Pitrau Festival: A Celebration of Cultural Heritage and Kryashen Identity

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ABSTRACT

Pitrau is the name given by Kryashens to the Christian Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Kryashens are Turkic-speaking people, most of whom live in the territory of the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia. The traditional celebration of the Festival of Pitrau involved folk traditions closely connected to significant seasonal agricultural events. In recent decades, the Festival of Pitrau has become a well-known cultural event in the Republic of Tatarstan. This festival has acquired new meaning, becoming a space to celebrate Kryashen culture and an opportunity to display Kryashen culture to outsiders, with an emphasis on Kryashen identity. This article discusses the roots of the celebration of this famous festival, its past and present traditions, and how and why this festival acquired its new significance.

Keywords: Festival, folklore, identity, Kryashens, Pitrau.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Festival of Pitrau was traditionally known among Kryashens as a day of widespread celebration of the Christian Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. In addition to the Christian meaning, Kryashen folk traditions indicate that this day was also imbued with agrarian significance in line with its common Turkic past when agrarian cults played an important role.

Kryashens inherited old Turkic traditions, which were later absorbed by Christianity and became an inseparable part of their folk religious traditions. These traditions reflect, in part, the unique situation surrounding the formation of this ethnic group that reflects both Russian and Turkic cultural heritage.

The majority of Kryashens dwell in the Tatarstan Republic in Russia. The term Kryashen is their self-label; outsiders often call them Baptized Tatars. However, Kryashens prefer not to use this name and insist on their distinctness from the Tatars.

Although most Kryashens consider themselves Orthodox Christians, there are also Protestant Christians, non-religious, and atheists among them. However, my fieldwork shows that even non-religious individuals readily acknowledged the impact of Christianity on their culture.

While Orthodox Christianity significantly influenced Kryashen culture, Kryashen folk traditions reflect an interesting mix of Christianity and folk traditions rooted partially in their old pre-Christian Turkic past. The Festival of Pitrau is no exception to this pattern; its Christian meaning, combined with pre-Christian popular agrarian traditions, produced the important social significance of this festival.

For Kryashens, the Festival of Pitrau was considered one of the most important occasions of the year and was specifically known for its rich folk traditions and customs. In recent years, the festival has attracted the attention of outsiders because of its remarkable celebration in the village of Zyuri in the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia. The festival was revived relatively recently in Zyuri, and this revival was connected to a broader process of religious and ethnic revival among Kryashens. It became one of the most important public platforms that showed the uniqueness of Kryashen culture and gave them a chance to proclaim the need to preserve their unique ethnicity publicly.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials I present in this article are part of my long-term ongoing research on Kryashen folk traditions and their religious and ethnic identities. This article is mostly based on the results of my fieldwork, which include interviews and observations I made in the Tatarstan Republic in the years 2006–2010 and 2015, as well as some recent interviews conducted in 2022–2023 via Internet communication. The on-site fieldwork I conducted occurred in villages in the so-called territory of Zakazanie. The traditional name of this area is the Arsk Land or, in the Tatar language, Arça yağt. It encompasses several administrative districts of the Republic of Tatarstan, including the Mamadyshsky District, within which is
the village of Zyuri, where the major Festival of Pitrau takes place. I also interviewed people from Kazan, the capital city of the Tatarstan Republic. This group has played an important role in the revival of the Festival of Pitrau and its new avenue of development.

In some places in this article, I will use the original terms signified by Tatar Latin script. Kryashens use the Tatar language as a vernacular language; sometimes, they call it the Kryashen language. Philologically speaking, it involves the same language structure as the Tatar language, with some dialectical features (Kirillova & Alkaya, 2018). For some Kryashens, language differences are part of their identity, and they insist that their language should be called the Kryashen language, not the Tatar language. I want to note that the official legal script for the Tatar language in Russia today is Cyrillic. However, the Tatar Latin script became a common alternative to the Cyrillic alphabet, and I chose this variant as a more convenient alternative.

III. THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF THE FESTIVAL

The name Pitrau has traditionally been used among Kryashens as the popular name for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (Tat. Petr häm Pavel köne). The official Christian name for the Feast among Kryashens is almost unknown, and people usually use the short common form Pitrau or Pitrau Bäyräme. According to the Russian Orthodox tradition, which still uses the Julian calendar, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul falls on July 12 of the modern Gregorian calendar. The Orthodox tradition prescribes a fasting period before the Feast (Russ. Petrov Post, Tat. Pitrau Urazast). However, my fieldwork revealed that Kryashens very rarely observe food restrictions. They are usually aware of them but do not follow strict regulations regarding fasting for Pitrau.

Among Kryashens, the Christian meaning of the feast itself is vaguely known and sometimes not known at all. However, the popular traditions associated with the festival are widely celebrated. In my conversations with Orthodox priests, they argued that the folk understanding of the Feast of Pitrau obscures its Christian meaning. The Kryashen priests I interviewed told me that they sometimes wondered how many non-Christian traditions still exist in popular Kryashen culture. Despite their attempts to be tolerant of popular traditions, priests do try to convince people to stop observing non-Christian traditions that contradict Orthodox teachings. Still, the Kryashen people do not usually separate Orthodox traditions from their folk traditions. For many, all of the existing traditions are an inseparable aspect of their heritage inherited from their ancestors, and they feel a moral responsibility to preserve these traditions and pass them on to their descendants.

IV. PRE-CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF THE FESTIVAL

The Turkic people had different types of communal celebrations, even before the advent of Christianity and Islam. One such celebration was Cıyın (alternatively spelled as Dzhien), a summer feast featuring joyful mass celebrations in which young people played a significant role (Çetin, 2009). What is interesting is that this name can be found in the lexicon Kryashens use in reference to the Festival of Pitrau. One of the alternative names for the Festival of Pitrau used by Kryashens is Pitrau Cıyın. The Turkic word “Cıyın” means “gather together,” illustrating the traditional communal character of the celebration.

Cıyın and Sabantuy were traditional summer feasts among Muslim Tatars and Bashkirs up until recent times. However, the non-Islamic roots of such festivals and the rituals that accompanied them were a cause of concern among the Tatar Islamic elite, who even attempted to ban such celebrations (Sharafutdinov & Sadykova, 2012). Unlike the Muslim Tatars among Kryashens, the old Turkic traditions were incorporated into the Christian context. However, Orthodox priests were also concerned about non-Christian elements, but they had difficulty banning such traditions because, for Kryashens, their popular religious practices were intertwined with their understanding of Christianity and perceived as part of their Orthodox identity.

Thus, Cıyın celebrations were common for Turkic people inhabiting the Volga-Kama region. The days during which the celebration was held varied depending on the particular village, but usually, the date was tied to the end of the sowing period and before the start of haymaking (Nogmanov & Bagautdinova, 2016). The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul fell on approximately the same calendrical period when Cıyın celebrations were conducted and thus absorbed some of the traditions of the ancient Turkic agrarian cults.

The Turkic people celebrate and acknowledge different types of agrarian festivals. To this day, many Kazan Tatars celebrate the well-known agrarian festival Sabantuy. Compared to other popular celebrations, Sabantuy did not worry the Islamic elite. This was probably because, even in the 19th century, Sabantuy was not associated with religious components but was perceived as a secular folk festival (Urazmanova, 2014). The Festival of Pitrau is often referred to as the “Kryashen Sabantuy.” This term is usually used by Kazan Tatars, but Kryashens also use this alternative. This is likely because Tatar Sabantuy and Pitrau are both agrarian celebrations, and some Kryashens participate in both festivals. My interviewees explained...
that Sabantuy does not bear any Islamic meaning and does not conflict with their Christian values, and because it comes from their common Turkic past, they consider it acceptable to celebrate both festivals.

In general, agrarian celebrations are widely known among the neighboring Turkic people. Ciyyn was celebrated by Kazan Tatars and Bashkirs, and Chuvash people still have a festival called Akitay, which is also traditionally accompanied by agrarian rituals (Salmin, 1994). Similar calendrical festivals with their roots in agrarian traditions are celebrated by other Turkic ethnic groups worldwide. Thus, we can see that festivals related to agriculture are not unique. The peculiarity of our case is that the typical Turkic Ciyyn celebration has become associated with the Christian Feast of Saints Peter and Paul.

V. POPULAR TRADITIONS OF THE PITRAU CELEBRATION

The Festival of Pitrau coincides with the beginning of the haymaking and harvesting period. There is a tradition among Kryashens that the harvest is not picked until Pitrau. This restriction stands even for ripe berries, cucumbers, and tomatoes. The Festival of Pitrau removes this prohibition and marks the beginning of a new phase. Thus, traditionally, Pitrau was some sort of a barrier festival that divided two important periods and marked people’s transfer into a new, intensive phase of work.

Elderly interviewees told me that according to tradition, the festival was celebrated in two parts. The first part is a morning celebration in the church, and the second part is a major popular collective celebration. The celebration of Pitrau is also a family reunion; relatives and friends who live in distant villages gather together in one place to participate in the festival. It is a good opportunity for elderly relatives and friends to see each other and talk warmly, especially if they have not seen each other for a long time. Despite this benefit for older people, my interviewees told me that the festival is always perceived as a celebration with special attention given to young people.

The Festival of Pitrau is also known as the “Youth Festival” and the “Festival of Flowers.” These popular names point out that the celebration’s primary focus is on the younger generation. Interviewees explained that after Pitrau, young people are fully involved in intensive work in the fields and would not have leisure time. Thus, Pitrau is the last day when young people are free to do what they want. Consequently, entertainment for this day is an important traditional component of the Pitrau Festival; it is a time for having fun and gathering strength before the hard work season begins. Thus, this day is associated with playing, matchmaking, and fun.

The other popular name for the Festival of Pitrau, the Festival of Flowers, emphasizes the value of the flowers and plants that play an important role during this festival. Interviewees attested to various customs related to the importance of flowers. Flowers hang on houses, fences, and gates; they are exchanged as gifts and collected for good luck. It is also customary to make and wear floral head wreaths. In another tradition, unmarried girls who want a husband collect twelve different flowers and put them under their pillows at night. If a girl sees a young man in her dreams that night, she is said to be able to expect a wedding very soon. Another custom is to hang flowers secretly on the gates of people you love. The opposite option is also available: If you do not like somebody, you can hang thistle or nettle on their gate as a sign of disrespect. Sometimes, the hanging of a thistle or nettle comes from an intentional desire to offend somebody, get revenge for something, or allude to a person that they did something wrong and appeal to their conscience.

Herbal folk medicine is popular among Kryashens and is associated with professional customs related to Pitrau. One respected herbalist told me that it was customary to collect medicinal flowers before Pitrau and medicinal roots after Pitrau. This custom is reflected in the proverb that I heard from several people: “Before Pitrau’s day, flowers are curative, and after Pitrau, the roots.” Another authoritative folk herbalist whom I talked to in my early interviews told me that every Pitrau, he specifically collects 41 types of flowers, and they have a perfect healing effect (Barkar, 2007).

The musical component of the Festival of Pitrau has always been significant. Actually, it was one of the few festivals that included the special ritual songs Pitrau köe (Almeeva, 2017). The major folk circle dances of the year also fall on Pitrau, and in popular belief, the success of the harvest depends on how well the dances are carried out (Bayazitova, 2017). It is still customary to dance, including circle dances, and sing during Pitrau. The day is also associated with dating, and traditionally, it is considered especially good for choosing brides, confessing love, and making marriage proposals. In fact, within the last few years, the Festival of Pitrau in the village of Zyuri gained an authoritative and famous matchmaker. Her role is not only to help young people find love but also to help build a new Kryashen family that can preserve and save their traditional culture. One famous Kryashen proverb states, “At Pitrau, brides are chosen, and at Pokrov, the wedding is celebrated.” Pokrov is the folk name for the Feast of Intercession of the Theotokos, which is celebrated in Russia on October 14.

It is also customary to hold various competitions on Pitrau. One of the most spectacular events is the popular style of folk wrestling called Kurash (Tat. Köräş). This type of folk wrestling is widely known.
among Turkic people. Kazan Tatars always conduct Kurash on Sabantuy. The Festival of Pitrau features different events throughout the day, but the spectacle of Kurash is among the most important. The rules of Kurash are similar everywhere, but what is particularly interesting is that my interviewees claimed that, historically, the Kurash conducted among Kryashens was more inclusive. They told me that, unlike Tatar Muslims, it was the norm for Kryashens to allow both women and men to compete in Kurash.

Another tradition associated with the Festival of Pitrau is to host a festive banquet and set a table for family and friends. Interviewees claimed that it is customary to slaughter an animal during Pitrau, whether it be sheep, goat, or even chicken. However, interviewees were not united in the terms they used to describe such animals; for example, some told me that such meat should be called “sacrificial meat,” but others tried to refuse the term “sacrificial,” saying that it is better to simply call such meat “festive food.” I especially noticed this tendency in my more recent interviews. People explained that the use of sacrificial animals is an Islamic tradition and not part of the Kryashen tradition.

I attempted to understand why different people gave me different responses about the names used to describe the same festive meat, and it seems that the clue to the answer is related to the problem of Kryashen identity. Some Kryashens, in their struggle for a separate ethnic identity, often use binary categories to distinguish themselves from Kazan Tatars. In this case, they try to make such strict distinctions purposely to avoid confusion between their customs and Islamic ones. Kryashens are aware of the famous Islamic tradition of the mass ritual slaughtering of animals, which takes place at the feast of Kurban Bayram. The Kryashens, who refused to refer to their ritual meat as “sacrificial” meat, also emphasized strict boundaries between themselves and the Kazan Tatars. However, regardless of what people call it, different Kryashen groups consume some kind of festive food. According to research on Kryashens from the Molkeev region, it was customary for every family to slaughter a lamb during Pitrau (Urazmanova, 1993).

In different villages, I also witnessed the wide observation of the traditional bloodless porridge sacrifice. As I noted before, with regard to meat, some people try to avoid the term “sacrificial” when referring to festive foods. However, I did not notice such a distinction with regard to the ritual porridge. People who participated in this ritual had no problems referring to this act as the “cooking of sacrificial porridge.” According to my interviewees, the porridge is boiled in large “sacrificial cauldrons.” These cauldrons should be used only for sacrifices; they cannot be used for any other purpose. The ritual itself follows a special procedure; during this act, people use special Icons called “Sacrificial Icons.” These Icons are used during and after cooking for prayers. On regular days, these Icons are wrapped in towels, kept at home, and are not used on any other day. The “sacrifice” is offered at a particular place of honor, often at the site of a former church or chapel or near a river. People participating in these rituals believe that their actions can produce good weather and regular rains.

Some participants claimed that the existence of this ritual is evidence of the old Turkic pre-Christian beliefs that still exist in Kryashen culture. However, cross-cultural research has shown that similar folk traditions related to the celebration of the Saints Peter and Paul Feast are also observed among Russians. For instance, Nikolay Matorin (1929) pointed out that porridge sacrifices and public mass prayers on Pitrau, traditionally conducted by Kryashens, share remarkable similarities with Chuvash folk traditions and are also observed in the traditions of Slavic people.

Today, as in the past, the presence of festive foods connected to the Pitrau celebration remains a prominent part of the various folk traditions observed in different places. The foods may vary—they can comprise lamb, goat, chicken, or just porridge. For people, such food is perceived not just as regular food but as ritual food. The process of cooking such food is considered an important ritual that promotes good weather and abundant harvest and eventually unifies Kryashens around a shared festive table.

VI. PITRAU FESTIVAL AS AN INTERRUPTED TRADITION

The Festival of Pitrau is well known, and people are aware of the major celebrations in the village of Zyuri, as well as the various local celebrations that are widely carried out in different villages of the Republic of Tatarstan today. However, not so long ago, during the Soviet period, it was impossible to imagine such celebrations due to the religious policies of the Soviet state. Soviet leaders consciously created new communist rituals and traditions as opposed to religious ones (Glebkin, 1998). As a result, Pitrau and other Orthodox Feasts could not be widely celebrated. The officials wanted the cultural diversity between Orthodox Kryashens and Muslim Tatars to disappear in the future with a new atheist policy that was supposed to erase the distinctions separating these ethnic groups. In this context, seasonal folk festivals that did not bear religious meanings were reimagined as festivals that glorified labor. Such a reimagining occurred with the socially important Tatar festival of Sabantuy (Rudnev, 1974).

Unlike Sabantuy, the Festival of Pitrau did not fit into such a framework. People managed to save some folk songs and dances, but they were removed from their religious contexts and were losing their previous meaning. However, despite the oppressive situation, it was difficult to completely eradicate religious
traditions, and some people tried to preserve them. Some of my elderly interviewees told me that during the years of religious oppression, they preserved their traditions by secretly keeping icons and other religious attributes in old chests. On certain days, they got them out and secretly gathered for prayers and other religious activities.

The situation surrounding religious freedoms changed for the better in the late 80s and especially in the early 90s. Voices arguing for the need for religious and ethnic revival became audible. From the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century, Kryashen activists created culturally oriented Kryashen organizations and advocated for the revival of folklore, language, and religious traditions. The most significant cultural change was the massive revival of the Pitrau Festival. Thus, the revival of the celebration of the Pitrau Festival is closely related to the Kryashen struggle for identity after the Soviet years, when their religious and ethnic expression was deemed problematic.

VII. THE REVIVAL OF THE FESTIVAL OF PITRAU

The social changes that occurred after the end of the communist era created a completely different social reality. As Lehmann (1998) pointed out, it became fashionable to reject communist atheistic ideology, and this new situation created great possibilities for ethnic and religious revival. In different Kryashen villages, people began openly celebrating their traditional religious feasts, including the Festival of Pitrau. However, until 1999, such celebrations were mostly local events. On July 12, 1999, a significant revival of the Festival of Pitrau took place in the village of Zyuri, located in the Mamadysh district of the Republic of Tatarstan. The Mamadysh district itself is well known for its dense Kryashen population and high preservation of Kryashen culture and folk music traditions (Kuyumova, 2016). This district includes different villages, including Albayevo, where the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul was a patronal feast of the local church and where the most solemn observance of the Festival of Pitrau took place prior to the Soviet period. Thus, Zyuri became the focal point of a substantial revival of the Festival of Pitrau. Selected by Kryashen activists as an optimal venue for large gatherings, Zyuri’s revival of Pitrau is perceived as an extension of the traditional major festival that was once held in Albayevo.

Since the revival of the Pitrau Festival in 1999, Zyuri has gained significant popularity, which has increased yearly. Pitrau has evolved from being a famous but local Festival to being widely known throughout Tatarstan and beyond (Kuzmecova, 2016).

The revival of the Festival of Pitrau was motivated not only by the aspiration to preserve Kryashen traditions but also by the Kryashens’ endeavor to assert their distinct ethnic identity, in contrast to the prevailing notion that they are simply a subgroup of the Tatar people. Today, in the Tatarstan Republic, the Festival of Pitrau is recognized as a day of celebration of Kryashen culture and ethnic self-expression. It also serves as an effective way to introduce outsiders to Kryashen traditional culture and provide information proving their distinctiveness from the Tatar people.

Cross-cultural research has shown that popular festivals play an important social role: they maintain society, create a sense of belonging, and may be instrumental in the formation of identity (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). At the same time, we know many examples of festivals aimed at celebrating national or ethnic identity, which incorporate traditions that are believed to be ancient but are actually modern inventions looking back in time (Trevor-Roper, 1983). The Festival of Pitrau and its attached traditions might seem like a new invention. However, we can track the historical background of this celebration and see that it is not something completely new. Nonetheless, what is really interesting is that in the last decades, the Festival of Pitrau has acquired a new significance that was previously unheard of. It has undergone evolution and transformation, particularly in the context of the major revival of the celebration in the village of Zyuri.

Pitrau in Zyuri has become more secular, and its religious meaning has become less evident. This fact produced an interesting phenomenon: the large number of Kryashens who participated in this festival could not describe the Christian meaning behind it. Additionally, this festival is unifying power among Kryashens; today, this festival is perceived more as an ethnic celebration than a religious one. This transformation has made the festival more inclusive for people with different religious views. This is important to emphasize because, in popular media, Kryashens are often described as “Baptized Tatars,” which is inappropriate for many reasons. In contemporary Kryashen society, Kryashens may be Orthodox Christians, but there are also Kryashen people with no religious identity who consider themselves secular or non-religious. There are also Kryashens who are involved in different Christian denominations or even in different religions. Despite such diversity, Kryashens have a clear sense of belonging to their community and consider themselves part of the same ethnicity.

That may be why the Pitrau Festival has become more secular in the last few decades—it simply reflects the secularization of society, and the secularization of the festival has only increased its popularity. While the religious undertones of the festival have faded, its ethnocultural meaning has intensified, and the festival

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is more popular today than ever before. However, this does not mean that its religious meaning has lost all importance, a fact that is especially important for Kryashens in rural areas where local traditions, including folk religious components, still exist. Regardless, for secular Kryashens, especially those living in urban areas, ethnocultural meaning seems more crucial today.

The Festival of Pitrau is primarily associated with the village of Zyuri, but there are other places where it is celebrated today. Many other villages hold this festival regularly. However, Zyuri brings together the most people, drawing famous singers, actors, and government officials, which emphasizes the special significance of this place. The Pitrau Festival in Zyuri is a spectacular event that features various contests, competitions, songs, and dances. There are horse races, running races, rides, traditional Kurash wrestling competitions, and an unforgettable female beauty pageant contest, “Keräšen Çihārā”—“Kryashen Beauty.”

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Festival of Pitrau plays an important cultural role among Kryashens, and its significance has increased in recent decades. The study of festive cultures worldwide has shown that such events can help in identity affirmation, especially for ethnic minorities (Frost, 2016). The Kryashen Festival of Pitrau is a primary example of this. The revival of the Festival of Pitrau occurred in the context of the Kryashens’ aspirations to preserve and bring back their traditions and to be officially recognized as a separate ethnic group from the Kazan Tatars. The festival, traditionally well-known and honored among Kryashens, provided a starting point for the public revival of Kryashen traditions, and the festival has become a space where their ethnic identity can be publicly confirmed. Thus, the revival of the Festival of Pitrau in the village of Zyuri is connected to a certain shifting of the festival’s previous meaning.

The historical evolution of the festival occurred through different stages. The traditional popular celebration is reminiscent of the Turkic communal celebration called Cıyın, which was an agricultural communal celebration. The Christian Feast of Saints Peter and Paul falls into the same seasonal period in which Cıyın was previously celebrated, so previous folk traditions have been adopted and integrated into the new Christian context. In the Soviet period, the traditions of Pitrau were almost completely eliminated because public religious activity was forbidden. Soviet officials also held the view that in the new Soviet reality, the differences between Kryashens and Tatars should not be significant. In their view, the Muslim Kazan Tatars and the Christian Kryashens should merge because the religious causes of their cultural differences should no longer exist. Nevertheless, the Kryashens saved their ethnic identity, and as religious freedom grew, they started to revive their religious traditions.

Different villages began to arrange local celebrations for the Festival of Pitrau. The most well-known regular public celebration of Pitrau was revived in 1999 in the village of Zyuri. Since then, Zyuri has become the epicenter of the Festival of Pitrau, bringing together many people from different parts of Tatarstan and beyond.

For religious Kryashens, Pitrau retains religious significance, and they continue to preserve popular religious traditions as an important part of their cultural identity. In recent decades, however, the festival has gained new meaning and importance for non-believers. Every Festival of Pitrau provides an opportunity for Kryashens to express their culture publicly and stresses attention to their identity and uniqueness on a wide level.

This new meaning of the festival is important for both religious and non-religious people. The Festival of Pitrau unites them together not because of their religion but because they are part of the same ethnic group. The name of the festival still bears a religious meaning, but for many Kryashens, this fact is no longer important.

The rethinking of the festival produced a new level of popularity; thus, the decrease in the religious aspects of the festival and its secularization did not reduce its popularity but rather increased it. This fact tells us that for contemporary Kryashen society, their ethnic identity is still important, but at the same time, their ethnic identity does not depend on religion. For the majority of Kryashen people, the Festival of Pitrau in the 21st century is not so much a religious celebration but an opportunity to declare Kryashens as a people with their own culture, reinforce Kryashen identity, and make Kryashen culture known to everyone.

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