

The Christian and Dance: The Redemption of Dance for Use in Christian Worship

by Pastor Ed Lapiz

To clap or not to clap?

To raise hands or not to raise hands?

To kneel or not to kneel?

There are matters concerning bodily movements in Christian worship that lead to the ultimate question: To dance or not to dance? After all, any movement beyond paralysis is a step in the direction of its climactic other-end: dance.

The Christian world is divided on this interesting issue with petrification on one extreme end and electrification on the other, with everyone else standing or shuttling in the many varied shades of persuasion in between. Congregational walls get over-simplistically defined by the kinds of movements or postures banned, avoided, discouraged, tolerated desired, encouraged, advocated or imposed by their respective ecclesiastical powers.

What is dance? What is its place in the lives of Christians? Is it of the devil or of God? Must it be destroyed with iconoclastic zeal or must it be nurtured with wise, even reverent concern?

Dance in Biblical Culture

Dance has been a prominent and an integral part of biblical culture. Military victory was celebrated in dance, as when Miriam the prophetess led all the women in dancing after God destroyed Pharaoh's army under the sea¹, or when the women of Israel met and greeted their triumphant menfolk returning from battle.² It also expressed adoration or and utmost submission to God, as when David danced before the Ark of the Covenant like a slave would dance before his master.³ As such, dance was also a sacred expression of praise and worship to God.⁴ Also, it celebrated God's favour and restoration.⁵ Aside from its religious character, dance was also an expression of personal happiness.⁶ Such was the importance of dance as an expression and indication of both worship and celebration that Jeremiah bemoaned the departure of the reason and ability for dancing in his troubled times.⁷ It must be noted, however, that such dancing was done either solo⁸ or by same-gender groups⁹ and was an expression of joy, thanksgiving or worship not as entertainment nor a performance before people but before the Lord.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Psalmist exalts God for turning his wailing into dancing¹¹, while Solomon essays the extremes and balances of life and behavioural propriety by wisely noting that there is a time to mourn and a time to dance.¹² But just like any good other good thing that was counterfeited by evil forces, dance has been usurped, twisted, corrupted and abused in the hands of the ungodly. It was used in pagan worship¹³ and unbridled revelry. Perhaps fearing she would be forced to dance indecently, Queen Vashti vehemently refused to appear before the king's drunken guests.¹⁴ In New Testament times, the infamous performance of Herodias' daughter before another court in another time cost John the Baptizer his all-precious head.¹⁵

Dance in Christian Culture

While dance was featured, or at least allowed, by early Christian churches,¹⁵ it began to disappear over time. One reason is that it later "caused degeneracy and was subsequently banned, as is indicated by many of the early Christian writers."¹⁷ Another very probable reason for the disappearance of dance from religious life is the development of cerebral theology as the Roman Empire adopted, sponsored and subsequently ruled Christianity. As the faith was Romanized and westernized, Judeo-Christian traditions, which were Eastern in origin and therefore holistic in character, began to move from mystical to philosophical, sensual to intellectual and expressive to stoical. This trend was further intensified when New Testament Christianity evolved into Catholicism and then into Protestantism, especially when the Western tendency to dichotomize everything into sacred-versus-profane, or religious-versus-secular was developed to near perfection. As dance became increasingly associated with 'this world' rather than the 'other,' dance in worship was lost altogether, with its attendant spirituality.

The Power of Dance as Ministry

Bodily movements, gestures and formations have always been parts of spiritual configurations and expressions. From the beginning of time, God's people bowed, knelt,¹⁸ prostrated, fell on the ground,¹⁹ and lifted their faces, arms and hands²⁰ before the Lord. It is of no little interest that Daniel risked being seen, arrested, and given the death penalty by insisting on praying by his window that opened toward Jerusalem²¹. More curiously, Israel kept winning in battle while Moses lifted up his hands in prayer, and began losing whenever the leader lowered his hands.²² Was such bodily formation so relevant in procuring God's favour that two men were tasked to hold Moses' hands up as he, due to fatigue, could not hold them up on his own any longer?²³ Furthermore, the Scriptures admonish the faithful to lift up holy hands,²⁴ and even lay hands²⁵ during prayer. Such was the seeming centrality of bodily movements, formations, and connections that the Lord Jesus touched bodies, even of the dead, in his ministrations. In so doing, he not only challenged petrified traditions but also technically broke Jewish law! Was bodily movement so central to worship that certain offerings were even specifically ordained and meant to be waived?²⁶ What happens when movement, an important component of spirituality, is subdued, suppressed, forbidden and, worst, lost?

Dance, whether in symbolic imitation of movements of creatures, expressions of emotion; through gestures, or involuntary and reflexive impulses, celebrate life in general and the wonder of the creation and design of the human body in particular.²⁷ To move - to dance - is to demonstrate, celebrate and exalt the genius of God's creation of the human body. More significantly, it could be to move, to pose, to align in physical configurations, to reflect or flow with spiritual dimensions that allow the body to be the meeting point of the spiritual and the physical and thus become a channel of mystical impulses and prayer. For what other reason would physical postures and movements figure heavily in biblical culture? Or why would the pronouncement that Michal remained barren and childless throughout her life immediately follow her berating of David's dancing before the Ark of the Covenant?²⁸ (What barrenness awaits or inflicts today's Michals who judge today's Davids?) Or why would stillness be equated with death?²⁹

All these gestures and movements and their supposed attendant spiritual meanings *a'i* power, however, were lost when Christianity turned from sensual to cerebral, from spirit to philosophical, from holistic to dichotomised. (Could this oversight be held accountable for the salt's loss of much saltiness?)

Aside from its presently little-understood mystical character, dance is also a very powerful communication tool. Just the thought of the balletic renditions of *Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker*, *Romeo and Juliet*, etc. readily shows the potentials of dance as language. No wonder even Mao's cultural revolution employed dance to the hilt in trying to charge hearts and minds. In a much greater way, dance can very effectively express of worship praise, thanksgiving, and petition to God. It can also explain, exemplify and teach profound and abstract ideas from and about God to both unbelievers and believers. Dance can also add great beauty, variety and pleasure to worship.

As it can express what is otherwise difficult or impossible to verbalize, dance is also an amazing channel of communication to God and to people. Enlightened Christians can only be thankful for the recent re-emergence of dance in the Church.

The Redemption of Dance

Just like in Biblical times, dance today has been and continues to be grave/ corrupted and misused. However, this must not necessitate the complete or wholesale rejection and destruction of the art form. It is too precious. too beautiful and too powerful a tool to be abandoned and left entirely in the hands of the devil.

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Dance must be redeemed for Christian use *a. Dance in the Philippines*

Dance in the Philippines is largely associated with worship. Indigenous and even colonize: Filipinos danced to pray and to express thanksgiving and deep spirituality. Even today

most traditional dances that survived the ravages of time are religious in purpose and essence. Even what some enthusiasts may classify as social dances are actually integral parts of larger contexts that are religious in character and purpose. But though very spiritual in nature, Philippine dance must be redeemed and purified if it is to be used in Christian worship as it has largely been associated with paganism. Many ancient dances survived among tribal groups that successfully resisted colonisation, while the same type of dances evolved among peoples who have been Islamized or Christianized. It is noteworthy that the Filipinos' affinity with and attachment to dance caused them to subvert both Islam and Catholicism.



They stubbornly kept their dances, however customised those have become due to accommodation of new and foreign encroachments, just to deflect further suppression or destruction. The strict segregation of the sexes among the more conservative Muslims and the evolution of the Subli into dances of devotion to the Cross and the Pandanggo to the Virgin Mary are just classic examples of such survival-through-accommodation. This is probably one of the reasons why iconoclastic Christian theologians and missionaries advocated and continue to move for the eradication of dance in the name of Christ; they perceive dance as strongholds of evil. But a 'redeemed' and 'purified' heritage is better than no heritage at all, which is bound to happen if redemption of indigenous dance is not done at all. Redeemed dance in the hands of Christians is definitely better than abandoned dance in the hands of the unchurched. To redeem such art forms from pagan use, practitioners must advocate and exclude or cancel texts and essences unacceptable to Christianity and use the greater part that will remain after expurgation in the context of Christian worship.

b. The Philosophy of Redeeming Dance

Redeeming dance for Christian worship is premised on the following principles:

1. Created arts, especially music and dance, came from God and must be used for God's glory.³⁰ Satan does not own anything. He is not a creator but only a thief and a destroyer. Creative arts, like most of creation, were only grabbed, distorted, and misappropriated for himself by the evil one.³¹
2. God's people, who were themselves redeemed by the blood of Christ and who are inheritors of the earth, must repossess such arts for Christian use and God's glory.³²
 - * The whole creation has been groaning for redemption
 - * Dance can be very powerful tools of evangelism and worship
3. Philippine dance forms, like most indigenous dances all over the world, are neither pagan nor evil. As non-living things, they do not have inherent, nor are capable of, morality or immorality. It is the heart of the dancer and the object of worship that *define the morality of the art form*.³³

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As the power of dance as a tool of worship and communication is beyond doubt, the same power becomes gravely destructive, if not lethal, in the hands of the devil. That is why redemption of dance is imperative. Christians must repossess the arts and thus dispossess evil forces of such powerful tools. As Christians redeem, reclaim and use dance and other art forms in the worship of the One True God, we not only strengthen our armoury but we also weaken and deprive that of the devil. Not to redeem and use dance in Christian worship and teaching is to concede and consign it to the exclusive misuse of the world.

c. Decolonizing Christianity

The culture of Philippine Christianity is predominantly foreign in essence and form. This phenomenon is rooted largely on the country's colonial history. Spain propagated Roman Catholicism during its rule in the Philippines from the 16th to the 19th centuries. America brought Protestantism when it occupied the country from 1899 to 1946. This resulted in Christianity wearing a western colonial face. With every step that Christianity took forward Philippine indigenous culture was pushed backward to the extent that successful evangelization had become almost equated with the destruction of native culture and identity.

Can Christianity only live if indigenous culture dies? Must an indigenous person be stripped of identity and be westernized to become a true Christian? *Is* western culture propagated through colonialism, geopolitics, globalization or 'evangelization' the only acceptable culture for the Christian church? The answer can only be NO!

In the Philippines, an exciting move of the Holy Spirit is decolonizing Christianity and setting the indigenous peoples to be free; to be Christians and yet remain or return to being indigenous.



One mighty tool that the Lord uses to catalyze this rebirth and renewal is KALOOB: Philippine Music and Dance Ministry. Founded and led by this writer, KALOOB is a group of enthusiasts committed to the research, redemption and promotion of indigenous culture for use in Christian evangelization and worship. KALOOB means "gift" of "revelation." Members of this ministry believe that one of God's greatest gifts to the Filipino people is music and dance and that their expression can comprise the Filipino's profound offerings to Jesus. They also believe that the ministry of cultural redemption is a revealed calling from God.

Other Spiritual Fruits of Redeeming Dance, especially Indigenous Dance

Indigenous communities in the Philippines are the repositories of a rich cultural heritage. Most of their cultural expressions predate colonization. This includes music, dance, beliefs, festivities and material heritage. For hundreds of years now, many such tribes have kept their traditions, resisting the influences of colonization and globalization. However, at the onset of evangelization of the tribes, indigenous Filipino communities started to

abandon their traditional music and dances upon being convinced by missionaries that these were 'of the devil.' Through careful cultural redemption, what was lost — including their sense of self, personhood and dignity — could be returned to them. This redemptive ministry will also validate and encourage tribal folk. For long, the Christian church has unwittingly stripped them of self-worth by systematically rejecting and destroying their cultural heritage. With enlightened appreciation and use of such art forms, the Church can now reverse her culturally destructive role and even become the patroness of indigenous art. With the realization that they can be true worshipers of the true God in the context of their own culture, these tribal people can rediscover themselves and thus be rooted and founded in their heritage. They can be unshackled from their inferiority complex and realize their fullest potential.

As Christian churches start to patronize these indigenous cultures for Christian worship, the demand for indigenous materials such as musical instruments and woven cloths for use in church wear will increase. Tribal people can then go back to their looms to weave again. The younger generation will start learning their elder's weaving techniques as well as the production of indigenous musical instruments. Our tribal people will then make a significant contribution to the country's economic recovery, especially their own, not to mention that Christian churches will be much more colourful, interesting and relevant.

The mission of cultural redemption is not to pull the Church back to the Stone Age, but to spur her into the future, only with feet firmly grounded on solid cultural heritage and sense of selfhood. Churches need not revert to anthropological 'purity' in music and dance, though it will surely be enriching to feature it in special events, and to offer it to the Lord periodically. The goal is to see the Church use and reinterpret for contemporary worship the rich musical, dance, and costume heritage of our people. This is mainly because the dance and music vocabulary of the Filipino Christian church today, at least those that use dance in worship, is needy of enriching and Filipinization. At present, most worship teams are confined to and limited by borrowings from foreign forms (i.e. tambourine, "ballet", etc.), missing a treasure trove of sounds and movements more expressive of the Filipino soul.

We should evolve a Filipino Christian liturgy and contribute the same to the Universal Church. We can inspire and assist churches in other countries to also redeem their culture for God's glory and therefore protect it from further destruction by the same Christian Church. It is KALOOB's vision to make the Filipino Church really Filipino in essence and form and to encourage other national churches to do the same with themselves.

Redemption of dance also results in the redemption of tribal and other colonized people's dignity from religious colonization. Sadly, Christianity has been used as handmaiden of colonization because nearly every tribe and nation that has been colonized was Christianized

or vice-versa. By imposing Western Christian aesthetics on Christianized peoples, the latter's sense of self and dignity was badly damaged and Western ideals were overly celebrated and exulted. If Jesus is Truth and His Truth sets free, then cultural communities must be set free to become Christian in the context of their cultural heritage and sense of being.

The Process of Redemption

The redemption of indigenous culture, specifically dance, and the contextualization of Christianity include the following steps:

Research

This entails the observation, recording, encoding of the text and context of specific dances and bringing them from the sticks to the school.

Filtration

Researched materials are studied, analyzed and filtered through Scripture. While the researchers' love for indigenous culture could be great, it certainly should not be greater than their love for Biblical truth. While the aim is to preserve and use elements of indigenous culture in Christian evangelization and worship, there must be the firm resolve to leave out those that contradict the Spirit of God's teachings.

Interpretation

Meanings of gestures and symbols are given contextual interpretation based on thorough research.

Redefinition

Elements, symbols or gestures whose meanings have been lost through time are given new Christian meanings and are used in worship and celebration of Jesus.

For instance, a traditional dance featuring oil lamps balanced on the heads of dancers (*Pandanggo Sa flaw or Wasiwas*) is now performed by KALOOB to celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit like tongues of fire on the heads of believers. An ancient martial dance



(*Kuntaw*) is now rendered to remind Christians of their spiritual warfare with and victory over the enemy. An age-old peace pact (*Vochong*) featuring the drinking of wine between enemy tribes is staged to interpret the Lord's Supper and the believer's peace with God through the blood of Jesus. A folk dance done between clashing bamboo poles (*Tinikling*) is performed to demonstrate the snares of sin and the way to avoid its entrapments.

Philippine dances can now be seen through Christian eyes, preserved and used as demonstrations of Biblical truth and celebration of Christian ideals. They will no longer be considered pagan and demonic, as they have been in the Church for so long. For too long dominant cultures of the West or other economically affluent 'Christian' nations have justified their destruction of Philippine dances and the supplanting of them with foreign culture.

Promotion

KALOOB promotes the study, preservation and use of indigenous culture in Christian ministry and worship through instruction. It offers on-going seminars and workshops on Filipino music and dance to worship teams and enthusiasts all over the country.

'Prayformance'

As each presentation is done in the spirit of prayer and offering, KALOOB calls its presentations 'prayformances.'

Publication

Paano Maging Pilipinong Kristiano or *Becoming a Filipino Christian*, written by this author, is an anthology that explains and promotes cultural redemption. More publications are presently being developed, especially the definitive book on cultural redemption.

Music Album Production

To support the redemption and use of Philippine dances in worship, KALOOB produces and distributes modern music worship albums which feature Philippine indigenous instruments and musicality.

To clap or not to clap?

To raise hands or not to raise hands?

To dance or not to dance?

Michal received a curse for trivializing David's dance which the Lord obviously blessed. The 'unpardonable sin' is conclusively the act of ascribing to Beelzebub what was done by God himself.³⁴ Peter was strongly admonished not to call unclean what God called clean.³⁵ Obviously, judgementalism and mislabeling are very serious offences against God. Those who are not (yet) into dancing should be extremely careful not to judge nor mislabel this act which may indeed prove to be a sacred, if not a crucial, vessel in God's temple.

References

- ¹ Ex 15:20 — Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.
- ² 1 Sam 18:6 — When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes.
- ³ 2 Sam 6:16 — As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart.
- ⁴ Ps 149:3 — Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. Ps 150:4 — Praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute,

- ⁵ Jer 31:4 — I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful.
- ⁶ Lk 15:25 — Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.
- ⁷ Lam 5:15 — Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning.
- ⁸ 2 Sam 6:14 — David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might
- ⁹ Ex 15:20 — Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.
- ¹⁰ 2 Sam 6:20-22 — When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"
- David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD'S people Israel—I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor."
- ¹¹ Ps 30:11 — You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.
- ¹² Ecc 3:4 — A time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance
- ¹³ Ex 32:19 — When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.
- 1 Kings 18:26 — So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.
- ¹⁴ Esther 1:11-12 — To bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.
- ¹⁵ Mk 6:22 — When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.
- The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.'
- ¹⁵ Freeman, John D. "Dancing". *The Living Bible Encyclopedia in Story and Pictures*. Vol. 4 H.S. Stuttman Co., Inc. 1968. USA pp 471- 472
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ps 95:6 — Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
- ¹⁹ Deut 9:18 — Then once again I fell prostrate before the LORD for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the LORD'S sight and so provoking him to anger.
- ²⁰ Ps 28:2 — Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.
- ²¹ Dan 6:10 — Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.
- ²² Ex 17:11 — As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.
- ²³ Ex 17:12 — When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset.
- ²⁴ 1 Tim 2:8 — I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.
- ²⁵ 2 Tim 1:6 — For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

The Redemption of Dance for Use in Christian Worship

- ²⁶ Ex 29:26 — After you take the breast of the ram for Aaron's ordination, wave it before the LORD as a wave offering, and it will be your share.
- ²⁷ Ps 139:14 — I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
- ²⁸ 2 Sam 6:20-23 — When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"
- David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD'S people Israel—I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor."
- And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.
- ²⁹ Ex 15:16 — Terror and dread will fall upon them. By the power of your arm they will be as still as a stone — until your people pass by, O LORD, until the people you bought pass by.
- ³⁰ Deut 10:14 — To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.
- 1 Chron 29:11 — Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.
- Is 1:17 — Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.
- ³¹ Jn 10:10 — The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.
- ³² Rom 8:22-23 — We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.
- ³³ 1 Chron 28:9 — 'And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever.
- ³⁴ Matt 12:31 — And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.
- ³⁵ Acts 10:15 — The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Ed Lapiz



Pastor Ed Lapiz is the resident pastor of the Day By Day local church in Makati City, Philippines, and senior pastor of Day By Day Christian Ministries which now administers churches in the Philippines, Japan, Middle East and the U.S.A. His pioneering underground mission in the Middle East starting in 1985 gave birth to this church network.

One of Pastor Ed's major visions is the redemption of the arts, especially music, dance and rituals, and the consecration, offering and use of such creative expressions in Christian worship.

His fascination with Filipino culture spans more than three decades of study, research, teaching and staging of cultural productions in the Philippines, Middle East, Europe and America.

He holds a degree in Philippine Arts from the University of the Philippines, and is presently writing his thesis to earn a Master's Degree in Philippine Studies at University of the Philippines.

KALOOB, an ensemble of musicians, dancers, researchers and enthusiasts committed to study, redeem and promote Philippine music and dance, was founded by Pastor Ed in pursuit of his vision to make the Filipino Church really Filipino in essence and form.

Pastor Ed zealously desires the Filipino Christian Church to be patriotic and to contribute to nation building. He believes and advocates that the Christian Church must be the sanctuary, not the cemetery of culture.

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