Representation in *Raya and the Last Dragon*: Examining the Progression of Gender, Sexuality, and Race in the Disney Princess Franchise

Sarah Hicks

ABSTRACT

The Disney animated film *Raya and the Last Dragon* was released in March 2021 to great acclaim, becoming the third-highest streamed movie of 2021 (Hayes). The Disney Princess franchise has long been criticized for cultural appropriation and privileging traditional gender and heterosexual norms. If Raya is canonized into the Disney Princess franchise, she will be the second Asian Princess and the first Southeast Asian Princess.[1] In contrast to historical Disney Princess films, *Raya* has garnered praise for the film's pro-feminist ideals, nuanced homosexuality, and careful representation of Southeast Asian culture. This essay analyzes the representations of race, gender, and sexuality in *Raya and the Last Dragon* in relationship to other Disney Princess animated feature films, especially the 1998 animated film *Mulan*. *Raya* reflects an almost one-hundred-year progression in the franchise and represents a significant advancement by Disney in terms of feminist and racial representation, but, at the same time, falls short in the area of queer representation.

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1. At the time of this article's composition (November 2021), no plans had been announced to "coronate" Raya into the Disney Princess franchise.

Introduction

The Disney animated film *Raya and the Last Dragon* was released in March 2021 to great acclaim, becoming the third-highest streamed movie of 2021 (Hayes). While the character Raya has not officially been inducted as a member of the Disney Princess franchise, her photo appears on the Disney Princess website, and merchandise from the movie has been promoted alongside other official Disney Princess merchandise. If Raya is eventually canonized into the franchise, she will be the second Asian Princess and the first Southeast Asian Princess. The Disney Princess franchise has long been criticized for cultural appropriation and privileging traditional gender and heterosexual norms. Conversely, *Raya* has garnered praise for the film's careful representation of Southeast Asian culture, pro-feminist ideals, and nuanced homosexuality.

This essay analyzes the representations of race, gender, and sexuality in *Raya and the Last Dragon* in relationship to other Disney Princess animated feature films and, in particular, the 1998 animated film *Mulan*, which also features a female Asian lead. *Raya* reflects an almost one-hundred-year progression in the franchise and can be used to evaluate the company's advancement—or lack thereof—toward imbuing their films with more progressive representations and ideologies. As this essay will demonstrate, Raya represents a significant advancement by Disney in terms of feminist and racial representation, but, at the same time, falls short in the area of queer representation.

1. Establishing the Franchise

It is important to understand how Disney has addressed the issue of representation historically in the Disney Princess franchise. The beginning of the franchise can be traced back to 1937 with the release of Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*—the first full-length, animated feature film. The character of Snow White would subsequently become one of the eight original Disney Princesses included in the establishment of the franchise in 2001. The other canonized princesses included Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Mulan, and Pocahontas. Tiana, Merida, Rapunzel, Anna, Elsa, and Moana were also "coronated" into the franchise following the release of their films. Over the past twenty years, the Disney Princess line has grown to represent a multi-billion-dollar industry within the Walt Disney Corporation (Orenstein). Even amidst the popularity of the line, the franchise has often come under scrutiny for "promoting harmful, unrealistic body types and the narrow ideal of marriage as the happiest of endings for young women" (Stover 1), applied most vehemently to the earlier films in the franchise. Consumers have shown a

desire for Disney to pivot from these outdated depictions and instead adopt a more progressive attitude toward gender norms, sexuality, and racial representation.

2.1 Representation of Gender

Several articles have addressed the representation of the traditional gender norms built into the films represented by the franchise. These criticisms have been especially applied to the early films from this franchise, including *Snow White*, *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). These films were produced before the beginning of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, during a time when society largely desired for women to fulfill domestic duties while men reassumed their positions within the workforce. *Sleeping Beauty* was the last film of this era and was considered a "critical and popular failure," signifying a shift in the viewer's reception to these "voiceless beauties" (Stover 2, 3). *The Little Mermaid*, released in 1989, marked a significant turn in the Disney Princess film, "which transformed the damsel into a heroine of sorts, with both a voice and desire for adventure" (Stover 3). In and after this film, Disney adopted a type of "soft feminism" to meet the current demand for female characters with stronger agency, where female protagonists transcend patriarchal expectations, reject domestication, appropriate masculine attributes and roles, and reframe the true meaning of love (Schiele et al. 663-667). Yet, even with this shift, there have still been instances of misogynistic messaging that have pervaded some of these films.

2.2 Gender Representation in *Mulan*

Mulan is one example of a film that seems to present strong feminist ideals but retains chauvinistic undertones. Mulan exists in a strongly patriarchal society, where she is expected to bring honor to her family by marrying a man of status. She ultimately transcends this expectation by rejecting domestication and choosing to go to war rather than placating her family and the matchmaker (666). When Mulan joins the army, she assumes a male identity and takes on traditionally masculine attributes.[2] She cuts her hair (18:52), adopts a deeper voice (27:01), and then develops strength, coordination, and stamina through the training process (38:04-41:03). Mulan is eventually revered as a hero by her male peers.

The surface-level message to the audience, who knows that Mulan is a woman, is that women can be strong, courageous, athletic, etc. Nonetheless, it is problematic that Mulan is only able to accomplish her brave deeds as a male. As soon

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2. Throughout this paper, I will be making references to generally agreed upon yet vague separations of what consists of traditionally male of female attributes and characteristics in America.

as Mulan's female identity is revealed, she loses her status and is rejected by those who once revered her. Furthermore, near the end of the film, she must appeal to and rejoin her male team to successfully save the emperor (Dundes et al. 4). It is only under the direct influence of the emperor that Mulan is re-established as a hero when existing in her feminine form. This implies that Mulan is only able to be successful and seen as a hero when she is presenting herself as a male, or with the permission of a male in power. The message of Mulan indicates that it is acceptable for females to exhibit traditionally masculine attributes such as leadership and heroism, as long as it is approved by a male in authority.

2.3 Gender Representation in *Raya*

Raya and the Last Dragon represents a significant progression in Disney's representation of feminist ideals in their films. Like *Mulan*, the main character is a female of Asian descent who leaves her home and engages in combat. Significant portions of each movie focus on the protagonist's adventures and battles. A noteworthy difference between the films is that *Raya* includes three females in lead roles (and multiple more females in supporting roles), a first for any of the princess films. Fawn Veerasunthorn, the Head of Story for the film, stated:

> … we [don't] have just one female character who has to carry all the burdens of being the one female character. We have so many that at one point we'd be calling a character 'she' and I didn't know which 'she' we were talking about because we were between three people—Sisu, Namaari, and Raya. (Frederick)

Because the film is led by a cast of women, the plot is dependent on their actions and decisions. This signifies a marked development in female representation in the franchise, as while many of the films feature a least one female lead, the plot is still driven by the actions or decisions of a male character.

Virana, one of the films supporting characters as the matriarchal leader of the Fang tribe, serves as a foil for Sisu. She is positioned as the power-hungry villain whose selfish actions led to the destruction of Kumandra. Virana's primary concern is for the people of her village, which can be seen by her careful architectural decisions that separate her people from the Drunn (52:34). But Virana's position of leadership leads to a lust for power and control, which causes her to make decisions that seem brash and cutthroat. She enlists the help of her daughter to obtain Sisu's gem as a way to usurp the supposed control of the Heart Tribe (21:56). Once she obtains a piece of the gem, she embeds it into her staff to ensure she has possession of the gem at all times (51:55). Virana has a very isolationist leadership style as a means to keep her village safe, and this is displayed in the traditionally masculine traits of hunger power

and control, cunning, leadership, and intelligence.[3] In contrast, Sisu believes that the only way to defeat the Druun is through teamwork and cooperation. Agreeableness is typically seen as a negative, passive, feminine quality. The climax and resolution of the film demonstrate that the isolationist strategy (masculine) is inferior to the strategy centered on collaboration and trust (feminine). Women are not just the stars of this film; feminine qualities are also celebrated which lends to the feminist messaging of the film.

3.1 LGBTQ+ Representation

Representations of queer[4] individuals have been extremely limited in all of Disney's animated films, including the princess franchise.[5] An analysis by Towbin et.al discovered that many of the villains from the Disney Princess films were coded as queer by their appearance and behavior, including Jafar from *Aladdin* (1992) and John Ratcliffe from *Pocahontas* (1995) (Towbin et al. 34). Anna Putnam also suggests that other villains such as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* and Lady Tremaine from *Cinderella* exhibit transgendered characteristics, with the former modeled after a drag queen (Putnam 152-155). This frequent association between stereotypically queer attributes with evil, immoral characters can have tremendously negative effects on the viewer by implying that queer people are evil and deserve to be treated that way— a message that is reinforced by the scarcity of any other positive queer representation.

3.2

Although there has been some discussion of queer messaging in *Mulan*, it is this author's opinion that the claims are not substantially supported enough to be considered seriously. Mulan dresses and acts as a means to conceal her female identity in order to gain admittance to the army; at no time does she express a sense of gender dysphoria. Some have read into the relationship between Mulan and Shang and concluded that Shang must be either homosexual or bisexual due to his attraction toward Mulan while she was presenting as a male. But it could be just as easily argued

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3. I would offer that these traits should not be exclusively ascribed to the male gender as women are just as capable of displaying cunning, leadership, intelligence, and a desire for power and control.

4. In this paper, "queer" is used as a general and inclusive statement to encapsulate the multiple identities and orientations represented in the LGBTQIA+ community. While each of these identities and orientations are unique and deserve to be treated as such, the term "queer" is helpful for describing the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole.

5. At the time of this revision, only four characters from Walt Disney Animation Studios have been confirmed as queer: Bucky and Pronx Oryx-Antlerson from *Zootopia* (2016) and Ethan Clade and Diazo from *Strange World* (2022).

that Shang was not exhibiting sexual attraction and instead admiration for the development of Mulan's strength and abilities as a soldier throughout her training. Shang might even be feeling a sense of pride in himself for his ability to transform Mulan, the weakest of the soldiers, into a formidable opponent. In any case, there is not sufficient evidence to claim queer themes or undertones in *Mulan*.

3.3 LGBTQ+ Representation in *Raya*

While none of the producers, directors, or writers for Raya have commented on the lead character's sexuality, Kelly Marie Tran, the voice actor behind Raya, has publicly stated that she thinks that Raya is gay and voiced her as such. The statement came from an interview with *Vanity Fair*, in which Tran explained that she decided there were "some romantic feelings going on there," between Raya and Raya's friend-turned-nemesis, Namaari (Robinson, "Kelly Marie Tran"). This is especially significant because, as the voice actor, Tran was responsible for bringing this character to life. Even if Raya was not written as a gay character, Tran brought that quality to her characterization. Even before Tran's interview, viewers began speculating about Raya's sexuality, similarly to the way they speculated about Elsa's sexuality in *Frozen* (2013). However, there is one major difference in *Raya* that is not present in *Frozen*: there are no other female characters that Elsa could display romantic attraction toward in the original film. The inclusion of Namaari's character in *Raya* creates an opportunity for Raya to express her same-sex attraction, whereas the other films have not included a character who could fulfill this role. While Disney has not commented on Raya's sexuality, they have created a scenario where an opportunity for same-sex attraction exists.

There are specific moments from the beginning of *Raya* that lend to a queer interpretation of Raya's character. When Namaari and Raya first meet, Namaari is incredibly shy, indicated by the way she hesitantly pushes her hair back from her face and struggles to look Raya in the eye (12:37). This behavior is less reflective of two casual friends meeting and more reminiscent of two people with a romantic interest. Immediately after they meet, Raya and Namaari walk off holding hands (12:57). This behavior is typical for younger children but less typical for twelve-year-old girls (the assumed age of Raya at the beginning of the movie). While learning more about each other, Namaari remarks, "We're both *warrior women* who despise uncomfortable formal wear" (13:50 emphasis added). Namaari puts a strange amount of emphasis on the words "warrior women." That combined with the comment about formal wear, which is stereotypically disliked by lesbian and bisexual women, seems to point to a deeper meaning in this phrase. Both Raya and Namaari use the term "dep la" to refer

to each other in their interactions (15:05). While the author was unable to find a direct translation for "dep la" in traditional Southeast Asian languages, the phrase is similar to "dep qua" in Vietnamese. The term "dep" means "beautiful" and "qua" means "very," so a rough translation of "dep qua" could be "very beautiful," (*Duolingo*).[6] Perhaps this phrase was invented by the writers as a vague nod to the physical attraction between Raya and Namaari. When Namaari confronts Raya for the first time several years later, Raya responds, "And here it's because I thought you missed me" (34:06). This reads similar to the playful banter between two possible romantic young adults.

The interpersonal conflict between Raya and Namaari is very similar to that of a romantic relationship. Namaari played on Raya's interests and trust to manipulate Raya into revealing the location of the Dragon Gem. After Namaari's deception, Raya is racked with guilt for revealing the gem's location. Her father entrusted her with the responsibility of protecting the gem, and Raya's short-sighted decision to take Namaari to the gem resulted in a considerable loss of life. Whenever Raya addresses this moment in the film, her word choice and tone reflect that she is specifically agonizing over her decision to trust someone who betrayed her (24:11). This idea of trust is central to the message of the film. Raya would obviously be devastated by the loss of her father and the re-emergence of the Druun, but it seems like she has not been able to trust anyone since the day her trust was initially broken. Namaari's betrayal would be even more significant if Raya had initially felt a romantic connection to Namaari. Of course, all of these moments contain a level of plausible deniability, most likely to protect the substantial financial investment *Raya* represents.[7]

4. Racial Representation

The history of racial representation in Disney films is extremely complicated and historically disheartening. Some of Disney's animated features have received severe backlash for their racial representation (see Benshoff and Griffin's case study on *The Lion King* as an example of this issue). This struggle with representation has affected the Disney Princess franchise, especially when the heroine is from a non-European culture. Jasmine from *Aladdin* and Pocahontas from the film of the same name suffer especially from hyper-sexualization rooted in their ethnic and foreign

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6. At the time of this article's conception, *Duolingo* was the most helpful tool in determining an approximate translation for this phrase. Further research and commentary would be welcome from someone more familiar with the languages and dialects used in Southeast Asia.

7. Movies with blatant homosexual themes are often censored in the international market. *Lightyear* (2022) was banned from several Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries because it contained a same-sex kiss (Vivrelli).

beauty (Cappiccie et al. 53-54; Ellis). Disney appears to side-step the issue of Tiana's race in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), by entirely ignoring race relations in 1920 Louisiana (Dundes and Streiff 1; Ellis). *Moana* (2016) served as a significant step forward in Disney's attempt accurately and respectfully to feature a heroine of color with the establishment of the Oceanic Trust. The trust was a group of anthropologists, cultural practitioners, historians, linguists, and choreographers from the Polynesian islands who assisted in the film's authentic representation of the Polynesian culture (Robinson, "Pacific Islanders"). The trust provided insight into everything from the costume design to the environmental design. However, *Moana* still received some criticism for pulling aspects of multiple Polynesian cultures instead of presenting one specific culture, which can lead to a homogenized view of Polynesian people instead of recognizing the distinct differences between certain groups. The plot of the film also received some criticism for following the traditionally American coming-of-age story arc instead of representing a truly Polynesian tale (Ellis).

4.1 Asian Representation in *Mulan*

Mulan struggles with Asian representation, due to a general whitewashing of the story and the general issues of orientalism in film. The source material used for inspiration for the film was altered in such a way that the film barely resembles the original Chinese ballad. In the original ballad, Mulan does disguise herself as a male soldier to take the place of her father in the army, but she does so with the blessing of her parents and serves in the army for over ten years without her true identity as a female ever being discovered (Cappiccie et al. 52; Dundes and Streiff 3). Disney forsakes the traditional Chinese ideals of cultural collectivism and filial obligation present in the ballad and "Americanizes" the story by framing Mulan's actions as a rebellion against her family in a search for honor and individual self-actualization (Cappiccie et al. 52). Other departures from the original story include the addition of Mulan's sidekicks, Mushu and Cri-Kee,[8] and the replacement of the Mongols from the original ballad with the Huns (Cappiccie et al. 3). These changes mirror the colonizing attitude that promotes taking what one desires from a target culture and then imposing their own values on said culture.

Historically, Asians and Asian Americans have suffered extreme stereotyping in the American film industry. It is also important to examine how the characters in *Mulan* either conform to or defy these typical stereotypes. Asians are usually posited "as being of one extreme or another in either a positive (wise sages, exemplary

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8. The inclusion of Cri-Kee as the "lucky cricket" is especially alarming since the concept of the lucky cricket has no basis in Chinese culture.

students) or a negative light (sadistic executioners, devilish heathens)," (Mok 194). This results in Asian women being stereotyped as beautiful, dainty, dependent, docile, and submissive or as evil and menacing. Asian men are stereotyped as reserved, studious, socially awkward, and effeminate or as dangerous, exotic, and menacing (Besana et al. 214-216; Mok 191-194). Some of the characters in *Mulan* circumvent these stereotypes. For example, Mulan displays independence, courage, and leadership without coming across as the menacing "Dragon Lady" (Mok 190). Nevertheless, many of the other characters fall into these stereotypes. Li-Shang is presented as reserved and menacing at the beginning of the film and struggles to express his emotions both after his father's death and when attempting to express his feelings for Mulan. Many of the male side characters are either socially awkward (Ling, Chien-Po), menacing (Yao), the comedic fool (Yao, Ling, Chien-Po), or effeminate (Ling, Chien-Po). The most blatantly stereotyped character in this film is Chi-Fu, who is drawn with exaggerated Chinese features, such as a stringy beard and mustache, slanted eyes, and crooked teeth (Towbin et al. 32). He is also extremely effeminized throughout the film, emerging from his tent with a towel draped around him like a dress (46:01), screaming "like a girl" (46:56), cowering under a rock away from battle (54:14), and fainting in front of the emperor (1:17:19) (Dundes and Streiff 5). While Mulan defies traditional Asian stereotypes by displaying self-autonomy, it is unfortunate that so many of the other characters in the film are still confined to these depictions.

4.2 Racial Representation in *Raya*

As Disney heavily marketed Raya as a Southeast Asian princess, they needed to rectify the mistakes in characterization and representation they made in *Mulan*. It appears that the creative team went to great lengths to ensure the film incorporated cultural elements respectfully and with authenticity. Don Hall, one of the film's directors, discussed how the creative team behind the film took three research trips to different countries in Southeast Asia. They were able to establish a "Southeast Asian Story Trust" (similar to the "Oceanic Trust" established for *Moana*) to consult on aspects of the film such as the script, screenings, character design, costumes, and minuscule details such as the designs on Sisu's horns (Frederick). Osnat Shurer spoke about the importance of including individuals from the target culture from the very beginning to the very end of the film. Adele Lim, one of the film's writers grew up in Malaysia (Frederick); Qui Nguyen, another writer, is Vietnamese-American; and Fawn Veerasunthorn, the Head of Story, is Thai-American (Moon). Having people on the story team from the target cultures represented in the film made it possible to include personal details that lent themselves to an accurate depiction of those cultures

(Frederick).

Even with the establishment of the Southeast Asian Story Trust, the film still received criticism for how it homogenized the distinct cultures of several Southeast Asian countries. Historically, when Asians have been the subject of film, the multitude of different Asian cultures, traditions, and lifestyles have been "collapsed" or "lumped" into one group under the umbrella term "Asian" (Mok 186, Towbin et al. 22). This depiction of a single, Asian monolithic culture, "[obscures] the distinctive ethnic and cultural differences within this population," (186). Some *Raya* viewers were disappointed with the way that the film mixed elements from distinct Southeast Asian countries, therefore not representing a specific ethnicity or culture and contributing to the homogenization of distinct Asian cultures. The film pulled influences from the Vietnamese, Thai, Laotian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Cambodian, and Singaporean cultures, but there is no specific differentiating among these cultures in the film (Moon). Qui Nguyen, one of the film's writers, addressed this concern during an interview:

> And in creating the five regions in *Raya and the Last Dragon*—each with its own personality and aesthetic, the filmmakers intentionally incorporated commonalities across Southeast Asia. "The easy thing we could have done was, this land in Kumandra was Thailand, this was Vietnam, this one's Malaysia," Nguyen says. "But then it gets into a really ugly place of going, oh, well, this country is bad, and this one's good, and our hero's from here." Instead, inspirations from specific countries were infused across the setting. (Moon)

From the interviews with the creative team, it appears that the decision to "incorporate commonalities from across Southeast Asia" was intentional to avoid villainizing one specific culture due to the nature of the film's plot. While this does not negate the desire for people from these cultures to see more of their specific culture represented on screen, it does clarify that this decision was intentional as a way to protect the cultures represented in the film.

Considering how much research and attention went into the writing and directing of *Raya*, it is very strange that Kelly Marie Tran, the voice of Raya, is the only Southeast Asian who was cast in a major role in the film (Martin, Moon). Two of the supporting roles, Boun and Noi (also known as "Con-Baby" for most of the film), are played by Southeast Asians, Izzac Wang and Thalia Tran, respectively, but the rest of the "top-billed" cast is East Asian (Moon). When asked about this decision for casting, Adele Lim stated, "Any time there is a prominent Asian-forward movie or we have

Asian leads, you know, that one project has to kind of take on the burden because there's just not enough of them," (Martin). This statement seems strangely similar to a comment made by Mok when discussing the use of "yellowface" in early cinema: "As the common perception of the time was that there simply were no talented Asian Americans to put on the screen in a starring capacity, Whites were frequently used in roles depicting Asians" (190). While it may be true that there is a limited number of professional Southeast Asian voice actors, this film could have been the chance to either discover or highlight more Southeast Asian talent. If any company would have the resources to conduct a casting call for this specific group, it would be the media giant, Disney. More research is needed in this area to determine if there could have been a more concentrated effort to include specifically Southeast Asian actors.

6. Conclusion

       The Disney Princess franchise represents a multi-billion industry within the Disney Corporation (Orenstein). Each of the films represents a multi-million-dollar investment, and Disney relies on these films and characters being relatable and likable to generate revenue. In a society demanding more equitable cultural representation and inclusion in media, it makes sense that Disney would attempt to include more progressive ideologies to meet these demands. We have seen Disney move toward more inclusive representation by including outward LGBTQ+ characters in their animated films and utilizing Trusts to ensure a film's cultural authenticity. *Raya* represents another step forward toward respectful, authentic cultural representation through the utilization of the Southeast Asian Trust and the inclusion of individuals from the target culture all the way through the writing and story process. Where this film falls short is that it did not include enough voice actors from Southeast Asia. Disney is such a well-known and powerful brand that it does not need to rely on billing big-name stars to attract an audience (Moon). This would have been a wonderful opportunity to find more Southeast Asian voice talent and provide them with a platform to showcase their ability, thereby bringing more Asian talent and representation to the film industry. Additionally, the inclusion of more Southeast Asian voices could have further lent to the film's cultural authenticity by utilizing voices that have been influenced by listening to and speaking a Southeast Asian language (Moon).

       Recently, Disney has been making advancements in including more modern-day feminist ideals in their princess films, specifically by removing the "male love interest who saves the heroine and otherwise drives the plot" aspect from its recent films (specifically in *Brave* [2012] and *Moana*). *Raya* also omitted this common

princess movie trope and instead focused on the relationships between the three female leads. The film also echoed the progress made in *Mulan* by depicting a bad-ass female character with incredibly athletic and fighting abilities. However, *Raya* was especially significant as the film took the traditionally passive feminine qualities of cooperation and trust and made them essential to the resolution of the plot, positing these characteristics as powerful, useful, and necessary. Disney could even further this feminist messaging in future films by including and exploring more female identities and relationships.

While Disney is outperforming their competitors when it comes to general female representation in animated films (Schiele et al. 661), there is still a need for the Disney Princess franchise to include more diverse representations of their female characters, specifically in the areas of ability, sexuality, and ethnicity. While *Raya and the Last Dragon* serves to rectify many of the mistakes Disney made in *Mulan* and demonstrates the positive progression Disney has made in representation within the Disney Princess franchise, there is still room for the company and franchise to grow.

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