nabi*) and various other religious events. Over time, Barzanji texts have continued to be published and disseminated across different regions of the Islamic world, including Indonesia. The celebration of the Prophet's birth is expressed not only through the recitation of Barzanji, but also through diverse *maulid* ceremonies combined with the chanting of *shalawat* and religious poetry. This tradition illustrates how the Barzanji text has transformed from a written work into a collective ritual that strengthens communal identity and spirituality. Accordingly, Barzanji functions as both a medium of religious expression and a social adhesive within Malay communities (Nur et al., [2024](#)).

The Barzanji ritual is generally conducted in the home of the family hosting the event, in mosques, or in village prayer halls (*surau*), with spatial arrangements that reflect the collective values of Malay society. Participants sit cross-legged facing one another or forming a semicircle, while the *Kitab Barzanji* is placed in front of the recitation leader, often alongside *rebana* or *hadrah* instruments. The ceremony begins with greetings, a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the gathering, and the recitation of *Surah al-Fatihah* dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad SAW, his companions, religious scholars, and ancestors. This stage marks the transition from an ordinary social atmosphere to a ritual space imbued with religious consciousness. The ritual then proceeds to its core segment through the recitation of Barzanji, which begins with praises and *shalawat* chanted repeatedly in a distinctive melodic pattern (Aziz et al., [2024](#)).



Figure 1. Barzanji Tradition Activity at a School Event in Deli Serdang Regency
Source: Personal Documentation

At certain moments—particularly during *mahallul qiyam*—all participants stand as a symbolic gesture of reverence toward the Prophet Muhammad SAW, while the *rebana* is slowly played to accompany the verses of praise. From an anthropological perspective, although the Arabic language used in the recitation is not always literally understood by all participants, it is nonetheless received as a sacred language experienced through sound, rhythm, and the repetition of phrases. After the entire sequence of recitations is completed, the ritual concludes with a collective prayer led by a religious figure and ends with *shalawat* and the communal utterance of *amin*. This closing is followed by a shared meal, marking the formal conclusion of the ceremony. Overall, the Barzanji ritual in regions formerly influenced by the Deli Sultanate appears as a cultural–religious practice that integrates text, sound, bodily movement, and communal togetherness, while simultaneously serving as a medium for the transmission of Malay–Islamic identity.



Figure 2. Barzanji Tradition at a Thanksgiving Ceremony in Deli Serdang Regency
Source: Personal Documentation

Discussion

The Barzanji tradition among the Malay community of Deli Serdang is understood as a religious practice that represents the process of internalizing Islamic values into local Malay culture. From the perspective of cultural archaeology, Barzanji is not merely an oral ritual, but also forms part of the historical landscape of Islamization along the East Coast of Sumatra. This tradition continues to live within spaces that possess historical continuity, such as old mosques, village *surau*, traditional Malay houses, and residential areas that, since the era of the Deli Sultanate, have functioned as

centers of religious life. The presence of old printed Barzanji manuscripts written in Arabic–Malay script, traditional *rebana* passed down through generations, and relatively consistent ritual spatial arrangements attests to the deep historical roots of this practice. Within this framework, Barzanji may be viewed as a living artifact—an intangible heritage sustained by collective memory and the continuous reproduction of ritual practices (Hamid, [2021](#)).

The Barzanji ritual in the Malay community of Deli Serdang exhibits a consistent structure rich in Islamic symbolism. The ceremony generally begins with greetings and the recitation of *Surah al-Fatihah*, followed by *shalawat* and narratives of the life of the Prophet Muhammad SAW delivered in prose and poetic form. The recitation is often accompanied by *rebana* played in gentle rhythms that cultivate a sacred atmosphere and express reverence for the Prophet. In Islamic anthropological studies, this practice illustrates that sacred texts and prophetic history are not only understood doctrinally, but are also experienced through aesthetic and emotional engagement. In this sense, Barzanji functions simultaneously as a medium of cultural da'wah, an informal form of religious education, and a means of shaping the moral ethos of Malay society, in which the Prophet's character serves as the primary moral exemplar (Ainah, [2023](#)).

Field research employing a comparative anthropological approach was conducted through participant observation, interviews with religious figures, and ritual documentation in Deli Serdang, Jambi, Riau, Rantau Prapat, and Aceh. The findings indicate that, textually, the Barzanji manuscripts used are relatively uniform; however, their social contexts and ritual expressions display significant variation. In Deli Serdang, Barzanji is typically performed within family settings and village communities, characterized by simplicity and integration with *kenduri* and communal meals. This pattern underscores the inclusive character of Malay Islam, which is oriented toward social harmony. Such practices demonstrate how religious traditions function as mechanisms for strengthening community cohesion (Suhari, [2025](#)).

Anthropologically, the practice of Barzanji in Riau reveals a transformation of ethical Sufism (*tasawuf akhlaki*) into a social habitus. Participants may not always understand the Arabic text literally, yet they internalize its meanings through ritual experiences such as sitting together cross-legged, following the rhythm of *shalawat*, standing during *mahallul qiyam*, and concluding the event with collective prayers and shared meals. This sequence of experiences shapes a collective disposition emphasizing equality, self-restraint, and mutual respect. Within the framework of Islamic anthropology, such practices illustrate how ethical Sufism functions as a social mechanism for forming morally grounded Muslim personalities. Thus, spiritual and social dimensions are not separated, but rather reinforce one another (Suhaila et al., [2024](#)).

Findings from Rantau Prapat indicate that Barzanji plays a strong role as a marker of Islamic and Malay identity within a multiethnic society. In this region, the recitation of Barzanji generally takes place within family circles or small community groups, with a strong emphasis on solemnity and ritual sanctity. Performative elements such as *rebana* are used sparingly, while greater attention is given to the orderliness of recitation and ritual etiquette. This pattern reflects an effort to preserve ritual purity within a heterogeneous social environment. Accordingly, Barzanji serves as a means of maintaining both religious and Malay cultural identity (Natuna & Pratiwi, [2023](#)).

In Aceh, Barzanji forms part of a broader and more institutionalized Maulid tradition, involving entire *gampong* communities and extending over longer durations. This practice is closely integrated with religious institutions such as *meunasah* and *dayah*, reflecting Islam's position as a dominant social system. In contrast, Barzanji in Jambi demonstrates more diverse forms of adaptation, particularly in inland areas, where it incorporates elements of Malay culture, local traditions, and Minangkabau influences. In Riau, Barzanji is closely associated with customary institutions and symbols of Malay identity, and frequently features in formal tradition ceremonies. These variations highlight the flexibility of Barzanji in adapting to diverse social and cultural contexts (Dewi & Utari, [2024](#)).

Anthropological analysis of cross-regional data indicates that the Barzanji tradition functions as a medium integrating the universal teachings of Islam with particular local cultures. Among the Malay community of Deli Serdang, Barzanji not only reflects devotion to the Prophet Muhammad SAW, but also affirms a Malay–Islamic identity that emphasizes politeness, communal solidarity, and balance between tradition and sharia. This tradition records both the history of Islamization and the social and spiritual dynamics of Malay communities along the East Coast of Sumatra. Consequently, Barzanji may be understood as a living religious-cultural heritage that continues to be reinterpreted. This perspective positions Barzanji as a vital element in the construction of collective Malay–Islamic identity.

In practice, Barzanji in Deli Serdang is generally conducted within family and village community settings, taking place in homes, mosques, or *surau*. The ritual structure includes an opening with greetings and *al-Fatihah*, a core segment consisting of *shalawat* and narratives of the Prophet delivered in prose and verse, and a closing marked by prayers and communal meals. Simple *rebana* accompaniment highlights *mahallul qiyam* as the emotional climax of the ritual. This sequence reflects a balance between the sacred dimensions of worship and social togetherness. Accordingly, Barzanji functions as a form of cultural da'wah, moral education, and a binding force of social solidarity within Malay–Islamic society.

When situated within the broader Malay context of the East Coast of Sumatra, these findings reinforce the understanding of Barzanji as an effective medium of cultural da'wah. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to present ethical Sufism in the form of religious aesthetics that are readily embraced by the community. From an anthropological perspective, Barzanji successfully bridges normative Islamic teachings with local cultural experience. Sufi values do not emerge as elitist practices, but rather as shared ethics embedded within tradition. Thus, Barzanji may be understood as a vehicle for transmitting ethical Sufism through symbols, sound, and communal participation, serving as a crucial pillar in the formation of Malay Islamic character in the coastal regions of Sumatra.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Barzanji tradition among Malay communities in Riau, Jambi, Rantau Parapat, Aceh, and Deli Serdang is not merely a ritualistic religious practice, but rather a form of cultural da'wah that functions as a medium for transmitting Islamic values, prophetic ethics, and local socio-cultural identity. Although the textual content and basic structure of Barzanji are relatively uniform, its modes of performance exhibit diverse contextual adaptations shaped by customary structures, ethnic composition, the history of Islamization, and the relationships between religious institutions and local communities. This finding affirms Barzanji as a living Islamic practice that is deeply rooted in local cultural dynamics.

In contrast to previous studies that tend to emphasize philological aspects, ritual functions, or partial discussions of Sufism, this research offers a cross-regional comparative perspective grounded in Islamic anthropology. Through this approach, Barzanji is understood as a *living tradition* that integrates aesthetic elements, ethical Sufism (*tasawuf akhlaki*), and social togetherness within a single system of meaning. The local variations identified—ranging from tradition-based legitimacy in Riau, cultural flexibility in Jambi, the assertion of Islam–Malay identity in Rantau Parapat, collective institutionalization in Aceh, to the synthesis of sultanate traditions and popular religiosity in Deli Serdang—underscore Barzanji as an adaptive, dynamic, and contextual expression of Islam Nusantara.

This study, however, has certain limitations, particularly in its primary focus on tradition and religious actors, which means that the perspectives of younger generations have not been fully explored. In addition, it does not specifically examine transformations in Barzanji practices within the context of modernization and digital media. Therefore, future research is recommended to investigate the transformation of Barzanji among younger generations, the role of social media in the transmission of tradition and shifts in ritual meaning amid contemporary socio-cultural change. Such studies are expected to enrich understanding of the sustainability of Barzanji as a heritage of Islam Nusantara in the modern era.

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