

**EXPLORING SOCIAL BARRIERS TO CONVERSION AMONG  
THE THAI**

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January 2005

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## **Introduction**

In this paper I am making what I consider to be preliminary observations that I hope will serve to stimulate further research on a subject that has been alluded to in the past two SEANET missiological forums. In Paul DeNeui's paper "Contextualizing With Thai Folk Buddhists" he argued that the strongest barriers Thai folk Buddhists faced in coming to Christ were social and not religious (DeNeui 2003:130, 134-135). In last year's forum I argued that it is our ways of "doing church" that create more problems for people coming from Buddhist backgrounds than their own doctrinal understandings (Johnson 2004:1). I want to pick up this theme of barriers to conversion that are not religious, doctrinal, or philosophical, but rather are social in the sense that they have to do with the dynamics that grow out of our interrelationships with other people.

The importance of this issue was driven home to me again through two experiences that happened in this past year. In one case I was chatting with a Thai friend who has been attending church for several years now, and who was planning on marrying a Christian girl. In the course of our conversation I asked when and how he had become a believer. He was quick to reply that he was not a follower of Christ yet. I was quite curious and questioned him about what he thought was keeping him from professing Christ, since he had such a positive attitude about Christianity in general and attended church regularly.<sup>1</sup> A second incident happened while I was sitting in front of a local

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<sup>1</sup> We had this conversation while taking a long driving trip together so I was unable to make any notes on what he said. Recently I asked him to recount what we talked about in terms of things that were barriers to him becoming a Christian. He told me that he is now a believer and, quite interestingly, said that he has forgotten much of his initial reactions that he had when he first went to church. I think that this is a very common process where time and distance from beliefs and values we once held makes remembering precisely what our feelings were in the face of a new belief system rather difficult. This normal "forgetting"

school. A teacher walking out saw me and stopped to ask if I needed anything. When she found out that I worked with a Thai Christian organization she asked me if I knew certain people. It turned out that the two or three people she mentioned were very well known people in the broader Christian movement in Thailand. She identified herself as the *luuksit* (disciple) of one of them. So I asked her if she was a Christian and how she became one and she immediately replied, “No, I am a Buddhist. My family is Buddhist.”

These two incidents reminded me of the fact that even where people have a chance to hear the Gospel over a protracted period of time and are in relationship with solid believers and groups of Christians, there are still things that act as barriers to their coming to faith. The problems are more than conceptual (in terms of not understanding key doctrines) or structural (in terms of not having long term exposure to solid believers); I believe that they illustrate the fact that there are social barriers that make it difficult for people to become followers of Jesus.

### **Delineating Types of Barriers**

At this point I want to make a few clarifying remarks about the whole enterprise of critically examining how people respond to the Gospel of Christ and then attempt to explain what I mean by social barriers. If we use a theological lens, it is clear that conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who convicts of sin and who draws people to the Father. On that basis there are some who feel that this implies that we should simply “preach the Gospel” and let the Holy Spirit do the work. The problem with this view is that it ignores the issues of encoding, decoding and social context that make communication meaningful. There are no culturally neutral renderings of the Gospel for either those who are sharing it or those who are listening because it can only be encoded

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process means that unless there are conscious attempts at reflection on our former beliefs in light of our new ones that we will be less sensitive to shape our message to those outside the faith and instead relate things in terms of our Christianized categories, terminology, and social contexts.

and decoded through perceptual filters that are based on our sociocultural context.<sup>2</sup> The practical outgrowth of this is that what the Gospel messenger may intend as her meaning is not what the receiver may understand.

It is this reality that means there is great benefit to increasing our understanding of both the conceptual and social worlds of our potential listeners so that we can render the Gospel message and all that goes with it in terms of being a community of believers on this earth in a way that is as easily understandable as possible. While it is the Holy Spirit who is ultimately drawing people to Christ, we have a role in either making that process easier or harder by the way that we communicate the Gospel, and here I am thinking of the Gospel in its broadest sense including not only verbal propositions but the entire structure and practice of the Christian community. Most Christians understand this reality when there is an obvious language difference. For instance, I do not know of anyone who would seriously defend the preaching of the Gospel in Russian to a Swahili speaker and expecting that the Holy Spirit could use that message to bring a person to Christ. However, the power of sociocultural context is often neglected when we are speaking the same language. The assumption being that since we are encoding things in the same language as our listeners (Thai language for a Thai listener) that everything will be quite clear.

Another way to express what I am saying here is that we can be confusing both conceptually in terms of the ideas of the Gospel message and socially in terms of what we are asking people to do or join. Although there are probably other ways of looking at this, one way of thinking about “barriers” would be to think of them in terms of where they

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<sup>2</sup> The Incarnation is the classic example here (Hebrews 1:1-2). When God chose to communicate with humans it was not through some kind of special invented “spiritual” language but in a particular human language and social context. Whiteman says, “The Incarnation tells us something important about God. God chose an imperfect culture with its limitations for making known God’s supreme revelation. From the beginning of humanity God has been reaching out to human beings embedded in their different cultures....The Incarnation tells us God is not afraid of using culture to communicate with us....The Incarnation shows us God has taken both humanity and culture seriously” (Whiteman, 2004:84).

are located. Thinking of those who are sharing the Gospel, there are barriers in the way that we conceive church, and do ministry and leadership. This is what I explored in my paper last year (Johnson, 2004). Thinking of those who are receiving the Gospel message, there are barriers that are conceptual in nature (inside the person) and those that are social (where the locus is both internal and external to the person in the networks of relationships they live in).

What exactly am I thinking of when I use the term social barriers<sup>3</sup>? Let me say first that we experience the flow of life as a totality and not in compartmentalized segments. So while I am separating conceptual problems and social problems analytically for the purposes of discussion, they are wound intimately together. In terms of lived experience it is much more a package deal. Let me make an example of the kinds of distinctions I am drawing here. If a Buddhist is puzzled about what we mean by God, or sin, or the significance of the cross at least in part due to their understandings of these subjects in the light of Buddhist teaching about their being no single creator God, merit and demerit, and karma; then we are dealing with a conceptual problem. By way of contrast, if a person does not want to become a Christian because he sees it as joining a foreign religion, or because his family would be against it, you are dealing with social barriers. A person could believe everything about the Gospel but not want to make a publicly known response because of the way other people in their social networks would respond. Again, social barriers could be classed as being fairly abstract (Christianity is a foreign religion, I violate my Thai identity to become one) to very concrete where a person hesitates to respond to the Gospel because specific relationships will become

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<sup>3</sup> In talking about things “social” in this paper I want to be clear that ideas about the nature of the social, social structure, and society are very problematic and notoriously hard to pin down in a concise definition. Anderson says that social in the broadest sense has to do with behavior or attitudes influenced by past or present behavior of others and that is oriented towards other people. He distinguishes the social as having to do with interaction, while the cultural has to do with normative and cognitive patterns for action rather than interaction (Anderson, 1964: 643). There are those who would take issue with this mentalist view of culture and see it as much more connected with behavior and interaction as well (Knighton, 2002:90; see also Carrithers, 1992 for his mutualist view of culture)

problematic (I cannot become a Christian because I have to become a monk temporarily in order to make merit for my mother).

The table below represents one way of representing these various types of barriers.

**TABLE 1**  
**THREE TYPES OF BARRIERS**

<b>Type of Barrier</b>	Conceptual or Doctrinal	Social	Church Life
<b>Location</b>	Primarily within a person	Primarily in interaction between persons	In the assumptions and practices of church life
<b>Examples</b>	Confusion about the nature of God, sin, salvation etc.  Use of amulets	Thai identity-to be Thai is to be Buddhist  Merit making ceremonies with the family.	Strong emphasis on trained, full-time leadership  Building-centric church life versus being out where people live in the community

### **An Examination of Some Social Barriers**

In this section I will now briefly overview some areas that I have come upon in personal experience that are social barriers for people and conclude with some material from a few interviews with young Thai believers and seekers. The concluding section will pick up on some of the implications that these barriers have for Christian witness

## *Thai Identity*

When you share your Christian faith with a Thai Buddhist, you will invariably run up against a wall which can be best summarized in the sense people have that to be Thai is to be a Buddhist. Although it will be expressed in a number of different ways (for example the ideas that Christianity is a foreign religion, that to become a Christian is to leave the paths of the elders, that one's parents would be horrified if a person became a Christian), at the core is the self-understanding that "Thainess" is in some way connected with being Buddhist. This sense of identity combines with the common saying that "all religions are equally good, they teach us to be a good people" to build a wall so that people do not see becoming a Christian as a life option at all. It is something for foreigners; it is "their" religion, while "our" religion is Buddhism.

This sense of identity that is reinforced and reproduced over and over again in social relations can be seen as the reason why it is so easy for Thai people who become Christians while in a foreign country to be reabsorbed into Buddhism upon their return. When they are outside of Thailand, it is permissible to a degree to adapt to local custom, to do as the Romans do in Rome so to speak and check out what the locals do for religion there. It is a case of where Thai identity can be marginalized in the effort to fit in with the new setting, and this includes religious practice as well. However, once they return to Thailand, even though they may have been very sincere in their desire to follow Christ, the overwhelming assertion of Thai identity, the call to fit in and be part of the group, means that many people abandon at least the outward practice of their new faith to conform to the appearance of Buddhist practice.

For those of us who have been raised in western cultures that are very individualistic, it is extremely difficult to understand how it feels to step outside of the mainstream in a much more collective cultural setting.<sup>4</sup> When a person does convert there

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember that the individualism that is noted about the Thai and that led to Embree's famous and controversial description of Thai society as "loosely structured" is not the same as individualism in the West. On measures of individualism and collectivism like those used by Hofstede

is often a period of intense pressure from family and friends to bring them back into the fold of Buddhism. While for the most part this pressure is not violent (although there are some exceptions) it is still extremely difficult for people to bear up against it as they feel like they are standing alone against the entire social system.

I think that this has much to do with the interesting observation that I have made, at least in the churches in the Christian group I am associated with, that hardly anyone who attends a given church actually lives in the immediate neighborhood of the church. They all come from somewhere else farther away and attend the services. When I have asked Thai Christians about this they have indicated that if you live close by everyone knows that you are going to church. But if you live far away and someone asks where you are going on Sunday you can easily dodge the question by answering with a generic line such as going on business, or going out for fun. The anonymity afforded by urban areas helps people to deal with the pressures of going against acceptable Thai identity and associated practice.

### *The Social Life of a Thai Buddhist*

I remember in my early years talking with people about the Christian faith and I began to hear what was to my ears an interesting sentence. People would ask what they must do if they were to become a Christian. My presentations about Christ rarely talked about what one must do; rather it was about what to believe. It began to dawn on me that for Thai people religion is much more about orthopraxis, about correct practice, than it is about a correct set of beliefs. Our Christian emphasis on fidelity to a set of propositions often seems confusing to people. Some years back I was interviewing students at

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(Hofstede, 1982) the Thai score on the collective side of the continuum. Cohen argues that hierarchy and individualism for opposing cultural codes that are ever present in Thai society and are continually reconfigured and reshaped without ever actually disappearing. Thai individualism is based on individual independence and an opportunism for advancing personal interests, it is both anarchic and present oriented (Cohen, 1991:42, 46).

Raamkhamhaeng University about their experience of having people share about Jesus with them. One young man said that all Christians said was *chua phrajao* (believe in God) over and over and it made no sense to him at all.

While there are some religious practices that Thai Buddhists will do by themselves, for the most part the things they do that are particularly Buddhist are social in nature, they are public events where family, neighbors, and friends can see what is happening. What I discovered is that if you create space to listen and have dialogue when sharing Christ with a Thai person, many of these concerns regarding their practices and the implication of becoming a follower of Christ on those practices will surface. Such things as temple attendance, merit making ceremonies with family and friends, becoming a monk for a period of time, giving food to monks, ceremonies surrounding death and cremation, are all practices that are done in a social context. Nobody has ever asked me if they can continue to chant *suat mon* if they become a Christian (a private practice they may do before going to bed), but they are often very concerned about what to do when invited to go to a temple (a public practice easily observable). Private practices and beliefs are not a worry to a person considering whether or not to follow Christ; in the early stages there is no doubt that they hold both the old and the new together relatively easily. Over time under the teaching of God's word they begin to change in their belief system and worldview. However, from the very beginning they are concerned about the implications of what becoming a Christian will mean for their ability to participate in rituals, ceremonies, and practices that identify them as being Buddhist and thus Thai.

### *Listening to Some Young Thai Voices*

My thinking about the subject of barriers has led me to start an ongoing project of collecting data from informants who are either new Christians or people who have attended church but not made a profession of faith. I am interested in probing what in

their minds were the major obstacles to their becoming a believer. As part of the preparation for this paper I asked a Thai friend who is planting a church to ask some people about the obstacles they experienced as they were coming to faith. In December of 2005 Pastor Brayun Maiwong spoke with four people on this subject. Three of the people were new Christians, while a fourth had attended church for about two years without yet becoming a Christian. The question was “What were/are the barriers that you were afraid of and that would be a problem if you became a believer”?

It was no surprise to me that their answers covered the spectrum of my three-fold barriers typology. On the conceptual/doctrinal side, one person said that the Gospel was hard to understand, another that it is was humorous and not very believable. They both used the terminology of the Gospel not having right reasoning or rationality *mai mii hetpol* which they felt was part of Buddhism. On the barriers within the church, the one person who attends church but has not yet become a believer completely lays the blame for this on Christians. He said the he was impressed with Jesus but not with Christians. They were no different with others, they say they will help you but they do not, they are not like Jesus, they have too many activities and actually neglect their families, and they say one thing but do another.<sup>5</sup>

The three who have become believers all said that their biggest problem had been social in nature. One person did not want to change her life as things were already going good and she did not want to create problems. The second said that her mother was violently opposed to Christians and said she could be anything but a Christian. This person is afraid of hurting her mother’s feelings and, since the mother is in ill health and she does not want to upset her, she has hidden the fact that she is now a Christian. Finally, one person said that he was afraid of losing his friends.

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<sup>5</sup> On a more encouraging note, my friend who I referred to in the beginning of this paper and who recently became a Christian, sent me his written reflections on what were barriers for him when he first heard the Gospel. He said that the Gospel and the preaching made absolutely no sense at all, but he came back over and over again because of the people and what he observed happening in their lives.

In all three of these cases it goes back to the issue of Thai identity as being Buddhist. It is an irrelevant point as to how serious they are in practicing Buddhism, but what is important is that they maintain at least the minimal identification with the essence of Thainess, of which identifying oneself as a Buddhist is a core part. Becoming a Christian creates problems by putting a person at odds with the broader Thai Buddhist community; it jeopardizes friendship not because people are zealous in the practice of Buddhism but because it threatens one's identity. A person can no longer join in activities which are part of defining a person as Thai.

### **Addressing Social Barriers in Christian Witness**

#### *Issues of Identity*

In my opinion it is the sense that to be Thai is to be a Buddhist and its corollary that Christianity is a foreign religion that comprises the greatest barrier to people becoming Christians here. Following Jesus is not even seen as an option, because in order to do so one must stop being Thai. In light of this fact it is interesting to me that so little is done in Christian churches to argue for an essence of "Thainess" that is not bound up in religion. Over my nearly 19 years of association with Thailand I have been involved in literally hundreds of situations where Thai people have been sharing the Gospel with their fellows Thais. This has ranged from one-on-one encounters, to public church services, to open air meetings where the Gospel is being preached. In my memory there has never been a single time that I have heard a Thai Christian make any formal argument at all that they did not shed their "Thainess" when they became a believer.

It is almost as if Thai Christians assume that because they are Thai that their listeners are similarly going to assume that you can still be Thai and follow Jesus. However, personal experience and the interview evidence provided here and in the

presentation by Eunice Burden would indicate that this is still an issue that looms large for the Thai person being exposed to the Gospel. What might explain this disconnect between a Thai Christians experience as a non-Christian and subsequent neglect of dealing with this issue as they share their faith with others?

While in fact there may be some Thai Christians who do not “feel” very Thai I think it is wrong to assume that this applies across the board in the absence of some empirical data. This in fact would be a most interesting study, to talk with Thai Christians about how Thai they feel post-conversion and document how they come to understand themselves as a Thai and a Christian. I think that there is too much vibrancy in the Thai church to posit that Thai Christians in general feel like they have lost their “Thainess.”

Another possibility, which does have empirical backing in the work of Dr Nantachai, is that Thais have bought into Western ways of formulating and sharing the Gospel (see his summary and conclusions from his interview questions Mejudhon, 1997:312-318). Since in the West we do not typically deal with identity issues for our listeners, Thais have picked this up and simply tell the story in the same way they received it. While I think this definitely has something to do with the situation, Neils Mulder makes an observation that may be more germane to this apparent disconnect. In his book *Thai Images: The Culture of the Public World* he explores the social construction of the public world through examining dominant ideology as embodied in the social science curriculum of the public schools and into the college level, in popular newspapers, fiction, and material from the Thai National Identity Office. (Mulder, 1997). He notes that there “is a tendency to shy away from critical analysis of things Thai, a weakness for which more than the experience of a narrow-minded formal curriculum appears to be responsible” (Mulder, 1997:25). Mulder points out the gap between the matter of fact reporting of the problems of public life in the news and Thai ideals and suggests that “as long as the king, national and religious ceremonies, and beautiful traditions keep existing, there is enough to identify with” ((Mulder, 1997:201). It is when

taboos are breached that image anxiety occurs, where the key institutions are questioned, or certain Thai customs come under scrutiny by foreigners (Mulder, 1997:201).

It is quite possible that having in one sense breached a taboo-leaving the ancestral paths to become a Christian-people feel in themselves and in the social world around them this “image anxiety” and find it extremely difficult to probe publicly into the generally unexamined bases that form the construction of Thai identity. But this reticence to examine things Thai creates a vicious circle where both Christians and those they are sharing with keep the very things off the table of debate and discussion that hold the potential for creating an articulated Thai identity where religious affiliation is not solely connected with Buddhism.

There are three things that come to mind immediately that I think it would be very healthy to add into our thinking about discipling Christians. The first is to begin to explore with Thai believers just what it means to be Thai and Christian and to work at articulating an apologetic that can be incorporated into personal and public presentations of the Gospel. It is safe to say that if it is never verbally expressed, our listeners are in the back of their mind wondering and worrying about how to negotiate relationships in a social world that is hostile to the idea of them becoming a Christian. This is part of being sensitive to local context as we share the Gospel.

A second point is that I think leaders need to work with people early in their Christian experience about what it means to *ruammuu* cooperate with others in Thai society. I have noticed in working with a Thai Christian church movement that their concepts of cooperation are very different than those of us who come from the West. We tend to view cooperation as being a separate issue from belonging, thus it is possible to for instance be a part of a denomination and not cooperate in everything they do, yet still be a member in good standing. I have noticed though that here *ruammuu* means that you must be involved in all the things that are going on or else you are accused of pursuing personal over group interests. A key part of what makes a person *naachuathuu*

(trustworthy) in Thai society is that they *ruammuu* with the group or community that they are a part of.

When people become Christians they often cut themselves off from social life, in which many things are related to Buddhist ceremonies or practices. By not being *ruammuu* with the community they increase the perception that they are now “other” and have moved away from being Thai. There is a place for working out in specific situations how Christians will position themselves in order to have maximum participation in social life without compromising their faith.

Finally I think that it would be good to encourage some Thai theologians and pastors to discuss the issue of Thai Christian identity with the goal of doing some writing on the subject in order to help both believers and non-believers to see that it is possible to follow Jesus and be fully Thai.

### ***Dealing with Implications of the Gospel for Social Life Issues***

My suggestions here follow in the same vein as those dealing with identity issues. For many listeners, there are specific social situations that they are thinking about when assessing whether or not to follow Jesus. Part of training people to share their faith should be how to handle questions such as what to do about temple attendance, merit-making activities, and the pressure to enter the monkhood for young men. We need to help people move beyond sharing only cognitive aspects of the Gospel to looking concretely at the implications that it has for a person in their network of relationships and daily life.

Another action point is that churches and leaders should examine how they can develop ceremony and celebration that conveys rich meaning to people, and is fun *sanuk*. I had this brought home to me while doing a participant observation on the parade put on during Thai New Years (Songkhran) in the slum community that I have been doing research in. What I initially thought was a brief walk through the community turned out to

be a two and a half hour street closing event, where a special image from the local temple was paraded around a major city block complete with a brass band, drums, water throwing, and lots of drinking. Well over a hundred people made the journey on foot while many more followed along in trucks and motorcycles. What struck me was the way that the old people so reverently crowded in around the image being carried on poles in order to briefly lend a shoulder to carry it or to reach out a hand and touch the poles, or even lay their hand on the back of someone touching the poles.

When I got home and was reflecting on this event I realized really for the first time how bland Christian worship is in comparison to an event like this which is just one of many the community does through the course of the year. The typical church service is exceedingly tame next to that, definitely not *sanuk* in the way Thais count fun. I also discovered that at least some Thai believers try to use Christian's lack of ceremony as a selling point in their witness. I was recently teaching a Sunday School class at a church and asked the people in the class about how they share their faith with others. One person said that they tell people that Christians don't have any ceremonies like the Buddhists do. This reflects not only their own experience in church, but also the fact that rather than looking for connecting points and thinking culturally like a Thai they are emphasizing the radically "other" nature of Christianity from Buddhism which just exacerbates the problem of identity discussed above.

Beginning with baptism and the Lord's Supper Christians should be finding ways to practice these ordinances that convey meaning and at the same time bring the group together so that there is a feeling of *samakhii* harmony and accord as well as fun *sanuk*. Next we should look at developing other ceremonies that are uniquely Christian (churches do very well with Christmas in this regard) and also find possible areas within Thai custom and tradition that can be drawn upon. One study of an immigrant community in New York city found that ethnic identity was closely tied to use of language, food and festivals (Ethnicity, n.d.). I believe that finding ways to integrate Thai food and both

creating and adapting festivals and ceremonies within the Christian community context would over time be significant in lessening the sense of distance that people of Buddhist background have from Christians.

Finally all of this needs to be done in a much more collective sense than we usually approach things. Thais appear to have bought into our individualistic approach to sharing the Gospel, focusing on winning individuals and forgetting that people are embedded in networks of relationships. Developing venues where the Gospel is presented naturally in a group where communication is not directed at the non-believer is more effective than inviting a person to join a “community” that she cannot see and has never experienced. People need to experience what the Gospel means in real life, seeing what reconciliation to God and then to each other looks like on the ground, experiencing God’s grace and power in the company of others. If this new community has a rich symbolic life as well then we are not inviting them to leave a vibrant social world to enter some kind of vacuum, instead we are inviting them to a new community, one that is manifestly Thai, which has beautiful ceremonies that are also fun.

As we work with seekers there needs to be a concerted effort to build trust with their personal network that consists of family and friends so that we are not seen as “pulling them away” from the community. The methods described by Ubolwan Mejudon in her integrated model for evangelizing Buddhists and illustrated from their own local church show that this approach is effective in helping people come to faith and creating acceptance among family who are not yet believers (Mejudon, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

In thinking about barriers in responding to the Gospel, I see the clarification and discussion of such issues as being very helpful and creating a sense of hope and expectation for the future of the Gospel among Thai people. First, when we start to set

out more precisely what the obstacles are, we can pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us in rendering the Gospel in a way that is understandable and relevant. Second, it makes us realize that people have not responded to the Gospel for specific reasons, rather than defaulting to the murky notion that they are simply resistant. It also makes us realize that the task is one that can be done, these are not insurmountable walls, and in fact elements of social organization and culture can actually facilitate the spread of the Gospel rather than hinder it if we will be open to understand and use them. Finally, I am confident that within the Thai Church itself lies the resources to take up the task of articulating what it means to be fully Thai and fully Christian and that there will be a day in the future when choosing new life in Jesus will be an acceptable option for millions of Thai people.

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