



Luis Berrueco (fl. 1727–1749), *Encounter with Four Women*. Municipal Hospital (Ex-Convent of San Juan de Dios), Atlixco, Puebla, Mexico. Courtesy of the Honorable Town Council of Atlixco.

Berrueco's aurally evocative painting depicts St. John of God in a sumptuous bedchamber beseeching four courtesans to leave their profession. The asceticism of the sixteenth-century Portuguese saint, who kneels on the floor wearing only a brown cloak and clutching rosary beads, contrasts sharply with the luxury of the courtesans, whose trappings include clothing made of colorful fabric, pearl bracelets and other jewelry, mirrors, beauty spots, a carpet, and a dressing screen. As a *negrita* servant watches in exasperation, the saint's chanted prayers seem to interrupt a session of music-making in which the courtesans had been playing the Spanish harp and guitar, probably as accompaniment to singing. Ironically, the saint's state of undress, coupled with the particularly luxuriant bed, alludes to the sexual basis of courtesantry while his asceticism highlights the courtesans' acquisition of the art objects and wealth. Following Novohispanic custom, a caption in the corner uses rhyming verse to explain the scenario.

The Courtesan's Arts

Cross-Cultural Perspectives

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is to expand the traditional humanist perspective on the “art” of the courtesan to the social dimensions of its existence by examining the place and scope of courtesans as agents within a social universe of musical production and its economic base.

Following my earlier adaptation of a Marxist mode-of-production perspective on the feudally based music-making nexus of male hereditary professional musicians,⁶ I propose here to focus particularly on the crucial site of the salon as the locus of female-controlled musical production and surplus appropriation as the site where women controlled musical production, as well as the profit or surplus value that the music generated. This means expanding the mode-of-production concept in two ways. To begin with, the quasi-mercantile dimension of the salon must be accommodated conceptually within the feudally based musical economy of northern India.⁷ The second and conceptually overarching expansion is to factor the impact of gender into the social relations of musical production.⁸

First, however, a context needs to be sketched of historical sources and of courtesans themselves as I was able to experience them and their patrons, thanks to my encounters with eloquent participants in that remarkably gendered musical culture. Unlike the exclusively historical focus of most courtesan-related studies, my project is motivated and influenced in important ways by these experiences of the courtesan milieu during its last phase, and on continuing personal contact with some of its performers and patrons. Their performances and remembrances are a treasure of oral history that enables me to center my exploration on the heyday of the twentieth-century salon culture of Lucknow. I thus admit to a frankly personal involvement with the world of Hindustani music and women, being deliciously situated among both musicians and patrons, including some present and former courtesans. Their words are central to my understanding. So is their silence, in the case of courtesans who have reasons for non-disclosure that I deeply respect.

My thinking turned to these challenges in response to a now famous article by Veena Oldenburg.⁹ A historian originally from Lucknow, she elicited an astonishing insider account of resistance against patriarchal domination from a group of Lucknow courtesans, which she described in an essay entitled “Lifestyle as Resistance.” Based on their earning capacities, these women were able to invert their society’s patrilineal control over women, by assigning men the role of service providers in their families and by treating patrons strategically as a source of income. Oldenburg draws a picture of a functionally feminist (and affectively lesbian) self-sufficiency. In social terms, what I see here is a “loose matrilineality” that extends familial solidarity to the biologically unrelated women who have joined a propertied senior courtesan and her daughter in an extended family setting. What stands out is the senior woman’s prosperity and her social prominence as the leader of the hereditary courtesan community in Lucknow, a position that has been held by prosperous women since at least the mid-nineteenth-century *chaudhrayin* (fem. of *chaudhri*, the standard term for the leader of a village or a professional caste group, including musicians). Oldenburg’s account does not address these women’s hereditary identities as performers, though the *chaudhrayin*’s daughter is a well-known singer who later replaced courtesan songs with the popular group genre of *qawwali*.

When Oldenburg’s piece appeared, I realized that this was the household that I too had visited some years earlier, but to a distinctly different effect. Mine was a

search for the courtesan’s art, and it resulted in the very special treasure of a private performance and video recording that I was able to make of the daughter’s singing in the intimate setting and style of her familial training, though accompanied by the larger group of musicians she now performs with.

What made it possible to have this performance held in a courtesan’s home, albeit in the daytime, despite the permanent ban on such performances? My own patronage was mediated, thanks to a common friend, by a landed gentleman who had an already existing quasi-familial patronage link to the artist. His late father had had a permanent liaison with the *chaudhrayin* and he therefore continued a benevolent relationship with the daughter as his half-sister—another aspect of patriarchy and perhaps also a reason for the continuing prosperity of the *chaudhrayin*’s family. Together we walked into the crowded old section of the city and were received with warm courtesy. The gentleman and our friend were comfortably seated in the rather small room upstairs, facing the performers; I was further back, perched on the balcony railing in order to gain a wider angle for my camera, though not wide enough to show my two companions, the patrons of the event. Male patrons were clearly an important constituency in this courtesan household, even if they remained in the background of her performing career.

The second male constituency were her accompanists, traditionally an intimate ensemble of *sarangi* (bowed string) and *tabla* supporting the singer and typical of the quasi-domestic intimacy of performances shared with one or two special patrons. The proliferation of instrumentalists in her ensemble was notable, because it provided a built-in enactment of the female artist addressing her singing to a collectivity of men, sometimes also reinforced by a second woman singer and/or a dancer. “Holding court” has been one of the historical settings for the enactment of courtesan performances in salons as well as in feudal courts, in addition to performing in intimate privacy. The two settings correspond directly to the two feudal social spaces that are literally built into the palaces (“forts”) of the Mughal kings in the form of courts for “general” and “special” audiences, respectively (*darbar-i-‘am* = “general court,” *darbar-i-khas* = “special court”)—a standard architectural feature of Indo-Muslim forts and palaces.

What is the connection between this 1984 enactment of a salon performance and feudal culture? Lucknow is situated in the feudal heartland of Colonial India located in the fertile Gangetic plain, where British colonial authority sustained feudal agriculture with numerous local courts and surrounding princely states.¹⁰ Thus throughout colonial rule this erstwhile royal capital continued to be a cosmopolitan center of feudal culture where courtesans continued to enjoy elite support.¹¹ Tawa’if performances also remained the quintessential courtly display of high culture-cum-entertainment in the Princely States until they were abolished in 1952, five years after Indian Independence. Sustained by feudal incomes, these courts could remain unperturbed by metropolitan bourgeois condemnation, especially since several of them financed public musical institutions like music colleges and some even expected courtesan singers to become students or teachers there.¹² Landed (as well as commercial and industrial) wealth continued as an economic and social force sustaining salons, along with private patronage.¹³

It was in these regions of longest feudal domination, often deemed “backward,”

that I had the opportunity to access the milieu of cultivated music-making as it existed in Lucknow and other urban centers away from metropolitan centers in which Western influence and Victorian values held sway over rising professional and bourgeois elites. In addition, a rich historical record makes it possible to situate this salon culture more broadly within the preceding feudal/colonial context of cultural and economic production in the region. Taking the 1984 performance as a starting point. I ask whether the tawa'if's practice has remained meaningfully linked to feudal culture. The question is of more than historical interest; it is of both semiotic and social relevance to interrogating the post-feudal life of this practice. I begin by sketching a historical frame based on sources for the feudal and post-feudal courtesan, keeping in mind her dual male constituencies of patrons and musicians.

COURTESANS AS CONSORTS: TAWA'IF AND FEUDAL PATRONS

A rich pictorial and literary record attests to the historical prominence of women musicians who consorted with and danced and sang for royalty, elite patrons, and even for British officers of the East India Company. Dating mainly from the eighteenth century, numerous court paintings depict women performers either in a standing or dance position, facing a seated princely patron who may have courtiers standing by him. They show the formal framing of courtesans, their appearance, and the distant but intense communication between the noble patron resting on a throne-like seat, at times surrounded by courtiers. The woman in turn may have male instrumental accompanists standing behind or even following her.¹⁴ Another style of painting depicts a more intimate setting with both patron and courtesan seated, he on a raised platform with bolsters, she on the floor facing him as a performer. Numerous intimate scenes also depict the patron consorting playfully with a courtesan on his dais.

Prominent because of their accessibility to Western readers, accounts by visiting Europeans report on courtesan performances as early as the seventeenth century. Like paintings, these descriptions tend to privilege the visual since these authors lacked the familiarity and comprehension to relate to the words or their musical setting. What these sources do make clear, however, is that formal performances by female singers and dancers were the standard entertainment for honoring guests, and visitors were obligated to be present and offer appropriate appreciation for what was obviously considered the most prized cultural performance at courts across northern India.

In vernacular literature (Persian, followed by Urdu in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries), the pre-Victorian period is represented in chronicles of courtiers and princes that give at least a formalized sense of social milieu and dynamic between courtesans and their patrons. Courtesans are mentioned collectively and also as individuals. Abu'l Fazl, the sixteenth-century court chronicler of Akbar the Great, identifies musicians, including women singer-dancers, by their community, suggesting hereditary identities, although matriliney is not even hinted at.¹⁵ Kanchan/kanjar are the dominant groups mentioned; these are also identified as tribes, implying an

endogamous (patrilineal) community in which women are professional performers. Whether named or not, early tawa'if are often assigned a regional origin from Kashmir or other northwestern locations that are already associated with fair-skinned beauty in classical Farsi poetry, and explicitly so in what is claimed to be the earliest Indian novel written in Farsi, by Hasan Shah.¹⁶

The standard Urdu-Persian term for courtesan, tawa'if, encapsulates these social characteristics, though it appears to be of more recent usage and designates profession and status rather than a particular communal origin. Tawa'if¹⁷ literally means “tribe, community,” while also implying people who move about, wander, and settle. Hasan Shah's novel provides an account of just such a troupe of women entertainers with male managers and accompanists traveling in search of patronage and ready to settle in their large tent where they find it.¹⁸ A somewhat related identifier is the Farsi term *deredar* (lit., tent-dweller), specifying the highest-ranking category of courtesans (*deredar tawa'if*) and referring to the royal tents of military chiefs and rulers and perhaps also to their own movable dwelling place.¹⁹ Etymologically, linguistically, and historically, courtesans were clearly a part of the Persianate cultural environment created in northern India by the Muslim ruling class.

A different treatment is found in the literary and historical accounts of particular courtesans who stand apart from references made to undifferentiated social groupings. Paralleling the careful paintings of courtesans at courts, these women are clearly presented as individuals, and as performers. Their social identity is not assigned but rather construed by association with their patrons, if only temporarily so, much like wives who are invested with the social identity of their husbands. An example is the vividly illustrated account in Persian of the travels of King Jahandar Shah with his consort, the singer Lal Kunwar. Of somewhat later origin is the equally remarkable romance between a singer/dancer in an East India Company officer's establishment and his literary scribe Hasan Shah in the autobiographical novel mentioned above.²⁰

What emerges from these and other sources is that pragmatically and functionally a tawa'if could share her patrons' social life, but her very function also kept her subsumed within the feudal nexus of performers as hereditary service providers—a trusted, beloved, admired servant, but a servant nonetheless. As for her lack of paternity, it was irrelevant, since her heterosexual interaction was extra-familial and thus by definition could not result in legitimate offspring.

This does not mean that noble patrons did not acknowledge or even own the children of their consorts.²¹ That this social valuation continued is confirmed by my experience with Zarina Parveen, which shows that daughters, and sometimes sons, were provided with musical training. One of several known examples is the daughter of a singer for whom her noble patron in Baroda had engaged Abdul Karim Khan as a teacher in the 1920s.²² When the teacher eloped with his pupil the noble tried in vain to have her return “home.”²³ And in the 1930s Begum Akhtar was regularly asked to set to music and perform the poet Natiq's verses at Lucknow's annual poetry festival, because he was generally acknowledged to be her father.²⁴

COURTESANS AS INDEPENDENT PERFORMERS:
SALON CULTURE

Strongly overlapping with patronage at court, courtesans holding court and performing in their own residence are mentioned as early as the 1730s in a contemporary account of Delhi's cultural life.²⁵ In the eighteenth century these venues were either urban salons or tents that rendered a tawa'if mobile and capable of joining military patrons—including commanders of the British East India Company's army. But as an institution, salons gained widespread prominence from the nineteenth century onward. The most detailed and evocative account of salon life by novelist/historian Hadi Ruswa suggests that nineteenth-century courtesan establishments were, at least ideologically speaking, supplemental to courtly performances.²⁶ Landed nobles remained the dominant patrons, while money from trade and other sources—including colonial offices—brought patrons lacking, but also learning, the culture of tawa'if patronage, including courtly deportment and the sophisticated idiom of Urdu poetry. Ghazal poetry of numerous Urdu poets most eloquently conveys the affective dimension of salon interaction. The British, too, continued to patronize salons, at least in the feudal environment between Calcutta and Lucknow.²⁷ This included travelers "in search of the picturesque" like Mrs. Belnos or Fanny Parkes, who describe in detail what the British categorically called "nautch" (from Hindi *nach*, i.e., dance), since they did not understand the songs and their poetic meanings, which underlie the dance.²⁸

From the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, the urban salon or *kotha* (lit. "villa") enjoyed increasing prominence as the first venue for Hindustani art music that was accessible to the growing commercial and colonial elite cadres outside the control of princely hosts. Elite salons maintained decorum and attendance was strictly screened so as to retain the character of an elite gathering. But money also enabled untutored wealthy men to visit, if not to join, the elite gatherings there. The increasing shift of feudal patronage to the locale of the salon was paralleled by the rise of mercantile wealth as well as the powerful impetus of reform and the rise of nationalism. Salons proliferated in urban centers across northern India and Pakistan, and they continued to flourish in large numbers even during the years of World War II when war contractors generated an upsurge in patronage.

Most remarkable about salons is the fact that courtesans themselves managed and even owned the salon venue, notwithstanding the fact that major feudal patrons sometimes owned the building or provided other forms of support for the tawa'if—though there is little information about the economy of such ownership. The courtesan in turn had to comply with patrons' preferences in performance, but she could exercise control over proceedings and also over who should be admitted to the performance. Control, finally, enabled courtesans to have family members live in their establishments, especially daughters, real or putative, who could become singers, but also sons and brothers who attended to service tasks and even served as subsidiary musical accompanists.²⁹

SALON CULTURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As a locus for social/musical heterosexuality, the salon served feudal patrons when in urban residence, along with merchants and colonial functionaries, who together formed a feudal-mercantile urban elite.³⁰ The unprecedented scope for female agency afforded by the salon within a thoroughly patrilineal/patriarchal society needs to be rendered explicit, because it stands in stark contrast with the subsequent turn toward public concerts that were essentially inspired by bourgeois notions of stage performance controlled by (male) managers. The tawa'if's independence was indeed singled out in contrast to respectable women suffering from male oppression, but such independence could not pass the test of Victorian social norms.³¹ Already by the late nineteenth century, tawa'if and their dance became morally stigmatized by the "anti-nautch" movement of missionaries and middle-class social reformers.³² Half a century later, nationalist musical reformers simply followed suit, with the aim of replacing bad courtesans with good wives, especially on the Radio, so that "respectable" middle-class women could perform there.³³ Starting before the turn of the twentieth century, the expansion of middle-class music-making by both men and women accomplished a gradual bourgeois takeover of relations of musical production, both in music education and on the concert stage. Gradually, music-making as a gendered field of cultural production was eliminated as cultural capital increasingly accrued to male and female musical performances on the public stage.³⁴

After independence in 1947 "a new public tradition which did not distinguish between male and female roles" superseded the gender-specific performances of professional women under feudal patronage,³⁵ and their musical repertory became marginalized within the gamut of "classical" (*klassiki*) music as it was reconceptualized by bourgeois scholarly and institutional consensus. The evocative text-oriented genres long cultivated by courtesan singers—thumri, dadra, and ghazal—were now defined as "light" or "semi-classical" genres sung to "light" and "mixed" ragas, in contrast to the fully "classical" khayal and dhrupad, which form the core genres of pure raga music that alone came to constitute the classical canon. Equally important, dancing and the miming of poetic content became detached from singing even while dance (and mime) retained their status among the three "branches" of *sangit*, the inclusive classical concept of Indian music.

1 2 Overshadowed by the triumphal march of musical reform in the twentieth century, the remarkable story of women music-makers and their gender-specific musical voice took the span of another generation and the impetus of the women's movement to gain scholarly and institutional attention. Recent historical research is opening up eloquent archival material on women musicians of the last two centuries, mainly rooted in Urdu literature and courtly paintings,³⁶ but also of English provenance, highlighting "the demise of the nautch girl" and the subsequent "decline" of professional women performers.³⁷ A special impetus comes from feminist initiatives that include women-centered perspectives on courtesans as well as temple dancers (*devadasis*).³⁸ And a pioneering effort was made in 1984 to assemble long-retired (and often impoverished) hereditary singer-dancers at India's premier arts academy,³⁹ although after decades of (respectable) silence few were still able to sing, or willing to speak of their life as courtesans.⁴⁰ The event brought into stark focus the social

collapse of the courtesans' cultural capital and their overt musical deference to male hereditary musicians who, in contrast to the women, have retained their primacy as musical experts and teachers.

Much work is yet to be done to open the doors shut by the official, essentially male, history of Indian music. But the strong moral antagonism cultivated in Victorian British as well as Indian writings against professional women performers has indelibly marked present-day historicizing efforts toward achieving a culturally appropriate perspective on the cultural and social role of courtesans. "Appropriate" here must mean: in the terms of the milieu that grounded courtesans culturally and sustained them socially, and free from the bourgeois resignification of courtesans as "fallen women." To achieve such a perspective is a formidable challenge, given the historical permeation of colonially generated Victorian values among dominant Indian elites and their institutions in the metropolis, including the state itself. And even the most positive twentieth-century representations of feudal milieus, particularly in Urdu, cannot help but speak in reaction to the long-dominant "anti-nauch" discourse, if only through attempts at rehabilitating courtesan heroines as innocent victims—a favorite plot in films (*Pakeeza*, *Zindagi ya Tufan*) as well as literature.⁴¹

A major challenge is that such cultural representations—apart from the tawa'if themselves—are invariably authored from the vantage point of male patrons. Furthermore, the very media of painting and literature typically serve elite representation. My own work is no exception: even as a female and thoroughly acculturated musician, my own relationship with former courtesans, like that of other female scholars (e.g., Post), has never transcended the confines of middle-class female respectability and connoisseurship that I have inevitably represented. On the other hand, there are now feminist scholars who explicitly represent courtesans from a position of solidarity⁴² and who offer a woman-centered identification of the courtesan's repertory with her agency.⁴³ Their work not only challenges the moralist bourgeois condemnation of courtesans by the likes of social reformers such as Mrs. Fuller, it also puts into question the feudal nostalgia that often colors representations of courtesans in literature and film.

Still, the issue of voice and representation clearly remains a strategic challenge in any discourse by and about courtesans. Agency can be found only in a few exceptional voices of retrospection from women who successfully negotiated the transformation into classical twentieth-century concert performers, the most outstanding one being an autobiographical account by Gangubai Hangal (even if translated and perhaps edited).⁴⁴ Alternatively, one untapped locus of agency is the courtesan's performance in which she literally enacts her rule over her court of elite patrons, making her art her primary tool of domination. Her performance is also the most accessible site of her interaction not only with patrons but with her male musicians. What kind of a tool is this art, and what empowerment does it contribute in the courtesan's relationship with both these male constituencies?

TAWA'IF AS PERFORMERS

By all accounts, Indian courtesans have been performers by definition, although they were not necessarily so named. The earliest accounts strongly identify tawa'if with the performance of poetry: they sang, mimed, and danced poems. Persian and Urdu ghazals were the privileged currency of elite conviviality that included enriching conversation with spontaneous recitation of verses from a shared repertory of classical and contemporary poems. Every account of courtesans performing is studded with ghazal verses from classical poetry as well as from the tawa'if's own personal repertory.⁴⁵ Poets traditionally asked tawa'if to sing their poems, to their mutual enhancement.⁴⁶ The performance of poetry, from informal conversation to formal presentation, was a central enactment of North Indian elite culture, then, and tawa'if were central participants in it.

In performance, the ghazal art song has been the tawa'if's most widely appreciated vocal genre. Musically more valuable, however, was the tawa'if's improvisational art music, which she sang to short poems in Hindi, notably thumri and dadra. Her other Hindi song genres were derived from regional songs evocative of her feudal patrons' local roots. The tawa'if's dance encompassed the two classical aspects of Indian dance: expressive miming (*bhav*) of the song and virtuosic rhythmic movements or "pure" dance (*nritya*). Together they constituted the most directly physical way for the tawa'if to embody both the text and the music of her performance.

How did these performances "go"? Sources on court performances offer scant information about the process beyond the visual depiction of courtesans dancing and singing in court assemblies and intimate settings. Musical matters are left out, beyond the sight of instruments and a few expressive hand gestures, but poetry, including poems composed for tawa'if (*tawa'ifi*) by recognized poets, has been recorded and published, though not explicitly identified.

More is known about the content of performances held by courtesans in their own establishment, since they have lasted until what is today still living memory. Moreover, they were attended by elite members outside the control of princely hosts, among them writers and poets. Salon audiences have been vividly described and remembered as court-like assemblies observing rank and etiquette, but here the courtesan herself presided over the court, even while she was serving the patrons in her audience in performances that in fact paralleled the court ritual. The continued use of the term *mujra* ("seven salutations") for these performances in the twentieth century clearly attests to the cultural capital accruing to this courtly model, if not to its literal enactment.

This continuity is evident from oral reminiscences shared by erstwhile patrons and poets who offered me concrete and evocative depictions of the *mujra* as enacted in Lucknow salons between the 1920s and 1940s. What follows is a composite sketch of a performance drawn from such living memories. It is here that cultural-musical relations of production were enacted and rendered observable.

COURTESAN PERFORMANCES OBSERVED

Mujra is symbolic of total submission before a royal patron. The deep obeisances which the tawa'if executes in an entreating and artful gesture introduce her display of artistic mastery, and of herself as a desirable female. For the mujra is really a heightened musical frame for a dialogue between one woman and many men—but only the tawa'if is privileged with the language of song. Her answers come from patrons in multiple forms through gestures, exclamations, and material rewards. Underlying this unequal discourse is an asymmetry of power that is tempered with gentility. The patron requests and the tawa'if complies, while the instrumentalists frame and facilitate compliance. A Lucknow patron recalls: "Whatever you made a request (*farmaish*) for is what was performed. Anything."⁴⁷ Within a song, improvisational musical structures serve the very purpose of responding flexibly to the listeners' preferences. What the audience has come for, in the words of Lucknow poet and patron Umar Ansari, is *ruhani ghiza* (literally: soul food), an essential emotional-spiritual nourishment that is inherent in music.⁴⁸

Dancing initially entails, for both dancer and musicians, a standing position appropriate in the presence of patrons who are, by definition, superior in status. For the mujra event is a *darbar*, or ranked assembly, where status is validated, and also a *maidan* (field of battle) where rivals assemble and compete for the queen's favor. Indeed, paintings as well as descriptive accounts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century court performances show how the model of actual court performances continued to inform twentieth-century salon etiquette.⁴⁹ Just as in the feudal court assemblies, the tawa'if awaits or elicits the permission (*ijazat*) of her superiors, and only then, followed by her musicians, does she sit down to present the songs that speak to her listeners' special preferences: thumri, dadra, and, above all, ghazal for Urdu speakers with Muslim cultural affinities, but also Hindi genres like *hori*, *kajri*, and *chaiti*, depending on the listeners' affinities with either Muslim or Hindu culture.

From an entreating inferior, she now becomes queen of the *mahfil*, the candle (*shamma'*) among moths (*parvane*), and the proud target of their rivalry. She is the cupbearer (*saqi*) of the wine of ecstasy, but also the killer who wields the dagger (*khanjar*) of cruelty. Aesthetically and affectively, her listeners, the patrons, become her lovers, ardent, helpless, and silent. But her songs speak for them as well as to them. She is the voice not only of love (*ishq*, *muhabbat*) but also of the lover (*ashiq*), his suffering and his delights. An assembly of rivals is by definition a place of suffering, a contest of desire for a woman untrammelled by the constraints of patrilineal kinship ties.

It is the tawa'if's unencumbered identity as a woman that enabled the courtesan to produce a sensual gendered cultural experience for her male patrons in return for the rewards they offer. But producing the music is different. Very much present in the performance were the courtesan's musicians, who provided her singing with melodic and rhythmic support on the bowed sarangi and the paired tabla (and earlier also on the sitar). Far more than mere accompanists, these men were in fact indispensable as co-producers of the tawa'if's performance, both in an immediate and in a more global sense.

PRODUCING THE PERFORMANCE:
COURTESANS AND MUSICIANS

Production is here understood to be more than staging the proceedings of a cultural event. The focus is on the relations of production as a diagnostic of what it takes to produce and sustain the mujra as an ongoing cultural practice. The concept of production is collective and functional, and the concept of social relations serves to identify the locus of control over the music that is being produced.

As highly accomplished performers, tawa'if were professionally trained and spent years studying and practicing their art. This training was in the hands of hereditary musicians who also provided the tawa'if's instrumental accompaniment. Sarangi and tabla players functioned as her teachers for voice and dance respectively. Sarangi players, in particular, have been uniquely identified with teaching courtesans as well as guiding their singing in performance, and even with managing their engagements. These instrumentalists belonged to endogamous patrilineal communities of male hereditary professional musicians who have been the exclusive heirs to Hindustani art music. An ongoing association existed between them and tawa'if as masters and students, and tawa'if accepted their authority, collectively referring to them as Khan Sahib (Respected Sir; literally: Chief). This is reflected in accounts of Begum Akhtar and others, and it was evident as recently as 1984, during the Women Music Makers festival. [Tawa'if themselves may have learned from their mothers or other courtesans informally, but their acknowledged masters were always men with a hereditary musical pedigree.]

As accompanists the musicians of course played a subordinate role, but they received a fixed share of the income (usually 25%) and the sarangi player, at least, often lived in the establishment.⁵⁰ The relationship was ongoing and hereditary, with sons taking their father's place, although few courtesans had hereditary successors.

Why did tawa'if owners of salons not simply hire accompanists and, above all, teach their own daughters or granddaughters, avoiding the inevitable dependence on hereditary male musicians? In order to contextualize this question it is helpful to examine the social conditions of this musical production in the wider context of class and heredity that has continued to characterize Indian feudalism up to the twentieth century.

Feudal musical production in India comprised ties of patron-client relations between controllers/appropriators and "laborers" or servants—even if given a chiefly title like Khan Sahib, that is, musician. Paternalistic, even affective, ties between patron and servants were balanced by a strict opposition between their functions: a patron⁵¹ listened to the music he had his musicians perform, but by definition did not perform himself, while his musicians had the duty to provide the patron with the music he wanted to hear. An ideology of land control as the source of wealth, and of labor as having low social value, legitimized the feudal appropriation of the value generated by labor, be it agricultural or musical. According to the same ideology, rewarding the laborer was seen as benefaction rather than a redistribution of value that was created by labor in the first place. Thus feudal rewards were considered a patron's personal gift to the musician, not a payment keyed to a musical service. Salon performances operated on a similar pattern, in which each patron presented

his remuneration as a personal gift to the singer, in a style that also evokes offerings made by courtiers to their superiors.⁵²

The means of production for music obviously includes a musician's instrument and skills; it also, crucially, includes the venue for the creation of a performance. Venues were of course totally controlled by the feudal patron, enabling him to appropriate the value or "cultural capital"⁵³ produced by the musician. In order to qualify for productive relations with patrons, musicians themselves were responsible for producing and reproducing their professional skills. This took place through long-term teaching and learning within endogamous "brotherhoods" (*bradri*) of patrilineal families who protected, and still protect, their professional knowledge by marrying within their community. While active performers were engaged elsewhere, earning support for their families, their children were raised and taught by senior relatives, enabling them in turn to perform at courts and support the community of their elders, wives, and children.⁵⁴

INSERTING GENDER

For male musicians, their endogamous patrilineal kinship organization has clearly been a functional aspect of musical production. For female musicians, gender difference profoundly affected both the production of music and their own reproduction. In terms of class and professional function, *tawa'if* are producers and can be classed with other feudal servants. Like male musicians, they became subject to feudal beneficence as reward for professional service. But the courtesan's presence in an assembly of men introduced an extra dimension of sensuality and heterosexual attraction that placed her in a potential relationship of personal and social intimacy with individual patrons. As a potential consort, she was subsumed by patrilineal society into a patron's entourage and then became his adornment. This was possible because she had the competence to transcend her service class and to affirm this new status through her cultivated deportment, wit, and conversational literacy in addition to her musical competence.⁵⁵ Whether in a feudal court or in her own salon, the courtesan acted the part of a higher class and received commensurate material rewards, certainly far beyond those of her male professional counterparts. In short, feudal and sexual ties became blurred.

The fact is that the gender position of consort is by definition unstable. In contrast to the patron's wife, her role is reproductively irrelevant and the gendered space she occupies lies on the margins of the patrilineal system of reproduction that is controlled through female seclusion within a propertied patron's family, leading to a *de facto* functional separation between the reproductive and the social and musical heterosexuality of wife and courtesan respectively. Functioning as a focal point for conspicuous consumption, social competition, and reaffirmations of social ranking, the *tawa'if's* social role and individual position was of necessity dependent on the male patron class.

Even while socially advantaged as individuals, courtesans also continued to depend collectively on men of their own class of hereditary professional musicians. As her teachers and accompanists, these musicians were in a position to act as her

musical managers. Historically and functionally grounded, such musical dependence continues to find expression in gestures of formal deference by courtesans acknowledging the dominant musical position of hereditary (male) professional musicians as the teachers of professional female singers.

Why were *tawa'if* not trained within their own families and why, as elders, did they not take on the role of teachers? Not enough is known about courtesan families and communities, but what emerges, based on recent conversations, is a lack of numbers and a generational structure that amounts to a lack of stable and localized communities that could serve as home base for female musicians. The major issue is reproduction. Since courtesans by definition could not be married or have "families," their very success with patrons meant that they could not be recognized as having their own hereditary or affinal family ties. This in turn affected their access to the means of musical reproduction: namely, to male master musicians.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY—COLLECTIVE CONSTRAINTS?

Individually courtesans were elevated by noble patrons as great artists and individuals, but collectively they shared the inferior status of specialized feudal servants. As owners and managers of salons, however, *tawa'if* have collectively enjoyed an autonomy that is entirely exceptional among women in their society, as was noted a century ago and has been again in the present.⁵⁶ Would courtesans not be ideally suited to the project of feminist emancipation?

In 1984 when Rita Ganguly brought surviving courtesans from across the country into Delhi to celebrate and acknowledge their art, most could no longer sing after decades of silence. I saw for myself how impoverished some of them were: the once splendid Mushtari Bai lived in squalor in a dark Old Delhi attic and had not sung in many years. I did not see an extended household with younger relatives providing for their mothers. And very few of these old courtesans had daughters who sang and could support their mothers. Others had sons who prospered in business, but kept little contact with their mothers. Most of all, what struck me with its absence was reference to wider kin and community links. This situation contrasts sharply with that of the courtesans' male accompanists, whose hereditary community continues to be overtly represented by a far-flung network of practicing musicians, including youngsters.

Zarina Parveen (fig. 17.1)⁵⁷ and other courtesans have targeted the loss of the *kotha* (salon) as the root cause of their demise (listen to CD track 15 and see the appendix). I tend to agree with them, for economic and social reasons alone. The *kotha* was in fact the first public concert venue of broad attraction, and, remarkably, it was run entirely by women. This situation surely became an issue of control for nationalist reformers and their governmental backers. And the loss of landed estates and courtly patronage also greatly reduced those patrons' support for the salons themselves. This amounted to a substantive loss, because members of the elite feudal class were paramount patrons who kept other men away from controlling the women they patronized. Since the control of venues is tantamount to controlling the major means of producing a performance, feudal patronage of the *tawa'if*—not just her



FIGURE 17.1. Master singer Zarina Parveen of Lucknow offers a traditional *ghazal* performance, videorecorded by Qureshi (August 1984).

particular performance—created the infrastructure for her to sell her performances to others while controlling the major means of musical production: the salon itself.

MATRILINEAL TIES AND POST-SALON STRATEGIES

Are courtesans matrilineal? Veena Oldenburg believes so, and indeed the matriline is invariably the only lineage identity courtesans have been assigned by others. But lineality is a construct invoked or denied strategically, and the absence of patrilineality does not equal matrilineality. Personal encounters in the post-salon present suggest some strategies employed by individual women to configure kinship around female solidarity. I have also heard a courtesan flatly deny that a famous courtesan was her mother, even though this was a piece of common knowledge put forward twice by the interviewing hostess of a performance that was being recorded at a prestigious Arts event for Pakistan's National Lok Virsa Heritage Label. On the other hand, the famous Pakistani singer Malka Pukhraj publicly promoted her daughter Tahira Syed as a singer and toured the world with her. Other courtesans, including Begum Akhtar herself, have emphasized, if not identified, their fathers and pointed out that their fathers encouraged them to become singers, thus projecting patrilineal legitimation for being a performer.

In actual practice, active lineal ties for courtesans have remained maternal. This

is most obvious in the traditional courtesan household of Lucknow's Zarina Parveen, whose mother was the head of the household of several women and their children while husbands and brothers remained in the background, even when I visited there along with my husband. Begum Akhtar, too, was raised by her mother, and after engagements at various courts she and her mother lived in her own house in Lucknow where she entertained and boldly drove around in a black Packard wearing slacks. But once she married Barrister Abbasi, she accepted the patrilineal rules of upper-class respectability, and therefore could not receive her matrilineal relatives in her new patrilineal household. Begum Akhtar had to compromise her matrilineal ties to the extent of having to camouflage the existence of her young daughter as a "niece" so that the girl could stay in her house. And she could only visit her natal family in the anonymity of a *burqa*, because any public sign of their existence was evidence of her disreputable lack of patrilineal identity and thus self-control.

This contrasts with the situation of courtesans who have married hereditary musicians and accompanists. One singer, the wife of a famous instrumentalist, has her sister live with them and her other relatives visit them freely, even though they are Hindu and the husband a Muslim. She has, however, given up singing in public, and he earns well. In another marriage of a Muslim courtesan singer to a hereditary musician, also Muslim, the wife has continued to raise her two daughters "in her people's way," that is, outside of domestic seclusion, even after she married a hereditary instrumentalist whose own milieu requires female seclusion. I saw these teenage girls sing and freely socialize with male visitors in their home while their stepfather kept his own daughter-in-law in strict seclusion in the kitchen of the same small apartment. He explained to me that his wife was following the norms of her community (*qaum*), he those of his. For these and other singers, marriage can be seen as cementing the courtesan's traditional musical partnership with her teacher/accompanist. At the same time she becomes locked into the patrilineal class status of her husband, thereby compromising her potential social mobility as a courtesan. But her professional scope as a singer, as well as that of her musician husband, is clearly enhanced.

In maintaining female agency outside patrilineality the issue is, in the end, one of economic power. Capital assets are what enable Zarina Parveen and other courtesans of means to maintain their independent social arrangements; in other words, some of these elite courtesans became entrepreneurs who can afford to live with or without music. But these may well be high-profile exceptions. We now need to hear from less fortunate courtesans whose only livelihood remains their traditional calling. Amelia Maciszewski's important new research on the self-help organization Guria clearly demonstrates their dependence on men to access the assets of patrilineal power structures. Denial or assertion, alliance at upper or lower class levels, the underlying social fact is that for North Indian and Pakistani courtesans agency has been contingent and linked in one way or another to patrilineal validation.

This exploration suggests that female agency is indeed constrained by the dominant social system of patrilineality. It was the post-feudal salon that provided courtesans with a unique, if limited, niche for systemic female control over the means of musical and even material production, if only in a narrow, domestic sense. The violence with which the bourgeois Indian nation state eradicated this niche raises

questions about the gender factor that must widen the usual focus on sensuality and its control in heterosexual relations. Could the female-controlled management of salon establishments have been seen as a systemic negation of patriarchal control itself? On an individual level, did salon culture open to women artists a social domain of agency vis-à-vis men, to the point of a transgressive blurring of class boundaries? And, not to be forgotten, did the absence of stable social conditions of reproduction most directly undermine patriarchal norms as well as the viability of the salon itself, including the courtesan's arts?

Marx, and prevailing Marxist social analysis, did not consider it within its all-male purview to bring gender into its conception of production; indeed, Marx's own attention to kinship extended to class, but not to gender.⁵⁸ In this study I have attempted to explore the convergence and tensions between the two, in searching for a relevant frame for situating North Indian courtesans and their lasting social legacy as women, as well as their cultural legacy as performing artists. I have also attempted to factor in the social style and "cultural capital" represented by feudal court patronage in order to show its impact on post-feudal salons, both in the form of landed patronage and cultural validation. My hope is that an approach embodying structure as well as agency should offer meaningful new ways for understanding the life of these women and for listening to their remarkable music.

Notes

Research for this study owes much to the late Begum Akhtar, Zarina Parveen, the late Umar Ansari, Saleem Qureshi, Abdul Qavi Zia, Khaliq Ahmad, and many others for sharing their memories with me.

1. In the famous 1954 dictum of the Broadcasting minister B. V. Keskar, quoted in H. R. Luthra, *Indian Broadcasting* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1986).
2. See Vidya Rao, "Thumri and Thumri Singers," in *Cultural Reorientation in Modern India*, ed. Indu Banga and Jaidev (Shimla: Institute of Advanced Study, 1996), 278–315.
3. See Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," *Feminist Studies* 16 (1990): 259–88; *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*, ed. Nina Kumar (Calcutta: Stree, 1994); Rita Ganguli (-Ganguly), "Bai Theke Begum [From courtesan to wife]," *Desh* 63/64 (1996): 73–93; Amelia Maciszewski, "Stories about Selves: Selected North Indian Women's Musical Biographies," *The World of Music* 43 (2001): 139–72; and eadem, below, chap. 18.
4. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "In Search of Begum Akhtar: Patriarchy, Poetry, and Twentieth-Century Indian Music," *The World of Music* 43 (2001): 97–137.
5. Siddeshwari Devi taught at the National Arts Academy (Bharatiya Kala Kendra), Savita Devi at Delhi University. Both were exceptional appointments for courtesan singers, speaking to their artistic eminence.
6. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "Confronting the Social: Mode of Production and the Sublime in (Indian) Art Music," *Ethnomusicology* 44 (2000): 15–38; and eadem, "Mode of Production and Musical Production: Is Hindustani Music Feudal?" in *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*, ed. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 81–105.
7. Christopher Alan Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

8. See Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210; repr. in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Heidi Hartmann and Lydia Sargent (London: Pluto Press, 1981); and Sumita Chakravarty, *Nationalism and Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).
9. Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance."
10. The so-called *ta'alluqdar* system inspired by its British counterpart. Princely states were under indirect British rule and internally autonomous.
11. Vivid oral accounts exist of Lord Butler supporting and presiding over annual song recitals by courtesan singers (Abdul Qavi Zia, pers. comm., 1992).
12. Susheela Misra, *Music Makers of Bhathkhande College* (Calcutta: Sangeet Research Academy, 1985).
13. In still-feudal regions of Pakistan such private patronage continues to this day, although urban salons have been curtailed even in that country as well.
14. This representation is of colonial provenance.
15. Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak, *The A'in-i Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann, ed. S. L. Goomer, 2d ed. (Delhi: Aadiesh Book Depot, 1965).
16. Written in Persian in 1790 but extant only as *Nishtar: Naval* in a nineteenth-century Urdu translation by Anjum Kasmandvi (Lahore: Majlis-e-Taraqqi-e-Adab, 1973), Hasan Shah's valuable source has been translated into English by writer Qurratulain Hyder, changing the title from *Nishtar* (= *nashtar*, "the surgeon's knife") to *The Nautch Girl: A Novel* (New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks, 1992).
17. The term is a plural derivative of the Farsi (Arabic) *ta'if* of no earlier than eighteenth-century provenance.
18. See Hasan Shah, *Nishtar*; and idem, *The Nautch Girl*, trans. Hyder.
19. Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, trans. and ed. E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (London: Paul Elek, 1975).
20. Hasan Shah, *The Nautch Girl*.
21. Unfortunately, my pre-nineteenth-century sources do not contain such information.
22. When Abdul Karim Khan subsequently eloped with his pupil, the noble tried in vain to have her brought back "home." She eventually established a school in Bombay.
23. Jayantilal S. Jariwalla, *Abdul Karim: The Man of the Times* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1973).
24. Qureshi, "In Search of Begum Akhtar."
25. Dargah Quli Khan, *Purani Dehli ke Halat* [An account of Old Delhi; original Farsi manuscript in Urdu], trans. Khwaja Hasan Nizami (Delhi: Mahbub Press, 1949).
26. Mirza Hadi Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada* [The Courtesan of Lucknow], trans. Khushwant Singh and M. A. Husaini (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1961).
27. Qureshi, "In Search of Begum Akhtar."
28. See Fanny Parkes Parlbly, *Wandering of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, During Four-and-Twenty Years in the East* (London: P. Richardson, 1850); and Mrs. Belnos, *Twenty-four Plates Illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal* (London: Smith and Elder, 1832).
29. See Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance"; Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*; and Shah, *Nishtar*, trans. Kasmandvi.
30. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars*.
31. Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (Edinburgh: Anderson and Ferrier, 1900).
32. Pran Nevile, *Nautch Girls of India: Dancers, Singers, Playmates* (New Delhi: Ravi Kumar, 1996).

33. David Lalyveld, "Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All India Radio," unpublished paper, 1998.
34. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of fields of cultural production is useful for this major shift within the realm of production and productive relations. See his *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
35. Jennifer Post, "Professional Women in Indian Music: The Death of the Courtesan Tradition," in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Ellen Koskoff (New York: Greenwood, 1992), 97–109, at 104.
36. See Hasan Shah, *Nishtar*; idem, *The Nautch Girl*, trans. Hyder; Khan, *Purani Dehli ke Halat*; Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase*; Mirza Jaffar Quadim Husain, *Lukhnau ki Akhri Bahar* (New Delhi: Taraqqi-yi Urdu Biuro, 1981); and Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*.
37. See Jennifer [Post] Quinn, "Marathi and Konkani Speaking Women in Hindustani Music, 1880–1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1982); eadem, "Professional Women"; Joep Bor, "The Voice of the Sarangi: An Illustrated History of Bowing in India," *National Centre for the Performing Arts Quarterly Journal* 15, nos. 3 and 5, and 16, no. 1 (1986–87): 9–183 (inclusive); and Nevile, *Nautch Girls*.
38. See Amrit Srinivasan, *Reform or Conformity? Temple "Prostitution" and the Community in the Madras Presidency* (New Delhi: Kali for Women Houdou, 1988); Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance"; and Maciszewski, below, chap. 18.
39. *Women Music Makers of India Seminar* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Kendra, 1984).
40. The Seminar was organized by Rita Ganguly, herself a student of Begum Akhtar and Siddeshwari Devi, the senior hereditary singer from Benares who also taught at the sponsoring academy of the event, Bharatiya Kala Kendra.
41. See Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*; Shah, *Nishtar*, trans. Kasmandvi; and idem, *The Nautch Girl*. *Pakeeza* (1971) was directed by Kamal Amrohvi, and *Zindagi Ya Toofan* (1956?) by A. K. Abbas.
42. Ganguly, "Bai Theke Begum"; Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance"; Carol Babiracki, "What's the Difference? Reflection on Gender and Research in Village India," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121–36; and Maciszewski, below, chap. 18.
43. E.g., Rao, "Thumri and Thumri Singers."
44. *Gangubai Hangal*, ed. S. L. Bhyrappa and Ashok Ranada (Hubli: Academy of Performing Arts, 1988).
45. See Shah, *The Nautch Girl*; Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada*; and Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (London: Phoenix House, 1993).
46. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "How Does Music Mean? Embodied Memories and the Politics of Affect in the Indian Sarangi," *American Ethnologist* 27 (2000): 805–38.
47. Ansari in Qureshi, "How Does Music Mean?"
48. Umar Ansari (pers. comm., 1992). Sufis also use this concept to explain *sama'* (listening to music for spiritual purposes); see my *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context, and Meaning in Qawwali* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), first published in 1987 by Cambridge University Press. See also Amin Nun, "Ruh ki Ghiza," in *Bazgasht (Sarguzisht)* (Karachi: published by author, 1991).
49. This is well exemplified by a painting depicting Raja Balwant Singh of Jammu and Musicians (dated 1748; Victoria and Albert Museum, IS 24–1974).
50. Jariwalla, *Abdul Karim*.
51. Significantly, even post-feudal concert audiences continue to be called patrons.
52. The notion of payment as a gift for musicians rather than payment for music—either of which could take the form of cash—survives among traditional hereditary musicians up to

the present day, as manifest in the offering practices still taught to disciples within the community. See Qureshi, "Mode of Production," 98–99, and Lowell Lybarger, "The Tabla Solo Repertoire of Pakistani Punjab: An Ethnomusicological Perspective" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2003).

53. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
54. This process of musical production continues to operate among some hereditary musicians today, though in greatly reduced numbers.
55. A role that is familiar from ancient Greece to feudal Japan and Europe.
56. Fuller, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*; and Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance."
57. I gratefully acknowledge the artist's generosity in sharing her art with me and offer my sincere thanks to Mr. Khaliq Ahmad for making this recording possible.
58. Of course, ignoring gender is itself a gesture of patriarchy.



Luis Berrueco (fl. 1727–1749), *Encounter with Four Women*. Municipal Hospital (Ex-Convent of San Juan de Dios), Atlixco, Puebla, Mexico. Courtesy of the Honorable Town Council of Atlixco.

Berrueco's aurally evocative painting depicts St. John of God in a sumptuous bedchamber beseeching four courtesans to leave their profession. The asceticism of the sixteenth-century Portuguese saint, who kneels on the floor wearing only a brown cloak and clutching rosary beads, contrasts sharply with the luxury of the courtesans, whose trappings include clothing made of colorful fabric, pearl bracelets and other jewelry, mirrors, beauty spots, a carpet, and a dressing screen. As a *negrita* servant watches in exasperation, the saint's chanted prayers seem to interrupt a session of music-making in which the courtesans had been playing the Spanish harp and guitar, probably as accompaniment to singing. Ironically, the saint's state of undress, coupled with the particularly luxuriant bed, alludes to the sexual basis of courtesantry while his asceticism highlights the courtesans' acquisition of the art objects and wealth. Following Novohispanic custom, a caption in the corner uses rhyming verse to explain the scenario.

The Courtesan's Arts

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