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Faked *antikas* and ‘modern antiques’

The production and marketing of tourist art in the Theban Necropolis

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ABSTRACT

Located in the Theban Necropolis of the Luxor west bank, the village of al-Qurna was central in the large-scale supply of ancient Egyptian antiquities to private and institutional collectors during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a result, the quantity of antiquities being offered for sale to individual travellers diminished steadily. The continuing high demand for Egyptian artefacts under the influence of ever-expanding international tourism and the increasing impact of twentieth-century antiquities legislation gave rise to a new industry at al-Qurna: the production of fakes to be sold as genuine antiques and the production of Egyptian artefacts for sale to international visitors. This article explores the close connections between the archaeological landscape of the Theban Necropolis, international tourism, and the artisanal production and marketing of artefacts of ancient Egyptian design by local craftsmen.

KEYWORDS

al-Qurna • antiquities • artisanal production • fakes • Luxor west bank • marketing • pharaonic artefacts • Qurnawi • Theban Necropolis • tourist art

■ INTRODUCTION

Between December 2006 and February 2007, the Egyptian Government demolished the village of al-Qurna, a cluster of hamlets located in and dispersed across the World Heritage-listed Theban Necropolis of the Luxor west bank. Tourists will now be offered a sanitized desert landscape where their singular focus will be directed at the ancient Egyptian tombs of royalty and court and temple officials. No longer will visitors be able to acquaint themselves with the local community in their colourful vernacular mud-brick homes. An aspect of Egypt's cultural diversity which has its historical roots in a unique form of adaptive re-use of the ancient pharaonic landscape – early habitation of the tombs before the evictions prompted by twentieth-century heritage management concerns gave rise to the construction of mud-brick dwellings in between the tombs – has yielded to political pressures to give way to the demands of the international tourism industry and Egypt's twenty-first-century modernist aspirations (Meskell, 2001, 2005; Mitchell, 1995, 2001, 2002: 179–205; Van der Spek, 1998, 2003).

One of the more enduring aspects of this cultural landscape before its recent demise was the production of tourist art, which, from the modern houses of the new communities constructed several kilometres to the north, will still continue to fill the display shelves of local west bank and Luxor souvenir shops or to be peddled to tourists visiting the Tombs of the Nobles in the Theban foothills and the pharaonic tombs in the nearby Valley of the Kings.

The dynamics that exist between local villagers and international visitors at archaeological sites are obviously not unique to the Luxor west bank. Yet the layering of ancient pharaonic and contemporary social landscapes combined with its prominent position in Egypt-focused global tourism makes the Theban Necropolis an important location for ethnographic study. It is this palimpsest of past and present which also imbues the production of tourist art – the most tangible reminder of a holiday or journey anywhere – and which here is marketed not just as a souvenir, but as containing within it the very essence of Egyptian antiquity itself. This article explores the history, theory, and ethnography of the production of Luxor west bank tourist art and its connections to the archaeological landscape of the Theban Necropolis.

■ FIELDWORK CONTEXT

Anthropological fieldwork was carried out in al-Qurna during 1997–1998 and 1999, including intensive contact with local artists. The overall objective of the research was to offer an ethnographic account of the

Qurnawi, the villagers of al-Qurna. Possibly because of the dominance of archaeological research activity in the surrounding landscape, this had not been considered until then. Foreign archaeological missions working in the Theban Necropolis for the past 200 years have recruited local villagers to work as labourers on the excavations. Thus, any references about al-Qurna and the reputation of its inhabitants mainly come from, and are coloured by, the professional reports and popularized accounts which result from archaeological fieldwork practice and from the popular fiction it has inspired. Damage to the archaeological monuments, theft of antiquities, or the illicit excavation and trade in antiquities feature in all these literary forms, but they are inspired by archaeological motivations and concerns rather than by anthropological considerations about how people live and make a living in this archaeological landscape. Fieldwork focused on the close linkages that exist between the archaeological and the social landscapes of the Theban Necropolis. The subsequent analysis countered the stereotypical view that the community inhabiting these ancient burial grounds is engaged in a singular, illicit and antiquities-related economic activity – that of tomb-robbing – offering in its place a plurality of subsistence practices (Van der Spek, 2004). The production of art and craft for sale to tourists and inspired by ancient Egyptian motifs is one such practice.

■ EARLY ANTECEDENTS OF CONTEMPORARY TOURIST ART ON THE LUXOR WEST BANK

Archaeological work carried out in the Theban Necropolis has historically had close connections with the tourism industry. Ancient Egyptian artefacts uncovered by Qurnawi, have been items of interest for Western visitors since at least the second half of the eighteenth century. In turn, the provision of pharaonic artefacts to foreign visitors in exchange for money by local Qurnawi became an economic specialization that may still be recognized in archaeology-related employment for both Egyptian and foreign archaeological missions excavating in the Necropolis today.

As a result of these excavations during the nineteenth century, the quantity of antiquities offered for sale to individual travellers diminished steadily, the apparent lack of antiquities during times of continuing demand giving rise to a new Qurnawi industry, namely the 'concoction of spurious antiquities' (Rhind, 1862/2002: 251). This industry has also created employment for local peddlers, with whom visitors to the Tombs of the Nobles in the Theban foothills and the Valley of the Kings will be well familiar. However, the specific objects which are at the heart of their profession, and the production and sale of al-Qurna's artisanal output more generally, have received little attention, as a result of which Qurnawi artistic expression itself has, likewise, been largely ignored.

The representation of Qurnawi artisanal activity in the literature, in common with the description of foothills' sociality more broadly, is sparse. The range of artistic quality tends to be expressed in opposite extremes. Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, who resided in Egypt between 1821 and 1833, living much of that time amongst Qurnawi, mentioned that 'particularly scarabaei (...) are so cleverly imitated, that it requires a practised eye to detect them' (Wilkinson, 1847: 325). Henry Rhind in 1862 encountered many 'unwieldy imitations' of the same, classifying Qurnawi art as comprising a very limited repertoire of 'small rogueries [which are] within the limits of their slight artistic ability' (252), yet acknowledging that some copies 'are singularly good' (254). Ninety years later German art historian Kurt Lange observed that whilst '... most [imitations] could be regarded as completely harmless (...) a fine sandstone head (...) would have been placed on exhibit (...) had it been found in the stores of a German museum' (1952/1965: 152). Lange's chapter is exceptional in that he spends the odd paragraph discussing the artistic merits of Qurnawi art, and how their work – by mixing characteristic stylistic features of different ancient Egyptian periods – can in most cases be readily distinguished from authentic antiquities. But even his account loses focus by diverting attention to the quality of imitations found elsewhere, especially Cairo (Lange, 1952/1965: 155–7), a literary device which bedevils the few extant accounts purporting to concern the abilities of west bank craftsmen (Ammoun, 1993: 124).

■ INTERPRETING ALLEGED MISCHIEF: FALSIFICATION AND STORYTELLING AS MARKETING STRATEGIES

Before discussing local art and craft practices more specifically, something must be said about the often-stated assertion that Qurnawi art is the art of forgery, their creation bordering on the criminal, as suggested by Rhind's 'small rogueries' (1862/2002: 252). Ammoun indeed refers to the Luxor west bank art market as 'un marché de dupes [a market of deception]', operated by 'artisans-fausseurs [forger-craftsmen]' (Ammoun, 1993: 121). Certain practices may have given cause for this ascription. Wilkinson describes the breaking up of complete papyri, the fragments used to coat the outside of false ones in order to give them a semblance of authenticity (Wilkinson, 1847: 325). Although such practices now no longer occur for lack of complete papyri, the breaking up of such texts under contemporary antiquities legislation would indeed constitute a crime. But such would not apply to Qurnawi as they probe the probable gullibility of visitors insufficiently expert in the recognition of authentic antiquities and attempt to sell them a 'modern antique'.

The process is one that cannot be divorced from the archaeological landscape of the Necropolis, and the role which indigenous actors have played in it. The combination of these two factors is crucial for many of the peddlers operating in the centrally located Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qurna area, where many of the so-called 'Noble Tombs' visited by tourists are located.

Under the influence of a seemingly insatiable appetite for things Egyptian and the global reach of modern media, there exists a general perception that al-Qurna is the 'village of the tomb-robbers' (Westbrook et al., 1995). This public image is closely linked with the ʿAbd ar-Rasul family, who lived off the proceeds of incidentally sold artefacts obtained from an important and intact royal burial for some 10 years, before their operations were uncovered in 1881. Perceptions of tomb-robbing as an economic specialization are further reinforced by archaeological reports, with Qurnawi allegedly pilfering artefacts from the excavations where they work (Carnarvon and Carter, 1912: 1–2; Petrie, 1897: 2), as much as being implicated in a destructive trade in antiquities (Gardiner and Weigall, 1913: 8–11).

Antiquities legislation now makes any such activity illegal, but there are nevertheless those who are still in the incidental business of selling some small item to visitors interested in buying genuine antiquities. The ʿAbd ar-Rasul history in this respect is serving local villagers well, and Qurnawi will readily assume an identity based on that history to support their stories when attempting to convince prospective buyers of the authenticity of a piece, whether it be an ancient artefact or a 'modern antique'. Assuming that their clients are at least somewhat familiar with the ʿAbd ar-Rasul history, local peddlers may adopt a marketing strategy which projects an image of continued involvement in illicitly procured antiquities.

It is indeed not uncommon for individual visitors to come to the Luxor west bank intending to buy some genuine antiquities, *antikas*. Peddlers hanging around the tombs may approach them or local guides may offer to show them items for sale in the privacy of their homes. The interaction between local dealer and prospective buyer has its own dynamics. Items offered for sale generally include both genuine artefacts and 'modern antiques', the latter suitably altered with a range of treatments such that only an expert eye can recognize they are fake. In the absence of such expertise, mis-recognition may result in an authentic fragment of poor quality being judged a fake and a 'good copy' identified as authentic. In an environment where time constraints and the covert nature of the proceedings add their own pressure, an atmosphere of uncertainty is established which is likely to influence the decisions of a peddler's client (Van der Spek, 2003).

Kurt Lange, in his 1952 assessment of Qurnawi artisanal production, fails to explain the dynamics that operate between customer and Qurnawi

peddler when it comes to the sale of artefacts which, in the particular surroundings of an embodied Necropolis, become imbued with archaeological qualities (1952/1965). The account here presented offers an holistic understanding of this process. It merges artistic forms with such equally important operative factors as spatial location, the embodiment of landscape through the legacies of past social actors, and the persuasive power of story to create a 'discourse of uncertainty' (Michael, 1994), where prospective buyers will always be 'left wondering' if they decline to commit to the purchase of an object which may well have been genuine.

Even if almost all items displayed during such transactions were fakes, the incidental presence of some genuine pieces would be essential to serve the mystification which blurs the distinction between real and false categories taking place in this environment of uncertainty. The evident availability of such genuine pieces to local villagers who live in the very landscape where such items may be found or occasionally pilfered enhances the veracity of the stories told and further suggests to potential buyers the possible authenticity of all items offered for sale. To maintain this 'discourse of uncertainty', and for their stories to remain credible in their business dealings with visitors, Qurnawi recognize the importance of their geographical surroundings and have consequently been against any relocation plans. Rather than to protect a livelihood based on illicit excavation and a trade in illegal antiquities, as is often assumed, it is for reasons such as these – combining economic pragmatism with the art of storytelling – that many Qurnawi have long been opposed to leaving the Necropolis.

But not all modern copies are necessarily forgeries or fakes, even if chemically altered to make them appear ancient. Artistic output is also sold in local roadside shops known as 'alabaster factories', and produced for the tourist bazaars in Luxor. Kurt Lange (1952/1965) correctly recognizes that most pieces are in fact not forgeries and indeed 'harmless', and that much of Qurnawi productivity thus simply constitutes tourist art, satisfying a demand for souvenirs rather than representing an interest in authentic antiquities.

■ THE CLASSIFICATION OF QURNAWI ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

The above characterizations of 'deception', 'falsification', and 'tourist art', and the possibility that a 'good copy' to be sold as a 'modern antique' can be accepted by a buyer as archaeologically authentic, suggest that there is indeed a degree of fluidity in the way Qurnawi artistic expression can be categorized.

A framework for the classification of indigenous art and applicable to 'Fourth World' contexts has been established by Nelson Graburn (1976),

and we may fruitfully apply parts of his schema to the artistic output of al-Qurna. Graburn defines the 'Fourth World' as:

... the collective name for all aboriginal and native peoples whose lands fall within the national boundaries and techno-bureaucratic administrations of the countries of the First, Second and Third Worlds. As such, they are peoples without countries of their own, peoples who are usually in the minority and without the power to direct the course of their collective lives. (1976: 1)

Applying this notion to the field of arts and crafts entails more than the study of seemingly fixed indigenous cultural expressions: the loss of isolation has caused indigenous art to become modified, the people involved often having become 'dependent part-societies whose very thought and culture reflect the differences from, and accommodation to, the realities of the majority peoples surrounding them' (Graburn, 1976: 2). Because of this accommodation, Fourth World art re-contextualizes itself to prevailing situations and is one of continual change: 'of emerging ethnicities, modifying identities, and commercial and colonial stimuli and repressive action' (Graburn, 1976: 2).

In such changing environments, the gift to express oneself artistically becomes particularly important. Graburn identifies two categories: 1) art for internal use, intended to reinforce the ethnic identity and social cohesion of the group through the display and transfer of values held as important by its members (1976: 4–5); and 2) art for external or commercial use which, apart from its economic function, maintains the inter-group boundaries which lie at the root of the perceived ethnic identity (1976: 5): 'all-human social groups... need symbols of their internal and external boundaries; the practical and decorative arts often provide these essential markers' (1976: 5).

In the case of al-Qurna, we may indeed observe that its identity as a community of craftsmen is one of the characterizing features which distinguishes it from neighbouring but mainly agricultural communities. Furthermore, its historical origins are squarely located in 'colonial stimuli', its contemporary artistic output remains entirely commercial, and it is continually subject to innovation and change.

Graburn's schema recognizes within the above two types some six different stages which document the many directions through which artistic expression can be channelled: (a) non-commercial traditional or functional fine arts which have remained unaffected by European contact, and which serve internal purposes such as the transmission of symbolic meaning; (b) commercial fine arts which may include objects which conform to the standard of (a) but which may be sold under certain conditions ('pseudo traditional arts'); and such less meaningful items as (c) souvenirs; (d) re-integrated arts; (e) assimilated fine arts; and (f) popular arts (1976: 5–6).

We may identify the two classifications relevant for al-Qurna as: (c) 'souvenirs' and (d) 'reintegrated arts.' 'Souvenirs' are those artistic

expressions which serve commercial tourism purposes – their production is driven by economic rationales, intended to be pleasing to buyers, but holding no artistic satisfaction for the producers who may even operate at a loss of their own aesthetic standards. Also known as ‘tourist’ or ‘airport’ art, these expressions ‘may bear little relation to the traditional arts of the creator culture or those of any other groups’ (Graburn, 1976: 6). ‘Re-integrated arts’ represent syntheses between traditional and post-contact, European-inspired designs, materials, and production techniques. Some of these may lead to new traditions and/or new forms of commercial art in their own right (Graburn, 1976: 6–7).

On the surface, these two stages of Graburn’s schema only roughly apply to al-Qurna’s artistic output, and we may make some further observations to obtain a better fit. All art produced at al-Qurna serves commercial purposes and, in common with most Fourth World art, is ‘rarely produced for their own consumption’ (Graburn, 1976: 1). In fact, what has been observed elsewhere also applies to the Luxor west bank: ‘I know of no [villager] who produces carvings for his own amusement, to display such items in his household for his own pleasure’ (McCall, 1980: 127). At least from travellers’ records, there is no attested evidence of Qurnawi indigenous artistic expression, although the symbolic hand stencils and *al-carusa* (‘bride’) clay figurines imprinted on west bank ovens and mud grain silos may be taken to reflect Graburn’s category of art for internal use, and are likely to be of early origin. Otherwise, contemporary Qurnawi artistic expression has no ‘relation to the traditional arts of the creator culture’ (Graburn, 1976: 6) and continuities between ancient Egypt and contemporary population groups claimed at times for their ‘analogies’ (Blackman, 1927/1968: 280–315) will not be advocated here. In this sense, the Luxor west bank artistic output is ‘reintegrated’, and constitutes a synthesis between traditional ancient Egyptian motifs familiar to Qurnawi from their immediate village surroundings, and the external, post-contact and initially European but now fully international demand for such designs. The fact that such ‘reintegrated art’ in Graburn’s schema may also give rise to new traditions and/or forms of commercial art in their own right is also evident at al-Qurna. The production of imitation-antiquities which has emerged since the early nineteenth century, and which continues to manifest aspects of technical and stylistic innovation, helps to explain the fluidity we have already observed which may exist between such categories as a readily recognized ‘modern antique’, a ‘good copy’, and a convincing fake.

These fluid dimensions of artistic expression at al-Qurna also provide a theoretical corrective to Graburn’s concept of ‘tourist’ art. They come into play especially in archaeological contexts of culture-tourism, where tourists’ demand for locally obtained art merges with a demand for artefacts that have collectable archaeological attributes, and where artists’ objectives become the creation of ‘modern antiques’ which can be identified as ancient

artefacts obtained from allegedly authentic archaeological contexts. Where such applies, and evidently it does not always, for the buyer items obtained in this category rather than being simply 'souvenirs' will have the additional dimension of collectable antiques. Whilst its true nature will be known to the Qurnawi artist or peddler, the distinction will in many cases not be evident to the tourist, and it is the objective of Qurnawi production and sales strategies to blur the boundary between contemporary artistic expression and ancient artefact as much as possible.

At the margin of these practices, no longer concerning 'true' tourist art, and certainly not operating 'at a loss of his own aesthetic standards', is the astronomically priced work of the master-craftsmen who create faithful labour-intensive copies of ancient carvings commissioned by international connoisseurs familiar with their work, or variant interpretations sold as forgeries to unsuspecting overseas collectors and antiquities dealers. Artists of this calibre were consistently evasive when the writer asked to view their work. The seemingly covert nature of their operations involves an understated process of referral through local and international contacts, which brings wealthy prospective buyers to their doors and which ultimately results in consignments of works of art being shipped to overseas destinations. Possibly because of the speculation about more sinister business which such operations invite, these artists remain otherwise inaccessible to individual visitors of evidently insufficient means, including an anthropological fieldworker.

■ SO MANY ARTISTS, SO MANY WAYS: FORM AND METHOD OF QURNAWI ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Contrary to the image invoked by the 'grinders' of alabaster stoneware encountered outside roadside tourist shops, artisanal production at al-Qurna is entirely a 'cottage industry', with all locally produced items destined for sale to tourists and created by men, women and children alike in the domestic environment of their homes. The stylistic range and variability of artefacts produced is vast and the totality of production has moved well beyond the straight copying reported by Kurt Lange in 1952, when local artists seemed essentially guided by museum catalogues, with stylistic variability the unintended consequence of an inadvertent mixing of ancient Egyptian period-specific stylistic features (Lange, 1952/1965: 152). Although today the copying from illustrations in catalogues, popular and scholarly publications or even picture postcards also takes place, the carving of limestone wall panels and assorted statuary appears to post-date Lange's observations (1952/1965), their introduction both reflecting the shifting tastes of visitors and the adaptive artistic skills of Qurnawi craftsmen. They form part

of a range of innovative designs and manufacturing practices that have evolved, and no doubt will continue to do so, in evidence of people's inventiveness and the inspiration obtained from the surrounding environment. Where Lange could observe that the demand for these 'harmless forgeries' would diminish because people with 'greater understanding of the true value

Figure 1 'Scribe' by Abdu Muhammad Ahmad. Limestone, January 1998.
(Photograph by Kees van der Spek)

of ancient Egyptian art [and] hardened by world wars would be less inclined to give in to romantic illusions' so as not to be 'taken in' by these 'naïve' forgeries (1952/1965: 153), the opposite has in fact occurred. The scarcity of ancient artefacts on the open market, induced by antiquities legislation, has forced any remnant trade to go underground. The consequent steep increase in prices asked for genuine *antikas* has placed the acquisition of authentic artefacts out of reach of all but the most serious collector, thus creating the market-niche for peddlers' 'modern antiques' and the host of imaginative substitutes capable of serving tourists' objectives of personal memento or gifts for loved ones (Figure 1).

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of the design and production of al-Qurna's artisanal output that has emerged from the above historical process. One limestone carver claimed there to be more than one thousand 'good carvers', a figure which does not seem outside the range of possibilities. At 5 per cent of the west bank population, and for limestone, soapstone and wood carvers alone, this figure can only be indicative of the total number of west bank craftsmen and women involved in the production of one type or another. Some 20 of these contributed to this part of the research during December 1997 and January 1998. Rather than reviewing their life and work individually, and beyond representing the range of materials and motifs through a few illustrations, the two following ethnographic vignettes are to be taken as representative of all artisanal activity on the Luxor west bank. They profile particular aspects of the material and social circumstance of their production and comprise complex connections between craftsman, artefact, archaeological landscape, and the tourist. Unless otherwise indicated, artists mentioned in this paper are identified by their real names.

Sayyed Mahmud Ali Abu-Sherifa

Starting when he was 11 years old, Sayyed was taught by his father, and he represents the third generation in a family of carvers. He acknowledges that he can make 'everything', and he has no preference for a particular material. After his father's death in 1964, Sayyed continued the family business, with bazaar owners who know the family tradition seeking him out to place orders, some coming from Aswan. He also received orders from tourists who made enquiries after seeing his work in bazaars, one of these landing him a commission worth several thousand pounds for a number of large sculptures to decorate a mansion in Germany. During a regular season, Sayyed has people coming to his house every day, both shop owners and local guides who bring interested tourists to his door. During the disastrous 1997–8 winter, when tourism had collapsed completely as a result of the November 17 terrorist attack at the Temple of Hatshepsut, incidental sales to unexpected visitors accompanied by local guides amounted

to at least (Egyptian Pound) £E500 in the week when fieldwork visits to his house took place. Involving no more than four days' work, and despite commission payments of anywhere between 20 per cent and 50 per cent customarily made to guides who provide such unexpected business, this was still well in excess of the roughly £E150 which is the monthly wage of a Qurnawi government-employed antiquities guard. Additionally, and recognizing that times were quiet, owners of large bazaars would come to his house to order a little stock, now that he was not so busy, rather than having to wait for a week during times of high demand to have their orders filled.

Also in line with his family history, Sayyed is a professional, working during busy times from seven in the morning to three in the afternoon, then from six to midnight. He has four boys and one girl, all of them at school, but he also teaches his sons, beginning when they are nine or ten, by letting them perform small tasks. At 16, his oldest son has been fully trained, is capable of further teaching his brothers, and may thus guarantee a fourth generation of craftsmen.

Other than limestone, Sayyed uses wood regularly, possibly because there appears to be an over-supply of limestone carvers, and wood is popular with travellers due to its weight. Soft palm-wood is favoured, it being relatively easy to shape whilst its porous structure presents no impediment for fine detailing, as most statues are plastered and painted. But a harder variety called *ghimīz* presents no technical difficulties for Sayyed either. 'Open' statues, such as those of striding figures with limbs extended, will be crafted as composite constructions when in excess of 50 centimetres; a method imposed by the size of the available wood, as a means to use up smaller pieces, because it makes carving easier, and because it produces less waste. The various separate parts are dowelled to the torso, with any visible seams filed smooth and hidden by plaster and paint. Once coated in plaster and sanded smooth, Sayyed marks the areas to be coloured with pencil for his wife to paint, eventually adding the finer details himself. Yellow and red ochre, green and black pigments are mixed with water and applied with a brush consisting of several pigeon feathers tied in a bunch. A final coating stabilizes the water colours, but *jamalaka*, the alcohol-based lacquer, is more than a fixative: mixed with salt, soil, and limestone dust, the carvings are given a gritty appearance and 'feel' as if to suggest they have only recently been excavated. Although such 'embellishment' would suit the stories told by tomb-side peddlers (see below), this treatment seems out of place for items sold in bazaars. There, such treatment is not intended as 'story', but simply to add to the character of the ancient theme, which is as much a part of the object as its physical shape: offered in the commercial environment of the bazaars, the statue represents a package which sells not simply a memento of a one-time holiday, but the essence of ancient Egypt itself.

As an artist, Sayyed is also a keen businessman and little inclined to discuss his financial dealings in detail. Yet, as mentioned, observed sales to

buyers coming to his house indicate that he can generate money almost at will, allowing him to lead a decent lifestyle. Since the routine production of tourist mementos might not be sufficiently indicative of his true skills, and to 'test' the artistic ability behind his evident business success, Sayyed was persuaded to carve a wooden *shabti*, a funerary figurine, in the likeness of

Figure 2 'Tutankhamun' *shabti* by Sayyed Mahmud Ali Abu-Sherifa. *Dūm*-palm wood, January 1998. (Photograph by Kees van der Spek)

Tutankhamun, whose features are readily recognizable. Sayyed dismissed the use of a photograph, as 'he has it "all in the head"', indeed shaping with chisel and file the figurine with deft, calculated but free-flowing masterly strokes. Continually blowing the chips and dust away with little puffs as he worked, Sayyed achieved lovely curves and exquisite proportions. The entire piece (Figure 2) was finished in two hours, entirely charming in appearance, sufficiently credible to evoke Tutankhamun, yet failing to fully replicate the distinctive nose and lips. Although the soft but course palm-wood will have imposed its own limitations, given a harder material, more time and a sufficiently large financial incentive that might come with a substantial formal commission, there is little doubt that Sayyed, especially when permitting himself to work from a clear illustration, would be capable of recreating a true likeness. However, other than from incidental commissions by knowledgeable collectors, such does not constitute his main business, and for his part Sayyed is content to make as many commercial pieces in as little time as possible, producing quantity-orders for his bazaar-clients or, not infrequently, selling any available piece at commission-inflated prices to such French or German tourists as may be guided to his door.

■ 'DISTRESSING' THE FAKE: CHEMISTRY AS A MARKETING STRATEGY

Sayyed's standard practice to coat his painted carvings with some earthy mixture in order to give it a certain patina appealing to tourists is common throughout the Necropolis. In generic terms, the process is known as *ghūbuwa*, a practice locally explained in a range from 'changing its quality' to 'making it look old'. The concept applies equally to innocent chemical processes applied to change the appearance of limestone and soapstone in order to suit the craftsman's artistic inclination, to the gritty 'package' patina of a Sayyed Mahmud Ali Abu-Sherifa creation, and to those pieces so treated to be sold as real *antikas*. As suggested by the one generic term applied to varying categories of application, individual craftsmen will have their own *ghūbuwa* 'recipe'. Others will sell their pieces untreated, leaving any additional interpretation of their work to the bazaar middlemen, or to those who have made a specialization of concocting particular *ghūbuwa* mixtures.

These latter *ghūbuwa* specialists may be commissioned by bazaar middlemen, but are also used predominantly by peddlers who hang around certain popular tombs, who have limited capacity to carry large pieces, and who are in the business of selling some realistically carved small item as a genuine *antika* to any tourist who is interested in buying antiquities and

capable of persuasion, *ghūbuwa* being the visible and physical attribute of their story. Those peddlers, who before the recent relocation used to invite potential customers to the security of their homes to inspect *antikas* there, would invariably have a mixture of small genuine items with pieces of more recent date, the latter suitably altered through *ghūbuwa*, the former as much for sale to add legitimacy to the rest, confounding the non-expert and feeding the 'discourse of uncertainty'. Needless to say, both categories will carry a price-tag which reflects the absence of antiquities on the open market – in 1999 starting at £E1,300 for a small amulet or *shabti* – a situation which marks the difference between the time of such observers as Kurt Lange in 1952 and today.

Hassan Sadiq Muhammad

Some peddlers may buy their pieces unaltered and apply their own preferred *ghūbuwa* treatment. But many will come to see Hassan Sadiq Muhammad (not his real name) who, in keeping with the academic community which frequents the village surrounds, calls himself 'Doctor Hassan', for good measure announcing himself as 'professeur de *ghūbuwa*'. Rather than in the artists themselves, it is in the craft of a person like Hassan that we may encounter what others have called the 'forgers' of the Necropolis (Ammoun, 1993; Lange, 1952/1965); artists probably less so, but artisans who ply a specialized trade nonetheless. Before the recent demolition of al-Qurna, Hassan's house was an assemblage of sorts: part mud-brick structure, partly constructed from palm-frond crates filled with rubble, the structure first served as animal space for the ancestral family home occupied by his brother. When married, Hassan moved out and converted the animal quarters into his home. His standard of living is both indicative of his limited government restorers' wage, and the make-shift practice that is his *ghūbuwa* trade: making things look less than what they are, rather than improving them into what they could be, 'distressing' rather than embellishing.

Realistically forged objects will contain their own power of persuasion and public knowledge of forgery techniques will not necessarily compromise the livelihood of a person like Doctor Hassan. In any event, the repertoire of his practices in broad terms is indicative of the range of methods employed by others who similarly 'distress' contemporary foothills' art and we may therefore make some general observations about aspects of that repertoire. But as we have seen in the case of Sayyed Mahmud Ali Abu-Sherifa, applications of *ghūbuwa* are not only intended to 'forge': in most cases they innocently serve to provide the piece with an atmosphere which is evocative of ancient times and which is therefore in aesthetic terms not very different from applying painted decoration.

Many of these practices concern small limestone items such as scarabs (*Scarabaeus sacer*, the sacred dung beetle) and heads (Figure 3). If colour

Figure 3 Amarna-period or *shabti* head. Peddler's ware. Painted limestone and *ghūbuwa*. Artist unknown, July 1999. (Photograph by Kees van der Spek)

is deemed necessary, such is applied first, consisting of pigments dissolved in alcohol, the colour absorbed by the porous stone. Epoxy-glues and natural resin can be used as coatings to control the degree of absorption. The corrosive processes then applied, either by means of chloric acid or through boiling in liquids which contain copious amounts of kitchen salt, will cause surface erosion also in the painted areas, its presence readily indicated to prospective buyers as proof of age. Additives during boiling may further include tea, henna dye, any surplus prescription medicines, soil, and limestone dust. Important ingredients used by several producers of *ghūbuwa* are pulverized mummy and mummification linen, obtained from ancient commoner burials still contained in the many caves and passages of the Theban Mountain and periodically accessed for this purpose by those who require these additives. Doctor Hassan is careful with their use, covering his hand in a plastic bag for fear of contamination by unknown ancient mummification chemicals, but in the process also protecting himself from any of the other chemicals which may affect his skin. Carvings may be left in this liquid mixture for several days, upon which they are slowly

heated for one day in the oven after the weekly baking of bread (or fired specifically for the purpose) in order to dispel moisture from the limestone and to add extra patina.

Wooden carvings may likewise be subjected to different treatments. One method requires a painted carving to be left buried for a period of one month in soil 'underneath the donkey'. A different method involves wrapping the carving in ancient mummification linen which is painted white and provided with a copied inscription. The entire assemblage is then buried for one month in the limestone dust of the hillside, the hole back-filled with a mixture of kitchen salt and *nitrokīma* fertilizer, and the area regularly watered. The resulting heat-assisted corrosive impact is considered sufficient to convince a non-expert of its authenticity.

Doctor Hassan's lifestyle suggests that this is not a lucrative business. At best, he may earn 10 pounds a piece for applying paint and *ghūbuwa* for the owner of a carving who, if he is a peddler, may indeed dispose of it to a tourist for whatever price that person is prepared to pay. If the piece is sufficiently convincing, and the peddler's 'intelligent' stories are equally persuasive, an individual sale for £E400 can indeed be realized. But by then Doctor Hassan's involvement with that piece will already have been concluded and he will likely be concocting a new mixture for his next project.

One final observation that may be made from Doctor Hassan's *ghūbuwa* business is that, rather than characterizing the Qurnawi art industry as a 'market of deception' (Ammoun, 1993: 121), generally the existence and application of *ghūbuwa* techniques place in a social and technical context the legitimate production of all contemporary Necropolis art. The 'test' to which Sayyed Mahmud Ali Abu-Sherifa was subjected, reported above, revealed that, whilst he was judged to be entirely capable of producing a faithful likeness of an ancient design, his work nevertheless failed to totally accurately achieve this. Whilst the particular context of that commission, as indicated, and the somewhat 'charitable' nature of his effort may have been reasons why he did not produce his best, the role of the *ghūbuwa*-phenomenon must also be considered. Individual pieces from different artists viewed during fieldwork could be totally satisfying and entirely charming in their newly carved state, but lost much of their appeal as works of art in their own right once they had become – literally – 'distressed' (for use of this term, also see Price and Price, 1995: 23). It must thus be concluded that artists technically capable of producing totally convincing pieces will rarely live up to their ability and will generally be satisfied with something less than perfect, not only because they know their craft will still earn them a decent income, but also because they realize that striving for perfection will ultimately be useless because of the socially motivated mutilations inflicted upon their creations under the requirements of *ghūbuwa*.

■ POINT OF SALE: PURCHASING TOURIST ART IN THE THEBAN NECROPOLIS

The covert nature of the master-craftsmen's operations mentioned earlier contrasts with the generally public way in which visitors to the west bank obtain their souvenirs and gifts: through tourist bazaars, stalls at particular archaeological sites, itinerant peddlers near popular tombs, and, as we have seen, through local guides mediating contact between individual travellers and local artists.

Package-tour groups arriving by coach on the west bank will have their first experience with the materials and artistic forms of the west bank artisan community whilst en route to Hatshepsut's Temple or the Valley of the Kings. By arrangement with the owner and in exchange for a hefty commission of between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of sales, tour guides will stop the coach at 'their' respective 'alabaster factory' to spend precious visitors' time not in temples or tombs but in the gallery atmosphere of these commercial establishments. Headlight signals from approaching touring coaches prompt workers into action, with disembarking tourists treated to a display of alabaster carving in front of the building, thereby giving the impression that the alabaster ware sold inside is made on the premises, and explaining the name of this type of business.

Their origin dates back to the 1970s, when one alabaster producer conceived of the idea to move the trade away from peddlers and concentrate sales in one particular point, at the same time providing a demonstration of the production process. The method was taken up by others when seen as successful, with people pooling resources to rent or build premises and obtain stock. Although it was said that during the early years these were true places of production, with mothers keen to send their young sons there for apprenticeships, the diversity of stock lines today underscores that these are indeed bazaars, tourist shops, rather than places of alabaster production. The alabaster manufacturing techniques exhibited outside only marginally contribute towards stock, but serve to attract tourists and to provide photographic opportunities supplementing any alabaster purchases made inside. The practice is locally known as 'cinema' or, to use Doctor Hassan's term, 'soap opera', earning the workers outside some £E100 a month, working from 0700 to 1300 hours, but leaving the bulk of production to those working from home.

The concentration of these roadside establishments along the edge of the northern foothills is remarkable and in stark contrast with their relative absence from the foothills road further south. According to one account, illicit antiquities are allegedly still obtained from the northern area and their proceeds invested in alabaster factories – such 'money laundering' accounting for their proliferation in that area. In turn, alabaster factories

may serve as a 'front' to cover up illicit antiquities dealings by explaining away any relative increase in personal wealth. There is probably a degree of truth in these accounts, which may also explain the original appearance of such alabaster factories during the 1970s. The trade in antiquities was only prohibited by Law 117 of 1983 (Article 7) (EAO, 1984), and antiquities shops openly offering items for sale could still be found to hold pieces of importance as late as 1975 (Habachi, 1979: 32,40). Antiquities police were concerned with damage inflicted upon tombs by extractive antiquities thefts, but will have allowed, or at least turned a blind eye to, the sale of items discovered privately. Today, then, alabaster factories may still constitute one example in a small repertoire of strategies to cover up antiquities-related earnings that can be manipulated to divert the attention from antiquities inspectors by blurring distinctions between legitimate and illicit means of financial prosperity.

Tourist shops, including alabaster factories, are generally called bazaar, a term which also applies to the sales kiosks located at major archaeological sites such as the Valley of the Kings, the Valley of the Queens, and Hatshepsut's Temple. The history of these kiosks is vague but is probably linked with the issuing of licenses to itinerant peddlers in attempts both to limit their numbers and to restrict their operations to specific areas. The World Bank-funded Arthur D. Little west bank tourism development consulting study (ADL, 1981a, 1981b, 1983), situated 64 per cent of visitors' feelings about the local population in the 'offensive', 'too aggressive' and 'harassing' practices of licensed and unlicensed peddlers at archaeological sites (ADL, 1981b: 28, 1983: II-12). Solutions offered included the allocation of specific areas near tourist sites from where sellers could operate, and improvements to the supervision over 'ambulant peddlers' by Tourist Police (ADL, 1983: V-26-7). Such visitors' discontent resulted in greater regulation working against the interests of licensed itinerant peddlers, and encouraged the increased institutionalization of permanent souvenir stalls at archaeological sites. Although these bazaars are built by the Luxor City Council, the rights to operate them are purchased and can be passed down from father to son, or even be sold. Increased regulation to control the sales overtures of roaming vendors has nevertheless only been partially successful and has resulted in a new generation of unlicensed, ambulatory peddlers at most sites.

■ A PEDDLER'S EXISTENCE: COMPETITION AND CORRUPTION AT RAMOSE'S TOMB

It is in the nature of these peddling activities, rather than in the activities of working artists or even those whose business it is to change the appearance

of things, that much of the above stated negative aspects of contemporary Qurnawi in their relations with foreigners are located. For tourists keen to simply concern themselves with the monuments and evade all contact with locals, any overtures made by a tomb-side salesman will be considered an intrusion. Those who are persuaded to buy faked *antikas* may or may not eventually realize that they 'have been had', whilst in the occasional sale of small items of real antiquity, peddling Qurnawi maintain the reputation of theirs being a community making a living through an illicit trade in ancient artefacts. Some indeed draw on the history of that reputation by feigning to belong to the ʿAbd ar-Rasul family, in an effort to enhance the persuasive power of their presentations.

Efforts to limit the operations of unlicensed peddlers have not prevented this trade from continuing. Police presence (Tourist Police, Antiquities Police, or plain clothes Interior Ministry Security Police) is essentially ineffectual in preventing peddling and for reasons of personal gain is instrumental in its continuation. Police are non-locals who view a posting to a tourist location as a means to obtain their share from that industry. Qurnawi implicate them as being interested in nothing else but obtaining kickbacks of as much as 50 per cent from unlicensed peddlers.

Other than as part of a general characterization of the peddlers who 'are located at each of the sites' (ADL, 1981a: XIII–14), the Tombs of the Nobles area in the central foothills was not specifically identified in the ADL studies as an area where peddler-activity raised concern (1981a: IX–10; 1983: IV–36), even though it could be expected that the close proximity of Qurnawi houses would lead to increased contact between tourists and locals. The density of tourist traffic at such sites as the Valley of the Kings, and the negatively experienced interaction with peddlers there, explains why such was less the case at the Tombs of the Nobles, where tourist traffic is much reduced. A notice board at the Novotel Hotel in Luxor in 1999 placed the Noble Tombs, 'time and energy permitting', as last on a list of activities:

West Bank Tour: A very full half-day of the famous West Bank of Luxor. Cross the Nile to the Necropolis of Thebes to see not only the Valley of the Kings and Queens, but also Artisan Tombs, Queen Hatshepsut's Mortuary Temple, the Colossi of Memnon and, time and energy permitting, the Valley of the Nobles. An early morning start and you will need to take sunhat, sensible walking shoes and water, but an experience not to be missed!

As a result of the reduced visitor-ratio-induced peddler-profile for the Noble Tombs area, regulation in the form of souvenir stalls was never considered. A local family operates such a stall near the tomb of Ramose, mainly catering in shaded seating, cold drinks, films and postcards, whilst prior to the recent demolitions there were some three small bazaars at al-Hurubāt in the Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qurna area of the central foothills. In

the main, the Tombs of the Nobles area is one where traditionally peddlers have been left relatively free to operate (Figure 4).

To understand how tour groups think they can do justice to an area with the world's greatest density of archaeological sites in 'a very full half-day' excursion requires an appreciation of the nature and scheduling of international mass tourism to Egypt. Generally, a two-week package tour will involve several days in Cairo to visit the pyramids, the Egyptian Museum, the Khan al-Khalili market and the Islamic quarter, then fly to Luxor to board one of the 'flotels' (floating hotels) for a Nile cruise to Aswan, before or after which two days may be spent visiting sites in and around Luxor. It is as a result of the limited time available and the saturation exposure to ancient monuments that the Noble Tombs can be squeezed out of an itinerary. Noble Tombs peddlers thus find themselves outside the mainstream and are dependent on the intermittent tour groups that do come along, including groups on day trips from the Red Sea coastal resort of Hurghada, tour-group participants who decide to come back during their 'free day' (a minority, as most will choose to go shopping in Luxor), and

Figure 4 'Ramose' by Muhammad Ali Muhammad. Limestone, January 1998. (Photograph by Kees van der Spek)

independent travellers. Because of these dynamics, those peddlers who expect to support their income from sales of artefacts in the vicinity of the tombs of Menna, Nakht, Ramose, Rekhmira, and Sennefer, will find such employment unpredictable at best, and outright unreliable during the hot summer months, when tourism is down in any case.

As well as these structural features of tourism which affect peddlers' operations, local constraints impacting on sales come in the form of tour guides accompanying groups, and the presence of police and other security personnel. Tour guides are held in low esteem by the guards and peddlers around the tomb of Ramose. A discussion on the topic of tour guide practices between two such guards will quickly turn to some of the excesses they have experienced. Guides may come from all over Egypt, but are essentially in the business to become rich quickly. They keep the petty cash given by their companies for themselves, rather than give the money as tips to the guards on behalf of their group, then ask group members for additional money since he 'has spent all the money on the guards'. Furthermore, the guides strongly discourage the giving of *bakshīsh* (tips) to the guards, indicating to their groups that they already get good government money and advising them that the giving of *bakshīsh* is therefore a sign of disrespect and an affront to them. In reality, any money spent on the guards cannot be spent by tourists when purchases are to be made in the alabaster factories later. For the same reason, they claim, tourists are taken by their guide often to one tomb only, even though they may hold access to as many as three tombs on one ticket: any time spent here might take from available time spent in the alabaster factory, and affect the guide's commission on sales there. If peddlers offer their wares, the guides advise members of their groups not to buy here, asserting that the quality of the work is inferior and that they know of a better place, that is, the alabaster factory he or she is associated with.

In all these allegations, distinctions between tour guide and tour leader are blurred. As a representative of the foreign travel company, it would be expected that the tour leader has the company program for that day, that he or she would dictate the itinerary, and that the scheduled tombs would therefore be visited rather than time spent unnecessarily in alabaster factories for purchases which group members could make during their free day in the Luxor bazaars. In reality, although not always, tour leaders may be Egyptian representatives of foreign travel companies, and a degree of fluidity between the two roles, possibly inspired by common financial objectives, may facilitate the practices described. There is likely to be a measure of truth in all these variant stories if their time-depth is of any significance: strained peddler and tour guide relations were also identified in the 1981 West Bank Social Impact Study (ADL, 1981a: XIII–14).

But no matter how they are reflected in the literature, for the peddlers themselves, the implications of these stories are real, and their truth is what affects them economically. Taking a day off work to sell his scarabs at

Ramose, peddler Badawi sold none, despite the many tourists – the cause for his bad fortune requiring no elaboration: 'because of the tour guides'. The absence of such sales does affect the family budget, and at any given time there may be little money to go around, making £E2 for the tailor to have a *jalabiyya* repaired something of a luxury. What money is available until the next monthly government salary falls due will be kept for market day, with all other essentials – including cigarettes – to be bought on credit from one of the small family stores which operate from neighbouring houses. But bad fortune never lasts forever, and on other days Badawi may be as likely to make a sale as he is not. These incidental sales can add some 60 per cent to his small government wage, indicating the relative importance of his tourism-related work, without which it would be impossible to meet all household needs.

Obviously, in all these dealings peddlers will be keen to maximize their profits, but it would be facile to say that they simply settle for the highest amount possible. Although setting a price and bargaining until some mid-way point is reached between seller and buyer may occur, a more complex way of price determination operates in the foothills, which is as much culturally situated as it is driven by economic pragmatism. Essentially tribal in the way it regulates social relations between kin and non-kin groups throughout the wider community, the fulfilment of reciprocal obligations through a convention known as *wājib* – 'duty' – instils an ethos which dictates that for any service provided there must be something in return, preferably with increase. This ethos can also be seen to inform present-day commercial behaviour operating between Qurnawi and tourists, and much of the pricing strategies which underpin their financial transactions with visitors when offering hospitality, acting as guides through the Necropolis, selling artefacts or, indeed, working as a research assistant. Price negotiations will often not be based on bargaining, but will be open-ended arrangements where a price is negotiated on the basis of what the buyer thinks is fair, with the standard invitation to pay 'as you like' encouraging uninformed foreigners to overestimate the value of goods or services supplied.

Nevertheless, and also reminiscent of *wājib*, a motivating factor remains the maintenance of good relations. In the tourism context this means that the visitor must be made happy if he is to ever return. Were he to discover that a 'good copy' is not the *antika* he thought it was, only because he never asked if it was a 'good copy', peddlers will simply say that today it is impossible to buy such authentic artefacts for £E100, £E200 or even £E1000; that 20 years ago *antikas* may have been the price of a 'good copy' now, but no longer so, thus preserving their own integrity in the expectation that the customer will see some humour in his own naivety.

It is also for reasons inherent in the *wājib* philosophy that the various forms of police presence, and their alternatively facilitating or obstructing role in peddlers plying their trade, are generally accepted by Qurnawi as

fair practice. By contrast with the tour guides who are held in disdain, cordial relations with police and other security personnel may be entered into. They may turn up in an off-duty capacity at weddings and other communal functions, where they may be seen sharing some locally brewed spirit with peddlers whose tombs they police. Rather than perceived as 'drinking with the enemy', reciprocal objectives are clearly involved, with the expectation that any drink freely shared will result in favours being returned and the business at the tomb be made that little easier, even if such interaction was stated as being separate from business. These relations are not entirely without risk, and there are remembered instances where security personnel who had been drinking with peddlers from the foothills the night before found themselves transferred to the Valley of the Kings the next morning.

On a bad day, when such reciprocity evidently fails to operate, police and security personnel may use any reason – a fracas between peddlers competing for the same tourist, or aggrieved by having received insufficient kick-backs as a result of disguised earnings – to suspend trading, round up the peddlers and take them by car to the west bank *taftīsh*, the antiquities inspectorate's office, where charges of unlicensed peddling are recorded. Processed by the Antiquities and Tourism Police in Luxor, offenders may receive a small fine in the order of £E10 after one or two months. Peddlers seem unfazed by these occurrences, and joke amongst themselves how one of them missed out on all the action whilst relieving himself 'in the mountain'.

■ BLESSINGS OF HAPPINESS AND PROSPERITY

One final touch of colour must be added to the tapestry that Qurnawi sociality imposes on the Theban landscape, and colourful it is: the young girls in their bright dresses selling their equally brightly coloured little rag dolls to whichever tourist is charmed by them. Yet small groups of heavily competing girls keen to sell their wares – jostling each other, waving dolls in front of the visitor's face to attract attention and to convince the tourist of this doll's particular merit – can be as invasive to an unsuspecting person as any harassing peddler. Such scenes of pandemonium attract police and security personnel who – in the absence of any bribes to be expected on so limited a turnover – will equally chase away any visitor-accosting vendors.

Modelled on the traditional *al-^carusa* design of the 'bride' figurines found on mud grain silos, the images symbolize happiness and prosperity. Their history goes back to the mid-1970s, when some local girls made several as home decoration. Likely purchased by a visitor, their sale will have been seen as a new market niche, soon inspiring others. Some starting as young

as seven and only 'working' when of pre-pubescent age, the girls may sell one or two per day during summer, four or five per day during winter, or none at all. New material is bought by the metre in various colours, the simpler constructions taking half an hour to make by an older sister or at night by the girl herself. Roaming the foothills rather than staying with a particular tomb, the girls will sell the *carusas* for one or two pounds each, their ability to 'speak good' a stated advantage. Girls will generally give the proceeds to their mother to pay for additional material when necessary, the rest going towards household needs. Individual girls may seek to innovate the standard design in order to get a competitive advantage over the other girls, and a variety of forms may now be encountered: a camel, a man with a camel, a woman with children on the arm. Whether such innovations will continue into the future remains to be seen. The phenomenon of young girls wandering around the Necropolis at several kilometres distance from their new homes seems unlikely, and their colourful business may well be the first artistic expression to fall victim to government-sponsored forms of social engineering here.

Such, then, is the artistry of al-Qurna, where the craftsmen and peddlers of today produce and sell the imagery of the past, and where the generations of tomorrow – following the best social requirements of *wājib* – bestow on visitors the symbols of prosperity and happiness. Despite government attempts at cultural homogenization, such is indeed the foothills' sympathetic magic which will continue to bring visitors back to the Luxor west bank, their expected arrival being the driving force initiating a new cycle in the continuing expression of the Theban Necropolis and its adjacent communities' artistic vitality.

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