

Peace Literacy Education Based on Conflict Experience in Aceh

Risdam Habibi Hasibuan ^{a,1,*}, Yasir Maulana Rambe ^{b,2}, Rahmi Seri Hanida ^{c,3}

^a Universitas Samudera, Langsa, Aceh, Indonesia

^b Universitas Samudera, Langsa, Aceh, Indonesia

^c STAIN Mandailing Natal, Panyabungan, Indonesia

¹ risdamhabibihisibuan@unsam.ac.id; ² yasirmaulanarambe@unsam.ac.id; ³ rahmiserihanida@stain-madina.ac.id

* Corresponding Author; Risdam Habibi Hasibuan



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the absence of Aceh's conflict history in Indonesia's national history curriculum and its implications for strengthening peace literacy in post-conflict education. Although values such as tolerance, diversity, and peace are emphasized in national curriculum goals, this study finds that these values are taught in isolation from local historical narratives—particularly the conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and a case study method, data were collected through curriculum document analysis, history textbooks, interviews with teachers, and classroom observations in several secondary schools in Aceh. The findings reveal that history teachers face both pedagogical and institutional gaps when attempting to introduce local conflict into the classroom. The lack of teaching guidelines, learning materials, and structural support leads to generic teaching practices that avoid sensitive topics, including Aceh's conflict. As a result, students are denied access to contextual, reflective, and experience-based understandings of peace and history. This study underscores the urgency of integrating local history and peace literacy as part of reconciliatory education and calls for curriculum reform to reposition history education as a transformative, rather than merely normative, pedagogical space.

KEYWORDS

History Education,
Peace Literacy
Aceh,
Post-Conflict
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1. Introduction

The armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, which lasted for nearly three decades (1976–2005), left a multidimensional impact on Acehnese society. Beyond the destruction of infrastructure and the loss of thousands of lives, the conflict caused deep social disintegration, severed intercommunal relationships, and left a long-lasting psychological trauma (Sahrudin et al., 2024). At its core, the conflict was fueled by structural inequalities in the distribution of natural resources, political marginalization at the local level, and resistance to centralized state governance (Rahman, 2023). Within this context, cultural expressions such as *Hikayat Prang Sabi* served as ideological instruments that shaped a spirit of resistance and Acehnese ethno-national identity (Sari et al., 2022). However, following the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), these narratives began to transform—from “songs of war” to symbols of peace and social revival.

The post-MoU period marked a transitional phase in Aceh's peacebuilding process, characterized by the reintegration of former combatants into formal sociopolitical structures, the formation of local political parties, and the decentralization of power through special autonomy status (Saputra et al., 2022; Zainal et al., 2022). Nevertheless, several studies indicate that the implementation of the peace agreement has not been consistently effective. Persistent inequalities in the distribution of post-conflict resources, the weakness of local institutions, and the rise of post-conflict political elitism have posed new challenges to sustaining peace in Aceh (Rahman, 2023). As a result, the peace process has often taken on an administrative character, rather than a transformative one.

In this context, education emerges as a critical space for reconstructing collective memory, repairing social relationships, and fostering intergenerational values of peace. History and civic education are ideally positioned to convey the lessons of conflict and reconciliation. Yet, in practice, Indonesia's national education system remains highly centralized and fails to accommodate local complexities such as those experienced in Aceh. This reveals a significant conceptual and implementation gap that has yet to be addressed by policy or research.

One of the most relevant responses to this challenge is the development of peace literacy education. Peace literacy involves more than just an understanding of nonviolence—it encompasses cognitive dimensions (knowledge about conflict and peace), affective aspects (empathy, tolerance), and conative elements (peaceful social action) simultaneously (Hakvoort et al., 2022; Ndwandwe, 2024; Truter et al., 2025). This approach must be grounded in the sociocultural and historical contexts where it is implemented. International studies show that peace education rooted in local experience is more effective than generic models. For instance, the RETOPEA project in Europe demonstrated that integrating local historical narratives into classroom learning enhances historical consciousness, tolerance, and students' capacity to envision peace (Maiden, 2024).

However, Indonesia's educational landscape has yet to reflect this understanding. Peace literacy continues to be approached as a set of normative values taught declaratively, rather than through contextual, experience-based pedagogy. A study by Humaizi et al. (2024) highlights how the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in Medan successfully initiated a digital peace narrative using participatory communication strategies on social media. While promising, such initiatives remain isolated and disconnected from the formal education system. In Aceh—rich in lived peace narratives—there have been no systematic efforts to document, archive, or integrate these narratives into local curriculum design. (Humaizi et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, other studies show that values such as empathy, cooperation, and environmental awareness have begun to appear in primary-level Indonesian textbooks through illustrations and moral stories. However, these contents remain generic and disconnected from real-world conflict experiences. This disconnect reflects a broader misalignment between peace education as practiced in schools and the lived realities of post-conflict communities like Aceh (Maulidina et al., 2024).

Accordingly, the urgency of this study arises from two critical gaps: first, the absence of curriculum policy that explicitly supports the integration of local conflict narratives such as Aceh's into peace education; and second, the lack of comprehensive studies that document and evaluate how local narratives of conflict and reconciliation can be pedagogically mobilized in the classroom. Existing literature tends to be theoretical or focused on international case studies, leaving a critical void in understanding how local dynamics in Indonesia could inform post-conflict educational models.

This research also underscores that transforming conflict into an educational instrument requires a paradigm shift—from ideological (top-down, state-centered) approaches to dialogical and reflective (bottom-up, community-based) education. In Aceh, this means positioning victims, former combatants, and ordinary citizens as active knowledge-holders in the learning process—not merely as historical subjects. The study also highlights the potential of community-based and digital approaches—such as student-led videos, peace posters, and school podcasts—as participatory tools in peace literacy that resonate with digital-native generations.

By positioning Aceh's conflict and reconciliation narratives as learning resources, education not only teaches what happened but also why it happened, how it impacted communities, and what can be learned from the experience. This kind of education does not merely impart knowledge—it fosters social awareness, empathy across identities, and active participation in building a more peaceful and just society.

Therefore, this study aims to address both theoretical and practical gaps in the discourse of peace education in Indonesia. By focusing on the Aceh context, it contributes to the development of locally

grounded curricula and proposes a replicable model of post-conflict education that is both contextually relevant and pedagogically transformative.

2. Method

This study aims to explore in depth the potential of conflict narratives and peacebuilding experiences in Aceh as authentic learning resources for peace literacy education. To achieve this objective, a qualitative descriptive approach was employed using a case study method. This approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive and contextual understanding of complex social phenomena—particularly within post-conflict settings that are embedded in cultural values, collective memory, and localized sociopolitical dynamics (Creswell, J W., Creswell, 2018).

The case study method enables the researcher to holistically examine a specific context—in this case, the Province of Aceh—which has experienced a prolonged history of armed conflict and a formal-informal transition to peace through the Helsinki MoU and grassroots reconciliation practices. As Bogdan (2022) emphasizes, case studies are suitable for capturing authentic and nuanced perceptions, narratives, and lived experiences of local actors (Robert C. Bogdan, 2022). This method provides a richer understanding of how conflict memory is interpreted, reconstructed, and utilized as a pedagogical resource by educational stakeholders in Aceh.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. The document analysis focused on four main types of sources: (1) local historical archives and cultural narratives, such as *Hikayat Prang Sabi*; (2) textbooks used in elementary and secondary schools in Aceh; (3) national and local educational policy documents related to peace curriculum; and (4) meeting minutes from community education forums and post-conflict dialogue initiatives. These documents were analyzed using content analysis, with a focus on the representation of peace values, conflict narratives, and reconciliation mechanisms.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format with a range of educational stakeholders in Aceh, including: (1) 12 teachers from primary and secondary schools across four districts; (2) 3 former GAM combatants who now serve as community leaders or informal educators; (3) 2 officials from the Aceh Provincial Department of Education; and (4) 3 local NGO activists engaged in peace education and reconciliation. The interviews centered on participants' perceptions of the relevance of the Aceh conflict in education, their experiences in integrating conflict narratives into teaching, and the pedagogical challenges of managing collective memory.

Participant observation was conducted in schools that were part of the case study, focusing on how peace values were taught, how local narratives were conveyed, and how teachers and students interacted throughout the learning process. Observations were concentrated on history lessons, given their potential to integrate peace narratives. Informants and locations were selected purposively, considering geographical diversity (coastal, inland, and highland areas), historical involvement in the conflict, and accessibility. To ensure data credibility, triangulation was applied by cross-verifying findings from documents, interviews, and observations.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical process included: (1) initial open coding of interview transcripts and observation notes; (2) categorization based on emerging themes such as integration of conflict narratives, resistance to peace education, community involvement, and the role of digital media; and (3) development of analytical narratives linking field data with the conceptual framework of peace literacy. The analysis was conducted iteratively and reflexively, with analytical memos used to capture interpretive shifts throughout the process.

To ensure research validity, multiple strategies were employed, including triangulation of sources and methods, member checking with key informants, and maintaining an audit trail that documented analytic decisions and procedures. The study also adhered to social research ethics principles, including

informed consent, confidentiality of participant identities, and sensitivity to traumatic memories in the post-conflict context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Curriculum Documents do not Accommodate the Historical Narrative of the Aceh Conflict

Findings from the analysis of national curriculum documents and secondary-level history textbooks (SMA and SMP) clearly reveal that the Aceh conflict has not been explicitly integrated into the construction of formal history education. Narratives surrounding the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), human rights violations during military operations, and the peace process through the 2005 Helsinki MoU are absent from contemporary historical content—whether in the form of case studies or localized reflections on national themes such as integration and democracy. The textbooks published by the Ministry of Education and Culture (*Kemendikbud*), whether aligned with the 2013 Curriculum or the Merdeka Curriculum, refer to conflict in only abstract terms using phrases like “separatist movements” or “threats to national disintegration,” without addressing the specific local dynamics that occurred in Aceh. The topic of “The Development of Democracy in Indonesia” typically ends with the Reformasi era and fails to address key post-Reformasi events, such as the peaceful resolution of the Aceh conflict.

This absence suggests that the post-conflict historical narrative of Aceh has been systematically excluded from national education discourse, contributing to a form of *silent curriculum* that suppresses the collective experiences of Acehnese society. Such exclusion reflects what scholars refer to as epistemic injustice—where they lived experience of a community is not deemed legitimate enough to be institutionalized within the official knowledge framework of education. This can lead to the marginalization of specific groups (Chapman, 2022; Samra, 2023), with consequences that manifest as testimonial and hermeneutical injustice—resulting in silenced experiences, misrepresentation, and the perpetuation of systemic inequality in contemporary society (Pohlhaus, 2018).

Although peace has formally been in place in Aceh for over a decade, the construction of a collective post-conflict identity has yet to be reflected in the curriculum (Rahman, 2023; Zainal et al., 2022). Previous studies indicate that the sustainability of peace is deeply influenced by how well society is able to reconstruct conflict narratives into productive social memory. Without inclusive interventions through history education, the wounds of the past may remain unhealed—or worse, passed down as intergenerational silence.

International literature on post-conflict history education also emphasizes the importance of locally rooted narratives as tools for reconciliation through education. Utilizing conflict archives, community history, and narrative documentation has been shown to strengthen historical consciousness and foster peace literacy in reflective and contextual ways (Hakvoort et al., 2022; Maiden, 2024). Peace values are most effectively taught through authentic and localized historical learning (Truter et al., 2025). In Indonesia, although peace-oriented values are beginning to enter the curriculum through initiatives such as the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5)* in the Merdeka Curriculum, local conflict histories like Aceh’s have yet to appear as core references. As highlighted by Humaizi et al. (2024) in their study on FKUB Medan, local narratives—when presented digitally and participatively—can become powerful tools of social communication that enhance tolerance and peace literacy.

Furthermore, these findings are reinforced by classroom observations and teacher interviews conducted in this study, which reveal that history teachers often feel they lack curricular legitimacy and pedagogical resources to teach about the Aceh conflict. Many avoid the topic for fear of provoking controversy or due to the absence of safe pedagogical guidelines. This confirms the assertion that in post-conflict education contexts, the courage to teach difficult histories must be supported by both structural and moral backing from educational institutions. The absence of Aceh’s conflict narrative in the curriculum not only results in the erasure of regional historical representation but also undermines the potential of history education as a medium for long-term reconciliation and peacebuilding. History

education that fails to open space for critical reflection on historical trauma risks producing generations that do not understand the complexity of their nation's conflicts—and, ultimately, are ill-equipped to build empathy across identities (Humaizi et al., 2024).

In this light, integrating the Aceh conflict into the national history curriculum is not only necessary but urgent. The goal of such integration is not to reopen old wounds but to recognize those wounds as an integral part of the nation's collective memory. In doing so, history education can move beyond mere reproduction of national identity and instead function as a space for social healing and the transformation of cultures of violence into cultures of peace.

A further review of the national curriculum—especially in the context of Indonesian History for high school and Social Studies (IPS) for junior high—confirms that the Aceh conflict is not explicitly included as part of official historical learning materials. Contemporary history coverage typically ends with the 1998 Reformasi or vaguely references separatist threats, without detailing local movements such as GAM or the significance of the Helsinki peace process. Ministry-issued textbooks may mention topics like “The Development of Democracy in Indonesia” or “Threats to National Unity,” but they do not engage substantively with Aceh's modern history. As a result, both students in Aceh and elsewhere lack a full understanding of a historically and politically significant period that has shaped one region of the nation in profound ways.

3.2 History Education Remains Generic and Avoids Sensitive Local Topics

Observations of history teaching practices in four senior high schools across Banda Aceh, Pidie, and Lhokseumawe reveal a pattern of generic and normative instruction. History teachers generally choose not to directly address the Aceh conflict, despite teaching in regions that were central to the armed conflict and political violence. In one classroom observation in Banda Aceh, for instance, the teacher discussed separatist movements by referencing East Timor and Papua, while omitting any mention of Aceh. When asked for clarification, the teacher explained that he was simply following the national textbook, which does not include specific material on the Aceh conflict. He also expressed concerns that bringing up the topic could spark controversy or be viewed as sensitive by school administrators or parents.

This situation highlights a structural absence in the history curriculum, which fails to provide space for local conflict experiences as part of identity formation and peace education. In post-conflict societies, history education should serve as a venue for reconstructing collective memory in a just and empathetic way. It should not merely transmit chronological facts, but instead facilitate a critical understanding of diverse perspectives and invite students to engage ethically and emotionally with historical interpretation (Hasan, 2011; Ni, 2023). By excluding the Aceh conflict from classroom discourse, schools are missing an important opportunity to foster reflective and inclusive historical consciousness.

Beyond individual teacher concerns, the lack of official guidance constitutes a major barrier. Teachers interviewed in this study stated that they had never received specific training on how to teach about conflict history or apply trauma-sensitive pedagogical approaches. Many felt unequipped to safely facilitate discussions about the conflict, particularly since some students come from families directly affected by the violence. This pedagogical gap has led teachers to “play it safe” by relying solely on standardized national content, without local contextualization. In this regard, responsibility lies not solely with the educators, but with an educational system that has yet to provide adequate pedagogical and psychosocial infrastructure.

The findings also point to a form of systematic historical avoidance. When conflict narratives are excluded from formal education, they may persist in informal spaces such as family conversations, community storytelling, or social media—platforms that do not always convey information critically or pedagogically. This creates the risk of historical polarization and latent trauma. In contrast, in other post-conflict countries such as Rwanda and South Africa, history education has been used as a key

mechanism for promoting reconciliation and social transformation. In Aceh, however, the opposite trend is observable: local historical narratives are being reduced—or erased altogether—from classroom discourse.

It is also worth noting that students themselves express a clear interest in learning about their local history. Several teachers reported that students frequently ask about what really happened during the conflict, why it is not taught in school, and how peace was eventually achieved. These questions indicate an unmet educational need and a significant opportunity to develop historically conscious, justice-oriented citizens. However, in the absence of structural support—through curriculum content, instructional materials, and teacher training—this curiosity is often left unanswered or even suppressed by institutional silence.

In this context, the exclusion of local conflict narratives from history education is not merely an academic concern; it is also a moral and political issue. A curriculum that silences local history fails in its function as a cultural space for processing the past, understanding identity complexity, and cultivating meaningful values of peace. Therefore, a reform of the national history curriculum is urgently needed—one that creates space for local contexts such as Aceh and adopts socially and historically sensitive approaches. The curriculum should not serve merely as an instrument for reproducing state narratives, but rather as a bridge for communities to process their lived experiences of conflict and reconciliation.

3.3 History Teachers Face Pedagogical and Institutional Voids

In-depth interviews conducted with eight history teachers from six secondary schools across Banda Aceh, Pidie, and Lhokseumawe revealed a significant pedagogical void and institutional uncertainty regarding the inclusion of the Aceh conflict in classroom teaching. While the teachers generally agreed that the conflict is an essential part of local history and deserves to be taught, they lacked curricular support, official teaching materials, and professional training to handle it. The absence of explicit policies supporting the teaching of local conflict history places teachers in an ambiguous position—they recognize its urgency but lack the structural legitimacy to formally integrate it into their lessons.

The main obstacles identified include: (1) the lack of official teaching modules or guidelines on local conflicts issued by the Ministry of Education; (2) concerns about the sensitivity of the topic, which could create tension among students; and (3) the limitations of national textbooks, which present historical narratives strictly from a state-centric perspective, leaving no room for local reflection. These concerns are amplified by the fact that many students have personal or familial connections to the conflict—as children of former combatants, victims, or state agents. Without training in trauma-sensitive or conflict-responsive pedagogy, most teachers opt for the safer route of avoiding the topic altogether.

Although teachers are aware of the importance of teaching Aceh's local history, they feel constrained by the lack of adequate instructional resources and a lack of institutional backing to address the conflict explicitly. Teachers observe that schools often avoid the topic to prevent controversy, especially when the historical narrative could challenge students' personal or family experiences. This reveals that teachers are limited not only by a lack of resources, but also by institutional cultures that discourage critical historical engagement. In sensitive educational contexts, teachers often operate under uncertain policy conditions and social pressure. In Aceh, this pressure is compounded by the dual burden of absent curricular mandates and lingering societal sensitivities surrounding the conflict narrative.

This situation demonstrates that the issue does not lie in individual teachers' willingness, but in an educational system that lacks the political courage to recognize history as a space for reconciliation. Without curricular legitimacy, pedagogical training, and institutional protection, teachers lack the moral and professional authority to bring difficult historical truths into the classroom. What is needed is a structural approach in which the national history curriculum explicitly mandates the inclusion of local

histories, and educational institutions provide the necessary professional support and safeguards for teachers to engage critically with conflict-related topics.

Without relevant learning materials and adequate training, history teachers in Aceh are left to operate in a pedagogical vacuum that strips history education of its local relevance and transformative potential. In a post-conflict setting such as Aceh, history is not merely a subject—it is a bridge between a wounded past and a more hopeful future. The reluctance or inability to teach difficult histories leads to a form of educational silence, where social meaning is lost, and the civic mandate to form reflective, just, and socially aware citizens is left unfulfilled.

3.4 Peace Literacy Is Not Integrated with Local Historical Inquiry

Although values such as tolerance, diversity, and peace are explicitly stated in the goals of Indonesia's national curriculum, in practice, these values are taught separately from local historical contexts—particularly those involving conflict. In Aceh, nearly three decades of armed struggle have left a complex and enduring historical wound. However, the curriculum offers no mechanism for bridging these historical experiences with value-based education. Instead, history and civic/moral education are treated as two separate domains—one concerned with national chronology, the other with normative ethics. This separation weakens the potential of education to cultivate a meaningful and reflective understanding of peace as a historical process.

The absence of local conflict history within peace literacy education creates both epistemic and pedagogical voids. The post-conflict history of Aceh constitutes a rich body of collective memory containing essential lessons about the causes of violence, the pathways to reconciliation, and the socio-political challenges of rebuilding. When this history is not taught, education loses its critical function as a means of shaping citizens who are attuned to local realities. It also reinforces what scholars describe as “historical silence”—where key events in a community's past are erased from formal discourse, distancing the younger generation from their historical identity (Clark, 2020; Frihammar, 2020).

When the curriculum neglects the Aceh conflict, peace education becomes decontextualized. While values such as tolerance and nonviolence are still taught, they are presented without historical and cultural relevance, rendering the education abstract and disconnected. Effective peace literacy must be grounded in learners' concrete experiences—including historical narratives and local dynamics that are familiar to them (Hakvoort et al., 2022). In Aceh, this means starting with the narratives of conflict and reconciliation that have shaped the region since the signing of the Helsinki MoU.

The RETOPEA project in Europe, as demonstrated by Maiden (2024), illustrates the impact of locally rooted historical narratives in peace education. When students engage with archival material that reflects conflict and diversity in their own communities, they do not simply learn history—they develop inclusive social consciousness. Applying a similar approach in Aceh would enable students to understand that peace is not a fixed or symbolic state, but rather the outcome of a long process involving recognition of past harms, intergroup dialogue, and the courage to transform (Maiden, 2024).

A study from Indonesia further shows that integrating local narratives through digital media—in the case of Medan—effectively expanded tolerance values among younger generations (Humaizi et al., 2024). This demonstrates that locally contextualized, digitally mediated education can overcome the limitations of normative and top-down educational approaches. Unfortunately, no similar efforts have been made systematically in Aceh to develop history-based learning materials that connect local conflict narratives to the competencies required for 21st-century peacebuilding. This has resulted in fragmented historical identities. When the Aceh conflict survives only in informal spaces—such as family stories or community memory—but is omitted from formal schooling, students encounter conflicting narratives. They learn a sanitized version of history in school while hearing stories of injustice, loss, or resistance at home. This produces identity confusion and weakens the foundation for long-term reconciliation (Rahman, 2023).

In post-conflict history education, the relationship between history and peace literacy is not optional—it is essential. History should not be taught merely for factual memorization, but to enable ethical reasoning and critical value reflection. When Aceh's conflict is erased from the classroom, students lose the chance to understand how conflict emerges, how violence is stopped, and what justice means in a post-conflict society. This is a serious pedagogical loss. Teachers are aware of this importance, but—as field data show—they face methodological and institutional barriers that hinder the pedagogical treatment of conflict history. The absence of instructional materials, pedagogical frameworks, and training leaves many teachers unwilling to approach the topic. Yet in socially sensitive education, teacher courage must be matched with structural support to enable safe and productive critical dialogue.

One of the greatest implications of this absence is education's failure to support Aceh's long-term peace agenda. Peace literacy is not a slogan—it is a social competence built through meaningful learning experiences. Without local history education, students cannot appreciate that the peace they enjoy today is the product of a long and painful historical process. Just like local wisdom, this local history can serve as a foundation for strengthening communities. An education system that silences history is one that limits awareness. Therefore, integrating local historical narratives into peace literacy education must be treated as an urgent curricular priority, particularly in post-conflict areas such as Aceh. Conflict and reconciliation narratives should not be feared or suppressed but embraced as critical resources for building a more peaceful and just future. Education must be bold enough to become a space of intertemporal dialogue—between a wounded past and a future that requires recognition and healing.

4. Conclusion

This study finds that the history of the Aceh conflict has not been meaningfully integrated into Indonesia's national history curriculum. As a result, history education in post-conflict Aceh remains generic, detached from local realities, and limited in its ability to foster critical historical awareness and peace literacy. History teachers face significant pedagogical and institutional constraints when attempting to introduce sensitive local topics, while peace-related values are often taught without historical grounding. This disconnect undermines the transformative potential of education in fostering reconciliation and collective memory in post-conflict societies.

To address this gap, it is essential to reform the history curriculum to incorporate local conflict narratives such as Aceh's into the broader framework of peace education. The government and educational authorities must provide pedagogical guidelines, professional development for teachers, and context-sensitive teaching resources. A strategic step forward would be to develop a peace literacy module based on the Aceh conflict, integrating local narratives, historical experiences, and reconciliatory values. Such a module could bridge collective memory with formal education, making history learning more reflective, contextualized, and transformative.

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