

‘Huh Tu Pu’: Negotiating Konyak Identity through Tattooing

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Abstract

Among the Konyak Naga, tattooing was deeply embedded in cultural identity, with the body acting as a canvas to represent social hierarchy, achievements and group affiliation. Tattooing was closely tied to the tradition of headhunting and served as a powerful symbol of bravery, status and social recognition. The paper focuses on the tattoo culture of the Konyak tribe of the Chenwetnyu village, who belongs to the shen-tu or the face-tattoo group. It also underscores the transformation and declines of these practices in the post-headhunting era, emphasizing the need to document and preserve this unique cultural heritage in the face of modernization and changing social norms.

Keywords: Tattoo, Indigenous, Konyak, Headhunting, Modernization etc.,

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I. Introduction

Traditional tattoo was practiced in many parts of the world. The tattoos hold cultural, religious and spiritual significance for many indigenous communities around the globe. Tattoos were used to signify the wearer's rank, social status and also to mark rites of passage. In ancient Egypt, women's tattoos indicated social standing while the Greco-Roman societies used them to mark criminals. Among the tribal communities of Maori in New Zealand, and Ainu of Japan, the tattoo served as a means to signify rank and were thought to provide magical protection. The western sailors later adopted tattoos to record their voyages.¹ Aziz & Ekawardhani (2024)² explored the Dayak tattoo in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, examining their role as markers of cultural identity. Similarly, Zulfa & Suraya (2024)³ investigated tattooing tradition in the Mentawai Islands, especially North Pagai, South Pagai, Sipora, and Siberut, where the practice is increasingly endangered. Their findings revealed that community elders are adapting tattoo motifs into batik textiles as a stratagem of cultural preservation, thereby enabling the continuation of symbolic meanings despite the decline of tattooing itself. In another context, Cabalquinto et al. (2022)⁴ conducted a study on the 'Batok' a traditional hand tapping tattooing practice of the Philippines, using a phenomenological approach. Based on interview with tattooed individuals and their relatives, the study identifies themes of *kapwa* (shared identity), self-disclosure through body art, and reclaiming of tattooing as a form of decolonial resistance. In the India context, Ghosh (2020)⁵ examined tattoos as a form of cultural heritage among the Santhal tribe in West Bengal, conducting a study in Bali Para and Phuldanga villages

¹Medhi, H. J. (2023). "Ink on skin: A cultural exploration of the history and significance of tattoos". *International journal of creative research thoughts*, Vol. 11(2), p. 2.

² Aziz, M. R. L., & Ekawardhani, Y. A. (2024). "West Kalimantan Dayak Tattoo as Cultural Identity in Indonesia". *Proceeding of International Conference on Business Economics Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 7, Pp. 925-934.

³ Zulfa, Z., & Suraya, R. S. (2024). "Exploring the role of tattoo discourse in Matotonan Village: Mentawai Tattoo Batik as an effort to preserve tradition in Mentawai. *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Research*, Vol. 4(1), pp. 78-89.

⁴ Cabalquinto, A., Dizon, C., Ramirez, C., & Santiago, M. (2020). "Batok: The exploration of indigenous Filipino tattooing as a collective occupation". *Master's Capstone, Dominican University of California*.

⁵ Ghosh, P. (2020). "Tattoo: A Cultural Heritage". *Antrocom Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 16(1), Pp. 295-304.

in Birphum District through focus group interviews and descriptive analysis, which revealed a decline in the significance of traditional tattooing and emphasized the for measure to sustain the practice.

When it comes to Northeast India, the tribal communities widely practiced tattoo culture in the past. The meanings, symbols, and significance of tattoos were unique to each tribe. While some tribes practiced it to signify rites of passage, some used it as a source to provide spiritual protection. It also denoted the rank and status of the people. Among the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, it was a customary practice to perform facial tattoos on girls, as a form of protection. The tattoos of the Apatani were associated with local myths, and were considered as a prerequisite for marriage. The tattoos were done at around the age of ten. The designs of the tattoo consisted of a single vertical line from the forehead to the nose, along with five lines on the chin. Tools were made from the thorns of *Vachellia nilotica*, locally known as tipe-tere or iime-tre. The pigment called Chinyu, was a mixture of pig's fat and fireplace soot that gave the dark blue tattoo colour. Tattooing was typically done in the winter to facilitate healing.⁶

In the context of the practice of tattooing art among the Nagas, it becomes important to understand the custom from Naga perspective. The Nagas practiced tattooing as a part of their cultural identity with the body serving as a canvas to showcase this tradition.⁷ Tattooing was widely practiced in the Northern and Central Nagas comprising the *Chang, Sangtam, Ao, Phom, Yimchungrü, Khiamniungan* and the *Konyak* and just like any other ornaments tattooing revealed membership of groups and status within groups⁸. For the Nagas, tattoo symbolised great strength and resilience, where the Konyak Naga tribe received a tattoo for taking an enemy's head or killing a tiger.⁹ Traditionally, Konyak women received tattoos to mark rites of passage during puberty and marriage which made the women even more appealing: it also symbolised rank, status and strength of the Konyak people. Among the Ao Naga tribe, tattoos among women were more common than among men, symbolising aesthetic, good health and fertility.¹⁰

II. Tattoo Culture Among the Konyaks

Konyak are major tribe of Nagaland. The word Konyak is derived from two words (*khau*) head and (*nyak*) black. This name thus is connected to the historical practice of using black colour in their teeth and face, by the people during earlier periods. The major concentration of the Konyak inhabit the Mon District of Nagaland. The district of Mon, which is the territory of the Konyak Nagas, is also known as the 'Land of Anghs'.

The Konyaks are widely known for their tattoo culture. Women were tattooed at various phases of their life, upon reaching puberty or getting married. Some of their tattoos also commemorate the achievements of the male members of the family.¹¹ Tattooing among Konyak originated during headhunting era. According to one account an orphan was punished by tattooing with black marks on his face. However, the boy later grew more attractive and was admired by others, and this practice became embedded in Konyak culture. Tattoos in Konyak society symbolized the rank of a person in the society as they were given to chiefs, warriors, and also to women when they reach certain stage. Each tattoo pattern is unique for different groups of people and symbolizes different meanings.¹² Tattoo culture of the Konyak was inseparable from headhunting. A warrior upon returning from war was marked by tattoo to symbolize his accomplishments. Konyak men tattooed their face, neck, chest and back. While the Konyak women tattooed their legs, arms, chest. Hence, in the earlier days, tattoo defined the identity of personal status, and social standing of the Konyaks. There was no Konyaks without tattoos pre-headhunting days.

III. Tattoo Culture: A Case of Chenwetnyu Village

Chenwetnyu village is located in Chen circle of Mon district, Nagaland. The village has population of 2368 of which 1234 are male while 1129 are female as per population census 2011.¹³ The Konyak tribe are divided into upper and lower Konyak and further into areas. The village is a part of Chen area of upper Konyak. These

⁶Bharadwaj, S & Baruah, U. (2020). "Inking the identity: a study of the Apatani tradition of tattooing through Bakhtinian Chrono tope". *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. 12(5), Pp. 1-6.

⁷ Chowdhury, D.P. (2020). *The Nagas: Social and Cultural Identity*, New Delhi: Heritage Publishers.

⁸ Odyuo, Iris 2013. "The various aspects of Naga art", *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* Vol. 9(4), Pp.13-22

⁹ Yhome, R.R. (2018). "An Ethnographic Account of Body Tattoo Art in Hutsu village Nagaland". *Journal of Multidisciplinary studies in Archaeology*, Vol. 6, Pp. 945-953.

¹⁰ Kavahru, A & Ntang, C. (2023). "The Culture of Tattooing in Women Society: The Ao Nagas and The Konyak Nagas". *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol. 5(4). Pp.1-2

¹² Konyak, Z. (2020). "Traditional method of preparing tattoo pigment by the Konyak tribe of Mon district in Nagaland, India". *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, Vol. 7(9), p.1

¹³ Census of India 2011. *Government of India*.

areas had different dialects, different ways of life and thereby their tattoo designs also varied. So, based on all these characteristics there were three tattoo groups among the Konyak: the ones who tattooed their face or the face-tattoo group, the ones who tattooed their body, and the nose tattoo group¹⁴. Chenwetnyu village belongs to the *shen-tu* or the face-tattoo group. For generations, until its decline in the 1960s, Konyak followed the same tradition, the same body parts were tattooed, and the same techniques and methods were employed.

In the Chen dialect, the act of getting tattooed is referred to as '*huh tu pu*'. *Huh* means 'thorn' and *tu pu* means 'to mark'. So basically, it means marking the skin with a thorn. Tattooing functioned as a rite of passage that formally initiated an individual into adult society, granting them the right to participate in communal activities such as farming and hunting. About, ten to twenty persons were tattooed each year. Village leaders, including the *Angh*, the priest, and clan leaders determined the number of candidates and scheduled the event, which was usually held in the month of October. Prior to tattooing, the selected individuals were expected to participate in a headhunting raid. Following this, preparations for tattooing began. The families of the initiates hosted a feast by slaughtering cattle, pigs, and buffaloes. The individuals receiving tattoos were also expected to prepare themselves mentally for the ordeal of initiation.

The designs and patterns of the tattoos varied. The tattoos of the males and females were different from each other. The first design of the male tattoo includes the face tattoo, followed by neck tattoo given to the most capable warriors and also include the "Tiger-spirit" tattoo, conferred upon the back of only the high-status men. The female tattoo designs include the leg tattoo, arm tattoo and chest tattoo. The tattoos on the legs and arms were done before marriage, whereas the chest tattoo was given after marriage. Traditionally, villagers got their tattoos in their teenage years, although there were instances of getting tattooed in their adulthood. Tattooing was usually performed by a specialized tattooist, either from the same village or invited from another village. The tattoo artists were not necessarily hereditary. Only a male artist was allowed to tattoo a man and only a female tattoo artist was allowed to tattoo a female. At present there are 41 tattooed elders left in Chenwetnyu village, of which 22 are males and 19 females. The tattoo culture is no longer practiced in Chenwetnyu village.

IV. Indigenous Tattooing: Tools and techniques

For the Konyak tribe, their body served as canvas for tattooing, where achievements and accomplishments were indicated by the tattoos. They represented the achievements, origin, social status, age, stages of life, and identity of the people. The technique of tattooing art was passed down from generation to generation. Resin extracted from tree trunks were used to prepare pigment, and rattan thorns were used as tools for tattooing.¹⁵

Tools used for tattooing: *Sing Trah Huh*



Fig. 1 Traditional Tattooing Comb. Photo by author, Chenwetnyu Village, February 2026.

¹⁴ Phejin Konyak (2023). "The Konyak Tattoos: Patterns & Meanings". *Konyak Student's Union, Platinum Jubilee Souvenir: A Journey Through Time*, p.62.

¹⁵ Konyak, L. C. (2023). *The Konyak Naga: Indigenous Crafts, Textiles & Attires*, Woods Publishers Publication house.

In earlier times, the ancestors of Chenwetnyu village used natural thorns from thorny plants. The traditional tool used by the villagers was a rattan plant needle *sing trah huh*. Apart from this, thorns from other plants like orange thorn were used. Typically, five thorn needles were used at once. These five thorn needles *sing trah huh* were bunched together in rows of five and were fixed onto a stem of cardamon plant. A plant fibre from any kind of creeper was used to bind the thorns and the stem together.

Ink used for tattooing: *Ying* tree



Fig.2.2 *Ying* tree, the source of *ying muh* resin used for tattoo ink in Chenwetnyu. Photo by author, February 2026.

Unlike modern tattoo ink which is prepared by mixing modern chemicals and elements, in earlier times, the material used for preparing tattoo ink included a tree resin known as *ying muh*, collected from *ying* tree. It was then dried and stored in a basket. When it was time to perform the tattoo, a portion of the dried resin was burned in a clay pot covered by a broken piece of another pot. A soot was collected in the pot covering it, which was scraped off the pot and mixed with *tonn tee* rice beer made from millet. When these two were mixed together, it produced a blank ink. If the ink was not mixed well or not dark enough, after healing the tattoo appeared faded.

Technique of tattooing

Among the Konyaks there were two techniques of making tattoos, '*hand tapping*' and '*hand hammering*'. Certain sections of Konyak community followed hand tapping method while some followed the hand hammering technique. Chenwetnyu villagers followed the hand hammering technique. In this process, the person getting tattooed has to be kept steady by holding his/her arms and legs down. The artist, before starting with the actual practice, draws an outline on the area to be tattooed by making dots with the ink. Then he/she starts hammering the needle comb tool on the outline, thereby permanently marking the skin. It was a long process usually, taking half a day to whole day sometimes.

***Shen-Tu* (Face Tattoo of Male)**



Fig. 2.3 Face tattoo of the male. Photo by author, Chenwetnyu village, February 2026

Chenwetnyu village belongs to the *shen-tu* (face-tattoo) group of the Konyak naga tribe. The men of the Chenwetnyu village tattooed their face. Every male member of the village was required to get a face tattoo, without exception. When asked about the design and the inspiration behind the tattoo, there was no specific answer. The same tattoo pattern was believed to have been followed for generations. Their ancestors had it, so they did too. It was believed to be a design meant for all human beings. The process of getting a face tattoo was painful and resulted in face swelling that lasted for approximately two weeks.

***Choh Sa Tu Ma* (Leg tattoo of the *Khalu (Long Hair)* clan woman)**



Fig. 2.4 Leg tattoo of the *Khalu (long hair)* clan woman. Photo by author, Chenwetnyu village, April 2026.

The leg tattoo of the *Khalu (long hair)* clan women or wangtrah clan group was referred to as “*Choh Sa Tu Ma*”, meaning, like the leg tattoo of the Chohs. Choh is a village in the Chen area of the Mon district, and the designed was named ‘*Choh Sa Tu Ma*’ because it drew inspiration from that village. The tattoo design consists of wide, proportioned position bands tattooed around both legs. Each band wraps completely around the leg placed at the back of the knee, just above the calves. The well-proportioned bands created a balanced appearance across both legs and serve as a traditional marker of a *khalu* woman’s coming of age.

***Lolat* (Leg Tattoo of the *Khatoi (Bald Head)* Clan Woman)**

The female tattoo art of the *Khatoi* (bald head) or *Pintrah* clan group is known as *Lolat*. In earlier times, ancestors secured the doors of their houses or huts by placing two bamboo poles against the woven bamboo door in a crisscross pattern. The inspiration for the *Lolat* tattoo design is drawn from this practice. That tattoo design consists of thick, intersecting bands wrapped around the lower thigh in a lattice pattern. This tattoo signified the coming of age of the *khatoi* clan women.



Fig. 2.5. Leg tattoo of the Khatoi (bald head) clan woman. Photo by author, Chenwetnyu village, February 2026.

Chest Tattoo

The chest tattoo on Konyak women was traditionally done after marriage, during a women's first pregnancy, by a female tattoo artist. This practice stemmed from the belief that if a woman did not receive the chest tattoo, her child would be born with physical or mental disabilities. The tattoo design consists of two solid bands, running parallel to each other, placed on the centre of the chest.



Fig. 2.6. Chest tattoo of the women. Photo by author, Chenwetnyu village, February 2026.

The Konyak community practiced tattoo culture widely in the past which was divided into three categories based on the area of body tattooed, the face-tattoo group, body-tattoo group and nose-tattoo group. Chenwetnyu village is a village under the Konyak tribe which falls under the face tattoo category. In Chen dialect, the act of getting tattooed is referred to as “*huh tu pu*”, which means marking the skin with a thorn. Tattooing in Chenwetnyu village functioned as a rite of passage that formally initiated an individual in the adult society. The tattoo designs of male and female differed, where the male tattooed the face and neck while female didn't. The female tattoo includes legs, arms and chest tattoos. Men of high rank also got a “tiger-spirit” tattoo. The tattoo design was different for women of different clan. Thorn needle was used and the pigment was made from a dried tree sap. Chenwetnyu village followed the hand-hammering technique.

V. Tattoo as a rite of passage

Among the inhabitants of Chenwetnyu villagers, tattooing function as an important rite of passage embedded within the socio-cultural fabric of the community. It held significance value in life-cycle ceremonies such as marriage and death, symbolizing the transition from one stage of life to another. Traditionally, tattoos were acquired during the teenage years, although instances of tattooing in adulthood were also observed, and the practice was common to both males and females. Tattooing was undertaken when individuals were deemed ready to assume social roles, and those who were tattooed were perceived as possessing greater wisdom, responsible, and independent, along with maturity to make life decisions. In this context, tattoos enabled them to integrate into the community, signalling their acceptance as full members of society.

Marriage

Tattoo was a prerequisite for marriage. Individuals without tattoos were prohibited from entering into matrimonial alliances. Tattooed individuals were regarded as full members of the community, entitled to participate in all societal obligations and practices. Possession of a tattoo indicated that a person had attained adulthood and was considered wise and more responsible, thereby ready to enter into matrimonial alliances.

Death

The tattoos were not just a form of aesthetic for the Konyaks. The tattoo on his body was believed to serve as spiritual armour, that would protect the individual in the afterlife, known as *loomching*. Also, his facial tattoo was believed to assist his soul in crossing over to the land of his ancestors. Without these markings, it was thought that his soul would not be recognized by the ancestors and would remain lost in the afterlife.¹⁶ Chenwetnyu villagers believed that an individual without tattoos would not have a safe passage to the afterlife. His soul would be unable to join his ancestors in afterlife.

Social status and identity

Tattoos were equivalent to degrees for the Konyaks as it denoted a male social status and his achievements and accomplishments in the headhunting activity. While it denoted a female transition from one phase of life to another.¹⁷ Tattoo was inseparable from headhunting among the Konyak. The number of tattoos a man received corresponded directly to the number of enemy heads he brought home. For males tattoo began on the face and extended down the neck according to individual accomplishments. Bringing an enemy's head home as a trophy was a source of great pride. Only the most capable warriors were permitted to receive neck tattoos.

Tattoos served as visual distinctions between social categories. They distinguished a warrior from a non-combatant, an aristocrat from a commoner, and an unmarried person from a married one. The tattoo designs of aristocrats and commoner differed significantly. A common man typically received only a mandatory face tattoo, whereas an aristocrat was entitled to special symbolic tattoos, such as the '*tiger-spirit*' tattoo. This tattoo was meant only for man from an aristocratic family. The late. Tolei Angh and Chen-O Khuzuthrupa possessed the tattoo. The same tiger-spirit tattoo was conferred upon every male member of the aristocratic family for generations until its decline in the 1960s.

The *Shahzu-Shatrah* (Tiger- Spirit) Tattoo

The tiger- spirit tattoo or the *Shahzu-Shatrah* tattoo, was a rare form of tattooing practiced by the Konyak Nagas. Only men of high social rank received this tattoo, which was placed on their back. Among the Konyak and Chen society, it was believed that when a child was born into an Angh clan, his tiger companion was also born in the forest. Each Angh or an aristocrat member possessed his own tiger-spirit. This belief led to a tattooing tradition in which men from aristocratic or Angh clans were required to tattoo their bodies. The tattoo designs represented the body parts of the tiger companion such as the limbs, legs, and skin pattern. It was believed that when these men slept, their souls left their bodies and entered their tiger companions. They could see, feel, hear, and smell whatever the tiger experienced. During headhunting raids, the animal companion guided the man by revealing about the whereabouts of his enemies. Men who possessed this "tiger-spirit" were said to have the same strength and power as a tiger or leopard, which made them undefeatable in battle. However, if the tiger companion was wounded or killed, the man who possessed its spirit suffered the same fate. If the spirit was too powerful for the man to control, he could go insane, leading to his eventual death.¹⁸

¹⁶ Kumar, G. (2024). "Tattoo: A symbolic link to cultural heritage". Memeraki Blog.

¹⁷ Kavahru, A. (2023). "Headhunting Among the Konyak Nagas: Tradition of Tattooing". *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* vol 5(4). Pp.

¹⁸ Krutak, L. (2022). "Huh tup u/To mark with tattoo: Chen Naga tiger-spirit tattoos and indigenous ontologies in Northeast India". In J. Martell & E. Larsen (Eds.), *Tattooed bodies: Theorizing Body Inscription across Disciplines and Cultures*, Palgrave Macmillan, Pp. 100.

VI. Decline of Tattoo culture in Chenwetnyu Village

Tattoo culture has largely disappeared from the community and is no longer practiced. The interactions with the outside culture in the early 1930s and the arrival of Christianity in the Konyak area in the mid-1940s made it difficult for the Konyak people to keep themselves isolated from the outside world¹⁹. In Chenwetnyu Village, tattoo culture has declined around late 1950s and early 1960s.

Advent of Christianity

The first and the foremost reason for the decline of the practice of tattoo culture in Chenwetnyu village can be attributed to the advent and spread of Christianity in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The villagers and Konyak in general followed diverse social, political and cultural practices. The *Morung* system or the male dormitory played a significant role in the village. Headhunting and tattoo tradition were central to village life and were given immense importance. Each and every individual, without any exception, was obligated to get a tattoo. The practice of tattooing was undeniably linked with headhunting, with the person taking the highest number of heads was treated with utmost respect and honour. The Christian missionaries who came to the area condemned it widely. It was considered a big sin. The missionaries often condemned the traditional cultural practices of the Konyaks like the tattoo culture because of its links with headhunting and heathenism. Christianity opened the eyes of the people, instilling in them the morals and religious values and faith in God. They realised that this traditional practice was a sin in the eyes of God. A resolution to ban the tattoo practice was passed by the Konyak Students' Union in 1960²⁰.

End of Headhunting

Headhunting and the practice of tattoo culture was inseparably linked. Before the village plan the day and month for tattooing, the selected individuals for getting the tattoo were required to go on a headhunting raid. In a year, around 10-20 individuals were tattooed. The selected individuals are required to bring enemy head before being tattooed. When a man takes an enemy head, he was rewarded with tattoo. However, with the spread of Christianity and the pressure from the Indian government, headhunting was banned in the 1960s. Not long after, tattooing culture also came to an end.

Modernization and education

Modernization of society also contributed to the decline of the practice of traditional tattoo culture in Chenwetnyu village. It brought about overall transformation in the lives of people. In the past, getting tattooed was like getting a degree or certificate²¹. But this changed with modernization as it had been replaced by formal education. The significance which was traditionally held very high in the society has lost its importance today. It no longer holds any significance in rituals and ceremonies. The traditional tools and techniques were replaced by innovative machines, leading to the decline of traditional way of tattooing.

VII. Conclusion

Like the rest of the Konyak, Chenwetnyu villagers has practiced tattoo culture for generations, and every individual, without any exception was obligated to get it. It became a part of their life, where every progress, achievements and cycle of life was associated with the culture. Today only few tattooed individuals are left in the village. And all of them are above 80 years. There remains no doubt that the practice of tattooing started declining with the ban on headhunting and emergence of Christianity. The end of headhunting spelt out a decline in all activities associated with it, including tattoos. Tattoos might have lost their relevance now, but a few elderly men and women still have tattoos from their younger years; they remain a testament to their attachment to this once intriguing cultural practice. Youngster are taking up renewed initiatives to revive tattooing along with lost cultural practices, but they are not prepared to inscribe them on their own bodies. Meanwhile, what is clearly noticeable is the fact that the once honoured tattooed men and women have now been reduced to the status of a living museum specimen subjected to the tourists' gaze. Therefore, it is important to study this culture because, although the practice cannot be revived, future generations should at the least have an understanding of how the ancestors lived and their impact these practices had on their everyday lives. The tattoo culture cannot be brought back, but efforts can be made to document the practices, patterns and cultural significance, which the future generations can refer to learn about the history of village ancestors.

¹⁹Phejin, Konyak (2023). "The Konyak Tattoos: Patterns & Meanings". *Konyak Students Union, Platinum Jubilee Souvenir*, 1948-2023. p. 62.

²⁰Kavahru, A. (2023). "Headhunting Among the Konyaks Nagas: Tradition of Tattooing". *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* Vol. 5(4). www.ijfmr.com

²¹ Phejin, Konyak. "The Konyak Tattoos: Patterns and Meanings". *Konyak Students' Union, Platinum Jubilee Souvenir*, 1948-2023. P. 61.

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