A Prophet Without Honor:
The Buffering Role of a Practitioner in Applied Anthropology

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". . . a prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house."
Matt. 13:57

Abstract:

A seminal characteristic of anthropologists is our ability to "flesh out" the cultures we study. Even so, little examination has been given to how our roles of mediator, broker, or advocate are performed, or the consequences of those roles in different contexts. Anthropologists must often assume unflattering or buffering stances to protect ourselves, our data, and our informants from exploitation. Refusing to accept, or even examine this essential reality borders on negligence. We must be willing to be prophets without honor in our own house, in our own country, if we will avoid becoming prophets without honor anywhere else.

Introduction

Applied anthropologists perceive themselves, and are perceived, as filling a repertoire of roles which have a variety of functions. Mediator, advocate, and culture broker are but three of these roles, but ones that are encountered frequently in assessing the attributes of anthropologists as applied behavioral scientists. Each of these roles and their accompanying functions are by definition distinct, but it is difficult to differentiate among them in practice. Terms, such as "interventionist" or "practitioner" also appear in the literature (Mead 1978; Kimball 1978), but were not common until recently. Those terms suggest more directly the activist role that applied anthropologists assume in the field.

Undoubtedly, other roles and labels come to mind in describing what applied anthropologists do beyond their research functions. One role in particular that applied anthropologists assume (or is ascribed to them) which is often subsumed in other terms yet is rarely acknowledged is the role of *buffer:* a role indispensable to any anthropologist acting as a consultant. The term is a useful one to highlight some of the situational dilemmas in which practitioners of anthropology find themselves.

Neither the buffering role nor the dilemmas that ensue from playing such a role are new. Books on casework and applied anthropology, particularly those addressing the ethical issues of anthropology (Weaver 1973; Rynkiewich and Spradley 1976; Eddy and Partridge 1979; Chambers 1985) frequently allude to the buffering role, but rarely discuss it explicitly. Moreover,

it is often late in the formal training of anthropologists -- perhaps in their first field experience -- before they become aware of the multiple roles which can be assigned to them should they decide to "apply" anthropology. Equally lacking then, is the realization of the responsibilities and problems that arise from such multiple role-playing.

The fact that there exists a considerable bulk of material on the subject of multiple roles along with a set of guidelines on the professional responsibilities of anthropologists (American Anthropological Association 1971) does not ensure that any practitioner of anthropology will be familiar with the types of problems they may encounter prior to their first entrance in the field. Some anthropologists, in writing about training for applied anthropologists (Eddy and Partridge 1979, 415-424), have called for a greater awareness of such issues prior to fieldwork. Nevertheless, there appears to be a gap in many anthropological departments when it comes to addressing this particular dimension of fieldwork. The premise of this article is that one reason for such a gap is a lack of explicit examples. In an effort to help remedy the shortage, two instances of the buffering role, based upon my fieldwork in Indonesia, are herein presented.

Buffer is used in this paper in its most literal sense: a person who shields another, as well as being one of a series of devices used to reduce shock due to contact. In this sense, the buffering role of anthropology, and of the applied anthropologist within it, is both active and passive. In other words, the conceptual role encompasses not only what the anthropologist *does* in response to an immediate

situation, but also what the anthropologist *does not, and should not, do* at any time. It would be a mistake, for example, to assume that the role of a buffer is dispensed with even after a job is completed.

Interestingly, this latter point has been underscored by current events. At the time this article was revised, Indonesia was in political upheaval. The engineering firm that hired me still does business in Indonesia. The research institute with which I worked is still under pressure for its activist views. If this paper makes only one point, it should be that a primary function of a *buffer* is to shield people and agencies from the "shock of contact" -- however unlikely the risk of harm may seem. Subsequently, although the fieldwork upon which the instances are based took place years ago, the names of the engineering firm for which I consulted, as well as the research institute which assisted me, are not given.

Background

The project which introduced me to the complexities of the buffering role consisted of several large-scale water development programs. Among these schemes was the need to assess the feasibility of building a number of small dams for irrigation projects, as well as raising the level of a man-made lake through means of a levee. In accordance with the United Nations and the United States Agency for International Development [USAID] guidelines for large-scale development projects, a number of studies had already been done to assess the impact of the proposed projects. Nonetheless, the population living around the lake was deemed "sensitive" in an unspecified manner by the government.

Subsequently, the engineering firm in charge of the project, at the prompting of the funding agency, was asked to supply a sociologist-environmentalist to determine the special problems of the lake population. Of particular interest to the government was the populations' reception to the idea of relocation. Because neither the social - environmental study for two new dam sites nor the lake population had been budgeted for in the original contract, both time and funds available for the studies were minimal.

Bluntly put, the sudden need for the studies meant that the firm was willing to settle for anyone who was available on short notice; someone such as myself, an inexperienced anthropologist who was not familiar with the country. My shortcomings were to be compensated for by engaging local social scientists to assist with the study. Within days after my arrival on the scene, it became obvious to me that what I had anticipated as a simple consulting role had expanded fourfold. On the one hand, I was to be mediator and culture broker to the engineering firm and the government. On the other hand, I was expected to act as a hybrid buffer-colleague for the local social scientists as well as an advocate for the collective populations around the lake and dam sites.

A restricted time frame became pivotal to all of the problems surrounding the studies. One month had been allocated for the lake study, with an additional month to be added for the assessment of two additional dam sites, provided approval and funds were forthcoming. In reality, the one month frame meant only two weeks for the fieldwork in the lake area. All the normal components of fieldwork – cooperation, rapport, data gathering, the language barrier, etc. – had to be managed within this restricted framework.

These same elements were mirrored in my relationship with the local research institute staff. As professionals who had done work in the lake area before, they were aghast at the time frame I presented them; neither were they as sanguine about my qualifications as the engineering firm had been. My first meeting with the staff was peppered with questions concerning my professional credentials and where my sympathies might lie. Would they be with our informants, with the engineers, or with the government? Their cooperation was only secured by my argument that we [the staff and I], as applied behavioral scientists, were the only mediators and advocates the people in the target areas might have concerning the projects. I sought to buttress my arguments by pointing out that since I was nominally in charge of the studies, the sole responsibility for any reports would be mine. Should the need arise, I said, I would be able to serve as a buffer between the institute and the informants on the one side, and the government and engineering firm on the other. At the time, my offer was entirely intuitive, based on a limited awareness of the roles I knew anthropologists had traditionally assumed. I had no idea that my words would prove to be prophetic on more than one level.

My concept of a buffering role was vague at best. If anything, I perceived it only in the context of assuming the "blame" for any reports or data that might fail to meet the more detailed, theoretical requirements of "pure" research. In retrospect, even if

the circumstances had been different; even if I had had more experience, I would still have made the offer, but I would have done so with a far greater appreciation of the limitations and risks involved.

Instance # 1

I was told by the local research staff that project personnel, locals themselves, had failed earlier in the project to follow local protocol, which was to ask local leaders for "permission to enter." That is to say, personnel were supposed to ask permission of village officials to conduct work in the area. According to the research staff, the local officials were still upset at the time of our study, as such behavior had violated their status in their communities and prevented them from passing on information to confused and curious villagers.

I was asked to pass this breach of protocol on to the proper authorities so that it would not happen again. I did so without consideration of any further involvement in the matter. I wrote a memo to the engineering firm's Project Manager with a carbon copy to his government counterpart. If I thought at all about my involvement in the matter, it was only to the extent that since local norms did not permit direct confrontation or criticism of another, I could act as an intermediary in the matter.

Some time later, having left the country and returned to the United States, I was called into the office of the engineering firm. It had received a letter from the Indonesian government who wanted to know exactly who, when, where, and in what ways these violations had occurred. The government had requested the same information from the research institute. The institute had replied by saying that I had "misunderstood" them; that the instances of which I had written had happened years ago. The institute claimed no knowledge of who – at that point in time – might have been responsible. I was then told by the engineering firm that the memo had created quite a furor. The firm also told me not to feel badly about the refutation. Such misunderstandings happened all the time. In the meantime, what did I suggest it tell the government?

I found myself in a quandary. The firm and I both knew that I had not "misunderstood," but we also knew that after my departure, the academic community in the country had come under considerable pressure from the government to assume a less politically active role. Any future success of the project would be affected by whether or not protocol was followed in the project areas. Conversely, if the indigenous project staff, who were all government employees, were to be reprimanded, the local research institute might be inadvertently affected.

As a student, I had studied values and norms of cultures that were different from my own. I had learned to take a relativistic approach towards various issues. In truth, I had never confronted the issue of what actions to take when a different set of norms or politics came into direct conflict with my own value system. If the engineering firm, and indirectly the Indonesian government, were my clients, and the local research staff and their sources were my informants, then I felt I had some measure of responsibility to both. Given my Protestant ethic upbringing, the fact that I had worked for, and taken money from, both the government and the firm was as strict an injunction on my behavior as was the prime directive of anthropology: to protect one's informants.

In writing the report in Indonesia, I faced somewhat similar circumstances. The dilemma which faced me about the letter, now that I was back in the United States and not directly involved in the project, seemed problematical and remote. Yet I knew it to be real. I did what I could; I evoked a double standard of communication. I *verbally* told the engineering firm that the transgressions had occurred as I had related them, but that I too had no knowledge of specific names, places, or dates. The firm could then write the government that I had misunderstood. That affirmation notwithstanding, the firm still needed to emphasize to their staff abroad that while the reported instances might have occurred in the past, every care should be exercised to see that they were not repeated in the future.

Instance # 2

As previously stated, the lake study was only allotted one month. Its object was to assess the reaction of approximately 53,000 people, living in 12 villages around the lake, to having the lake level raised. The purpose of raising the level was to supply more water for hydro-electric power and to furnish water for the nearby provincial capital. Since its creation by the Dutch nearly 75 years earlier, the lake provided water and food for the local population, as well as a source of hydroelectric power.

The level of the lake had been raised twice in the past, in the 1930s and the mid-1960s. The raising of the level in the 1960s coincided with a time of major "civil unrest," which was particularly violent in the vicinity of the lake. At that time, the army came in, raised the level of the lake, and took over its management and power plant. Occupation by the army, civil unrest, and the increase in water level all had measurable consequences on the local rice farmers. The villages lost prime rice land to the lake waters. The army also tithed a portion of rice from the farmers to help defray the problem of feeding the occupation forces along with a number of prisoners who were jailed in the immediate vicinity. These details were uncovered during the course of the study.

The engineering firm knew little of the lake's history when they hired me. The expatriate staff only saw the lake as a perfect reservoir site for municipal, irrigation, and hydroelectric water. Moreover, the government had only told the engineering firm that because the lake area was a "sensitive and vocal" place, some sort of feedback was necessary concerning the project prior to any further undertakings in the area. In other words, while the engineering staff knew that there was some "problem" with the lake population, no one knew precisely what it might be. It was at this juncture, after the initial meeting with the research institute but prior to any fieldwork, that some of the implications of a buffering role began to emerge. I wrote in my field notes at the time:

Values surrounding [interfacing with] thousands of people's lives is a lifetime nightmare come true. Not to do the job [would be] as bad as to do the job poorly. . . . At a [project] staff meeting today, trying to get a better feel for what was wanted, I was told 'We want you to identify the problem and how to solve it. We want ideas.' And a little bit later on I heard, 'Yes . . . we could do it [the job properly] but we don't have the time.' . . . It is more than time however. It is [a question of] inclination or focus. I suddenly realize that in many ways . . . my position here as a sociologist-environmentalist-anthropologist is a defensive one. Merely by seeing . . . the WHOLES of people and their lives – *I become a stranger in a strange land, yet remain a prophet without honor.* I defend myself, my interests, concerns and focuses to and for people who are already on the defensive – because they are in a position of power and don't have time to 'see', or because they are in a position of 'seeing' only too well, and I am an outlet for their anger. It is an

awkward position, but it seems to me now, a crucial one.

Anthropology is a calling and not all will survive the training. [Anthropologists] sometimes have other jobs, certainly a variety of roles, but one primary function. Our value stems from our ability to connect people with realities; to give faces to issues. Mystic, entrepreneur, politician – call us what you will. We stand apart in many ways from the societies in which we operate, yet become very much a part of them. Like shamans, we call out and are either asked or volunteer to intercede. I wonder what happens to shamans when the gods refuse to hear them. . . . (Emphasis added)

Fortunately in this instance, the gods were kind. The first week of fieldwork unearthed the superficial reasons why the lake population was considered sensitive and what the problem with the proposed project might be. The villagers claimed that when the army had raised the lake in the 1960s, they had never been compensated for the fertile rice land that they had lost, nor had they ever been compensated for the *ongoing* flooding of their villages and adjacent rice fields. The government however, claimed that; a) some compensation had been paid at the time and; b) it was impossible that these villages had been subject to flooding for the past 15 years or so, since the land the villagers claimed was currently being flooded was the very land that was proposed to be flooded. The villagers had persisted in their claims nonetheless, going so far at one point as to bring the matter before the national assembly. Nothing had been resolved. At the time of my study, they were refusing to negotiate further with the government concerning the proposed project until the issue of compensation was settled.

Although the engineering staff could not attest as to whether or not any compensation had ever been paid, they too said that the land the villagers claimed was being flooded, was land that was proposed to be flooded by raising the existing levee. In other words, the farmers *must be* mistaken about the area in question. Armed with project maps, a rural sociologist and I went out to the lake. Wading through water on land the maps indicated was dry, the two of us concluded that the villagers, in fact, were right. When I informed the expatriate engineers that the disputed land was under water, they did a "reality" check. They found that the maps they (along with the army in the 1960s) had been using were based upon maps made by the Dutch 75 years earlier. Unfortunately, the original

maps contained not a few serious topographical inaccuracies.

In trying to further determine whether or not any compensation had been paid by either the army or the government at the time of the raising of the levee in the 1960s, another major problem concerning the lake population was uncovered. Simply put, *on paper* the army had returned the management of the lake to a civilian administration when the country's internal situation had stabilized. *In practice*, the army had retained effectual control over the lake and was continuing to extract a portion of the rice harvest from the farmers. Knowledge of the situation was confined to the area around the lake. Although rumors of army control were known to the local research institute, they had never investigated them until I was hired. [It should be noted that the army has always been an influential force in Indonesia. To conduct investigations into its affairs is, and was, risky at best.]

At the end of two weeks, I and my team had come to an uneasy conclusion. Even if the villagers were to be paid compensation for their previously flooded land, they would not accede to the proposed project unless they could get the army out of their rice bins as well.

A digression must be made here. The water resource project was my first job -- ever -- as an anthropologist. I had never heard of the guidelines of professional responsibility issued by the American Anthropological Association in 1971. Today, having read them many times, I state without reservation that they are no substitute for an informed awareness of the potential risks and issues contained in the various roles assumed by "applied" anthropologists.

In my opinion, consultant roles have laid bare ethical and professional aspects of applied anthropology which have yet to be fully embraced by anthropologists. This is particularly true in the areas of confidentiality and the ways in which study results can, and are, used. Even prior to uncovering the military scandal at the lake, it became apparent that the development projects had many more ramifications, both socially and environmentally, than anyone at the project -- expatriates and local personnel alike -- had ever anticipated. As these began to surface, the research staff and I seriously questioned whether or not our "research" had been requested to "purely" assess the potential impact of the projects, or whether it had been commissioned to gather information to stabilize a variety of sensitive political issues in the

area. The situation regarding the army was, in some ways, simply one more delicate issue to be dealt with.

Socioeconomic assessment studies deal with controversial information almost by definition. It is axiomatic that such data must be handled judiciously. There is always the risk in consultant work that the data will be contrary to official policy, or in conflict with the technical desires and perceptions of private enterprise or a funding agency. Governments may object to foreigners being privy to internally sensitive matters. Few people or organizations who have a vested interest in a project are likely to receive favorably any information that is contrary to their jobs, or to be receptive to information which reflects unfavorably upon major institutions associated with the project. Nevertheless, a consultant role entails a responsibility to the employer, to the government, or agencies, who hired the consultant: a responsibility as a scientist to present facts as they are and, if one is an applied anthropologist, an ethical responsibility to protect the informants, whoever they may be.

Although the data collected by me and the local research institute were reliable, they were so controversial that their unedited publication could have been construed as threatening to local and national power structures. Therefore, it was simply not possible to "publish" the data. My informants were no longer solely the populations living around the lake, but now included my colleagues at the research institute. More than their continued access to the field was at stake, yet the thought of not reporting the findings never surfaced. The question of publication became one of *how, not if.*

I had naively offered myself as a buffer for the local research institute to protect their academic reputation if need be, or to protect the confidentiality of mutual informants. That the research institute might fall into the category of "informant" had never occurred to me. I did not see how I could protect them. It was public knowledge that the institute had been subcontracted to assist with the study. The fact that the ultimate responsibility for the final report would be mine seemed to offer a way out of my predicament. If I could not protect them, I could shield them.

From the outset there was a tacit understanding with the institute staff that should denials of data be required to ensure confidentiality or protect reputations, the refutations would be based upon my "misunderstanding" of the data. I planned to tell the

expatriate project manager *verbally* what "I" had uncovered before I wrote up my recommendations and conclusions. Furthermore, I hoped that I could implement my role as buffer through the submission of a preliminary draft of the report to the institute so that in the event of any major distortions of our findings, they would know what had actually been written and could protect themselves.

Still, an effective buffering role could not be carried out unless the institute staff was willing to point out possibly controversial wording or data in the report. Neither I nor the institute could afford to alienate the audiences for whom the final report was intended. If the reading audience felt threatened in any way by phrasing or the presentation of data, then they would not be receptive to other alternatives. Conversely, neither of us could foresee if our findings would be used at all; and if so, how they would be used. The report had to be structured in such a way as to afford maximum protection to all informants and populations in the areas studied without compromising the data.

The expiration date of my contract meant that I would not be present to handle any questions that might arise. The planned submittal of a draft prior to departure was designed to enable the institute to make any corrections or offer clarifications in any manner they chose. By discussing the delicate nature of the material with all concerned first, and then by giving the institute a draft prior to editing by the expatriate project manager, I hoped that the chances of the information in the report being misconstrued, misused, or deleted would be minimized.

The purpose of such a strategy was threefold: to commit nothing to paper until after the issues had been disclosed to the project manager and the director of the research institute; to involve all concerned parties in the writing of the report; and to submit only a "draft," thereby maximizing dissemination of information before the inevitable editing by various other sources.

Unfortunately, this strategy could not be carried out as conceived. In the first place, local cultural norms inhibited direct confrontation and criticism by the research staff, making them extremely hesitant in pointing out English phraseology that was misleading or threatening concerning local situations, people, or administrative groups. The research staff also perceived my role as a consultant as possessing a great deal more latitude than they had in expressing unpleasant facts or contrary opinions; I was a prophet

with honor to them. Politically active themselves, they saw no reason why I could not be the same.

Secondly, the engineering firm saw itself in an awkward situation when faced with environmentally and politically sensitive data. They, too, perceived themselves in a dilemma: foreign advisors and consultants with responsibilities to their clients, but with stockholders in America who saw part of their job as making a profit -- a goal that could only be reached if the job was carried out. Between an unwitting collusion in the issue of the topographic maps and a potential scandal involving the army, it was conceivable that the project could be seriously curtailed, if not canceled.

Lastly, the insidious time constraint and difficulties encountered in translation resulted in the draft being simultaneously submitted to both the engineering firm and the research institute.

The effectiveness of my role as buffer was never clear, nor is it now. The project's final report, which consisted of all studies done in the various project areas, was not submitted to the government and funding agency until some months after my return to the United States. Immediately after I left, the government began a crackdown against political involvement by academic and research institutions in general. The project manager said he was satisfied with the way the facts about the army, compensation, and other findings regarding relocation had been presented, but the section of the report dealing with social and cultural aspects had been severely reworked and edited by the time I saw it. Where the issues had been treated as a body in the draft, the findings were splintered throughout the final report.

In other words, the section had been structured in such a way that only by reading between the lines and piecing together information from different sections would someone have been able to realize what the existing situation was at the lake. There were no allusions to the fact that part of the difficulty the lake program faced had to do with the military. A single statement in the executive summary at the front of the complete final report read that the project could not be successfully implemented unless the issue of "contested property damage" arising out of the 1960s raising of the lake was resolved. Still, by the time I saw the final report, it had been tentatively decided that the raising of the levee was not going to happen.[2]

Summary Discussion

One of the seminal characteristics of anthropology has always been "thick descriptions:" the ability to add breadth and depth, flesh and bones, to people studied. Even so, anthropologists have woefully neglected to apply this same characteristic to the roles in which they cast themselves. Anthropologists study megalopolises and small villages, using life histories of individuals to substantiate their findings. Context and theoretical scale are critical in all of those analyzes. Yet, these same criteria are overlooked regarding the use of such labels as mediator, broker, or advocate. Little examination has been given to either the level at which these roles are performed, or the potential consequences of those roles in different contexts.

This lack of examination carries with it its own consequences. The effect of those roles as well as the roles themselves can, and do, affect the lives of people in the field, however the field may be defined. The point is this: Whether or not anthropologists engage in an applied role with the conscious recognition that their data may be used to shape policy decisions, the very nature of applied work *always* has that potential.

Neglect of the dimensions of various roles, inside or out of the academic setting, borders not on naivete, but on negligence. It is not just a question of being manipulated or duped by others. The "Thai controversy" of the late 1960s (American Anthropological Association Newsletter 1970), which resulted in the American Anthropological Association's formulation of Guidelines, is an example *par excellent* of the potentials of misuse of anthropological data and the abuse of informants *by anthropologists themselves.*

The multifaceted roles of mediator, advocate, and buffer are too weighty in their various functions to be discovered in the field; too important to be relegated to professional journals or newsletters. The decreasing availability of jobs in academia and a growing awareness of the types of services that anthropologists can provide to businesses, non-profit organizations, and governments demands that anthropologists assume a greater responsibility for the critical, ethical, political, and moral repercussions of the roles they assume -- or are thrust upon them by the nature of their work.

The opinions expressed herein are not a call for the need for certification of applied anthropologists [See

Commentary: Accreditation in Applied Anthropology in *Practicing Anthropology* 1991]. They are a call for standardization of a minimum level of awareness of what can and does take place in the field and of the anthropologist's obligation to respond in an appropriate and ethical manner. It is just as easy to claim that one is a "practitioner" of anthropology as it is to claim that one is a "therapist." No license is required in either case, yet few would argue that both contain the potential of affecting people's lives for better or worse -- it is only a question of scale.

Kimball (1978) makes a chilling observation when he points out that intellectual competency and field competency are not necessarily the same thing. It is patently ludicrous to assume that they are. If the distinction made by Baba (1994) between "practitioners" of anthropology and "applied" anthropologists[3] is a valid one, it is all the more critical that those who prepare practitioners for the field abandon the elitist, outdated point of view that the separation of the application of anthropological knowledge into such categories as "academic," "applied," and "practice" is anything other than arbitrary, and hence artificial.

The same could be said regarding the types of research anthropologists (in whatever discipline) engage in. It may be self-serving to suggest that the types of research anthropologists undertake -- pure, applied, or practice -- *perforce* are subject to or exempt from misuse, abuse, or ethical conduct by the sole virtue of their context.

Intellectualizing a role does not equal fulfilling it. It is not enough for us to romanticize ourselves as "marginal natives," or as "strangers in a strange land." It is all too easy to present oneself as a practitioner or a consultant without uniform standards to which one is held accountable. Other professional associations (as diverse as literary agents and engineers) have codes of conduct by which their members, by virtue of their subscription, attest to their willingness to be bound or face expulsion and loss of professional good standing. Can anthropologists do no less?

Anthropologists must be willing to assume unflattering or buffering stances to protect ourselves, our data, and our informants from exploitation. To accomplish this, we must be honest -- with ourselves and with those who seek our guidance. If we cannot, if we do not examine the truths, the realities, of our "calling," we are in trouble. Thirty-one years ago

Gerald Berreman (1968) wrote about the "social responsibility in social anthropology." For Berreman, the responsibility was not confined to anthropology as a science; it extended into what we teach, train, and advise others. It is a sad commentary on our profession and our science, to note that Berreman's words ring as true today as they did then. We must be willing to be prophets without honor in our own house, in our own country, if we are not to become prophets without honor . . . anywhere.

Notes

1. Susan Scott-Stevens holds a doctorate in cultural anthropology. An independent researcher, she currently resides in Boulder, Colorado.

2. Later I was told that a senior engineer from the funding agency had decided to ignore the warning in the report and had ruled to build the project anyway. Two or three years later, when I returned to the project area on another matter, I was told by an Indonesian engineer that when engineers came out to start raising the levee, there was an insurrection.

3. The latter is based in academe, whereas the former is largely without ties to academe.

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