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Hasan Gönder

The versatile public service initiatives in Turkey's rural areas: The case of Village Institutes

Abstract

States are obliged to provide public services to their citizens equally. However, in most cases, countries have prioritized cities over rural areas in the provision of public services. For instance, in Turkey, following the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, until 1935, the government had offered public services only to the cities. Due to their limited budget and economic difficulties, they had been unable to extend their public services to rural areas. With the 1940 initiative called Village Institutes (VIs), the state launched a project aiming to provide all public services—education, health, agriculture, and social and cultural services—under the umbrella of VIs. With this paper, I aim to examine the extent to which this initiative has been successful in rural areas.

Keywords: Village Institutes, Turkey, rural areas, public service, education, health, agriculture.

Introduction

The Republic of Turkey was proclaimed in 1923, coinciding with the regime's modernization of the country. Since then, construction for the modern society began after the abandonment of the old patrimonial order. Atatürk was able to modernize the state through reforms in the institutions; however, modernizing people created the hardest challenge. In order to create a new society, the villages needed to be modernized, as 80% of the population lives there – this meant that the old must be destroyed (Avcı, 2018: 91). However, due to claimed economic hardships, the regime only provided public services for cities. Rural areas were abandoned until the regime changed its focus in 1935.

Three important developments between 1929 and 1930—the World Economic Crisis (1929), the meeting of the Free Republican Party in İzmir (1930) and the Menemen Incident (1930)—horrified Turkey's intellectuals and state officials, causing them to realize that if they wanted to preserve the reforms and the republic, they would have to modernize the rural areas to help rural people adapt to the reforms and make them the defenders of the republic. As the first step, a research commission was established to research rural conditions and identify rural people's expectations.

In the first experiment which was started in 1936, village educators were trained to be sent to villages of less than 400 people. After obtaining positive results, the Village Educators Project officially began in 1937. This project paved the way for the Village Institutes (VIs), which were established in 1940. The VIs were expected to provide all public services and adapt reforms for the villages. In this paper, I examine how successful this regime was in rural areas.

Methodology

The primary sources for this research are the archival documents of İsmail Hakkı Tonguç¹⁷⁴, the designer of the VIs and the general director of primary education between 1937 and 1946. These documents provide invaluable information about the VIs, their development, and the curriculum they implemented. Secondary sources include the biographies and memoirs of students, teachers, and directors of the VIs to examine how these institutes were able to provide all public services. Through the close examination of all relevant documents, biographies, and memoirs, the important points of texts were extracted and interpreted using discourse analysis (Wamboldt, 1992).

Public Services

Public services are those services intended to serve all members of a community. In the modern era, it is generally accepted that these essential services should be provided to all, regardless of income and social status (Staats, 1988: 601–602). McGregor considers public services as institutions, especially in the developed world (McGregor, 1982: 305). All communities, towns, cities, states, nations, and even international communities must rely on some form of public service (McGregor, 1982: 304).

Considering these definitions, the question arises: What if society cannot benefit from public services equally? In other words, what happens when one part of a society enjoys the public services provided by the state, but another part does not?

In Turkey, cities and towns received public services from the time of the foundation of the republic; however, rural areas, where 80% of the country's population resided, did not receive most public services until 1940.

As a result of my study, it is observed that rural places were socially, economically, and culturally backward; therefore, they could not develop or be modernized. This

¹⁷⁴ The founder of initiative of the Village Institutes, İsmail Hakkı Tonguç, who also worked as the General Director of the First Education during 1935-1946, had documents of great value related to this issue in his personal archive, which were revealed a few years ago when they went public. Tonguç made several references to important documents in the Ministry of Education (National Education), which have been vanished due to a fire incident, increasing the significance of these documents analyzed within this study further.

observation leads to the following question: Is there any relationship between modernization and public services? In other words, should public services be provided to facilitate modernization? Although these two terms are independent of each other, I argue that there is a positive relationship between them. That modernization appeared in the rural areas immediately after the public services offered through the VIs supports this claim.

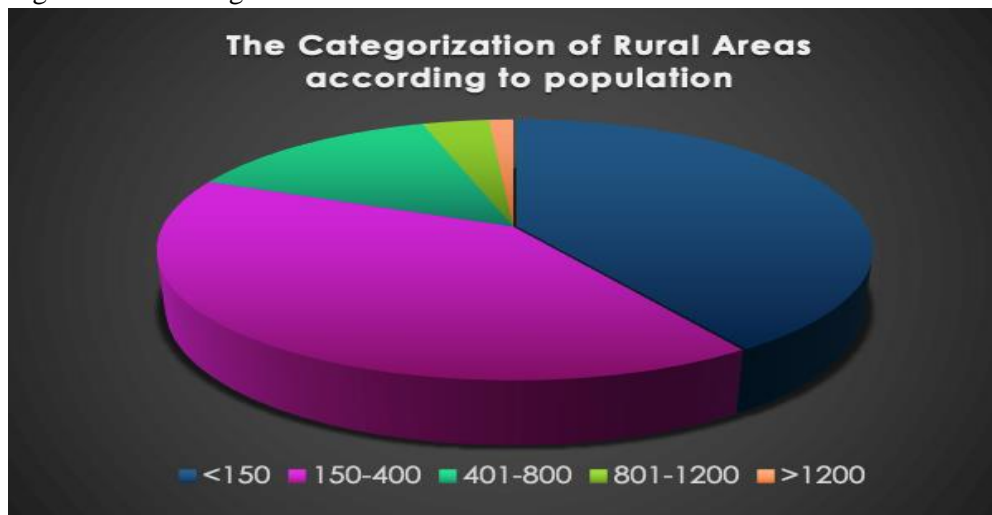
The situation in Turkey between 1923 and 1937

By 1937, the regime had been able to modernize the cities and their people by offering public services and implementing reforms. Conversely, implementation and adaptation of the reforms in rural areas had not been successful; indeed, economic hardships had meant the regime had failed to offer any public services in rural areas (Kirby, 2018: 117–127).

In 1935, the population of Turkey was 16 million, 80% of which resided in rural areas. Thus, by only providing public services to the cities, the regime was only reaching 20% of the population. Of the 40,000 villages in rural areas, 31,000 had no school and 35,000 had no teachers. Thus, only 5000 villages had a school with a teacher. An additional 4000 villages had a school, but the regime had been unable to raise the teachers to staff them. Moreover, teachers from cities refused to work in rural areas due to the conditions (Tonguç, ca.1936).

Rural areas also did not receive health care services, and most villages lacked roads for transportation, electricity, and access to clean water. Villagers had to cart water from mountain streams or rivers (Tonguç, 2020: 517–529).

Figure 1: The Categorization of Rural Areas



Source: (Tonguç, ca.1936).

As shown in Figure 1, the problem arose due to the structure of the villages; almost 32,000 of Turkey's villages had a population of less than 400 people.

Table 1: Turkey's Community Typology in 1940

	<i>Köylü</i> (villager)	<i>Şehirli</i> (townsman)
Basis of solidarity	Resemblance	Differentness
Nature of society	Pre-modern	Modern
Size	Small (less than 400 people) and undifferentiated society	Large and differentiated society
Law	Practiced both customary and civil law ^a	Civil Law
Division of labour	Simple	Complex
Faith	Religious/traditional	Secular
Conscience	More collective	Less collective
Norms	More consensual	Less consensual
Arrangement	Dependent ^b	Interrelated, mutually interdependent
Interdependence	High	High
Social bonds and integration	Normal	Strong

^a In Article 69 of the 1924 constitution of Turkey declares that all Turks are equal before the law and are obliged to respect the law. All privileges of whatever description claimed by groups, classes, families, and individuals are abolished and forbidden (Earle, 1925: 96). However, most of the villagers could not have practiced this law. The main reason was related to the low literacy rate and the lack of government institutions such as school, hospital, police station, etc. in rural areas.

^b Turkish villagers were not independent and autonomous. They were dependent on the landlords or religious leaders. With the Village Institute, the state and professionals wanted to make them dependent on the state and society. Sources: Adapted from Kaya, 2012: 113–121; Tonguç, 2020: 13–20, 22–25, 32–37, 63–67, 414–418, 451–456; Kirby, 2018: 53–54, 77–78, 98–100, 156–160; Tonguç, 1970: 55–56, 164–167, 202–205.

Three events occurred over the period 1929–1930 that forced a radical shift in the regime's focus, policies and reforms. The first of these was the World Economic Crisis of 1929, which had serious implications for Turkey's agricultural production, on which

the Turkish economy relied (Karaömerlioğlu, 1998: 57–58) and had brought the problems in agriculture into the spotlight. As Kuruç observes, during the 1930s, it became apparent that industrialization required increasing purchasing power not only in the cities but also in the villages (Kuruç, 1987: 170).

The second event came in 1930 when, with the support of the regime and its founder, Atatürk, the Free Republican Party (*Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası*) was established by Atatürk's closest friend, Fethi Okyar. This new opposition party¹⁷⁵ attracted unexpected mass support, primarily from reactionaries. In the same year, the Menemen Incident¹⁷⁶ further fanned the regime's fears over the success of their reforms. As these two experiences demonstrated, the reforms had not taken root among the people (Aytemur, 2007: 69).

The first step

In 1935, Atatürk set up a commission to analyze the conditions of rural areas and develop projects. J. Dewey's report¹⁷⁷, which was given in 1924, had been effective in encouraging such steps. J. Dewey wrote in the report that Atatürk should establish schools that were not like those in the West. He claimed that these schools should be formed according to Turkish characteristics, carrying their own reality. Thereupon, Atatürk sent educators to the villages to examine the village realities and to prepare a report. Those who visited the villages with Western and scientific concerns (Tonguç was among them) returned with three observations.

¹⁷⁵ Atatürk intended to make a transformation towards multi-party democracy in Turkey, for which he made several attempts. The initiative that took place in 1930 is his second attempt. In the first attempt carried out with the Progressive Republican Party in 1924, this party was closed with the gathering of opponents of the revolution and the republic within the Progressive Republican Party and then supporting the rebellion that took place in the country in 1925. For this reason, Atatürk had the party established by his trusted friends for the second attempt. He wanted to make a smooth transition to multi-party democracy.

¹⁷⁶ The Menemen Incident is the incident where, on December 23, 1930, in the Menemen district of Izmir, Teacher Mustafa Fehmi Kubilay, who was doing his military service as a reserve officer, and Hasan and Şevki, the guards who came to his aid, were killed by a group seeking shariah. It is regarded as one of the important events in the history of the Republic in terms of indicating the struggle between Shariah and secularism.

¹⁷⁷ John Dewey is a famous philosopher and educational theorist, the founder of the philosophy movement, also known as empiricism, functionality and instrumentalism, who developed pragmatism as a logical and moral theory of analysis, which attaches importance to learning by practising-living and experience. He came to the country in the first years of the Republic of Turkey (between 19 July - 10 September 1924) upon the invitation of the Minister of National Education Vasıf Çınar and after making various observations and examinations, he prepared a report for the improvement of the education system in the country and submitted it to the ministry.

1. Those who graduated from Western-style schools in Turkey and went to villages to work either could not get used to the conditions of life in the villages and went back to the cities or stayed and instead of enlightening people in the villages accepted roles as landlords or religious leaders.

2. The villagers, who had learned how to read and write in the village school, had forgotten how to do those things within 4-5 years of leaving school.

3. Rural people who had done their military duty learned how to read and write during their military service. After they went back to their villages, they taught those skills to children. They also taught that the republic was a system without a Sultan, malaria was transmitted by a mosquito, etc. (Eyüboğlu, 1979: 62–63).

Ataturk, after analyzing the report prepared by the commission, started the Village Educators Project. This is important because the Village Educator Courses were the first step for educational mobilization. This project: literate corporals and sergeant who are originally from the countryside, were sent to their village as an educator (Tonguç, 2020: xvi–xvii). The first educator's course was opened in July 1936 in Mahmudiye, Eskisehir with participation of 84 candidates. After obtaining positive results, the Village Educator Law No. 3238 dated 24.04.1937 was enacted (Tonguç, ca. 1937). Until the beginning of the academic school year of 1946 – 1947, 8675 village educators were trained in these courses. 7090 schools within the villages were opened and the number of students that attended was 210,863. Considering the number of all students studying in village schools during the 1933-1934 academic school year was 313,169, which was a good amount (Tonguç, 2020: 518).

Village Institutes

The Village Institutes (1940-1954) project is a program that was ahead of its time by aiming to improve the conditions of the villages and raise the level of education. With this project, all public services were given under this institution.

The Village Institutes Law No. 3803 was enacted in April 17, 1940. The drafted law passed with 278 out of 426 votes (Tonguç 2020: 597). This shows that the project was not supported by the vast majority and the assembly created an opposition.

20 institutes were established that compromise all regions. During their 14-year period, they had raised 16,400 teachers, 8,756 educators and 7,300 health officers (Kaplunan, 2012:184–185). Considering only 6,785 teachers were provided to the villages after 108 years of work¹⁷⁸, the success of these institutes are apparent (Tonguç, 2020: 522–523).

Behind this success are two professionals – the first one is Ismail Hakkı Tonguç, who has visited to 61 provinces, 305 districts and 9,150 villages (Tonguç, 1984: 60) during his 11-year term. He comprehended the problem well and designed a program suitable

¹⁷⁸ During II. Mahmut period, primary education became compulsory.

for the villages. The other professional was Hasan Ali Yücel, the minister of education who defended this project in the assembly.

The Village Institutes foundation was scientific. Tonguç and the founding staff calculated every detail. Village Institutes adopted the "on-the-job training" approach. It implies that students were not limited with just educational theories, but also apply what they have learned (Küçüktamer and Uzunboylu, 2015: 392). The "education within work" concept had peculiar conditions, in which each institute has accepted the grounding principle (Küçüktamer and Uzunboylu, 2015: 395). This method allows students to play an active role in their education and raised their awareness. By being aware of themselves and their environment, they were motivated to make decisions and finds solutions, rather than being dependent on authorities for regional development. Students trained within the environment that helped maintained this philosophy in their villages as teachers in and out of school. Tonguç's goal with the Village Institutes was not just to increase the rate of literacy, but to raise the awareness of the peasants; to save them from exploitation and to liberate them to create their awareness within the proletarian life (Küçüktamer and Uzunboylu, 2015: 399).

Curriculum

Village institutes implemented a different program compared to the classical curriculum. In this curriculum, 50% of the instruction consisted of basic courses as in the classical education, whereas the other 50% was based on the principle of learning-by-doing.

With VIs curriculum, the duration of cultural courses (114 weeks), agricultural courses (58 weeks), and technical courses (58 weeks). In other words, 50% of the instruction consisted of cultural courses, 25% consisted of agricultural courses, and the remaining 25% consisted of technical courses, and students were free to choose health, construction, blacksmithing, tailoring, fishing, beekeeping, or carpentry as their future profession.

Opponents harshly criticized institutes for using child labor (Tonguç, 1951; Turan, 1979: 168; Geray, 1974: 6; Tütengil, 1948: 14; Soysal, 1945: 97—99). Even today, most of the researchers make the mistake of evaluating that period based on current conditions. However, the conditions of that period led them to design and execute a project through which all necessary public services could also be provided in rural areas. A graduate student at the institute, Mustafa Avcı (2018), mentioned in his memoir that some students could not stand the harsh living conditions and had run away. He wrote that they were a group of 150 students when they joined the institute, but only 53 of them graduated. The graduation rate, in this case, was approximately 33% (p. 21). According to another graduate student at the institute, Fakir Baykurt (2019) stated that the average class failure rate was 7% (p. 100). Then the remaining students may either

have quit the institute due to the harsh working and living conditions or due to family issues—some families needed manpower for agricultural work when the other men in the family served in the military. Mustafa Avcı also claimed that since they were from the countryside, they were habituated to working under such harsh conditions (Avcı, 2018: 26). Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, a teacher at the institute, argued that these criticisms are made by those who want schools to remain as consumers, not producers (Eyüboğlu, 1979: 75). Hasan Ali Yücel, the minister of education at the time, responded to this criticism with this famous line: "The matter of primary education is that those who want to govern themselves with the feudal order would not sincerely want." (Aydın, 2018: 105).

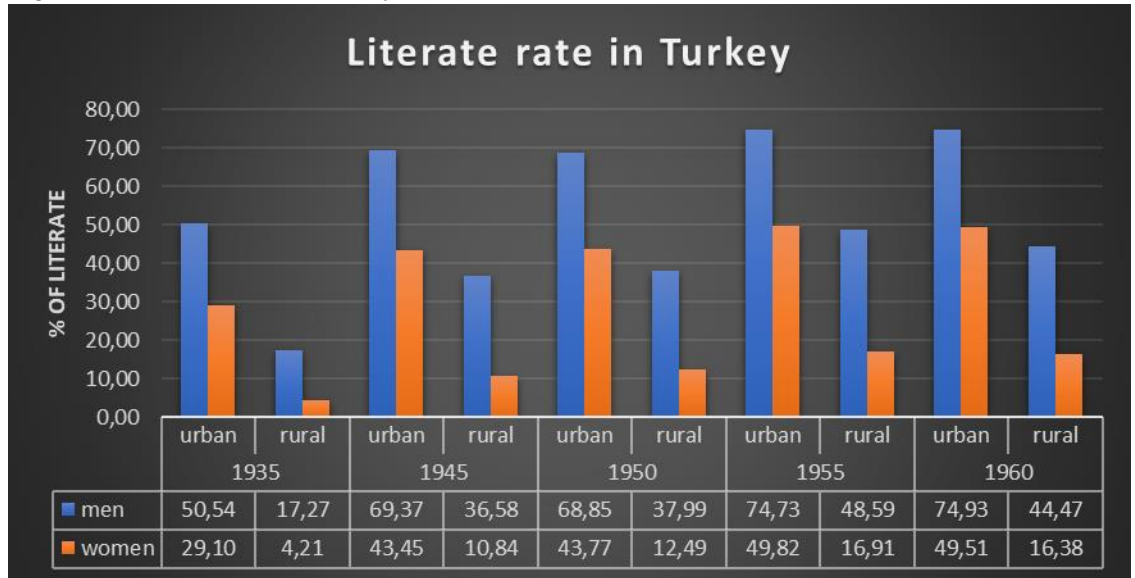
These institutes were officially transformed in 1954 through the de-professionalization process when the educators working in critical positions such as İsmail Hakkı Tonguç, Hasan Ali Yücel and directors of VIs were dismissed and landlords and opponents took the power in 1946. Landlords had an opposite attitude towards this project due to the conflict of interest and their sovereignty were threatened. That's why they have started defamation campaign –claiming institutes to be "communist nests" (Küçüktamer and Uzunboylu, 2015: 399–400). The important principles of the Village Institutes were abandoned – "education within work concept and the principle of co-education– and male and female students were separated (Kirby, 2018: 259). All teachers and students adhering to principles of the Village Institute were subjected to various charges (Tonguç, 1984: 104).

According to Küçüktamer and Uzunboylu (2015), the reasoning behind their closure is tied to the political issues in Turkey. They claimed that this project was not a failure in terms of education and modernization (p. 393). I agree with Küçüktamer and Uzunboylu and would like to say that this initiative was not a failure in terms of providing public services.

Concluding remarks

This project has improved the conditions of rural areas and increased the level of education. Reflections of this success can be observed in Figure 2 and 3 below. The literate rate of villagers, the number of schools, teachers and students have risen sharply with Institutes. They have applied a different curriculum and successfully implemented "education within work" concept. Thus, institutes have become producers.

Figure 2: Literate Rate in Turkey

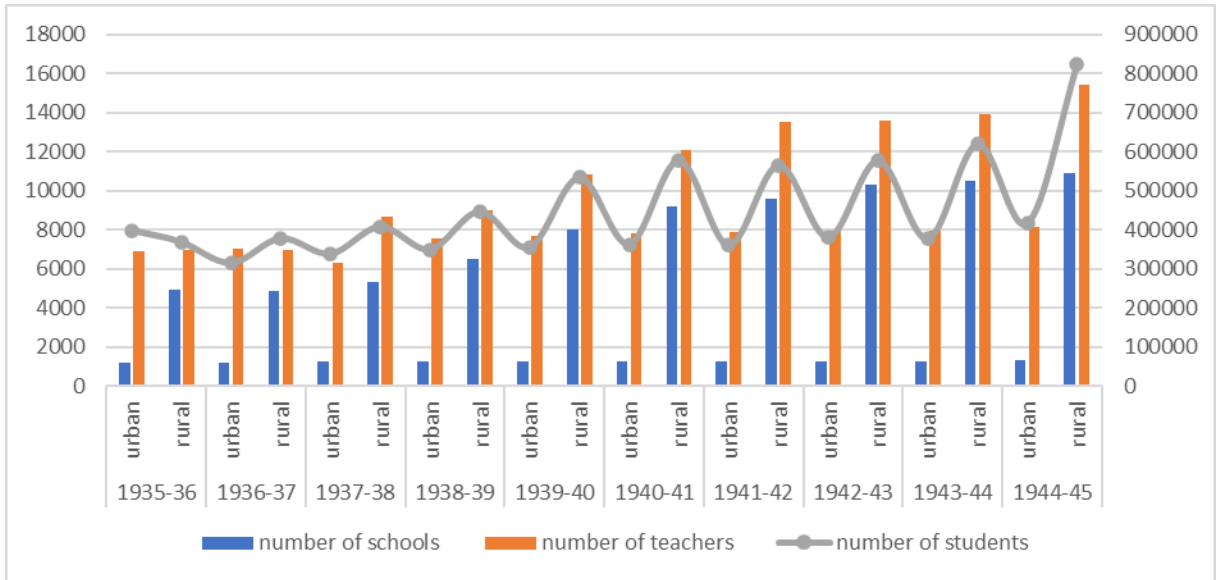


Source: This chart was compiled from State Institute of Statistics, 1973: 4.¹⁷⁹

And furthermore, building forty thousand schools in forty thousand villages with a minimal budget and still having to train forty thousand teachers for those schools could not be possible if these institutes remained a consumer and be a burden to the state (Tonguç, 1945). They have produced all the needed equipment and materials by themselves.

Figure3: Number of Schools, Teachers and Students in Turkey between 1935-45

¹⁷⁹ In this chart, it breaks down into two separate categories: first, the population and location of people – which during this period, approximately 80% lived in the rural areas. Secondly, society had a patriarchal structure, which negatively influenced women and restrained them. Thus, this chart is designed with two variables: urban-rural and men-women, so a more accurate assessment of the project in the field of education can be shown.



Source: This chart was compiled from the following source: Tonguç, ca. 1945.¹⁸⁰

The VIs provided a wide variety of public services in rural areas. In this study, these services offered are evaluated under three categories according to their importance.

The first one is the main services provided by the institutes. These are education, health care, consultation in agriculture, and pioneering of scientific techniques in agriculture to increase productivity.

The second one is the services that were not available in rural areas before and were provided by the institute: construction, blacksmithing, tailoring, fishing, beekeeping, and carpentry.

The third and last one is the social and cultural activities organized by the institute: music, dance, and theatre. Every student was obliged to learn at least one instrument—mandolin became a symbol of those institutes—and local dances. Each institute had a theatre, and the students organized theatre performances twice a month (Kirby, 2018: 298–301). VIs and their services have improved the rural conditions and set ground for the rise of a new economic class in rural areas.

¹⁸⁰ Two types of data: one from the State Institute of Statistics (SIS) and the data on the documents of the İsmail Hakkı Tonguç. As a result, from examining these information, inconsistencies were found. However, more details are given in the documents of Hakkı Tonguç, but only general information is provided in the data of SIS. In addition, the fact that Tonguç was the General Directorate of Primary Education during 1935 to 1946, verified his work. No other information was found after 1946. Lastly, this chart was designed with two variables- the number of schools and teachers refer to the left-hand side for numbers on the chart and for students; refer to the numbers of the right side.

With their consultation, productivity in agriculture has increased in rural areas and contributed to the rural economy (Tonguç, 1944). Many occupations were made available in villages—health care, construction, blacksmithing, tailoring, fishing, beekeeping, and carpentry—and students were able to specialize in one of them. The institute also provided various social and cultural activities such as music, dance, and theater.

With VIs, villagers have been introduced to concepts and activities such as the republic, reform, doctors, teachers, the theater, etc., which they were only familiar with through the newspapers. For the first time, they have experienced what it is like to live in a republican country because even Turkey transited to the republic in 1923, the feudal order remained in rural areas.

VIs, although short-lived, have been successful in providing public services to rural areas and attempted to eliminate the feudal order in rural areas. It is clear that this initiative has failed to do that, however, has managed to awaken some of the rural people, inspiring them to continue to provide the public services and enlighten the residents of their villages.

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