THE END OF THE LAST GREAT COLONIAL EMPIRE: MEMORIES OF A HISTORICAL REPORT

Beatriz Bissio

Last November 11th it was celebrated the 40th anniversary of Angola’s independence! The date evokes memories of that historical and dramatic moment in which the richest Portuguese colony in Africa conquered - even amid many uncertainties - the desired status of an independent state.

Neiva Moreira and I followed that date in Luanda. We were in Angola by an invitation of the MPLA, representing a journal which publication was forbidden in Brazil, “Cuadernos del Tercer Mundo”, and which would only be able to move its headquarters to Rio de Janeiro five years later, in 1980.

Throughout the year of 1975 we had been in Luanda on several occasions, alternating visits to Mozambique, Somalia, Tanzania and other African countries. In one of the visits we had been received by President Agostinho Neto, who granted us an exclusive interview in “Futungo de Belas”.

1 Beatriz Bissio and Neiva Moreira, founders, editor and director at the time of the "Cadernos do Terceiro Mundo" journal, were invited by President Agostinho Neto and the Prime Minister Lopo do Nascimento, to participate in the proclamation of Angola's independence, in November 1975. They had already been reporting over the transition period and, before independence, President Neto provided both the first of several exclusive interviews, published in the journal "Cadernos do Terceiro Mundo", and reproduced in different Latin Americans newspapers. Upon this first interview, Neto was in Luanda but his presence had not been confirmed in Angolan soil, due to safety measures. Exclusive interviews of President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos were also published by “Cadernos do Terceiro Mundo”. The magazine was widely circulated in Angola and in the Portuguese-speaking countries in the first decades after the independence.

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3 Neiva Moreira traveled with a document issued by the Peruvian government - we resided at the time in Peru. Exiled, banned by the Institutional Act 1 (AI-1), of April 9th 1964 (along with Leonel Brizola, Miguel Arraes and other political leaders previous to the military coup), in practice, to the military government that revoked all his political rights, he was a stateless person without right to Brazilian documents.
- an architectural complex built by wealthy Portuguese of Luanda in the last colonial period, facing the bay of Mussulo. The MPLA used it at that time for security reasons, since it was located away from the city center. That historical interview published by our magazine, at that time still circulating only in Spanish, had great repercussion and, in one of several conversations held with President Neto in this period, he put us to the challenge - which we actually received as an invitation of great honor - to launch a Portuguese edition of our magazine. The only publications that circulated in Angola with international information were published in French, “Afrique-Asie”, directed by the great friend of Angola, Simon Malley, and “Jeune Afrique”, with a more conservative editorial guidance.

President Neto considered that if it were published in Portuguese, our magazine, mostly made by Latin American journalists committed to the social movements of the continent and very close to the struggles of African and Asian liberation movements, would be an important tool for the formation of cadres, a challenge that independent Angola would face soon. And, indeed, there came the “Cadernos do Terceiro Mundo”, first published in Lisbon, especially for the newly proclaimed Lusophone African Republics, and only after the 1979 amnesty in Brazil it would have a headquarters in Rio de Janeiro.

On one of these trips, we got to Luanda few days before independence, invited especially for the celebrations. We were staying at the Intercontinental Hotel, where we found a number of foreign correspondents, especially Europeans and Americans. Most of them were hostile to the MPLA and I believe there were not many accredited as journalists, but working as agents of some Western secret service.

Some of them, especially the French, have used to have “confidential news” conveyed with simulated secrecy, claiming a private access to military sources. Interestingly, what they were announcing was always the advance of the forces opposed to the MPLA. “They broke the line of Kifangondo” they said, or, “It’s a matter of hours to take Luanda”, “There are already battles in the suburbs”...

The fact was that Luanda remained besieged, from the north and south. Defeated at the Battle of Luanda and expelled from the city, the FNLA and UNITA had launched a double offensive toward the capital. In fact, under the name of FNLA, regular forces of Zaire army penetrated the Angolan territory from the northern border. And from the south, advancing through Namibia (at the annexed area by South Africa), under the banner of UNITA, was the army of South Africa’s white minority regime. Despite the challenge of a possible international military intervention, the Angolan people kept going on with their lives, although alert and watchful.
However, it was undeniable that the daily life of the city was deeply affected by the military framework. Among other difficulties, there was food rationing. Electricity was under frequent blackouts, water was scarce and the military situation was becoming critical since the war front was very close to the capital, in Caxito and Kifangondo, where the dam that supplies water to Luanda is located. (Today, this area is undergoing a major transformation with the construction of a road by a large Brazilian construction company...)

One night we were invited to join a group that would hold a round at the suburbs of the capital, in company of the MPLA commanders. One of them was Major Saidy Mingas, brutally murdered two years later in the attempt to coup in May 1977. We were identified as foreign journalists, but that would not assure us any immunity. Fortunately, the visit took place in peace and we enjoyed the privileged company of a group of high-level cadres. Particularly pleasing was the conversation with the brilliant commander Mingas, with whom we developed a beautiful friendship. Without having any surprise, we returned to the hotel after noting the high level of tension that existed in the neighborhoods of Luanda, which increased as we approached the most exposed peripheries. This visit to the periphery was a special moment, one which every journalist dreams with, in such a situation: a “tour” with experienced escorts to the fight scene without restriction to speak to the people. An experience that would not have been possible if they did not trust in our ability to make the proper use of the information eventually obtained during the survey there.

The 10th of November was unforgettable. In the morning, still very early, the Portuguese flag was flown for the last time on the mast of the imposing fortress which dominates the bay of Luanda; watching it, the population was heading to their jobs. Little by little, the Portuguese city that we had left last time we had been there, a month earlier, had turned into a completely African metropolis, with the mass exodus of the white population and the affluence to the paved area of the black population.

The complicated traffic in Luanda flowed much better than before, as the number of cars in circulation had decreased significantly. The ones abandoned, now usually without tires, referred to the hasty getaway of the owners; they could also refer to a third car of a wealthy settler who, having sent abroad two others, had not found a way to circumvent the law and send a third one to Lisbon. Some Mercedes came to be exchanged for cigarette packets, since the value of them to who was departing and could not carry them was equivalent to the exchange power of whoever was staying...

The former Portuguese statues were torn from their places by the people and the austere pedestals had been painted with the colors of the MPLA, combined with creativity. It appeared so a new decoration,
undoubtedly much more in harmony with the sensitivity and the Angolan population’s state of mind than the cold face of a navigator of the XV century or a settler.

That day we had the opportunity to participate in an episode that confirmed the presence of Zairean forces in the war. By the Minister of Communications’ invitation, the poet and writer Manuel Rui Monteiro, and the commander “Jujú”, the Angolan army spokesman, we were interviewing the first Zaire’s soldier captured near Luanda with his armored “Panhard”. It was up to me, along with Neiva Moreira, to ask the prisoner of war on his patent and the reason for his presence inside a Zaire tank in Angola’s territory. A considerable number of Angolan officials accompanied the statement.

The soldier replied promptly, in French, he was from Zaire, was called Antoine, 25 years old and belonged to the Armored Unit B of Zaire army. He had arrived 15 days earlier, along with his unit, at the city of Ambriz, a port of the Uige province. He drove the vehicle with two white mercenaries whose nationalities were unknown, and had advanced without problems until his tank was hit by a FAPLA bazooka. The two mercenaries managed to escape, but he, unconscious after the explosion, ended captured by the Angolan soldiers and was taken to Luanda with his French tank. An interesting fact is that in the next visit to Luanda, months after independence, we found this small tank installed on the top of one of the old Portuguese pedestals, in one of the central avenues of Luanda; it served for the population, which enjoyed a brief interval of peace, to remember the high price of war.

Street names had also begun to change. The heroes of the Portuguese empire gradually were replaced by commanders of the MPLA killed during the years of the liberation struggle. As well as in the airport ‘air bridge’ was only left the memory of some plumbing smashed, in the city the empty shop windows, formerly full of Portuguese and imported articles, showed, with a lot of expressiveness, the removal process of a secular past.

Some popular, boisterous environments on that day of the Independence eve, full of young and women, reminded me the people of Brazil.

New posters adorned the walls, commemorating Independence. Concomitantly, others disappeared. Not even a single reference to UNITA, not a single writing, many of which existed months earlier, from the FNLA. The people in their loving and dedicated preparation of the capital for the day of great celebration had erased meticulously every vestige of those appearances, which caused so much pain and shed so much blood. In fact, that time in Luanda, from those that felt like shameless instruments of
foreign interests, there were only left the buildings hit by artillery and the sacrifice of fifteen thousand lives. In fact, there were parts of the city - like Avenida Brazil, with large and modern buildings – left half-destroyed. Some of these buildings had been occupied by the forces of UNITA and the FNLA and turned into a scenario of fierce battles.

Among the combatants there were many boys (“miúdos”, as called by the Angolans, or “pioneiros”, engaged in MPLA). They have served the cause of independence, since it fell to them the task of ensuring communications between guerrillas of the MPLA - mostly peasants, who arrived in Luanda for the first time - and lead them through the alleys of the musseques (slums), which they did not know. The epopee of these guerrilla kids is depicted in one of Manuel Rui books:

“The unpredictable imagination of childhood opened, in the War of Luanda, a parallel front, unruly and dispersed, a guerrilla of the pioneers governed by laws that are beyond the immediate understanding of adults, autonomous and unexpected like a game, mobilizing children in toy-combat ruthless and deadly against the invader of its streets, against the foreigner who dared to walk on the dream of freedom, brand new, with their leather boots and lace. At the syncopated rhythm of the bursts, the eyes follow the singular figure of the legend boys, foot-and-half adults, nameless heroes of a toy-to-serious war. (...) “

Months after the end of the Battle of Luanda they continued playing with their old iron and wooden guns, waiting for the enemy.

It had not been these marks left on the great buildings, of violent artillery duels caught inside the city, someone unaware of the background could think Luanda had always been impregnable MPLA stronghold.

In some ways, that was true. It was very significant the popular support for this political movement and very special was the feeling in relation to President Neto. We traveled several musseques (slums), other remote areas, ministries, public places. Literally all of them were covered in posters of the movement. In all these locations we were treated as “comrades” and the greetings followed the movement tradition: a threefold handshake, which represented the slogan “Unity-Work-Vigilance”.

There were also some posters in French. “They were written for visitors to understand”, commented one of the militants designated to meet the foreign delegations. We read, for example, in many walls: “A bas le neocolonialisme”, “A bas le FNLA et l’UNITA”.

Shortly before independence, the representation of the Organization

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of African Unity (called African Union since 2002) and brigades of volunteers from the slums visited Luanda and, in a few days, helped to change the face of the city, abandoned and dirty during the time of mass Portuguese exodus.

When an unexpected rain began, many commented that it was a happy omen. “Also in Mozambique it rained on the day of independence. People say that it is the message of our dead”, said one of the soldiers with whom we spoke. For others, the rain symbolized the tears of the colonialists who were not resigned to the irreparable loss of such a rich Angola. Omen or not, this rain was a kind of baptism of a young nation whose birth was putting an end to the Portuguese colonialism in Africa.

At the airport it was visible the difference of the situation we had left in Luanda. The thousands of Portuguese who camped for weeks there, in the long wait for the shuttle that would take them to Lisbon had given place to a clean airport, organized and covered in posters, including a huge one, of Agostinho Neto, and was decorated with MPLA flags. In the “VIP” room, full of foreign delegations, members of the Party Central Committee received the guests and showed the airport control - until then under Portuguese direction - by the popular forces. Outside the airport, the same sense of change, stronger by the presence of the newly created Angolan Military Police, on elegant khaki and blue uniforms.

Foreign delegations had begun to arrive three or four days before, auguring an important international recognition of the MPLA government. Journalists kept coming from all over the world, including some friends of MPLA from the earliest times. A group of them had already been organized to give its contribution to the struggle of the Angolan people, setting up a campaign to donate blood for the war’s wounded.

In the Ministry of Information, the newcomer correspondents received their credentials by the pace of the working capacity of an efficient group of employees. Photo albums of the development of the fight in the last months passed from hand to hand. Several colleagues praised the fact that the press had complete freedom of action, even those who, rather than sending articles with concrete facts, preferred to launch to the world echoes of rumors of all kinds that continued to proliferate.

A ceremony of collective marriage, with eighty couples, was one of the most publicized news in the days before November 11th. The press and the media devoted extensive analysis to the decisive weeks of the end of October and start of November 1975, since it was being written a decisive page in the history of MPLA and Angola. And the MPLA spokespersons were engaged in publicizing campaigns aimed at forming a new revolutionary
ethics, exhorting the people to change the individualistic attitudes that each one carries within them.

The fighting continued in the North front, 30 km from the city; people carefully followed the course of the fight, but not refraining to prepare the celebration. “Only 14 years ago just dreamers were convinced that we would be led by an Angolan President, and we are on the eve of it becoming a reality. Why should we be pessimistic today? The fight goes on; victory is certain”, commented a militant of the old days, quoting the motto of the MPLA. It was a palpable fact that the people felt confidence in victory and, in face of that, any sacrifice was valid.

Not even one complaint we heard when it came to an end the fourth day of water shortage in the city. “There are coming a few drops,” it was always the answer when we asked about the problem. In fact, it hangs from a preventive measure on the eve of November 11th, because the enemy artillery had Kifangondo Dam as main target.

The people proved to be far above those vicissitudes. No mention, either, to food shortages. The hotel staff struggled to keep the routine. At mealtimes, waiters in uniforms and white gloves solemnly delivered the printed menus, a recent past heritage, and wrote down the order: “Today, comrade, we have dried fish with rice,” they would say invariably. That’s all there was. But the city had gotten into the warlike climate and the restrictions of the war were accepted with apparent normality.

The war on TV and the front just around the corner

On the afternoon of the 10th, the hotel employees eventually disappeared. In that tense atmosphere, everything was seen with fear. Had the city been taken? No. They were all in the main hall, watching the first transmission of the Angolan TV, newly opened. A struggling group of young people organized by Luandino Vieira, militant writer of the first hour, nowadays internationally recognized and with his work translated into numerous languages, had put in the air, on the Independence eve, a special program, made during a meeting held the day before in Maputo, Mozambique. There, representatives of Sao Tome and Principe, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, hosted by the president Samora Machel, received with exceptional honors the leader of MPLA, Agostinho Neto, and expressed the full support of the new Portuguese speaking African states to the brother still at war. And in particular, they proclaimed recognition of the MPLA as the sole legitimate government of Angola.

The inaugural program of the Angolan television continued with
movies made at the front lines, which caused a great excitement in the people who watched the images through 400 devices distributed throughout the neighborhoods and *mussequeus*, at the headquarters of sports organizations and nuclei of grassroots organizations. The artillery shots showed that they were not playing a war, but fighting a bloody and dangerous fight. An artillery that, at night, could also be clearly heard from every corner of Luanda; during the day, the city noises muffled it, even though the shots were fired from so close.

At that November 10th, the press conference of Commodore Leonel Cardoso was the only ‘cold’ act. It was the last official ceremony on the Portuguese side, since there was the decision of the former metropolis government of not being present at the proclamation of independence, that night, by Agostinho Neto.

For those who, like us, had the privilege of being present in the Independence of Mozambique and, thus, admire an unique historical fact, with those welcome and military honors to the representatives of Portugal - a huge delegation, headed by General Vasco Gonçalves - that unilateral proclamation of Portugal, its retreat from Angola without participating in the midnight celebrations, the departure without greatness or glory, left everyone frustrated. And the Angolan people too.

On the other hand, it was exciting the moment when the last Portuguese soldiers bid farewell to Angola. First they took a long walk through the streets of Luanda, with their arms raised, a final goodbye to the last colony of Portugal in Africa. Soon after, already at the island of Luanda, posing for the lenses of the photographers of various nationalities, they received the military that would replace them from that moment: the members of the Angola Liberation Popular Forces. They had the exact notion that their shipment (of the last Portuguese contingent on African soil) symbolically marked the end of five centuries of colonialism: or rather, to be exact, it closed the historic period opened in 1483, when the first Portuguese vessels arrived at the mouth of the Congo River.

- So, now, will people join the ranks of the counterrevolution in Lisbon? - asked provocatively a Latin American journalist to one of the commanders of the group of Portuguese soldiers. “Counterrevolution? You are mistaken. From my part I will present myself to fight alongside the revolutionaries”, the soldier replied.

“While we were here, we endeavored to assist in the decolonization process,” said another, who said goodbye slowly to an Angolan lover that he could not carry. He did not hide his displeasure with other colleagues: yes, he told us, they were integrating the ranks of mercenaries or had already
links with rightwing-sectors of Portugal. And frustrated by an irreversible reality, they had revenge destroying public buildings of Luanda, sabotaging the very Military Hospital and destroying equipment that would be vital for the Angolan population and the dozens of wounded that came every day from the battle fronts.

In the evening of the last day of colonialism, the people went neatly to Largo 1º de Maio, where ceremonies would be performed. The greatly vaunted bombing of the city did not materialize. In the suburbs, which had no means of transport to reach the site of ceremonies, speakers were placed and pallets with flag poles so that the proclamation of independence was played in each of these locations. The same was true in remote rural areas. From an early age, children tried to put colorful posters and banners in some houses, helped by their mothers and sisters, who painted signs and revolutionary phrases. One of the most widespread sentences was greatly significant: “We must make war to end war”.

Interestingly, in many of these popular proclamations midnight was not waited, but, even so, the ceremonies were even more formal than the very central ceremony: the people sought a Portuguese flag to remove from the mast and hoist the new flag, from the newest independent country.

In Largo 1º de Maio, the places were running empty. The pioneiros (pioneers), who for so long had been prepared for this occasion, paraded firmer than ever, proud of their homemade guns, always with the torn and old uniforms, losing on their slender arms and dragging with difficulty and grace to the big soldier boots they had inherited from the ancients.

Women, organized in OMA - Organization of Angolan Women - sang revolutionary songs and melodies from other Portuguese-speaking nations. A few minutes after midnight, fighters armed with katanas - symbol of the first stage of the conflict –lighted up the “Eternal Flame”, as Agostinho Neto arrived at the official platform, amid great applause from the public that was scattering across the square.

Thousands of shots fired into the air by FAPLA, with tracer bullets that crossed the skies, shouts of joy, hugs, songs and tears that quivered the hearts of all that were in the crowd. Would the attack be so often announced? A special plane with the delegates of the progressive forces of Portugal that at that time was arriving in Luanda did not even land. The commander heard about the shots and, since the airport tower had no explanation to give about what was happening, he decided to return to Lisbon, refueling in Brazzaville.

How and why the curtain of fire happened was not clear in those moments; what was seen in Largo 1º de Maio was that it was accompanied
by thousands of guerrillas who considered those bursts as part of the celebration fist, which should be imitated.

Agostinho Neto, undisturbed, kept on reading his speech. He outlined the main policy directives that Angola’s Liberation Movement adopted as a government plan. He then sang with the people the new national anthem, which only a few hours before was acknowledged. Still, he asked for a minute of silence in memory of the dead for the freedom and independence, and this gesture was the most sensible tribute to all missing comrades, those who did not live to attend these dramatic and exciting moments. Many of the widows and mothers of martyrs wept and were supported by friendly people.

The People’s Republic of Angola was born marked by the joy of the people, by the fighting unity against enemies and by the common and collective sacrifice that greatly ennobled all.

The black and red flag took the central mast: black as the African continent; red as the blood of those who had fallen.

Neiva Moreira and I were in front of the official platform. The crowd was immense. There were the main leaders of the MPLA, African delegations and two more presences that had a special significance, for different reasons, the representative of Brazil, Ambassador Ovídio Melo, and the representative of Vietnam. They were both very close to president Agostinho Neto.

In an improvised way, the President called on the people to meet in the Government Palace Square after the closing of the ceremonies, already at dawn. Into the night, people gave a start to their joy with dances, songs and marches full of enthusiasm, until the rising sun of the first day of complete victory against colonialism. The experienced tensions, the accumulated fatigue, the daily responsibilities assumed seemed to disappear on the faces of the small group of the Movement leaders who were leading the fight and the new state settling. Many of the ideals that had led them to take up arms were converted into reality, even though they knew it was a hard and long way between them and the final victory.

The celebrations had a peak at 11 pm on November 11th, 1975, when on behalf of the Political Bureau of the MPLA, Lucio Lara declared Agostinho Neto the first constitutional President of People’s Republic of Angola and announced that more than twenty nations had recognized the new State and its government. In a public act it was read a list of governments that recognized the new independent state and the recognition by Brazil was announced.

The day before, at 8 pm, that is, given the difference in time zones, at
zero hours in Luanda, the Foreign Ministry of Brazil (Itamaraty) spokesman had issued a statement in Brasilia, in which the military regime recognized the new state and the MPLA as their legitimate government.

What almost no one knew is that the recognition by Brazil hardly materialized, and that only the personal commitment of Ambassador Ovídio Melo - recently deceased - and, as it seems, the strong personality of General Geisel, who decided to “join the fight” with opponents of this African politics, have ensured the proclamation of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry.

“Given the dubious actions of the last weeks before the independence, I clearly passed to the Foreign Ministry that it would not be appropriate to err. Either we recognized the MPLA government in the first hour or I would have instructions to immediately retreat from Angola, with the Special Representatives and all Brazilian workers, “reported the ambassador Ovídio Melo”. “Finally, two days before the scheduled parties, I received the decision of the Foreign Ministry to be reported to the local government: Brazil recognizes the government of Luanda by statement to be given to the press in Brasilia at 8 pm on November 10th (midnight in Angola), just while the MPLA would be taking over”.

On the same date, as reported by the Foreign Ministry, would be signed the decree that created the Embassy of Brazil in Luanda. “I conveyed the message to the Prime Minister of the ruling MPLA party, Lopo do Nascimento, and the news caused great impact and joy in the MPLA”, recalled the diplomat, who was in Angola until January 1976.

On the afternoon of November 11th, 1975, in the popular parade in Catete Avenue, new emotions: the FAPLA welcomed President Neto in a non-traditional parade; the forces that marched there had participated in the fighting a few hours before, in Kifangondo battle front, to which they would return as soon as the show was over. This fact gave the Independence of Angola an easily observed historical density.

This historical density was further increased by a special fact: the landing of Cuban forces in the early hours after the independence, to help the troops of the MPLA to contain the double invasion of Zaire and South Africa. Everything was done in secrecy and only gradually began appearing in the international media speculation about military reinforcements that would allow the MPLA to contain the enemy double offensive.

Before returning to Luanda for the festivities of independence, Neiva Moreira and I had passed very quickly by Portugal, where we interviewed the general Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho and his chief of staff in the Mainland Operational Command (COPCON), Colonel Artur Batista – that later joined
the direction of our magazine in Portugal and that recently has passed away. Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho and Arthur had spent much time in Africa and had been protagonists of the April 25th, in Portugal, an openly acting in favor of decolonization. They thought that the MPLA was able to resist the foreign invasion for some time, but that if it would be prolonged, substantial foreign aid would be required. In view of this assessment, both General Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho and Arthur Batista raised a hypothesis that, at the time, seemed unrealistic: the possibility of MPLA to receive foreign aid. We asked from where this possible help would come from, to what Othello replied: “Of the progressive African states in the first place, but can also come from non-African countries, Cuba, for example.”

Curious, because such a scenario would be full of complex geopolitical implications, Neiva asked if this was a simple hypothesis or if it was founded on any concrete information. Quite frankly, but stating that this is a conjecture of him own, strictly personal, Otelo replied that he was sure that this would happen as soon as it was proclaimed the independence and the MPLA government could make its own decisions.

Months later, in a new conversation with Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, Neiva insisted on that question, and the answer was the same: “My speculation was merely the result of a thorough analysis of the situation,” said the military leader of the Carnation Revolution.

Forty years later, I still get deeply emotional while reliving those moments. They marked the history of the Angolan people and also my own life. Long live to the independent Angola! Long live to the Angolan people!

REFERENCES


ABSTRACT

In 2015 it was completed 40 years since the end of the last great colonial empire, which had been initiated in the fifteenth century when the Portuguese sailors dominated the seas. An empire defeated in the twentieth century in Angola, one of the last and most painful episodes of the African continent emancipation process. Latin America was present in this process through two protagonists with different roles but equally decisive: one at the diplomatic level and the other militarily, Brazil and Cuba. The date raises a reflection on the cost of human lives and sacrifices that made foundation for the path to the XXI century Angola. This matter reflects the memories of a journalistic coverage of this historical moment.
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