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**Literacy Culture in Islamic Boarding Schools:
An Analysis of Tradition, Modernity, and Global Challenges**

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of pesantren literacy culture amid the intersection of classical Islamic scholarly traditions, educational modernity, and the demands of globalized information. As one of the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia with distinctive literacy traditions, pesantren are increasingly challenged by modernity and globalization, which are often perceived as forces capable of eroding their identity and epistemic continuity. This research employs a qualitative approach using library research methods, drawing on academic literature related to pesantren literacy culture. Data were analyzed using Bourdieu's theory of habitus, Gee's Critical Literacy Studies, and Giddens's disembedding mechanisms to map the dialectical relationship between pesantren's traditional structures and broader social transformations. The findings indicate that pesantren literacy culture remains deeply rooted in classical scholarly habitus, which maintains epistemic continuity and cultural capital, while modernization and globalization stimulate innovation through the integration of digital technology, the strengthening of critical literacy, and curriculum development. The interaction among these three dimensions produces a form of literacy that is adaptive, selective, and contextually grounded, demonstrating that the transformation of pesantren literacy is not a simple shift between tradition and modernity, but a complex and ongoing process of negotiation that preserves the institution's distinctiveness.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Habitus, Literacy Culture, Modernity, Pesantren.

PRELIMINARY

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, possessing a strong and enduring intellectual tradition (Bruinessen, 1995; Dhofier, 2011). This tradition is rooted in distinctive literacy practices involving reading, writing, memorizing, understanding, and discussing classical religious texts or yellow books (Sangid & Muhdi, 2020). Reading practices, through the bandongan (religious study), sorogan (religious study), halaqah (religious discussion), and musyawarah kitab (religious discussion), not only serve as a mechanism for knowledge transfer but also shape the unique intellectual habitus of students (Bourdieu, 1990). In this context, the literacy culture of Islamic boarding schools must be understood as a system of knowledge with its own epistemic structure, maintained through the authority of the kiai (Islamic scholars), the tradition of the sanad (scholarship), and distinctive patterns of interaction between teachers and students (Gee, 2015).

However, in the last two decades, modernity has presented new challenges for Islamic boarding schools. The digitalization of knowledge, the abundance of information sources, the emergence of online learning platforms, and changes in the learning patterns of the younger generation have pushed Islamic boarding schools to adapt (Azra, 2019; Giddens, 1991). Various Islamic boarding schools have begun developing digital libraries, utilizing social media for learning, introducing digital literacy, and integrating contemporary literacy into their curricula (Yuwanda et al., 2023). This transformation demonstrates Islamic boarding schools' efforts to remain relevant in modern society without losing their traditional

roots. However, this adaptation is not always smooth, as debates often arise between maintaining tradition and embracing innovation.

On the other hand, the current of globalization brings additional challenges to the literacy culture of Islamic boarding schools. The flood of information, the penetration of transnational religious narratives, the issue of global radicalism, and the need for future literacy competencies, including foreign language skills and media literacy, require Islamic boarding schools to broaden their literacy spectrum (Azra, 2019; Gee, 2015). Students are not only required to be able to read classical texts, but also must possess the ability to sort information, understand global contexts, and develop critical digital literacy (Yuwanda et al., 2023). This situation places Islamic boarding schools in a strategic and vulnerable position: strategic because they possess strong cultural capital in the tradition of scholarship; vulnerable because modernity and globalization can erode literacy traditions if not addressed selectively (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1991).

Bourdieu explains that habitus is understood as an embedded dispositional scheme that unconsciously guides individual actions, perceptions, and preferences, including in the activities of reading, reciting, and interpreting texts (Bourdieu, 1990). In addition, James Paul Gee, through his Critical Literacy Studies, emphasized that literacy is not only related to the ability to read and write, but also the ability to understand the social context, ideology, and power structures inherent in the text (Gee, 2015). Anthony Giddens emphasized that modernity creates disembedding mechanisms (the process of releasing social practices from local contexts) that encourage traditional institutions to reflect and adapt (Giddens, 1991).

Previous researchers have conducted research on Islamic boarding schools and the flow of modernity. Abdul Basyit explained that the ability and strength of Islamic boarding schools in responding to modernity does not necessarily ignore their inherent uniqueness and distinctiveness. Dialogue with modernity is carried out through updates in content, methodology, institutions, and functions (Basyit, 2017). Ghafar views the ability of Islamic boarding schools to adapt as evidence that they are learning organizations. This evidence is marked by the role of the kyai, together with the board of trustees and ustadz, in preserving Islamic boarding school culture and utilizing technological and information developments for innovation in the development of virtual Islamic boarding schools (Ghafar, 2017).

More explicitly, Al Asyari, in his article entitled "Challenges to the Islamic Boarding School Education System in the Modern Era," stated that integration measures are necessary to maintain the existence of Islamic boarding schools amidst the rapid flow of globalization. This integration encompasses curriculum, management, organization, planning, and supervision (Al Asyari, 2022).

Saifullah Aldeia et al. studied the modernization of Islamic boarding school management at Al-Kautsar Banjar Islamic boarding school in response to the Society 5.0 phenomenon. Their research identified five indicators that Al-Kautsar Islamic boarding school management has implemented: intentionality, novelty, specificity, acceptability, and direction toward specific goals (Saifullah Aldeia et al., 2023).

Yuwanda et al. studied the digital transformation of human resources in Islamic boarding schools. Four aspects were deemed necessary for improvement to simplify work and reduce costs: digitalization of human resource management activities, creative, innovative, and collaborative thinking, digital leadership and transformation, and the digital environment (Yuwanda et al., 2023).

Taufikin et al., in their paper titled "Integrating Creative Digital Content in Islamic Boarding Schools: Improving Students' Digital Literacy and Islamic Learning," stated that Islamic boarding schools need to adopt strategies to increase teacher capacity, strengthen digital infrastructure, and implement content monitoring policies to ensure the sustainability of digital transformation. Leadership and stakeholder policies are crucial to strengthen the transformation of Islamic education through adaptive and inclusive technological innovation (Taufikin et al., 2025).

Anjaludin and Pratama highlight the importance of digital technology integration in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), which is seen as capable of supporting online learning, expanding digital preaching, improving educational management efficiency, and increasing students' competitiveness in the workforce. Despite its importance, its implementation still faces obstacles such as limited infrastructure, low teacher preparedness, moral concerns, and a lack of an integrated curriculum (Anjaludin & Pratama, 2025).

Huda et al. explored technology integration in Islamic boarding schools and its impact on learning effectiveness in the modern era. The use of digital technology presents a significant opportunity for Islamic boarding schools to improve the quality of education and strengthen their competitiveness. The success of this integration depends heavily on the Islamic boarding school's ability to face challenges and choose appropriate strategies (Huda et al., 2025).

Noviyanti et al.'s research at the Daar el-Qolam Islamic Boarding School and Al-Azhar Islamic Boarding School shows that implementing an integrative curriculum, using technology in learning, and community-based economic empowerment programs can strengthen the role of Islamic boarding schools as centers of education and community empowerment. Continuous reconstruction of Islamic boarding school management is deemed necessary to ensure their relevance and effectiveness in facing the dynamics of the modern world (Noviyanti et al., 2025).

Based on the literature review above, the researcher believes there is still a lack of studies or research examining the culture of literacy in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as they face global challenges and modernity. Through this study, the researcher explores how traditional literacy culture in Islamic boarding schools can be maintained, how Islamic boarding schools respond to modernity and global challenges to build a culture of literacy among students, and how the interaction between tradition, modernity, and globalization shapes the broader transformation of Islamic boarding school literacy.

METHOD

This study is a qualitative study using library research (Assingkily, 2021). Creswell explains that qualitative research focuses on understanding the meaning constructed by individuals or groups regarding a social problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection focused on academic literature in the form of books, journal articles, research reports, and official online sources from Islamic boarding schools related to literacy practices. Data were analyzed using Pierre Bourdieu's Habitus theoretical framework to understand the cultural dispositions and social structures that shape literacy practices, Gee's Critical Literacy Studies to assess students' ability to read, interpret, and filter information critically, and Giddens' concept of disembedding mechanisms to examine how Islamic boarding schools adapt to global dynamics and modernity. The presentation of the research results was conducted descriptively and analytically.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Traditional Literacy Culture in Islamic Boarding Schools

The bandongan or halaqah method is a traditional literacy practice in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) where students sit in a circle to listen to the kiai or teacher read the yellow text, translate it, and explain its meaning, while the students take notes and listen carefully (Bruinessen, 1995; Dhofier, 2011). For example, the Qomaruddin Islamic Boarding School in Gresik consistently practices the bandongan tradition in its yellow text learning, emphasizing direct interaction between teacher and student (Sangid & Muhdi, 2020). Furthermore, large Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) still maintain and adhere to this method. Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School, Al-Falah Ploso, API Tegalrejo, APIK Kaliwungu are some of the names of Islamic boarding schools that still use this method. This practice is not only useful in building a collective understanding of the text but also strengthens the emotional and intellectual bond between students and kiai and enables the transfer of knowledge broadly and systematically.

The sorogan method is a traditional literacy practice in Islamic boarding schools that emphasizes individual learning, where students read the yellow texts in front of a kiai (Islamic teacher), who then provides guidance, correction, and detailed explanations. The Wali Songo Sukajadi Islamic Boarding School routinely implements sorogan to improve accuracy in reading the yellow texts and foster a deeper understanding of each sentence (Yulianti et al., 2024). Many Islamic boarding schools still use the sorogan method. This traditional method is still widely used by traditional Islamic boarding schools, both in Java and throughout the archipelago.

This practice serves not only to master tajwid and harakat correctly, but also to build personal interactions between teachers and students, strengthen concentration, and develop accurate textual interpretation skills, thus confirming the quality of intensive and structured traditional literacy in the Islamic boarding school environment.

The halaqah discussion or deliberation (*mudzakarah*) method is a traditional form of literacy in Islamic boarding schools that emphasizes collective interaction, where students gather in a circle to analyze the text of the yellow book or solve religious problems together with the *kiai* and senior students (Dhofier, 2011). For example, at the Nurul Ummah Islamic Boarding School, the practice of "*syawir*" or deliberation is used routinely as part of literacy activities, not only for classical texts but also contemporary materials relevant to the students' social lives (Muhdi & Halim, 2023). This practice is still inherent in traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. This practice serves to train critical thinking skills, scientific rhetoric, argumentation skills, and collective understanding of religious issues, while strengthening students' abilities in methodical, reflective, and text-based discussions, thus emphasizing the role of the Islamic boarding school as an active and collaborative intellectual space.

The *tahrir* method, or writing notes in the margins of books (*ta'liq* or *hawashi*), is a traditional literacy practice in Islamic boarding schools that encourages students to jot down summaries, commentaries, or transliterations of translations while studying the yellow books (Dhofier, 2011). Many students still practice this *tahrir*, especially among students from traditional Islamic boarding schools. This method is widely used in Islamic boarding schools, both officially and informally. This means that many Islamic boarding schools require their students to write or compile their *tahrir* collectively and independently. Some Islamic boarding schools do not require this, leaving the choice of composing the *tahrir* to the individual student. This practice serves to deepen understanding of the text, strengthen long-term memory, and document the students' thoughts so they can be used as references for future study, while also accustoming students to critical reflection on the material they learn.

The practice of memorizing Islamic texts, or *tahfizh*, is an important aspect of the traditional Islamic boarding school literacy culture. Students memorize important sections of the yellow texts, such as prayers, poetry, *hadith*, or *fiqh* texts, as a form of in-depth oral literacy (Bruinessen, 1995; Dhofier, 2011). In many Salaf Islamic boarding schools, memorization is an integral part of the curriculum, although it is usually combined with *sorogan* and *bandongan* methods to strengthen the overall understanding of the text. The function of this activity includes internalizing the values and traditions of scholarship, mastering the text orally, and training in concentration, pronunciation, and retention of material. Thus, memorization is not merely an activity of memorization, but also a means of building the intellectual and spiritual *habitus* of students within the Islamic boarding school tradition.

Muhafazhah (recitation) activities are synonymous with traditional Islamic boarding schools. The *Alfiyyah* text is the most frequently memorized text by students, with a higher degree of difficulty. Typically, before memorizing the *Alfiyyah*, they must have completed the *Imrithy* text and the *Jurumiyyah* text. Al-Luqmaniyyah Islamic Boarding School in Yogyakarta is one of the Islamic boarding schools that has a tradition of a one-sitting memorization session for the books and texts studied, such as the *Alfiyyah*, *Imrithy*, *Jurumiyyah*, *Aqidatul Awam*, and others (Alluqmaniyyah, 2024).

The use of *sanad* (transmitted text) is a crucial element in the traditional Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) literacy culture, emphasizing the line of transmission of knowledge from teacher to student as a guarantee of the authority and authenticity of religious texts (Dhofier, 2011). This practice serves to maintain the legitimacy of knowledge, strengthen the *pesantren*'s identity as a traditional educational institution, and instill respect and historical awareness of the transmission of knowledge, so that students not only receive the text but also understand the context of the accompanying scholarly authority. Many salaf Islamic boarding schools consistently transfer *sanad* (transmitted text) to students when completing the reading of the text. The process of acquiring *sanad* (transmitted text) is a crucial stage in a student's learning, and most students would not want to miss this stage.

Bahtsul Masail is a unique Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) scientific discussion method that emphasizes critical analysis and problem-solving based on classical texts. This activity involves senior students and Islamic scholars (*kyai*) in discussing *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) or contemporary issues, referring to texts, comparing scholarly opinions, and formulating relevant legal or ethical solutions. At the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School (Kediri), *Bahtsul Masail* is a regular agenda, for example, discussing issues of Islamic banking, the use of technology in worship, or the ethics of social media, which are examined through classical texts such as *al-Mughni* or *al-Fiqh al-Manhaji* (Afifuddin, 2020). This method not only trains critical thinking skills, scientific argumentation, and rhetoric but also strengthens students' abilities to connect traditional literacy with contemporary issues, making *pesantren* literacy contextual and

applicable. Thus, Bahtsul Masail strengthens the students' collective culture of understanding and resolving religious issues scientifically while maintaining the authority of the pesantren's scholarly tradition (Afifuddin, 2020; Bruinessen, 1995).

Islamic Boarding Schools' Response to Modernity and Global Challenges in Efforts to Build a Culture of Literacy among Students

In facing modernity and global challenges, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) employ various strategies to build a relevant, adaptive, and contextual literacy culture among their students. First, integrating technology into learning. Second, strengthening critical and analytical literacy. Third, adapting to the globalization of information. Fourth, empowering and innovating the curriculum.

Many Islamic boarding schools recognize that modernity demands adaptation to technological developments to maintain the relevance of education and student literacy. In response, Islamic boarding schools are attempting to integrate e-books, e-learning platforms, and digital notes into learning activities, thus maintaining traditional literacy while strengthening 21st-century skills. The use of digital books has become a new phenomenon in the learning process for students and their teachers. This approach demonstrates that technology integration is not merely an administrative formality, but a systematic strategy to bridge classical literacy with modern competency needs, while simultaneously strengthening students' readiness to face global challenges. Many kyai (Islamic clerics) and students use digital platforms to access classical texts.

Islamic boarding schools face the rapid flow of global information, so traditional literacies such as bandongan, sorogan, and halaqah need to be combined with a critical and analytical approach to contemporary texts and contexts. This strategy strengthens students' abilities to filter information from digital media, prevent disinformation, and internalize Islamic values reflectively. Therefore, Islamic boarding school literacy is not only textual, but also contextual and critical. Bahtsul Masail is one means of testing students' literacy skills in addressing current social issues.

Islamic boarding schools face the currents of globalization that bring diverse information, including transnational religious narratives and global social issues, thus demanding strategic adaptation in developing students' literacy. This adaptation effort is carried out by strengthening the students' epistemic framework, namely the ability to select, sort, and critically evaluate information before internalizing it. Studies in several traditional Islamic boarding schools in East Java show that students who are accustomed to reading yellow books, discussing in halaqah, and utilizing digital media, can harmoniously combine local and global perspectives, making their literacy not only text-based, but also contextual and reflective of contemporary issues (Bruinessen, 1995; Dhofier, 2011). This approach confirms that Islamic boarding schools can remain relevant in the era of globalization without losing their identity and classical scholarly traditions.

Modernity demands that Islamic boarding schools adapt their curricula to meet 21st-century needs, including strengthening STEM literacy, media literacy, and foreign language proficiency, without sacrificing the school's scholarly traditions. In practice, students not only study religious texts through sorogan, bandongan, or halaqah (religious gatherings), but are also guided to understand science, technology, and digital literacy through online learning platforms, laboratories, or entrepreneurial projects. This curriculum strategy not only enhances students' academic competencies but also equips them with practical skills to contribute to the socio-economic development of their surrounding communities. Thus, the integrative curriculum serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, combining in-depth religious education with the development of 21st-century competencies, while strengthening the position of Islamic boarding schools as centers of adaptive, relevant, and innovative education.

The Interaction between Tradition, Modernity, and Globalization in Shaping the Transformation of Islamic Boarding School Literacy

The literacy culture of Islamic boarding schools is still heavily supported by traditional learning patterns rooted in classical scholarly habits. Practices such as bandongan, sorogan, and halaqah serve not only as transmission methods but also as mechanisms for internalizing literary habits (how to read, mark, note, and understand texts) that are passed down from generation to generation.

This habitus emphasizes that Islamic boarding school literacy is not simply the ability to read texts, but an intellectual orientation that places the yellow books as the center of epistemic authority. The students interpret reading as an act of worship, while the kiai's explanations serve as the primary point of legitimacy in the interpretation process. This finding is consistent with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which states that cultural dispositions are formed through repeated and inherited social practices within stable communities.

On the other hand, modernity has begun to enter through formal curricula, the use of digital tools, and the strengthening of media literacy. Many Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have introduced digital tools such as e-books of yellow books, digital libraries, and the use of reference search applications to aid learning. However, this adoption process is selective: technology is accepted as long as it does not disrupt the authority of traditional learning. Students utilize technology primarily for quick access to reference sources, but still consider printed books and explanations from their religious leaders (kiai) as the primary authority. Modernity in these findings is neither a form of total rejection nor acceptance, but rather a practice of negotiation that aligns with Giddens's notion of reflexive modernity, where tradition is not lost but continues to be consciously reconstructed in the face of social change.

Other findings indicate that the challenges of globalization have given rise to a new need for Islamic boarding schools: critical literacy skills. Students face an abundance of digital information, not all of which aligns with their established scholarly traditions. This is where Gee's Critical Literacy Studies approach becomes relevant: critical reading skills are beginning to be integrated, both through digital literacy training and discussions on the authority of texts and the credibility of sources. Some Islamic boarding schools have even developed digital content creation programs, student journalism, and media literacy studies to equip students to navigate the increasingly complex public information space. However, some Islamic boarding schools remain concerned that the expansion of digital literacy could weaken the depth of their study of the yellow books if left unchecked. Thus, the literacy culture of Islamic boarding schools is currently in a transitional phase, where strong traditions based on classical habitus coexist with the demands of modernity and the need for critical literacy in the global era.

The literacy culture of Islamic boarding schools remains heavily influenced by the scholarly habitus that has developed over centuries. From Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, the practice of reading yellow books, attending religious studies (Majelis Taklim) held by Islamic boarding schools (Majelis Taklim) and the bandongan and sorogan methods constitute embodied dispositions consistently reproduced within the social fabric of Islamic boarding schools. This habitus not only determines how students understand texts but also influences what is considered "legitimate knowledge" and who has the authority to interpret it. Thus, Islamic boarding schools represent a field that maintains the stability of traditional cultural capital, namely the mastery of inherited texts. Traditional literacy practices have proven capable of maintaining the epistemic authority of Islamic boarding schools because they are supported by a hierarchical structure that positions Islamic boarding schools as the holders of the highest symbolic capital. The interpretation of literacy as worship, rather than merely an academic activity, reinforces the reproduction of this habitus.

Meanwhile, the influx of modernity through digital technology and formal curricula has created new dynamics in Islamic boarding school literacy practices. Within Giddens' theory, Islamic boarding schools exist within a space of reflexive modernity, a state in which traditional institutions negotiate modernity through a process of selective adaptation. The use of e-books, digital libraries, and online learning platforms demonstrates that Islamic boarding schools are neither static nor anti-modern. However, this adaptation is carried out in a way that does not overhaul the basic structure of scholarly authority. Students utilize technology to expand access to information, but the legitimacy of understanding remains dependent on the explanations of the kiai (Islamic teacher). This finding is important because it demonstrates that modernity does not erase tradition but rather enables renewal through reinterpretation that maintains core values. Islamic boarding schools, therefore, serve as an example of how traditional institutions can coexist with modernity without becoming trapped in the "traditional vs. modern" dichotomy.

The critical literacy discourse emerging in the research findings also further enriches the dynamics of literacy culture in Islamic boarding schools. Referring to Gee's Critical Literacy Studies, the ability to read information critically is necessary to address the flood of global information, hoaxes, and diverse

digital content. Islamic boarding schools that have begun integrating media literacy training, digital content production, and discourse analysis-based learning demonstrate that they are entering a phase where literacy is understood not only as a linguistic skill but also as a socio-political practice linked to identity and power. This process places Islamic boarding schools in a strategic position: their textual traditions provide a deep foundation for critical understanding, while modernity encourages the development of new intellectual capacities. However, the resistance of some Islamic boarding schools to the excessive use of technology demonstrates the tension between maintaining the depth of their studies of heritage and meeting the demands of global literacy. This tension is not an obstacle, but rather an indicator that the transformation of Islamic boarding school literacy is undergoing a complex process of social negotiation.

In other words, Islamic boarding school literacy culture exists at the intersection of strong traditional habitus, selective penetration of modernity, and the demands of critical literacy in the global era. These three do not exist as mutually exclusive entities, but rather form a new configuration that demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of Islamic boarding schools. Tradition serves as the foundation, modernity as the instrument, and critical literacy as the demands of the times. This configuration enables Islamic boarding schools to remain relevant in the face of contemporary social, intellectual, and technological dynamics.

CONCLUSION

The traditional literacy culture of Islamic boarding schools remains the primary foundation for the development of the intellectual abilities and character of students. Practices such as *bandongan* (traditional Islamic boarding school), *sorogan* (students' circle), *halaqah musyawarah* (community discussion), *tahrir* (recitation of holy books), memorizing Islamic texts, *sanad ilmu* (translation of Islamic knowledge), and *bahtsul masail* (recitation of holy books) emphasize in-depth mastery of the yellow texts, internalization of religious values, and the development of critical thinking and scientific argumentation. The learning structure, which emphasizes the teacher-student relationship and the legitimacy of scientific authority, aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's Habitus Theory, where patterns of interaction and routine practices shape stable cultural dispositions and reproduce the social and intellectual capital of Islamic boarding schools. Thus, traditional literacy is not merely a textual practice, but a solid cultural capital that is adaptive to social change.

On the other hand, modernity and globalization present new demands that encourage Islamic boarding schools to innovate through technology integration, strengthening digital and critical literacy, and curriculum relevant to the 21st century. The Islamic boarding school's response to these changes shows alignment with Gee's Critical Literacy Studies, as students are trained to analyze texts and contexts reflectively, and are able to assess information critically. However, tensions arise between maintaining the depth of their studies and following the currents of globalization, which indicates a partial incompatibility between Islamic boarding school traditions and the demands of global literacy. The interaction between tradition, modernity, and globalization forms a dynamic literacy transformation: tradition provides epistemic and identity foundations, modernity increases learning effectiveness, while globalization demands critical literacy and contextual skills. This transformation shows that Islamic boarding school literacy is evolving into productive, contextual, and reflective literacy, in line with Giddens' modernity theory of social adaptation to change, so that Islamic boarding schools remain relevant and adaptive in the contemporary era.

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