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Objects of Desire: Photographs and Retrospective Narratives of Fieldwork in Indonesia

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This discussion of my fieldwork, memory, and experience begins with a nod to Handler and Gable's essay (this volume) in which they ask what anthropology can contribute to the study of social memory. I take Gable and Handler's insights about the false dichotomy between memory and history (since, they argue, all history and memory are perspectival) and consider ways in which fieldwork photographs demonstrate the same point. I suggest that my photographs became the repositories for individual interpretations of a host of broader issues related to the nation-state and its agenda. This agenda was reflected in ways the photographs were framed, exchanged, and narrated by anthropologists/photographers and recipients of the photographs as presentations.

In Sulawesi, Indonesia, where I have conducted intermittent but intensive fieldwork since the 1980s, I found that the photos I had taken could act as objects that froze my own and others' memories of the past to events depicted within the borders of the pictures. In other contexts, they were like social contracts, binding present relationships to past in a more fluid and encompassing manner. Both the Indonesians who received the photos as gifts and I who had not seen them since the 1980s were unaware that the ways in which we had posed, stored, or narrated the photos were inflected by broader political and economic forces. Now, cognizant of the impact such

forces have had on both my fieldwork and perception of self and others, I am concomitantly conscious that all memory is perspectival and presentistic. My conclusions, thus, coincide with Gable and Handler's.

THE "OLD" PERSPECTIVE OF FIELDWORK: NOT SEEING THE STATE

These insights surfaced when, in preparation for a PowerPoint retrospective presentation on fieldwork for the Southern Anthropological Society meetings of 2008, I began to digitize negatives and slides that I had not seen since they were taken in the 1980s. From 1984-1986 I conducted fieldwork among so-called tribal people in upland Sulawesi, Indonesia, where I photographed myriad scenes and people. From my 21st-century perspective, it became clear that many of the photos taken had been unwittingly choreographed with categories delineating who was "modern" and who was not—categories that had been promulgated by the Indonesian state during the Suharto regime (1966-1998). Though I had consciously rejected as offensive the claims of the Suharto government that uplanders like the Lauje I studied were inferior to the modern lowlanders, because of their more "primitive subsistence [swidden] agriculture," I nevertheless regarded the lowlanders, as the Indonesian bureaucracy did, as "modern." Following the Indonesian state's contention that its bureaucrats and educated middle class who lived in coastal towns throughout Indonesia were the most civilized and "modern" group of citizens, I did not realize that these state categories had preconditioned me to regard the superficial trappings of "modernity" such as tennis clothes and kids on bicycles as so similar to my own experiences that there was no question that Tinombo dwellers were indeed "modern" like me and, therefore, "different" from the highlanders. It was only after

I scanned negatives I had not seen in 25 years that the pictures of the young “moderns” in Tinombo seemed quaint, provincial, and not as distinct from the upland photos as I had originally thought.

For the first three months of my fieldwork, I lived in the coastal, “modern” town of Tinombo, with my new husband, “Mr. Eric.” There we learned the upland language, Lauje, and waited for the flooded rivers to subside so we could hike to the highlands and begin “real” fieldwork. Anxious to meet as many people as possible, Mr. Eric and I accepted all invitations, using the occasions as a chance to learn the mechanics of our new camera by taking photos and offering them as gifts (*prestasi*) to the subjects. In almost all of these contexts, one or the other of us was usually asked to pose next to a “modern” Tinomboan. For instance, recently digitized images revealed a “holiday piknik” taken in 1984 at a nearby waterfall with young Tinombo bureaucrats and merchants. I now see the Ray-Bans, swimming suits, and Nike running shoes as conspicuous items to mark these people as affluent and stylishly “modern,” and I wonder if Mr. Eric and I were not one more status marker when we were included in the photos of moderns.

Most of the digitized negatives revealed photo after photo of Tinombo’s brides and grooms with either Mr. Eric, me, or both of us posing next to the bride and groom. These photos made us known throughout Tinombo; we quickly became “hot commodities”; every newlywed couple in Tinombo wanted their picture taken with us in the second, *modern*, phase of the ceremony. (See figure 10.1.)



Figure 10.1. Wedding in Tinombo in 1984.

The first phase consisted of the bride and groom, dressed in full colonial regalia, the indigenous (*asli*) segment of the ceremony, positioned on stage in front of the audience. At the end of the wedding, during the modern segment, the couple changed into full western garb, the bride in white gown and the groom in suit and tie. Here, while a rock band played Beatles music, Mr. Eric and I were asked to pose with the couple while someone else took pictures using our camera. The photos we developed became our wedding gift, including a framed 5 x 7 print of us with the bride and groom. We were often surprised later to find these photos displayed on a wall in the newlyweds' front parlor. The requisite pose with the bride in white wedding dress and face powdered until it was pale white did not seem odd until I reviewed the digital images recently, 25 years after the fact, and juxtaposed them with upland wedding pictures.

There are fewer upland wedding photos in my collection, and Mr. Eric and I were never asked to pose with newlyweds nor with their families for photos. At first glance, uplanders appear more traditional than modern lowlanders. For instance, an upland bride and groom never changed clothing, remaining in traditional sarong and

headdress throughout the ceremony. At the time I thought that the uplanders' consistently traditional clothing indicated that they were less acculturated to "modernity." Now, however, I see more similarity than difference between uplanders and lowlanders. In every upland wedding sequence, at least one wedding photo incorporated a shot of the bride and groom beneath President Suharto's picture. No matter how poor the family was, they displayed a photo (perhaps unframed if truly poor) of the President on the wall of their bamboo hut in what could be loosely termed the "front parlor." (See Figure 10.2.)



Figure 10.2. Taipaobal Wedding Couple with Suharto Picture in Background

In wedding portraits, whether the President's face was included inadvertently (a distinct possibility) or purposely choreographed by members of the wedding, the iconic face of Suharto, representing the coercive "New Order" regime, revealed how deeply the state's tentacles had reached upland communities. Despite the fact that the Suharto government had categorized these people as *suku terasing*,

as non-citizen tribals, these upland Lauje regarded themselves as national citizen-subjects and made that claim by hanging the President's photo on the wall and by asking a government representative, the lowland mayor, to speak at their weddings. They did just as lowlanders did.

The presence of Suharto's Mona Lisa-like smile in upland wedding photos and the young and earnest anthropologists in lowland images suggests that both uplanders and lowlanders are making similar statements by referring to the state. Suharto's New Order regime concertedly strove to "modernize" Indonesia through massive (World Bank-sponsored) social engineering projects. Giant billboards and TV commercials advertised Suharto's family planning program (the central component in his scheme) with smiling faces of a Eurasian-looking couple and their two westernized children, urging: "Come On! Let's Modernize!" "A Small Family is a Happy Family."

Although his face did not appear in the wedding photos of lowlanders, Suharto's influence did. Lowlanders made themselves look like the westerners from Suharto-era billboards, whether in clothing, in lightened (powdered) faces, or through requests that western anthropologists stand beside them. For Lowlanders, all things western became synecdoches for all things modern as well as all things nationally sanctioned by the state as exclusive objects for ideal citizens. Thus the tennis outfits and rock bands made lowlanders appear to be more modern than uplanders, whom the state defined as "foreign tribes" (*suku terasing*), lower in rank than lowland citizens. Uplanders, unaware that the state regarded them as beyond development, too primitive to climb the ranks of an evolutionary ladder that would eventually lead to civilization, mimed the actions of lowland moderns by placing Suharto's photo in prominent places in their homes and asking bureaucrats to speak at their weddings. In

the process they revealed a desire to be recognized as citizen-subjects, a desire just as intense as that of the lowlanders. The photos of both lowlanders and uplanders conveyed the same message, but lowland photos including westerners like Mr. Eric and me revealed an awareness that embodying things western signified their loyalty to the state's development agenda. Simultaneously, these prominently displayed photos with westerners marked the owners and the household dwellers as well-positioned citizens at the apex of a state imposed hierarchy of status and privilege that excluded those defined as foreign tribes.

When I returned to the field in 1997, right before Suharto was deposed and after my own eleven-year absence, and now with two children as well as Mr. Eric, these hierarchies were more clearly drawn; Suharto's modernization and development policies had allowed those at the apex of the hierarchy to prosper and those at the bottom to sink even lower. In lowland Tinombo, the number of satellite dishes, new motorcycles, and houses equipped with electricity was astounding. Tinombo streets were now rather empty in the early evening as the gray glow of TV screens kept the family members of the modern merchant class indoors watching *Baywatch* or *MTV-Asia*. If I did encounter a young person on the street, usually from a poorer foothills family without a TV, instead of politely greeting me as they had in the past, or asking the usual set of questions about where I was from and what birth control I used, they would look at me and say in English (not understood at all prior to this), "Hello, Mrs. I Fuck You." Now this may have been a mistranslation of the 1980s greeting, "Hello, Mister (in English) I Love You." Nevertheless, this new statement was off-putting, to say the least.

Even merchant class youth resented the western lifestyle Suharto had recommended that everyone embrace, for it was not as readily available as the regime had promised. Though still desiring contact

with westerners, the resentment seethed beneath the surface. Rather than directly confront me or Mr. Eric, though, some of that resentment was deflected to our two children, Larsen, 7 years old, and Grace, almost 2. Requests for photos with them, especially in retrospect, verged on the scary. Hundreds of strangers wanted pictures with Grace and they would even try to grab her out of our arms. Grace was at the most adorable age as far as Indonesians were concerned, and she had the most desirable hair color, blonde. Strangers of all kinds, travelling through town on the Trans-Sulawesi highway, in buses or jeeps, and stopping for a restaurant break in Tinombo, would see me or Mr. Eric with Grace and rush toward us, begging for posed pictures. Now, though, people had their own cameras and they shot photos even as we walked away to protect exhausted Grace from the disconcerting flashbulbs. Many people came to pinch Grace's cheek, especially pregnant women; they believed touching the cheek of a European child while one was pregnant would bestow lighter-colored skin and prosperity on the prospective newborn. But these women pinched her hard! Grace became so used to aggressive squeezing that when a stranger neared her she began wildly swinging her arms and yelling guttural defensive gibberish.

At this time, overt aggression toward the West had intensified generally. Demonstrations in Jakarta called for multinational companies to divest from Indonesia until Suharto was ousted. Average Indonesians were well aware the Suharto family had accepted bribes from American businessmen representing oil and other multinational corporations so they could conduct business in Indonesia. Suharto had embezzled \$15-35 billion dollars—\$12 billion of which was inaccessibly stashed in an Austrian bank, while the rest of the country remained impoverished (BBC News 2004). The fact that average Indonesians were antagonistically pinching Grace's cheeks while superficially interacting in a friendly manner revealed

resentment over their perceived lack of economic advancement vis-à-vis Westerners. Acting politely (*halus*) on the surface, while feeling turmoil (*kasar*) internally, was a key behavior of civilized elites that Geertz had repeatedly described (1976; 1981). Knowing what Geertz said, however, did not help our surprise at the duplicitous pinches. We often responded by running, Grace snuggled in a backpack until we could duck into a friend's house to escape. When explaining the chase to our modern friends, the initial panic eventually abated. One woman laughingly said it reminded her of the Beatles' movie *Help!* Her comment reframed Grace (and us) into rock stars and the raw fear (a *kasar* emotion) into a more honed (*halus*) recognition that we were an elite group in the eyes of locals.

Larsen's experience, at least initially, did not instill the same degree of panic. He was invited to a series of birthday parties at the homes of *nouveau-riche* Tinombo children. All the children, dressed in their finest, wore themed birthday party hats, ate boxed lunches, drank from matching themed party cups (Pokeman or Star Wars), and dabbed their mouths with matching napkins. The scenes were vaguely reminiscent of an American birthday party. But there were differences; approximately fifty 6-8 year olds sat perfectly still in chairs carefully placed in a circle around the birthday child's living room, while listening quietly as Tinombo's elementary school principal spoke about the importance of schooling for "national progress and modernity." Larsen would be asked to stand next to the birthday child for the "cutting of the cake photo." Candles were lit, never to be blown out, while the birthday child stood on one side, holding a knife, pretending to cut the cake, and Larsen stood on the other side, smiling. The photos looked like exact replicas of what might be shown on American TV, but the actions and meaning behind the images were quite different. The presence of the state (in the school principal), the fact that the children were so still and quiet, and the

fact that the birthday cake was neither cut nor shared made me realize that people here may look like westerners, but the meaning they derived from their behavior was much closer to what locals in the uplands were thinking and doing. Both sets of acquaintances wanted to demonstrate they were loyal citizens of Suharto's westernized state, but not all had the means to do so. Those who could, claimed their place at the apex of the Suharto hierarchy by miming all things western, but resentment toward Suharto and westerners seethed just beneath the smiling faces of these model citizens.

That these were merely "pretend" American birthday parties was clear to 7-year-old Larsen, who complained, "Parties here are no fun 'cause all we do is sit still and we don't even get to eat the cake!" To appease Larsen I bought him and another boy, Iki, bicycles and squirt guns. While I conducted interviews with midwives and clinic personnel in Tinombo, Larsen and his friend rode through the town chasing the pedicab (*becak*) drivers and squirting them with water guns. I had heard a few people tell me Larsen should be more careful. In retrospect, I think they disapproved of his energy and freedom of movement, but in typical Indonesian fashion they never said so directly. Within a week, Iki's father had taken away his son's bicycle, saying, "Iki is too naughty." I ignored this cultural cue, intent instead on pleasing Larsen. One day, Larsen, now the lone bicyclist, rushed out to squirt the young tough guy peddling the pedicab without a passenger. Before Larsen had a chance to squirt him, the fellow kick-boxed Larsen in the chest, knocked him off his bike into an open sewerage canal, and spat on him. Larsen, scratched, bleeding, and scared, returned home crying. Most adults commiserated, but two of my close friends told me that "Larsen got what he deserved; he should not have been chasing a driver while he was working." Another said, "It's not right for a well-brought-up lad like Larsen to behave like a young street urchin who is uncivilized."

I realized I had mistakenly allowed Larsen to act in a way that allied him with lower-class pedicab drivers. The “moderns” in Tinombo believed Larsen deserved the treatment he received. Nevertheless, these same “moderns,” all elites in the community, people who had shared “pikniks” to waterfalls with me and Mr. Eric years before, or had hung wedding photos with me and Mr. Eric in them on their parlor wall, had, unbeknownst to me, called an impromptu town meeting in which they asked the mayor to see that the angry pedicab driver was reprimanded. The hierarchy of position, power, and citizenship was clearly evident here. No wonder the lower-status pedicab driver took out his resentment toward elites and foreigners on an American child. In these months right before Suharto was ousted from office, most coastal dwellers, of any class or status, knew that none of the American oil company executives who had bribed Suharto and his cronies was being questioned for his actions. There was talk among Tinombo people loyal to Suharto and his family that Suharto was not completely at fault, for the corruption had involved westerners as well as him. As one Tinombo man said to me about the Suharto crisis, “A bribe passes between two hands, yet here only one hand is being blamed or being caught.” Larsen and I were receiving privileged treatment, even though we had defied local standards of propriety. Despite their inner resentment, elites smoothed over or made refined (*halus*) their rough feelings about our inappropriate conduct.

Revisiting these incidents recalled by photos provides a new perspective on civilized behavior, modernity, globalization, and the state. For Indonesian “moderns” who worked for the Suharto bureaucracy, the world was structured in the same way as it had been during colonial times; the world was conceived in terms of a Lewis Henry Morgan-style hierarchy with its Social Darwinist overtones (Duncan, 2004). “Modern” people regarded themselves as more

refined (*halus*) and therefore civilized because they smoothed things over, made the rough and negative seem positive. The less civilized, the crude ones (*kasar*), revealed their inner emotions and struggles; they moved, sweated, and toiled in the fields (or on pedicabs) in a system that placed the effortless, seemingly refined activity of bureaucrats and merchants on the highest rungs of a ladder and the sweaty, toiling, angry actions of farmers or pedicab drivers on the lowest rungs. When I let Larsen act like a “worker,” I also revealed the sham of the effortless western-life of prosperity that was the promised reward for all those “modern” Suharto bureaucrats. Suharto’s state had promised that if Indonesians behaved as if they were “modern” and western, if they had smaller families, and if they looked as if they lived effortless lives, then they eventually would have those lives. The modern bureaucrats had allied themselves with me and my family in the 1980s because they desired the refined status that we represented. In the earlier photos in which Mr. Eric or I were included with the elites, the inclusion marked them as if they were on the same rung of the civilization ladder as Americans. The moderns’ wedding photos did not merely signify a desire to be like westerners, it marked the people in the images as superior to anyone else in the community and equal to elites throughout Indonesia and beyond.

At this moment, though, the year before Suharto’s regime finally fell, the prosperity that his New Order regime had promised had not materialized for everyone. At the end of the 1990s, the happiness that was tantalizingly revealed through images of prosperity in TV programs beamed from Jakarta or in American TV programs was now revealed as a false promise, never to be attained for the average Indonesian. The Tinomboers who had educated themselves, married later, and practiced family planning, just as the government had urged, regarded the pledged rewards from association with the West to be, in reality, a sham. Tinomboers who had not known me or Mr.

Eric during the past, and with whom we had no prior social relationship, reacted as one would to anyone seeming to represent the broken promises of Suharto's scheme; they reacted with contempt (the spitting and the comments) and brutality (kickboxing a 7-year-old child). Still unable to critique their government, the resentment erupted against Westerners like me and my children because the coercive Suharto regime prohibited dissension. When young men uttered, "Hello, Mrs. I Fuck You," the phrase contained multiple subtexts of significance.

HOW I BECAME A BLONDE: MIMING FOR THE STATE

By 2001, Indonesia had elected two Presidents since Suharto left office and was adjusting to democracy, transparent government, and free markets. Beleaguered by the Asian financial crisis and clear evidence of corruption in his cabinet, the Indonesian Senate (MPR) in a special session impeached President Wahid in July 2001 and elected Megawati Sukarno as President. Sulawesians talked of her credentials as a businesswoman and claimed, falsely, that she had attended Georgetown with Bill Clinton and their friendship would thus improve Indonesian business. Meanwhile President Wahid refused to relinquish power to Megawati. The nation was paralyzed. In transit to Tinombo, I was stuck in a Best Western hotel in South Sulawesi when all airports, government offices, and banks shut down. It was days before I could reach Tinombo. Contacting friends I knew in this town, I arranged to meet at one of the few open places in Makassar, the Yuppi salon. Lili told me, "Salons are always open in a crisis because the stylists give the gift (*prestasi*) of making everyone look refined (*halus*) on the outside. Just like they do at weddings. If we feel rough or crude (*kasar*) on the inside, the stylists make us seem refined and soon we feel like we look." The exchange rate being favorable to me, I offered to treat my friends to a cut and style. I decided

on blonde highlights. As stylists combed and coiffed, we all talked, revealing our inner fears; some worried about demonstrations and riots, others feared their marooned husbands/partners would stray. I spoke about my impending divorce. To soothe us, two male stylists dressed in wigs, gowns, and heels began to sing “I Will Survive” and other ’70s and ’80s feminist pop songs. The blonde highlighting solution, left on my hair longer than it should have been during the cabaret show, resulted in a new overall haircolor—blonde. One friend exclaimed, “Isn’t it wonderful? You forgot about your own problems, we about our country’s problems, and now you look like a real Western woman. You have blonde hair.”

When I arrived ten days later in Tinombo, my friends told me, “You look like the deceased Princess Diana.” When I asked them to explain what they meant, one friend said, “Now you are a more appropriate and better Western female.” In the foothills towns of Dusunan and Lombok, many people just stared at me, rather than enthusiastically greet me as before. They retrieved photos of me from 17 years earlier. It was clear that my brown hair from the past and blonde coiffure in the present confused them. One man said, “See this picture, remember? Mr. Eric took this picture with you, me, and my grandmother. You look different now, but you are the same person, aren’t you? You do remember?” Over the first few days I was there, incidents like these happened repeatedly. Eventually, subtly, after telling me about what had happened to all the others in the photo, the presenter of the photo would say something like “Remember how my grandmother told you secrets and showed you the ritual for healing malaria? You brought sugar and cooking oil to my grandmother.” I recognized they were too proud to directly ask for money or goods, and they were jogging my memory so I would recall my past debts and obligations and respond appropriately. The photograph was a material reference to my prior gift and proof of our

relationship. As a social contract reminding me to continue acting as an ideal citizen, the photo prompted me to give a gift in a refined way, not crude nor embarrassing.

Later that same evening, I brought some photos of one of the midwives of her now-deceased grandmother, an image Si Giombang had asked for when I had visited the year before. She had been reluctant then to answer my new research questions about midwifery and the government, and I think my frustration had shown. I had not been able to tell if she had frozen my research questions into her memory of the past when I was more interested in ritual secrets, which she willingly proffered, or if she was hiding her negative opinions about the government's women's health programs. She said, "My grandmother told me long ago she was willing to reveal secrets to you because you had come to the village like good Lauje spirits come, as a husband-wife pair." Tears welled up in my eyes. I explained I was in the middle of a divorce. She confessed she was having identical husband problems. We eventually turned to the positive and discussed the wonderful children we had had from these husbands. Suddenly I realized, in the process of talking, Si Giombang had now answered the questions I had asked the year before.

The photos and memories we had exchanged were the gifts we gave to each other to recollect the happier moments of our lives and smooth over the rough ones. Si Giombang had been hesitant the year before to talk about the government health clinic and her dismay at its condescending attitude to midwives such as herself. Perhaps this was because it might indicate that she did not belong to the national community of good citizens. As a foothills Lauje woman who was constantly regarded by "moderns" in Tinombo as one step away from a *suku terasing* or primitive tribal person (especially since she practiced "traditional" medicine and believed in placental spirits [Nurse 1999]), she avoided criticizing the government to my face.

This exchange brought our relationship back to the state of interaction that the government elites, even in post-Suharto times, admired; the interaction now was that between proper citizens who “foster social connectivity” through gift exchange (Boellstorff 2007, 67; Pemberton 1994, 9).

CONCLUSION: WHICH NATIVES’ POINT OF VIEW?

The “gift,” *prestasi* in Indonesian, a loan word from Dutch, had become a central feature of Suharto era designations of good citizenship and, inadvertently, a component of my gifts of photographs in the 1980s. For lowlanders in Tinombo, or in the foothills, my photos represented a situated social relationship, an exchange in which the photo itself, as a gift, acted as a social contract, evoking perhaps tacit, perhaps overt, Works Cited to national belonging. The photos served as an icebreaker for recalling a host of relationships in and out of the picture’s frame. In post-Suharto times, people brought these photos out because, newly blonde, I no longer looked like the person in the photo. Moreover, the urgency, even desperation, with which they presented them revealed that the photos represented more than just a memory of a moment. These images had become tickets to national belonging and social and moral responsibility, an obligation to reciprocate, to exchange friendship and empathy for information, perspective, and occasional provisions. The memories evoked by these photos, at once disembodied from the blonde I now was and the brunette I had been, were no longer unmoored from a narrative having to do with a transformation to someone else that was brought about by Indonesians trying to help me be the best Westerner I possibly could be. In some senses, then, as a blonde, I had become more like them; performing as the Tinombo moderns dressed in white wedding gowns and powdered faces were, as the iconic Western female. I now posed like the blonde princess they saw on TV, though they

knew she was dead and I was brunette. They knew they too were not authentic Westerners, but we all feigned happiness, pretended to be ideal citizen-subjects, while also knowing that beneath the smiles, peroxide and powder were secrets, lies, and struggles. Something in the act of doing the performing brought out the similarities and differences between us all. Both of us were shaped by the personal as well as the political.

In conclusion, I support Gable and Handler's point that memory, whether theirs or ours, is recollected through a perspectival and presentistic lens. I suggest, then, that if a "native point of view" about memory exists, as Gable and Handler suggest, it is one that is dialogic, shaped in interaction with an anthropologist and mediated by his or her recollected and theoretical perspective about what authentic worldviews are. Ethnographies and recollections of fieldwork rarely reveal an authentic native voice but are mediated through an anthropologist who translates into English what authentic natives believe. Both "the native" and "the anthropological" perspectives are layered perspectival descriptions reflecting multiple social and temporal interpretations of the past as the present shifts. Thus photos do not reveal the facts of experience any more than memories do, and neither do the narratives about them. What photos can reveal is that the images of self and other embedded in one's memories are inflected by categories of sameness and difference prevalent at a particular point in time and shaped by more hegemonic state and/or disciplinary agendas. Culture and memory are neither frozen nor hegemonic recitations of an authentic past, nor mere individual perspectives, but continually negotiated dialogues reflecting the elusive and shifting boundaries dividing "natives views of us" and "ours of them."

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