

Haiku Poetry: An Introductory Study

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What is Haiku?

One of the major features of modern literature is experimentation. Hence, Haiku, Tanka¹, Ghazal² and many other foreign poetic forms became well-known forms in modern and contemporary American and English poetry and they found hundreds of practitioners. Most of the well-known dictionaries of literary terms define haiku as “a Japanese verse form consisting of seventeen syllables in three lines of five, seven and five syllables respectively” (Cuddon: 300). The three lines of a haiku, argues Kenneth Yasuda, correspond to the three elements of time, place and object (Yasuda: 179) which are the basic elements of any haiku. There is no haiku without these three elements. Take, for instance, this haiku by Basho, the most outstanding Japanese haiku poet:

Spring Morning
Season of spring days!
There a nameless hill has Veils
Of soft morning haze
(Yasuda: 186)

Here, the translator is so honest that he keeps even the number of syllables the same as in the original: 5-7-5, with the first and third lines rhyming together to convey to the English reader a true impression of what haiku looks like.

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In the Japanese language, Yasuda states, “there are no stressed and unstressed syllables” and therefore it “must depend on other means of rhythm formation, such as syllable count” (Yasuda: 80-81). Furthermore, Japanese haiku appeals to the eye rather than to the ear; even the images are mostly visual not aural.

Historically speaking, Japanese haiku poetry, in its perfect and rigid form, started in the seventeenth century at the hands of Zen-Buddhists. However, Kenneth Yasuda, an authority of haiku, traces the origins of haiku as far back as the eighth century when *tanka* was the dominant form. Hence he calls the first period the *tanka* period. The second period, according to him, is the *renga*³ period from the fourteenth till the late sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century haiku acquired its perfect form at the hands of Buddhist monks. (Yasuda: 109-132). The term *haiku*, argues Yasuda, developed from *hokku* which comes from Chinese prosody (Ibid: 133).

However, the emergence of haiku poetry is associated with the Zen Buddhist monks in the 15th and 16th centuries and it achieved perfection during the following two hundred years at the hands of four major haiku poets: Bashô, pseudonym of Matsuo Munefusa (1644-94), Japanese poet, considered a master of the haiku form, Buson (1716-1784), Japanese painter and haiku poet of the Edo period (1600-1868), also known as Yosa Buson, Issa (1763-1827), Japanese haiku poet of the Edo period (1600-1868). Best known by his penname, Issa, and Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), Japanese writer, whose real name was probably Tôgo Hirayama. (Encarta 2008). Basho is credited “with establishing the haiku

form”, Buson emphasized “the universal nature of subject matter of haiku by focusing upon human as well as nature subjects”, and Issa is well known for “his child-like identification with nature and human behaviour” (Ross: xv).

The haiku is the shortest poetic form; even the couplet is longer than the haiku. Harold Stewart relates the highly compact and concise nature of haiku poetry to the Japanese love of “perfection in little things. Carved ivories for the girdle (*netsuke*), metal inlaid sword-guards (*tsuba*), dwarfed trees (*bonsai*) and other minor crafts” (Stewart: 117). Nevertheless, if some nations are well known for their epics, the Japanese are well known for their haiku poetry.

The haiku is so concise that it can be comfortably spoken in a single breath. This is partly due to omission of unnecessary words which add nothing to the meaning and to ellipsis from which the suggestive power of the haiku comes (Yasuda: 59). Take for instance this haiku by Basho:

On the withered bough
A crow alone is perching;
Autumn evening now. (Ibid: 59)

The omission at the beginning of the third line rids the poem of its prosaic nature and creates a thought-pause which is very important in haiku, bearing in mind that it is strongly related to meditation. Without this omission, Yasuda suggests, the line reads: “[It is an] autumn evening now” (ibid.).

On the other hand, this concise nature of haiku logically corresponds to the fact that haiku is a record of a moment of insight into the essential nature of things; “an instant of insight into the quality of an experience” (Ibid: 179). Such an

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experience can never be eloquently and accurately expressed by words and that is why haiku poets resort to images and symbols.

As a compact, yet profound and evocative form, **haiku** gives an objective, suggestive, concise and fleeting picture of its subject. What is said --in haiku-- is important but what is unsaid or suggested may be more important. Take for instance this haiku by the greatest Japanese poet Basho:

None is traveling
Here along this way but I,
This autumn evening
(Yasuda: 186).

Though this piece is an observation of nature, it is highly suggestive. The speaker is traveling alone without any companion and it is autumn time with its connotations of old age and death. Take also this example;

Here at parting now
Let me speak by breaking
A lilac from the bough
(Ibid: 203).

Again, instead of speaking, the speaker breaks a lilac from the bough as a symbol of separation or, to use T.S. Eliot's term, as the "objective correlative" of separation. The following is one of the most well-known haiku by the Japanese haiku poet Basho with the Japanese transliteration opposite to it to show the number of syllables in each line:

The old pond	<i>furuike ya</i>
A frog jumps in	<i>kawazu tobikomu</i>
The sound of water	<i>mizu no oto</i>

(Ross: x)

Commenting on the translation of this very poem into English, Harold Stewart says that the translator fails “completely to evoke ... [in the reader’s] mind’s ear the associations and atmosphere which this verse has for every Japanese, who can recite it by heart” (Stewart: 160). The most important feature of the original poem is onomatopoeia, “in which the assonance of short ‘o’ sounds, repeated no less than five times, suggests to the ear the water sound when the frog jumps in” (Ibid.).

The composers of Japanese Haiku poetry usually choose picture-making words that induce in the reader the same feeling the poet felt at the moment of poetic inspiration. However, it is not an easy task to write about a scene in nature or about a fleeting image; the greatest haiku poet, Basho, is quoted saying: “the masters of the past took such care in composing [haiku on natural scenes] that they created only two or three in their life time” (Yasuda: 18). Traditionally a haiku presents two contrasting images; one of them is suggestive of time and place while the other is a vivid but fleeting observation. However, in the haiku, subjective thoughts and emotions are omitted and the poet does not comment on, or explain his images at all. He only tries to suggest or to invoke in the reader the moment of heightened awareness or of mystical enlightenment. Haiku’s emphasis on the union between the poet and his subject and upon the selfless devotion to nature is strongly related to Buddhism and to the Buddhist concept of “*muga* or selflessness” (Ross: 20-21). This is also related to the nature of Buddhism as a

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mystical religion based on meditation and annihilation of the self and the sensual desires.

Haiku was given this name “in the late nineteenth century by a man named Masaoka Shiki by a combination of the older *hokku* (発句?) and the *haikai* (or verses). In Japanese, *hokku* and *haiku* are traditionally printed in one vertical line. In English, haiku is written in three lines to equate to the three parts of a haiku in Japanese. A haiku traditionally contains a *kigo* (season word) representative of the season in which the poem is set, or a reference to the natural world (*Wikipedia*, the free encyclopedia). For this reason, dictionaries of haiku are arranged according to the seasons of the year. Every Japanese haiku writer, maintains Jane Reichhold in her *A Dictionary of Haiku*, “owns one or more *saijiki* (sigh-gee-key)”. She explains this:

A *saijiki* is a dictionary of haiku in which the poems are arranged, not alphabetically, but by seasons. Within the five seasons (New Year's Day has a separate section) are usually the seven different categories: Season (weather aspects indicative of that time of year), Celestial Phenomena (stars, sun and moon), Terrestrial Phenomena (geographical aspects such as mountains, fields, rivers, etc.), Events (or holidays), Life (terms dealing with the daily life of humanity), Animals (deemed appropriate for each season), and Plants (often those most conspicuous for the season). (Reichhold, 1992: 3)

Hence, the poems of each season are divided into seven categories: Moods, Occasions, Celestial, Terrestrial, Livelihood, Animals and Plants. The season *kigo* is a must for haiku

poetry. However, haiku is not poetry of nature though nature is a very important element without which the expression of a temporary enlightenment becomes rather impossible.

Restricting the number of syllables in a haiku poem to seventeen (five, seven, five), as Harold Stewart argues, had its roots in religious meditation. According to the *Pali canon*, he argues, “the longest process of consciousness caused by sense perception consists of seventeen thought-instants (*cittakkhana*) each briefer than a lightning flash” (Stewart: 123). For this, as well as other reasons, Haiku is strongly associated with Zen Buddhism. The quest of Zen Buddhism was to attain truth in nature; truth “can be anything from an insignificant blade of grass growing on the roadside to the golden-coloured Buddha body ten feet six in height” (Yasuda: 170).

Kenneth Yasuda, an authority of Haiku poetry, argues that “haiku has something in common with painting, in the representation of the object alone, without comment, never presented to be other than what it is, but not represented completely as it is” (Yasuda: 7). Stewart holds a similar idea, “many haiku poets”, he maintains, “have been painters of note, and have illustrated their own verses with rough but vital sketches reduced to a minimum of strokes with the writing-brush” (Stewart:134). Like painting, in haiku poetry there is neither commentary nor conclusions.

In her study of the haiku techniques Jane Reichhold (herself an outstanding haiku poet) identifies twenty three techniques of writing haiku and she gives examples for each technique. The most outstanding among them are: the technique of comparison, the technique of contrast, the

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technique of association, the technique of the riddle, the technique of sense-switching, the technique of narrowing focus, the technique of metaphor, the technique of simile, the technique of using puns, the technique of word-plays, the technique of verb /noun exchange, the technique of the paradox and the technique of humor (Reichhold, 2000: 50-61).

Characteristics Of Japanese Haiku

1. Simplicity of language and structure is the first feature of haiku.
2. Concentration: Haiku poetry is highly concise and to the point.
3. Haiku poetry reflects nature though it is not poetry of nature. It is especially interested in nature for the transience, fleeting and suggestive quality of nature.
4. Haiku poetry is not interested in war or in any sort of violence.
5. Haiku poetry is masculine rather than feminine. It is written by men and supposedly for men.
6. Haiku is based on experience, especially an aesthetic experience in nature which mounts to the level of illumination or a moment of mystical revelation.
7. Any haiku should not include more than three images which should be concrete images from real life. The third image illuminates the previous two.
8. Haiku poetry should be quick and direct.
9. Haiku poetry speaks of common things with common language to reveal uncommon ideas.

10. A haiku poem is visual rather than aural; it uses visual rather than auditory images. This brings haiku closer to painting; the haiku poem is a painting in words in stead of lines and colours.

Haiku in America

Japanese Haiku poetry attracted the attention of a great number of English speaking poets in America, England, and Canada as well as in many other countries. This is reminiscent of the sonnet which was introduced through translations from Italian poetry by Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard and Sir Philip Sidney and perfected at the hands of Shakespeare till it became one of the dominant English verse forms though the English or Shakespearean sonnet is a little different from its spiritual mother, the Italian sonnet. No wonder, then, that the Japanese haiku has exerted a great influence on world poetry in General and particularly on American poetry and is adopted by English speaking poets, though, most of the times, it may be slightly different from the original. This idea is supported by Bruce Ross:

Although American and non-Japanese haiku poets cannot really produce classical Japanese haiku in the strictest sense because ... haiku is determined by codifications of statement, ideology, symbol, and intertextual allusion as well as sound values specific to Japanese culture and Japanese haiku in the classic mode have been composed in English and other languages (Ross: xvi)

The influence of haiku is strongly and evidently felt in the imagist poets. This is evident from the Imagist manifesto which put down the main principles that shaped imagist

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poetry. The manifesto insisted, like haiku poetry, on using the simple language of every day speech, on absolute freedom in the choice of subject, on presenting images from real life like painters, on producing a poetry that is hard and clear and on concentration as the very essence of poetry. Needless to say that most of these principles were previously emphasized by the Japanese haiku poets (press: 43).

Furthermore, Pound's definition of the "image" is very expressive of the images of Japanese haiku. "An 'image'", he says, "is that which presents an intellectual complex in an instant of time". He adds

It is the presentation of such a complex instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits, that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

It is better to present one image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works [italics mine] (quoted in Press: 41).

Even this emphasis: "*It is better to present one image in a lifetime*" is an echo of Basho, quoted on p. 2 above. According to haiku poets, the picture or the image is easy to appreciate and can be immediately enjoyed. "This is called intuition", says Yasuda, "Intuition is immediate as the perception of colour is immediate...the picture speaks for itself, we seek no metaphor or simile to make the picture clear but simply let the objects do their part" (Yasuda: d-6). In this sense haiku has many things in common with painting, on the one hand, and with Imagism on the other hand. The haiku poet never

comments or draws conclusions; he gives concrete objects intuitively seen as charged with meaning.

The Imagist poets, says Yasuda, “knew of *tanka* and *haiku* as early as 1909 and felt they were influenced by them...Ezra Pound felt this influence and so did Amy Lowell. So have many of their contemporaries and followers” (Yasuda: xvi). Furthermore, the Imagist poet F. S. Flint (1885-1960) admits this influence of Japanese haiku on them “we proposed at various times”, he says “to replace [English poetry] by pure *vers libre*; by Japanese *tanka* and *haiku*; we all wrote dozens of the latter as an amusement...” (Hughes: 1430). The major Imagist poet, Pound, wrote many poems which can easily be labeled as haiku poems, for instance “In a Station of the Metro” in which some critics find echoes of Japanese haiku:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Press: 48)

Similarly, Pound’s Imagist poems “Fan-piece for her Imperial Lord” and “Alba” are frequently quoted as manifesting the influence of haiku:

Fan-piece for her Imperial Lord

O fan of white silk,
Clear as frost on the grass-blade
You also are laid aside. (Ibid.)

Amy Lowell and other imagists followed the steps of Pound. William Carlos Williams’ emphasis on the importance of the image and the objectivity of art brings him closer to

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haiku poetry. However, the direct and serious introduction of Japanese haiku into America started in the early thirties with Harold Henderson's translations of Japanese haiku in his book *The Bamboo Broom* (Ross: 18).

The American Beat Poets of the nineteen-fifties such as Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Kenneth Rexroth and many others came into close contact with haiku poetry through their interest in Zen Buddhism. This interest was simultaneous with the publication of the four-volume translation of Japanese haiku by R. H. Blyth (began in 1949), Donald Keene's *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (1955) and the study of Japanese poetry *Haikai and Haiku* (1958) (Holmes: 6). These books as well as other minor studies might have increased the commitment of the Beat poets to haiku.

However, the most important period in the history of American haiku is from the late fifties till the late seventies. This period witnessed the publication of Kenneth Yasuda's book *The Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature, History and possibilities in English* (1957) and many English language haiku journals such as *American Haiku* (1963), *Haiku Highlights* (1965), *Haiku* (1967), *Haiku West* (1967), *Modern Haiku* (1969), *Dragonfly* (1973), *Cicada* (1977), and *Frogpond* (1977). It also witnessed the publication of many anthologies of haiku. The most important event in this regard was the publication of *The Haiku Anthology* (1974) which was a collection of contemporary American and Canadian haiku poets. Five years later, in 1979, George Swede edited *Canadian Haiku Anthology*.

Later on, the poets of *The Haiku Anthology*, (such as Matsua Allard, C. M. Buckaway, Betty Drevniuk, James William Hackett, Michael McClintock, Claire Pratt, O. Mabson Southard, Robert Spiess, George Swede, Cor van den Heuvel, and Anita Virgil), produced individual haiku volumes (Ross: xvi-xix). Hence, haiku became an established poetic form in English and it found hundreds of practitioners everywhere, in America, England and Canada.

As we approach the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century the number of haiku poets in America increases twofold or even more which indicates their strong interest in this new form, in experimentation and in trying to break new ground.

During this period many haiku societies were founded, such as the Haiku Society of America (HSA) and the Haiku International Association (HIA). These societies produced hundreds of haiku volumes and books of haiku criticism, arranged trips to Japan for their members and published anthologies and journals of haiku and held conferences on haiku (Brooks: 1). Some of the poets were bilingual; they can read haiku in Japanese and they participated in translating haiku into English such as Sanford Goldstein who lived in Japan for twelve years during six trips of two years each and translated *tanka* collections with Seishi Shinoda. He translated three collections of Japanese poetry and wrote three collections of *tanka* in English (Goldstein: 2).

Haiku societies became wide-spread in America and Canada especially “in Seattle, San Francisco, Gualala, Santa Fe, Dubuque, Raleigh, Rochester, New York City, Boston,

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Hamilton, Toronto, and Ottawa” (Ross: xxii). That is why dozens of books of haiku, haiku criticism and translation were published during the last two decades of the twentieth century. By now, haiku has become one of the American favourable poetic form. In his anthology *Haiku Moment: Anthology of Contemporary North American Haiku* (1993) Bruce Ross (who is an outstanding haiku poet) includes 186 North American haiku poets. Here are three haiku poems for the American haiku poet C. M. Buckaway:

The autumn moon shines
whitely on my loneliness:
lonely too the night.

Among the poplars
in a sudden stir of wind
a white owl cries out
Closing my eyelids
just before going to sleep
I hear the blizzard. (Ross: 25-26)

In these three haiku, the poet remains faithful to the Japanese rules such as the number of syllables in each line: five, seven, and five respectively as well as the other principles of haiku nature imagery.

However, American haiku departs from the original Japanese haiku in many points related to form and substance. Obviously, the basic principles of prosody vary from language to language. Hence, it is rather impossible to attempt to reproduce in English the strict form of Japanese haiku of

seventeen syllables in three lines of five, seven, five syllables respectively.

American haiku poets took more freedom and liberated themselves from the bondage of 5-7-5 system and kept only the number of lines. Here is a haiku by the contemporary American poet Chuck Brickley in which the number of syllables in the three lines is 2-4-4 respectively:

a car
at the cliff's edge—
the Milky Way
(Ross: 22)

In another haiku by Robert H. Zukowski we have 3-5-4 syllable in the three lines:

April rain—
the name almost smooth
with the tombstone
(Ross: 344)

Carol Montgomery's haiku is 4-3-3- syllables:

in my silver
wedding shoes
..spider webs
(Ross: 139)

These are just few examples of the variation in the number of syllable in American haiku.

Some critics have a logical justification for this change. Keiko Imaoka, for instance, in his essay "Forms in English Haiku" justifies this variation by the differences between English and Japanese languages:

Over the years, however, most haiku poets in North America have become aware that 17 English syllables convey a great deal more information than 17 Japanese syllables, and have come to write haiku in fewer syllables, most often in three segments that follow a short-long-short pattern without a rigid structure. This style is called by some "free-form" haiku. (Imaoka: Haiku Poets Hut)

Hence, he suggests 11 English syllables as a suitable approximation of 17 Japanese syllables because the Japanese syllables are very short compared to their English counterparts. He also mentions another difficulty which may face English practitioners of haiku due to the differences between English and Japanese. In English, he maintains, words and phrases cannot be moved about freely without changing the meaning of a sentence while in the Japanese language, however, "because of the presence of grammatical particles (*joshi*) that are suffixed to nouns and mark their syntactic relationships, word units become independent" (Ibid.) and the poet is free to change the word-order and to move words within a sentence without affecting its meaning. As an Example he gives a sentence in Japanese which means "Mother gave it to the kitten," and he shows the various ways in which it can be written:

- 1) **haha-ga koneko-ni sore-o ageta mother/to the kitten/it/gave**
- 2) **haha-ga sore-o koneko-ni ageta mother/it/to the kitten/gave**
- 3) **sore-o koneko-ni haha-ga ageta it/to the kitten/mother/gave**
- 4) **sore-o haha-ga koneko-ni ageta it/mother/to the kitten/gave**
- 5) **koneko-ni sore-o haha-ga ageta to the kitten/it/mother/gave**
- 6) **koneko-ni haha-ga sore-o ageta to the kitten/mother/it/gave**

Hence, the Japanese haiku poet enjoys concerning language. In this regard it is not out of place to quote the

American Haiku poetess and critic Jane Reichhold's essay "Haiku Rules that Have Come and Gone", in which she gives a lot of freedom to English-speaking haiku poets in her sixty five rules for writing English haiku. For instance, concerning the number of syllables and their distribution on three lines or less she gives the poet the right to choose any one of the following alternatives:

- 1. Seventeen syllables in one line.**
- 2. Seventeen syllables written in three lines.**
- 3. Seventeen syllables written in three lines divided into 5-7-5.**
- 4. Seventeen syllables written in vertical (flush left or centered) line.**
- 5. Less than 17 syllables written in three lines as short-long-short.**
- 6. Less than 17 syllables written in three vertical lines as short-long-short.**
- 7. Write what can be said in one breath.**

(Reichhold 1989: 31)

This is sound evidence of the attempts of the American haiku poets to compensate for the lack of freedom concerning the word-order and to create their own form of haiku which, though greatly and directly influenced by the Japanese haiku starts to break loose from its roots and to acquire new shape and new characteristic features.

Conclusions

American haiku is the legitimate son of the Japanese haiku. Without the influence of translated Japanese haiku there wouldn't have been such a form of writing in America. However, reading the available anthologies of both Japanese and American haiku, one can come out with the following differences between the two:

1. Japanese haiku is written in seventeen syllables while the American varies between eight or nine and twenty or more syllables. There are changes in form and substance.
2. Unlike the Japanese, there is consistent lack of reference to the seasons in the American haiku.
3. Human subjects, rather than nature, are frequently emphasized in the American haiku.
4. American haiku extended its scope to include erotic, social, psychological and political subjects.
5. More figurative expressions are used in American Haiku.
6. Haiku became the domain of women as well as men in America.

Recommendations

1. Encouraging further studies on the Haiku, its nature and significance, its reception in other countries and the possibilities of haiku in Arabic.
2. Encouraging postgraduate students to write on individual haiku poets, both American and British.

Notes

1. The *tanka* is five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. (Microsoft® Encarta® 2008. © 1993-2007 Microsoft Corporation.)
2. *Ghazal*: an Arabic, Persian, or Urdu lyric poem consisting of five or more couplets ... each may have a different theme. Haiku is influenced by Buddhism and *ghazal* by Islam—which shapes even its descriptions of ordinary life. Each makes use of a highly traditional body of imagery. The *ghazal* includes wine, the road, the mirror, and the nightingale, while the haiku includes standard images of the seasons, such as spring plum blossoms, summer spiders, the autumn moon, and the winter bush warbler. (Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2008. © 1993-2007 Microsoft Corporation)
3. *Renga* is a poem of five lines of 5-7-5--7-7- syllables composed by two persons (Yasuda: 123). A Japanese five-line poem *tanka*, with two authors or a sequence of such poems, in which the first three lines are written by one person and the fourth and fifth lines by another (Microsoft® Encarta® 2008. © 1993-2007 Microsoft Corporation.)

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شعر الهيكو: دراسة تمهيدية

أ.م. حمدي حميد يوسف*

الملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى دراسة تركيبية شعر الهيكو الياباني. وتدرس فترة نساك البوذية في القرنين الخامس عشر والسادس عشر وإلى الزمن الحالي. وتسلط الدراسة الضوء على أسلوب ولغة ومضمون شعر الهيكو. وكذلك تحاول أن توضح تأثير شعر الهيكو الياباني على الأدب العالمي وبخاصة على الشعر الأمريكي الحديث والتي بدأت بظهور حركة الصورة في الشعر الأمريكي والإنكليزي والتي لا تزال موجودة إلى الوقت الحالي.

وتحاول الدراسة سبر غور عدد من أشعار الهيكو الأمريكي وطبيعة هذا الشعر وبيان التشابه والاختلاف بين الهيكو الأمريكي والياباني.

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