

**A critical overview of racialization in the United Arab Emirates**

**Introduction**

This article aims to explore and critically analyze the process of racialisation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It will touch upon four main areas; current anti-racism laws, contemporary slavery and racism, racial hierarchy in the 'professional' sector and segregation in education. To establish and understand the process of racialization it is critically important to understand the concept of 'race' and racism. Dikotta (2008) helps provide a useful definition of racism, as an 'organized belief system [which] is a limited historical, ideological and political phenomenon- one tool among others in the arsenal of horror devised by human beings to demean, oppress or exterminate each other' (1480). In the UAE racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia are entangled with the idea of a racial hierarchy. Importantly Dikotta (2008) is able to pry the term racism away from the Eurocentric approach, which is adopted by many, and suggest that hierarchies of race have been continuous in history. Dikotta (2008) explains that 'a more precise way of approaching the issue is to emphasize how opposition to the notion of equality often prompts the formulation of racial discourse' (1486). This understanding of racial discourse lends itself to each of the four aspects studied.

The history of the United Arab Emirates is crucially important to understand and consider when assessing racism. The development of UAE and the substantial changes in the country have meant an evolution in population, industry and economy. These changes are vast as 'prior to 1950, the countries of the Middle East exhibited some of the lowest levels of socioeconomic development in the world' (Yousef, 2004: 91). The discovery of oil has enabled incredible leaps for the country, bypassing the lengthy economic development that other developing countries have had to experience (Shihab, 2001: 249). The vast amount of oil has moved the country from tribal communities to a modern and wealthy society, however UAE's labour force was not so easily adapted. To maintain and feed the growth of the UAE, a large inward migration was needed. The development of the country was dependent on the large number of foreign manpower. The first census in 1968 measured the population at 180, 226, however this jumped to 557, 887 in 1975 and this upward trend is seen throughout the late 1900s. The number of immigrants into the UAE, from all over the world has grown so significantly that non- nationals now outnumber Emirati nationals. The 2005 census counted 825, 495 nationals compared to the 3, 280, 932 non-nationals living in the UAE (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority, 2010). The Non-Arab Non-Nationals consist of Indians (26.8% of the total population), Pakistanis (14.6%), Bangladeshis (4.6%), Sri-Lankans (2.2%), Filipinos (2.1%), English (.8%) and all other countries (4.6%) (Ministry of Planning UAE, 1995).

Racialization in the UAE is defined and shaped by the countries unique social and cultural demographics, which create a barrier to equality. Emiratis are vastly outnumbered, however in social status they preside over non-nationals whilst a socially accepted hierarchy is constructed which leaves certain nationalities at the bottom. This commentary will argue that underlying social attitudes towards migrants in the UAE is poor; this is because of xenophobic and racist beliefs of Arab superiority and an anti-black notion rooted in slavery. This ties in with Dikottas argument that racism or racial discourses are a result of opposition to racism and an attempt to maintain superiority.

Whilst building critical analysis of the current anti-racism law in the UAE and analysis of education and employment practices will be scrutinized. Furthermore, the reoccurring notion of racism as an opposition to equality appears within the inadequacy of anti-racism laws, contemporary slavery, the racial hierarchy and the segregation in education.

### **Anti-racism law: an attempt to appease the outraged West**

The UAE has undergone significant social change based around the need for modernization. As a country that relies on the West for business, tourism and stability (not that I am ignoring a level of interdependence at play), the UAE is not shy of developing their customs to suit Western 'standards'. The major cities of the UAE, such as Dubai have vast skylines and a plethora of tourist attractions that rival other major cities. Celebrities and tourists alike have flocked to the gleaming hotels and resorts along the coast- Dubai has even given celebrities the opportunity to own their own country. Modernization and rapid social change in the UAE however has been dependent on large cultural adaptation. The 'glocalisation' or adaptation of local culture and practices by incorporating the global has been seen throughout the UAE (Khondker, 2008). A key part of this political change has been development and adaptation of anti-racist laws alongside attempts to equalize human rights across nationals and non-nationals. This section of commentary however will argue that these changes have been made, in part, to appease the West instead of an attempt to change the structural racist belief system of Emiratis and within the political system.

It comes at no surprise that as world media was confronted with the human rights violations concerning domestic and construction work within the UAE and the racist policies within education and employment there was increased pressure for the West to act. In 2009, the United Nations Special Rapporteur visited the UAE and produced a report on contemporary forms of racism, the report addressed issues such as the granting of citizenship, living and working conditions and areas such as education policy. The recommendations suggested that the UAE needed to step up their anti-racism laws and assess many of their current policies such as education policy and their immigration system (United Nations Special Rapporteur, 2009).

Following on from action and recommendations from not only the United Nations but also other campaign groups, the UAE issued a law against any form of discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, colour or ethnic origin. In 2015, following a decree by the President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the No.2 of 15 law criminalises any act that stokes religious hatred and/or which insults religion through any form of expression (Wam, 2015). The law is an important step to tackling the problem of racism within the UAE especially because the UAE boasts people from over 200 diverse nations. The law introduces penalties which include jail terms of six months to over 10 years and fines ranging for Dh50,000 to Dh2 million (Salama, 2015). This law has been met with appreciation and support, with the suggestion that it is part of the modern UAE. The breakthrough law was supported by government officials but also the head of the Emirates Human Rights Association, Mohammed Al Kaabi, who suggested 'the law was an advanced civilized step to protect the rights and dignity of citizens and residents' (Remeithi, 2015). However, as to not be critical of any steps made to prevent and challenge racism, it is essential to question whether the UAE has produced anti-racism legislation to appease the West. This suggestion has some historical grounding in the UAE as Gordon (1989) argues that 'the decision by Arab states to abolish slavery... was taken for reasons that had little to do with the moral aspects of the issue' arguing instead that it was because of increased pressure from the West and the realization that maintaining the practice would exclude them from entering councils of international society. The UAE government is yet to prove that the introduction of the anti-racism law has done anything to change the structural problem of racism in society, instead has introduced legislation as an appeasement to the West instead of a full commitment to tackling racism.

The anti-racist position conveyed by the introduction of this new legislation is contradicted by the remaining exclusionary citizenship law. The UAE is renowned for its distinctive and hierarchical immigration process. Citizenship is granted automatically to children born to an Emirati father and an Emirati mother by descent however citizenship for non-nationals is not

as simple. As the UAE does not grant citizenship to non-migrants coming to work, the UAE operates a different immigration protocol. The immigration process began in the late 1950s and was designed as a system to allow more foreign workers to occupy the jobs in oil fields or domestic work that Emiratis no longer could (or wanted to), with their higher status and recent prosperity (Yasin, 2015). The immigration process runs alongside the concept of 'sponsorship' as part of the Kafala system and acts as the only legal way to gain entry to and remain in the UAE. Yasin (2015) explains that Kafala regulates foreign labour through citizen sponsorship, and any citizen can sponsor. However foreign workers are unable to choose their sponsor as these are allocated to them by their agency. In this process 'each non-citizen worker enters the country already tied to a particular job and is sponsored by a national citizen or company' (Yasin, 2015). Importantly however, the Kafala system emphasizes the racial hierarchy as the 'Kafala also does not place the worker and his/her employer on equal levels with regard to salaries or benefits allowable to take home', furthermore once the contract is made regardless of whether it is poor or deceptive, the worker cannot leave the contract nor find another sponsor (Yasin, 2015). The Kafala system represents the credence that Emiratis are superior, and reiterates the attempt to maintain nationalism within the UAE by resisting equality of citizenship.

It is essential to both commend and criticize anti-racism laws, there is to a certain extent an attempt to reduce racist speech and hatred. However it is clear that practices like the Kafala system represent an opposition to equality and the government is not attempting to change this. Therefore bringing into question whether the government chose to create legislation to appease the Western human rights organizations instead of a wholehearted attempt to upheave the current racist system by changing or adapting contradictory laws. Therefore calling research to examine the necessity of the reconstruction of Gordon's (1989) argument to be applied here.

### **The prevalence of Contemporary Slavery in the UAE**

Slavery has had roots in Arab culture since the expansion of the Islamic State. The Arab slave trade began at the era of Muslim conquests and up to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Trade was conducted in markets in the Middle East, North Africa and the horn of Africa. Sharia law permits slavery however it is prohibited when involving other Muslims. The ethnic prejudices and notions of anti-black racism are embedded into Arab society despite the abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. Importantly, many scholars argue that the concept of slavery is not dead. Instead they introduce the concept of modern slavery, Skinner (2008) argues that today there are more slaves than any point in history. The application of the concept of contemporary slavery in the UAE is debated, however Degorge (2006) argues that modern day slavery is shaped by increased globalization and modernization. Degorge throws out the Western paradigm which accepts slaves as being owned by someone else, instead he suggests that one of the key areas of slavery in the UAE is that of migrant workers. Furthermore Degorge (2006) argues that a common form of modern day slavery in the UAE occurs when individuals are entrapped 'out of economic necessity' (664).

This section will specifically talk about two of the main areas associated with contemporary slavery within the UAE; construction and domestic work. Importantly, the UAE has had a mass influx of foreign workers, supported by the government to satisfy the demands of their fast growing economy. Racist attitudes towards non-national citizens are reflected in the poor working and living conditions of construction workers across the UAE. Construction workers are segregated into camps and face long working hours. Reports suggest that workers building the £17bn cultural hub in the UAE are treated like 'battery hens' (Batty, 2015). Racial discrimination allows for the exploitation of migrant workers including 'unsafe working conditions that contribute to illness or deaths' (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Other reports of misconduct show workers are not paid on time or correctly, with some workers receiving no pay for their work whatsoever. The Kafala system contributes to these problems as sponsors often withhold workers travel documents (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Furthermore with the

Kafala system bonding workers to their sponsors or employers, they are unable to leave work without permission. Poor living and working conditions represent the societal view that non-nationals are commodities.

The UAE does however have labour laws in place which aim to protect all staff and employees including expatriates. Labour matters are governed by Federal Law No.8 of 1980 Regulating Labour Relations, which has been amended 3 times (UAE Labor Law, no date). The law is suggested to cover all aspects of the employer-employee relationship, such as wages, working hours, leave and safety and protection. The International Labour Organization (2014) produced their latest inspection of labour law in Arab states and suggested 'over the past decade, Arab states have made steady progress in improving their labour inspection systems in terms of regulations, human capacities, and use of technology' (3). Furthermore, the inspection suggested that the UAE had set up different sectors to protect employees, such as The Wages Protection Office, which was intended to organise periodic inspections, however it also noted that 'workers and employers are not involved in labour inspection activities at any level' (36). In addition to the lack of input from employers, it also noted that 'labour inspectors are poorly trained and often lack the technical skills required to conduct quality inspections' (36). With this being said the report outlined the steps that have been made by the UAE government, however critics suggest that implementation of new laws is patchy.

Furthermore, the UAE government ensures that no trade unions are able to freely and fairly operate. Being part of a trade union is illegal and 'in January 2011, 70 Bangladeshi construction workers were arrested and deported accused of instigating a strike of 3000 workers at the Arabtec construction company' (International Trade Union Confederation, 2012). Furthermore, the labour law does not recognise the rights of workers to create a trade union. The prevention of trade unions is supported by many who suggest that 'a lack of collective bargaining rights is good for workers, as it leads to more growth and job creation' (Global Workplace Insider, 2014). However prevention of trade unions creates limited improvement with their current laws which is critically important for those whose human rights is being violated.

Domestic workers often come under the same commentary as construction workers as part of the ongoing battle to create better working conditions for non-national workers within the UAE, however domestic work does not fall under labor laws as construction workers. Woman migrants are often in search of domestic work in the homes of Emirati citizens, also under the Kafala system, domestic work is also seen as contract slavery. Workers from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines alongside African women often set out in pursuit of the financial incentives that domestic work in the UAE is assumed to bring (Halabi, 2008). Domestic workers again have their passports taken away from them by their sponsors, however the 146, 000 domestic workers in the UAE are often confronted with violence from both male employers but also female employers who feel they are superior (Sloan, 2014). Female domestic workers are exploited under the legal framework of the Kafala system, which leads employers to believe they own the domestic workers (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Furthermore domestic workers are let down by their exclusion from labour law, which means there is little regulation of the exploitative and racist system. Domestic and construction workers have large health disparities compared with Emiratis, and reports suggest that 'the conditions reported by domestic workers in the UAE imply that many are routinely sleep-deprived and have sub-standard sleeping accommodations' (Sonmez et al, 2011). The large health disparities show the difference in social status and position that face non-nationals. With these racialised standards for both construction and domestic workers reflecting the hierarchy within society which leaves certain nationalities at the bottom, as the 'layers of repression and oppression take their toll on the lower orders in the status hierarchy' (Jureidini, 2003). This reiterates the argument that xenophobic attitudes, which allows many

of the human rights violations to be overlooked by government are a result of an opposition to equality.

### **Step in line: how non-nationals fit into the racial hierarchy**

To develop the concept of racialization in the UAE further than the suggestion of contemporary slavery, it is important to look at other aspects of the workplace for example the racial hierarchy in other workplaces. As the UAE has suggested it is tackling the problem of contemporary slavery and human rights violations, another area that is important therefore is the exclusionary practices in the workplace and consider the hierarchical structure within the 'professional' sector. The concept of racial hierarchy has been running throughout this commentary, and in this section racial hierarchy is closely linked to the concept of race as a marker of success in 2 different sectors of work; sex work and the 'professional' sector.

The growing prevalence of the sex industry in the UAE has appeared alongside the growth in cities and the tourism industry. Glamorous and expensive cities in the UAE such as Dubai have seen a boom in the sex trade, with an estimated 30,000 sex workers out of a population of about 1.5 million (Butler, 2010). This all happens even though prostitution is illegal under the UAE's and Islamic law, however is widely accepted in major cities such as Dubai (Cooper, 2013). When looking at racialization in the UAE it is important to consider the racial hierarchy that exists within the sex trade and its implications upon racism and racist attitudes within the UAE. An important and detailed account of the racialization of the sex industry in Dubai comes from Mahdavi (2010). In his paper, Mahdavi (2010) explains the connection between the sex industry and racist attitudes within Arab culture. The growth of the sex industry in the UAE has 'grown to include women from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, East Asia and Africa' (Mahdavi, 2010). The variety of nationalities within the sex industry itself has created a racial structure, which is played out in a number of locations with the main marker being skin colour. The report explains that woman from Iran, Morocco and other parts of Eastern Europe (described as lighter skinned woman) commanded the higher price and worked in more expensive bars. Below them were the women labeled as 'brown' and were mainly from East Asia, the Phillipines, India and Pakistan who were rated middle tier. Finally woman from Africa who were perceived as 'black' were over-represented in the more dangerous areas, such as street work. Goldthorpe (2012) argues that racialization within the UAE is based around the vilification of darker skinned groups, with Emiratis viewing them as 'inferior' contributing to the xenophobic attitudes, which originate from slavery stereotypes.

Racial discrimination in the 'professional' workplace is dependent on the racial hierarchy amongst expatriate workers and Emiratis. Race acts as a marker of success in the 'professional' sector, dependent on the racial hierarchy. Divided into strata's, the upper stratum is comprised of Western professional workers, such as engineers and medical doctors (Winckler, 2012). Below Western professionals are professional workers from Arab countries such as teachers, with the bottom of the hierarchy dominated by unskilled workers from various non-Arab countries, such as domestic workers (Winckler, 2012). There are vast disparities in rates of pay because of race or skin colour, reports have shown that if you're Asian in a professional job in the GCC (To note: Gulf Cooperation Council consisting of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar), you can expect to earn 26 percent less than a Westerner in the exact same job (Gulf Business, 2013). Specifically within the UAE, the report suggests that 'the average monthly salary for a Western expatriate in the UAE is \$11,936, 34.8 per cent higher than an Asian expat pay of \$8,853' (Gulf Business, 2013). The report suggests that value is placed in skin colour however HR managers that this is in line with 'home country salaries' however this is viewed as a flawed excuse. Furthermore, Shamsi (2013) argues that 'the wage system in UAE-GCC is completely based

on the color of the employees passport'. For nursing specifically, there is a difference in salary with Asian passport holders being paid the least and the highest salaries go to the U.S. and Canada (Shamsi, 2013). Pay equality in the UAE is flawed, wage is based on nationality which entirely reflects the poor attempt to change structural problems within the UAE.

Furthermore race can act as a barrier to success (Sloan, 2014). It is not uncommon in the UAE for job advertisements to specify nationality or skin colour of applicants they require. Croucher (2013) notes that job adverts specifying nationality or skin colour are regularly placed on Dubizzle, a jobsite advertising jobs in the UAE. Croucher (2013) explains that 'a human-resources manager who posted a listing seeking an attractive Russian said the specification was necessary to meet the needs of the role'. This exclusionary practice is not illegal in the UAE, with gender and racial requirements the norm for job advertisement.

### **How segregation and globalization has created educational disparities within non-national education**

Diversity and multiculturalism in the UAE has shaped the education system. The UAE education system is relatively new and in the 1960s and 70s a school building program expanded the system to create a Primary and Secondary system, which is now compulsory up to the ninth grade (O'Loughlin, 2013). There is mix of state and privately funded schools with 40% of pupils attending private fee paying schools that are mainly geared towards expatriate communities (O'Loughlin, 2013). The two key areas to consider when assessing the racialization and segregation in education in the UAE. Firstly it is important to assess racism and segregation in education and how this is or isn't dealt with by institutions and policy. Secondly in the case of the UAE, the education system has increasingly become globalized (Godwin, 2006), therefore it is important to consider how this has influenced racism in education.

Racial segregation in education is not uncommon, however the UAE has a distinctive system-key to the countries development. The education system was established in 1971 around the formation of the UAE itself. Education was deemed necessary to reproduce the human capital needed to sustain the growing economy and country. The education system is run and controlled by the Ministry of Education and is based on the essential Islamic values that run throughout the rest of society.

Commonly research and media attention has focused on the vast number of Pakistani schools across the UAE, this section will follow this trend and focus on mainly Pakistani schools however it should be noted these problems are not unique to Pakistani schools and could be applied to other groups of school for example Indian schools. It is however important to state that 'non-UAE nationals may attend government schools as fee-paying students' (UAE Government, no date). However, it is clear that the vast majority of those attending Pakistani schools, as they are named, are doing so because these are the schools with the lowest fees and therefore the only ones they have access to. Removing the indirect supports such as education for non-nationals creates racial segregation within schooling. Emiratis are able to attend any schools for free however non-nationals are excluded from this and increasingly only have access to the cheapest and lowest standard schools. This racial segregation has meant there are a large number of Pakistani children who are not able to attend school, as their low-income families are not able to support them with the fees. School has been labeled 'beyond reach' for some of the poor Pakistani children living in Dubai (Safdar, 2010). Despite the growing numbers of schools in Dubai and across the UAE, the number of spaces in the less expensive schools are few, the Pakistani Ambassador, Asif Durrani suggested 'there are limited seats in schools being run under the supervision of the Pakistani missions, which offer the cheapest fees in the country' (Ahmed and Nazzal, 2014). Numbers of Pakistani children out of school have been placed at 20,000, with little initiative from the government for improving this as citizenship laws prevent the access of free education.

It is essential to look at the government's rhetoric and its approach to reducing racial segregation in education. With the government portraying a pro-equality and free speech approach with the introduction of their anti-racism law, it would not be silly to assume they had some measures in place to protect non-national pupils against racial segregation. However in the governments UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda report, which outlines the aims for the future of the education system in the UAE lacks any mention of approaches towards reducing racism and segregation in schools (Vision 2021, no date). Instead the majority of legislation and incentives in education are aimed at raising 'the rate of nationals in the educational sector into 90% by the year 2020' (Ministry of Education, no date). This exclusionary practice means that non-nationals are segregated and some are not able to afford education with current education goals leaving non-nationals behind. This system only emphasizes the hierarchy set in place by institutions and engrained into society, which maintains the view that non-nationals are not equal to Emirati citizens.

Secondly, an important area of the education system in the UAE is the comparison between Pakistani and International schools, there firstly needs to be a distinction made between the difference between these schools and the other schools, which again consist of mainly non-nationals. International schools have sprung up across the country as a result of increased globalization of education within the UAE (Godwin, 2006). This growth and globalization of education has contributed to 'an increase in the number and quality of private and/or international educational institutions entering the United Arab Emirates'. (Godwin, 2006:1). According to the International Schools Group (2014) the UAE is the top host country for English-Language International Schools in 2013, with 428 schools in total (Clark, 2014). Furthermore, the International School Consultancy Group report has suggested that 'the markets in Dubai and Abu Dhabi have grown rapidly during the past decade and further growth is inevitable. Expatriates outnumber local students throughout the UAE by a large margin' (Shabandri, 2014). The development of international schools calls for comparison to be made between these and other schools accessed by non-nationals in the UAE.

Importantly there are some striking differences between International schools and some of the Pakistani schools in the UAE. Reports, mainstream media and parents have all expressed concern for the poor standards of schools in Dubai and the UAE in general, with the suggestion that 'hundreds of pupils in two Pakistani schools in the Emirates are performing poorly in mathematics, science and reading' (Hanif, 2014). Furthermore, the standards of Pakistani schools compared to other non-national citizens such as British, Germans for example seems to be incomparable, Rehman (2011) suggests that in Pakistani schools, 'which cost next to nothing, you find teachers who are unqualified, over-worked and under-paid...the options for educating your children in Dubai are limited and because of that, you would be hard-pressed to find a place for your child in the few schools that offer quality education at an affordable price'. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (2016) produced their latest report from 2015-16, with the overall suggestion that things were looking up. In the report they suggested that no schools declined in their overall judgement and 7 schools had improved their overall performance between 2014-15 and 2015-16.

This however shows little improvement compared to the gleaming International schools scattered across Dubai and the rest of the UAE. The private and expensive international schools have generated '\$2.5 billion a year in fees, more than Dh9bn, and accounts for 7 per cent of global tuition-fee income' (Hanif, 2014). International schools provide exemplary education to western expats and have been described as 'Harry Potter-esque' (Sahoo, 2015). The Repton in Dubai was among the first international school brands in Dubai, and has expanded to Abu Dhabi in 2013 and has intends to increase its campus next year. The headmaster of one International school in Dubai suggests that 'the market has been under-supplied with schools and the UAE Government has been very keen to attract high-quality international schools to the region to meet demand' (Sahoo, 2015). The higher than average school fees have not put off parents however who are attracted to the top-quality education offered in these schools.

This shows the wide difference between schooling available to non-nationals living with the UAE, emphasising not only this inequality between non-nationals and Emiratis but also the hierarchy that is in place amongst non-nationals. The UAE government encourages the high quality schooling for wealthier non-nationals however only intends to meet basic standards for those attending Pakistani schools in the country.

In conclusion, it is clear from the evidence of the racialization within the UAE that racial stereotypes, xenophobic practices and human rights violations are a product of the unique and multicultural aspect of the UAE culture. Moreover, the brutal reality of the human rights violations and xenophobic practices within the UAE have captured Western human rights and media attention for quite some time. Most widely are the human rights violations of construction workers building the vast skylines visited by many tourists, with reports revealing the 'dark side' of the UAE. These reports aimed at gaining public attention show conditions which 'shame the west' (Batty, 2013), many produced as an act of 'calling out' to the UAE government for changes. A protests staged at the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan, opposing the working and living conditions for migrant workers working on the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, demonstrates how this topic has captured the attention of Western academics and general public alike (Vartanian, 2014). The protests, human rights reports and media attention has however influenced a new approach from the UAE government, the introduction of the No.2 of 15 law criminalises any form of discrimination based on religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race colour or ethnic origin. However, it is important to use critical analysis to guide social scholars towards producing conscious and informed research. The suggestion that the introduction of this law is based on an attempt to appease the West as opposed to an attempt to tackle the underlining social problem of xenophobic attitudes, racial hatred and an enforced hierarchy needs to be researched. With this being said it is clear that the UAE is tepidly approaching the issue of xenophobia and racism by introducing legislation and policy not to just tackle discrimination but in the way of education, labour and human rights legislation. However this is all contradicted by the exclusionary practices that remain in place which Dikotter (2008) argues are the result of opposition to equality.



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