

The Role of Songs in Promoting Interreligious Understanding in Multi-Religious Sri Lanka: An Islamic Aesthetic Analysis

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Abstract

The paper has chiefly examined the vitality of the aesthetic expression of the song and music to promote inter-religious understanding among multiple faith traditions that exist in Sri Lanka from an Islamic aesthetic point of view. It can be observed that there is a growing debate among scholars concerning the contributions of the expression of aesthetic aspects of human beings, especially song, and music, and their use of them for the harmonious relationships among the divergent communities of the nation of Sri Lanka. This entails a thorough study of whether the song and music can be utilized for that purpose from the Islamic aesthetic point of view. Against this backdrop, this study sought to investigate and explain how an effective song and music can be used to promote coexistence and interreligious understanding, especially among Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. This study used the qualitative research method relying on the library to collect the data from relevant literature on the subject and employed content analysis. The findings show that Islam is in a positive position in terms of using songs with music to promote peace and social harmony but with some restrictions. This also suggested optimising the aesthetic instruments in connection with other communities within the Shariah compliance. This study can be useful for decision-makers, educators, and religious figures who are dedicated to fostering interreligious harmony and minimising conflicts in Sri Lanka and other countries.

Keywords: Song tradition; Muslim-Buddhist understanding; Islamic aesthetic view; Sri Lanka

Introduction

One of the main features brought by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during his lifetime was the integration of society, as he was the one who constructed a peaceful society in the Islamic Era when Muslims, Arabs, Christians, and Jews coexisted.¹ Contemporary scholarship is arguing about alternative tools and methods, instead of the traditional way of doing to enhancing mutual understanding among divergent communities. It is explained in the work on *The Role of Arts in Promoting Cultural Communication Between Communities* that aesthetic expression like the song is becoming one of the pertinent tools for this purpose in modern debates.² The expression of song and music is being debated in view of culture as it is related to society's mentality, attitudes, and thoughts in life contrary to civilization which is connected with societies' material existence. Generally, the songs are regarded as energizing emotional feelings and stimulating them to do good deeds as so long as their content, rhythm, and presentation are at an expected level. Music plays an intrinsic role in the evolution of culture in various regions, communities and eras. Protest songs have a unique function, as they reflect viewpoints regarding the operation of society, including issues such as social justice, inequality, environmentalism, and the rights of indigenous peoples; they frequently explore an imbalance of power between social groups. Importantly, they often express minority viewpoints, those in opposition to prevailing mainstream opinion or government policy. Further, songs have proven to be an effective tool for increasing community awareness and stimulating community action concerning the issues they confront.³

¹ Mohamed Adnan, Mohamad Azrien, Arifin Mamat, Mohamad Zalhan Mohd Sabri, and Khazri Osman, "Understanding Multicultural Education From Islamic Perspective", *Jurnal Usuluddin* 49(2) (2021), 223-41. <https://doi.org/10.22452/usuluddin.vol49no2.8>.

² Muna Ali al-Hamood, *Dawr al-Funun fi Ta'ziz al-Tawasul al-Hadari bayna al-Sh'ub* (Riyadh: Fihrasat Maktabatu Fahd al-Wataniyyah, 2021), 9.

³ G Aronson & K Box, "Song Translation Analysis as a Means for Intercultural Connectivity", *Journal of Arban Soeities' Arts* 8(1) (2021), 1-14.

Therefore, even religions also acknowledge the expression of feelings and thoughts in the form of songs and music that are compliant with their confines. Songs and music have become indispensable means of influencing all walks of life in the contemporary world to the extent it is hard to find an event without music and songs. But the important thing is to what extent these songs and music are being utilized to create a peaceful environment and uproot extremism and violence. In this context, it is incredible to make a serious study of how to employ this potential tool for the purpose of unity and harmony.

Sri Lanka has been a victim of religious tensions and conflicts for many decades, leading to social unrest, violence, and even terrorism⁴ racial conflicts.⁵ Although, Sri Lanka is a Buddhist-majority country and Buddhism teaches peace and harmony the meeting of Buddhists and Muslims is sometimes portrayed as violent confrontations in Sri Lanka.⁶ Due to the multiple factors, current misunderstandings, and misperceptions sparked and riots also erupted and resulted negatively in peaceful life specifically between Buddhists and Muslims, which prompted a dire need to utilize attractive and effective means and ways to reestablish unity and harmony among the nationals instead of traditional methods. On the other hand, the song and music traditions that have been maintained by Sri Lankan Muslims were confined to ritualistic aspects and cultural dimensions. It did not concentrate on building healthy relations among Sri Lankan nationals. In this context, the role of music, particularly songs, in promoting interreligious understanding in Sri Lanka is of utmost importance. In this way, songs and music can strengthen repour among the nationals.

Unfortunately, the same aesthetic skills are being employed to create unwanted issues and foster misunderstandings among the communities in this competitive world. Not only that but still

⁴ Razick, A. S., Long, A. S., & Salleh, K., "A Study on Religious Interaction among the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka", *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 53 (2015), 133–137. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ilshs.53.133>

⁵ Stewart, J. J., "Muslim–Buddhist Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka", *South Asia Research* 34(3) (2014), 241–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728014549134>.

⁶ Mohamed Ashath, "Peaceful Coexistence Through the Concepts of Brahmaviharas of Buddhism and Maqasid al-Shari'a of Islam: A Content Analysis", *Analisa: Journal of Social Science and Religion* 6(1) (2021), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.18784/analisa.v6i01.1298>.

Muslim community in Sri Lanka and many other parts of the world did not reach an agreement over the use of music and song for the promotion of peacebuilding activities. This unstable position necessitated the critical study that is supposed to be carried out with regard to the modern improvements that occurred in the field of song and music. This study is focused on the examination of the usage of the song platform to sustain harmonious relationships among divergent societies.

The attitude of Islam towards non-Muslims has been a subject of attention for contemporary Muslim scholars as well as non-Muslim researchers. The Muslim scholars are interested in presenting the just system adopted by Islam for non-Muslims.⁷ Indeed, Muslim and Non-Muslim understanding is inevitable in this global world. In the area of Islamic aesthetic art, some important disciplines especially in Islamic jurisprudence developed in the name of the jurisprudence of unprecedented cases to propose actionable solutions from an Islamic juristic viewpoint. This realm of contemporary knowledge extensively concentrated on the modern issues of art, including drawing, painting, pictorial representation, singing, music, and acting.⁸ It is evident from the Islamic aesthetic point of view that using art and culture as a tool can help people understand each other better. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to determine how an effective song may be used to promote coexistence and interreligious understanding, especially among Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study collected data by scrutinizing relevant literature. This study benefited from the sources for data collection such as journal articles, books, research papers, magazines and other sources. The thematic content analysis method was used to analyze the collected data. The potential for song and music to establish strong links among religious traditions is revealed by a

⁷ Nafiu Ahmad Arikewuyo, "Selected Discourses Relating to Non-Muslims: A Review of Madkhali's Refutation of Sayyid Qutb", *Jurnal Usuluddin* 52(1) (2024), 149-70. <https://doi.org/10.22452/usuluddin.vol52no1.7>.

⁸ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *al-Halal wa al-Haram fi al-Islam* (Cairo: Maktabatu Wahbah: 1997), 252-268.

thematic content analysis of literature on the expression of song and music in Islamic tradition. The paper chiefly examines the vitality of the expression of the song and music to restore robust relationships among multiple faith traditions from an Islamic aesthetic point of view. This study also highlights the demarcation of using the song platform for this purpose.

Literature Review

It is hard to find literature dealing with Islamic arts including songs and music with the purpose of fostering religious understanding in a multi-religious context like Sri Lanka. The existing literature can be divided into two phases. Firstly, some of them strived to provide a thorough understanding of the Islamic point of view with regard to music and songs. They elaborated that Music and song have been the subject of various interpretations and debates among Islamic scholars. Despite the diversity of views, it is evident that music is permissible to various degrees within certain guidelines and restrictions and the debate is been validated by scholars like Muhammed al-Ghazali⁹, Al-Qaradawi,¹⁰ Mohammed Imara¹¹, Second, several academics have discussed the contributions made by Muslims in Sri Lanka to songs and music. Mainly songs promoted by *Sufi* traditions were highlighted in the works of M.S.M. Anas,¹² Nadine Vanniasinkam.¹³

However, even though the books that provide an Islamic point of view about music and songs benefit researchers in the general conceptualization of Islamic arts, they did not view how to utilize diversion in promoting interreligious understanding in a pluralistic context. Sri Lankan literature did not adequately explore the influence of Islamic arts, including song and music, in strengthening community bonds within Islamic boundaries and limitations.

The structure of the study is as follows. The first part provides an introduction consisting of the research background, methodology, and literature review. The following part explores the

⁹ Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Al-Sunnat al-Nabawiyyat bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Hadith* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 2010).

¹⁰ Yousuf al-Qaradawi, *Fiqh al-Ghina wa al-Musiqah* (Cairo: Makataba al-Wahba, 2013).

¹¹ Muhammad Imarah, *Islam wa al-Funoon al-Jamilah* (Beirut: Dar al-Shurooq, 2005).

¹² M. S. M Anas, *Muslim Fine Art in Sri Lanka* (India: Kumaran Book House, 2007).

¹³ Nadine Vanniasinkam, *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka: An Overview* (Colombo: International Center For Ethnic Studies (ICES), 2021).

contemporary Sri Lankan multi-religious context and analyzes Muslim contribution to song and music in Sri Lanka. The Islamic aesthetic point of view with regard to song and music and its application for religious understanding in pluralistic Sri Lanka have been analyzed extensively in the third part. Finally, it ends with a conclusion and recommendations.

Contemporary Contextual Background of Sri Lanka and Social Unrest

Despite being a multicultural country with many different ethnic and religious groups, the majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalese, who make up 74.9% of the country's population. Of them, 70.19% are Buddhists who use the Sinhala language. They converse in Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan tongue. The Tamils are the second largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, making up approximately 15.37 percent of the total population, including Tamils from India and Sri Lanka. Hindus make up 12.61 percent of this group. The northernmost region of the island is primarily populated by Tamils. The Muslims in Sri Lanka constitute 9.7% of the country's population,¹⁴ and are present throughout the nation; in some areas, they outnumber Buddhists. They belong to three different ethnic-social backgrounds: the Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Moors, and the Malays. The others include the Memons and the Bohras.

The presence of Islam in Sri Lanka goes at least as far back as the ninth century.¹⁵ Arab traders who frequented the island during this time period began to settle, and, like elsewhere, a nascent Muslim community developed from these newcomers. The ethnic composition of this group was primarily of Moorish origin and Sri Lankan Muslims are generally categorized as Sunni.¹⁶ Since the earliest days of the Muslims' arrival in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese, and the Muslims have had close social and cultural ties. When Sinhalese leaders were in power, both local and Arab Muslims made significant contributions to preserving and extending their rule.

¹⁴ Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka (Colombo: Ministry of Financial and Planning, 2012).

¹⁵ Lorna Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony 900-1915* (Colombo: The Lanka Islamic Foundation 1994), 23.

¹⁶ D. B. McGilvray, "Sri Lankan Muslims: Between Ethno-Nationalism and the Global Ummah", *Nations and Nationalism* 17(1) (2010), 45-64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00460>.

Many Muslim leaders and academics fought valiantly for Sri Lanka's independence from colonial authority during the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁷

They protected the nation's geographical integrity and sovereignty despite disparities in ethnicity, religion, and language. The bond between the Sinhalese and the Muslims was so strong after independence as well that they shared and cared with respect and understanding. Muslims have been recognized as people who value peace and uphold healthy racial and social relationships with their neighbors, with whom they coexist. Additionally, the Muslims and the Sinhalese kings have maintained a fairly positive political connection.¹⁸ The Muslims in Sri Lanka are one of the privileged communities due to their positive ties with the Sinhalese and their rulers.

Sri Lanka has experienced tensions and conflicts arising from interethnic and interreligious differences in the last part of the twentieth century. The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has lasted nearly three decades and is one of the longest-running civil wars in Asia. More commonly known as the Tamil Tigers, the LTTE wants an independent state for the island's Tamil minority. Following a fierce, year-long military offensive, the Sri Lankan government claimed in May 2009 that it had defeated the separatist group (NYT) and killed its leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran. The origins of the Sri Lankan Civil War can be traced back to the ongoing political feud between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils.¹⁹

In recent times, since the end of the war in 2009 (Between the government of Sri Lanka and LTTE), attacks on religious minorities have grown in number and intensity in Sri Lanka.²⁰ Islamophobia

¹⁷ Lorna Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka*.

¹⁸ H. L. M. Haris, *Buddhists' perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka: An empirical study in the context of Da'wah* (PhD Thesis: International Islamic University Malaysia (2010), 132.

¹⁹ Intiyaz, A. R. M. & Amjad Mohamed Saleem, "Some Critical Notes on Sri Lankan Muslim Religious Identity Formation, Conservatism, and Violent Extremism", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 58(3) (2023), 438-451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211069651>.

²⁰ Iselin Frydenlund & Michael Jerryson, eds. *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2020), 248. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9884-2>.

has been one of the major trends in post-war Sri Lanka since 2009.²¹ Buddhist nationalist groups have become increasingly concerned with the presence of Muslims in Sri Lanka. They contend that Buddhism is being displaced by Islamic religious institutions and that Islam poses a threat to the security of Sinhala Buddhists. They even contend that the existence of Buddhism on the island is threatened by the presence of Islam.²² These conflicts have sometimes strained relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, leading to misunderstandings and mistrust. Four years back, because of The Easter Day bomb blasts at three Sri Lankan churches and four hotels killed around 259 people, including at least 45 foreign nationals (US Official, Injured In Sri Lanka Suicide Attack, Dies In Hospital) and wounded hundreds more²³, the Sri Lankan Muslim and Non-Muslims relationship harmed hugely.

Given the diverse religious landscape of Sri Lanka, interfaith understanding has become increasingly important for fostering harmony and peaceful coexistence. Interfaith understanding initiatives aim to promote respect, and cooperation among different religious communities, laying the groundwork for a united and inclusive society. It has been observed that Muslims in Sri Lanka are actively seeking opportunities to create positive relationships with non-Muslims and trying to build interreligious understanding. Therefore, some efforts are being made to improve understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims and it is noticed, that recent efforts toward reconciliation and interfaith dialogue have provided opportunities for communities to bridge divides and build mutual understanding. However, amidst these challenges and ongoing plans, Islamic songs have emerged as a powerful medium with the potential to bridge the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims in Sri Lanka. This article aims to explore the role of Islamic songs in fostering understanding, promoting harmony, and bridging communities in Sri Lanka.

²¹ Intiyaz A.Razaq, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55 (2020), 3-16

²² Stewart, J. J. "Muslim–Buddhist Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka", *South Asia Research*, 34(3) (2014), 241–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728014549134>.

²³ Intiyaz A. Razaq, "The Easter Sunday Bombings Muslims".

Music and Song Tradition of Muslims in Sri Lanka

Music holds a significant place within the Islamic tradition, with a rich history of devotional and spiritual expressions. Islamic songs, often known as *nasheeds* or *qasidas*, are a form of musical expression that adheres to Islamic principles. They encompass a range of themes, including praise for the Prophet Muhammad, messages of faith and spirituality, and the celebration of Islamic values.

Historically, the Muslims of Sri Lanka are known for their involvement in trade, medicine, administration, the military, and diplomacy.²⁴ However, Sri Lankan Muslims' music traditions illustrate how Muslims have historically participated in a very vibrant and rich music culture that spans the devotional, the cultural, and the popular. It also illustrates how music among Sri Lankan Muslims exemplifies not only their link to the global Ummah but also their relationships and linkages with other ethnoreligious communities in Sri Lanka and abroad. In doing so, the work of Vanniasinkam on *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka: An Overview*, commences with a discussion on the status of music among Muslims in Sri Lanka, followed by a description of the role of song and cantillation within the religious sphere. It then moves on to illustrate cultural music and song practices, borrowings, and adaptations, and finally, the engagement of Muslims in Sri Lankan popular music.²⁵

According to a report published by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lankan Muslims have diverse views on music and song traditions, with some considering them haram (forbidden) and others embracing them as part of their cultural heritage.²⁶ According to the article, hardline Muslims who interpret Islamic teachings strictly hold the belief that music is haram. However, it is crucial to note that this viewpoint is not shared by all Sri Lankan Muslims, and many do not consider music to be haram. There are some works, that state that there are varying opinions among Sri Lankan Muslims on the permissibility of music and singing, with some believing it to be haram and others considering it to be halal

²⁴ Lorna Dewaraja, *Muslims of Sri Lanka*.

²⁵ Vanniasinkam, N. *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka: An Overview* (Sri Lanka: International Center For Ethnic Studies (ICES), 2021), 2.

²⁶ Vanniasinkam, *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka*.

(permissible) under certain conditions. The articles go on to explain that the interpretation of Islamic teachings on music is a complex issue, and there are different schools of thought within Islam that have different opinions on the matter. Another source, a paper published in Daily FT, discusses the event of Sufi Muslims on music and dance in the context of Sri Lanka.²⁷ From the paper, it can be grasped that while some Sufi orders in Sri Lanka use music and dance as part of their spiritual practices, others have opposite practices as being incompatible with Islamic teachings.

When asked what musical traditions are followed in Muslim society in Sri Lanka. The common answer of largely young and middle-aged Muslims from various parts of the country is "Music is not permitted in Islam" or "Muslims don't have a music tradition.!" In fact, music is at the center of Islamic rituals, ceremonies, and prayers, especially among Sufi Muslims in Sri Lanka. Muslims' participation in contemporary music and the distinctive folk heritage of the East Coast Muslims serve as examples of how music and song are essential components of their cultural lives. However, in the recent past hostile attitudes toward music, dance, theatre, and film gradually increased and became hampered to improve. Some of these cultural music traditions and engagements have succumbed to time and now only exist in the memories of the older generation. Other cultural music traditions are also quickly losing their relevance.²⁸

According to the song customs, notably of the Sufi Muslims in the southern region of Sri Lanka, each month of the Islamic lunar calendar is devoted to a feast or a holiday, with each featuring the singing or chanting of sacred texts. The most important songs are the Hasan- Husain mawlid and the *Thalai fathiya* chanted during the first month of Muharram (commemorating the death of the Prophet's grandson Husain), the *Hareed mawlid*, *Subahna mawlid* and *Berzanji mawlid* recited during the third month of *Rabi ul awal* (Prophet's birthday), including the *Rasool malai* and *Mubarak malai* which were composed by an Indian and Sri Lankan respectively. These songs recount the life story of the Prophet.²⁹

²⁷ Galely, H., "World Muslim Choral Ensemble to Enthral Sri Lanka" *Daily FT*, 16 July 2022, <https://www.ft.lk/ft-lite/World-Muslim-Choral-Ensemble-to-enthrall-Sri-Lanka/6-737549>.

²⁸ Vanniasinkam, *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka*, p2.

²⁹ Vanniasinkam, *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka*, 5.

These songs can be used to improve understanding between religions and to educate non-Muslims about the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Ratib Performance has a significant role in the song and music traditions of Sri Lanka³⁰ and Rifai *Ratib* was a very famous Devotional Music and specific song tradition of Sufists of Sri Lanka.³¹ The performance was staged by two opposing rows of seated men, each with a tambourine (*Dahira*, or *Daf*) under the leadership of *Kalifa* who sang the opening lines and prompted the seated members to respond. The singing started slowly and gradually picked up in tempo until it reached a highly emotional crescendo, accompanied by rapid tambourine rhythms and energetic body movements in perfect union. Sung is sung in a mixture of Arabic and Urdu and performed with tambourines.³² Music and song are also essential to the livelihood of the *Faqir Bawa* community (who are part of the *Refai* order) in the Eastern and Southern Provinces and the Puttalam District, which has its own tradition of singing spiritual, narrative, masala, and drama songs³³. Similarly, songs and chanting also play an important role in Muslim women's worship. The *Thalai Fatiha* is "an intercessory prayer recited by women to the wives of the earlier Prophets and to Prophet Mohammed's daughter Fatima"³⁴

Recent Trends

Overall, it is clear that the views of Sri Lankan Muslims on music and song traditions are diverse and complex, and cannot be reduced to a simple binary of haram or halal. Sufi traditions contribute a lot to the music and song traditions in Sri Lanka, yet there are a number of works done by both individuals and organizations. Individuals like Matale Kamal, Marutamunai Kamal, Pottuvil Asmin, Lareena Haq, Ahsan Aarif, and Rahman Hasan (Katrus Sumandu Warum Kanawuh, production of Trim Arts), can be identified.³⁵ Islamic

³⁰ Dennis B McGilvray, "Jailani: A Suf Shrine in Sri Lanka" In *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation & Conflict*, edited by Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004), 273-289.

³¹ Dennis. B McGilvray, "A matrilineal Sufi Shaykh in Sri Lanka", *South Asian History and Culture*, 5(2) (2014), 246–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2014.883763>.

³² Dennis, "Jailani: A Suf Shrine in Sri Lanka, 273-289.

³³ Vanniasinkam, *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka*, 2.

³⁴ Vanniasinkam, *Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka*.

³⁵ AWM Basir, personal communication, May 23, 2023.

organizations; Jamathe Islami of Sri Lanka³⁶ and Salama³⁷ attempt to bring some significant productions. Unfortunately, we could not find that any literature did include these contributions. Similarly, the Sri Lankan Malay population shares religious song traditions with Muslims, they also have their own distinct cultural music traditions derived from their Indonesian, Malaysian, and Burmese ancestors.

In recent *Sufi* traditions, a new tendency called *Aswatuna* and *Aswatuna* means ‘our voices’ in Arabic. It was initiated to promote Muslim music in Sri Lanka and will focus on the musical traditions of the Muslim world found in the Middle East, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia. *Aswatuna* in collaboration with talented voices and aspiring singers from across the globe will come together to promote Muslim (Islamic) and Sufi music.³⁸ Their journey will take listeners on a mystical path through music to communicate the essence of their faith and beliefs truly, whereby they can propagate and emphasize the value of their love for humanity through their music.

The initiative was founded by Professor Andre de Quadros (Boston University) and Haadia Galely (Music and Artist Promoter) Shahid Shabaz – Winner of The Voice UAE, Adeel Mirza – Worked alongside Pakistani singers of the likes of Abida Parveen, Atif Aslam, and Shankar Mahadevan, and has been an outsourced musician for Coke Studio Pakistan, among many other well-wishers have joined to collaborate with the project.³⁹

The Muslim Choral Ensemble (MCE) Ambassadors for Peace has announced phase two of this undertaking that takes shape as the World Muslim Choral Ensemble (WMCE) Ambassadors for Peace in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in July 202.⁴⁰ Ten international choristers and instrumentalists, from India, Iran, Pakistan, the USA, and Sri Lanka, participated in a residency in Colombo from 18 to 24 July

³⁶ Marikkar SACP, personal communication May 28, 2023

³⁷ AWM Basir, personal communication, May 23, 2023

³⁸ Islamic Sufi Music Ensemble Calls for Auditions, *Daily FT*, 2017, October 5. <https://www.ft.lk/FT-Lite/islamic-sufi-music-ensemble-calls-for-auditions/6-633604>

³⁹ Islamic Sufi Music Ensemble Calls for Auditions.

⁴⁰ Galely H, World Muslim Choral Ensemble to Enthral Sri Lanka, *Daily FT*, 2022, July 16, <https://www.ft.lk/ft-lite/World-Muslim-Choral-Ensemble-to-enthrall-Sri-Lanka/6-737549>

2022, leading up to a performance and closing ceremony at Lionel Wendt Theatre on 24 July 2022, at 7 p.m.⁴¹

The World Muslim Choral Ensemble WMCE is unique with an international membership that hopes to continue enlisting musical Ambassadors for Peace to collaborate and celebrate Islamic choral music traditions from around the world. In so doing, not only does WMCE breathe new life into an interest in the genre, but also encourages and nurtures budding choral talent with a passion for Islamic choral traditions. This Peace Ensemble consists of both female and male artists. Transcending borders, it encourages cross-cultural collaboration worldwide to reach its goals, with participation open to not only Muslims but also non-Muslims with a passion for the genre field.⁴² Their repertoire will mostly consist of Islamic spirituals such as Nasheeds, Qasidas, and Naats, as well as styles associated with South Asia. It is intended to conduct an annual event with the goal of connecting more Islamic devotional music traditions from around the world.⁴³

Additionally, WMCE will highlight the special power of music as a peace ambassador. By taking part in collaborative performances with choral groups from other traditions, such as the Yale Alumni Choir at the Yale International Choral Festival in 2018 and the Philippines Singing Ambassadors in a church at the International London Music Festival in London in 2019, WMCE has expanded its vision beyond the performing arts to include peacebuilding over the past five years. In the aftermath of the Easter bombings, WMCE also organized and took part in Voices for Peace, an interfaith concert that featured a variety of performers from all Sri Lankan communities. This concert was made possible by their hospitality partner Shangri-La Hotel, and the following one was held at the same location in February 2022, in harmony with Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu choral ensembles.⁴⁴ Similar to this, WMCE musicians and singers will keep up their commitment to peace by serving as ambassadors for it. Choristers and performers from all around the world who join the WMCE make a commitment

⁴¹ Galely, World Muslim Choral Ensemble to Enthral Sri Lanka.

⁴² Galely, World Muslim Choral Ensemble to Enthral Sri Lanka.

⁴³ Galely, World Muslim Choral Ensemble to Enthral Sri Lanka.

⁴⁴ Galely, World Muslim Choral Ensemble to Enthral Sri Lanka.

to give back, celebrate, and promote peace via their voices and music.

The traditions of song and music have been fundamental to Sri Lankan Muslims' cultural manifestations. But they were confined to ritualistic purposes and cultural dimensions of Muslims. In this, it is explicit that the song and music tradition that has been maintained by Sri Lankan Muslims did not focus on any elements of bridging inter-religious understanding. During religious celebrations and significant occasions like the birth of the Prophet Muhammad and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), traditionally some Muslims used to sing songs containing the relevant subjects. However, this kind of ritualistic song was not concerned with mutual understanding among the communities.

Analysis Based Findings:

Employing Songs and Music for Multi-Religious Understanding in Sri Lanka: An Islamic Aesthetic Point of View

As explicit that multi-religious context is in need of wider understanding among diverse communities so that each community can guarantee a smooth life with peace and harmony. Multiple tools and means have been employed in order to ensure healthy relationships among diverse communities throughout history and even today. Among them, it can be observed that aesthetic expression which comes under art is one of the vital instruments in restoring harmonious relations in pluralistic societies. Indeed, art encompasses everything that bears a direct relation to feeling, sensation, and aesthetic expression, including song, music, rhythm, architecture, drawing, and painting.⁴⁵

Islam as a comprehensive code of life, looks at human beings as a whole. A human creature has multiple needs due to that he has different organs that necessitate some natural and indispensable needs. Physical, intellectual, and emotional impetrates must be considered in a balanced manner. Therefore, Islam is more concerned about human needs from a broad perspective that does not overlook any needs. Islamic teachings are not confined to

⁴⁵ Hanash I. M, *The Theory of Islamic Art, Aesthetic Concept and Epistemic Structure* (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2017), 1.

physical or intellectual impetus rather it encompasses emotional needs too. Aesthetic sense and appreciation of beauty are indispensable needs of human beings. Islam boosts awareness, appreciation, and expression of beauty. It motivates Muslims to enhance an aesthetically oriented sense. It is evident that Allah himself introduced beauty and he also declared that he loves beauty. There is wider space for aesthetic sense in Islam and therefore, multiple manifestations of aesthetic sense such as the beautiful universe, poetry, literature, song, architecture, calligraphy, and so on are permissible. The Quran is evidence of this. The Quran not only stated that cattle have been created for the betterment of human beings but also stressed the aesthetic fulfillment that they can bring to man's life. "And in them, there is beauty for you when you bring them home and when you take them to pasture."⁴⁶ While the Quran mentions the fish which is in the sea, and the material benefits for the men, it also draws attention to the ornaments which man can extract from it and use to make beautiful as we see in the following verse: "God is the one who has subjected to you the sea so that you eat from it flesh fresh, and you extract from it ornaments which you wear."⁴⁷ These kinds of evidence are full in the primary sources of Islam that stimulate human beings to enjoy the aesthetic beauty of creatures and also motivate to entertain through diversions and other arts as long as they are compatible with Islamic confines⁴⁸.

Songs and Music from an Islamic Perspective

At this juncture, it is imperative to explore and analyze the divergent views over the utilization of song for peaceful relations in a multi-religious context like Sri Lanka, due to the fact this subject is still controversial and needs an examination from an aesthetic point of view before delving into its application in the multi-religious context of Sri Lanka. A heated argument in terms of song and music has been endured among Muslim scholars about whether song with or without music is allowed or not. A thorough exploration reveals that there are two varied positions existent in this regard, a group of scholars disallowed whereas another group made some arguments

⁴⁶ Al-Nahl 16:6.

⁴⁷ Al-Nahl 16:14.

⁴⁸ Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Diversion and Arts in Islam*, Rawah El Khatib, trans. (Egypt: Islamic Printing and Publishing, 1998), 4-5.

in favor of this. A quick analysis of those divergent views helps to reach a proper position that is compatible with the Islamic aesthetic position and more suitable for a multi-religious context.

Opponents present some documents for their arguments that need to be taken into account in reaching a firm position in this regard. Primarily they refer to certain Quranic verses, prophetic traditions, and statements of companions. The Quranic usage of “*Lahw Hadith*” which is stated in certain verses is mainly interpreted as a vain talk that includes song and music that distract the attention from serious matters according to opponents. “And there are among people some who buy vain talk to lead astray from God’s way without knowledge and to Make a mockery of it.”⁴⁹ Likewise, there are some prophetic statements and some incidents that prohibit diversions, especially singing. The Prophet (PBUH) said: “There will be people of my nation who will consider adultery silk, intoxicants and *Al Maazef* lawful – musical instrument.”⁵⁰ Ibnu Maja narrated a Hadith which Abi Maleck Ashari Reported saying: “Some people of my nation will drink intoxicants and call it other names. They will surround themselves with music and singers. Eventually, Allah will destroy them and turn them into monkeys and pigs.”⁵¹ According to them, both statements explicitly prohibited singing and music without any exception.

Contrary to this, advocates provide some arguments in favor of singing. It appears that their central argument revolves that the evidence that has been provided by opponents is not sound and the way that deduced the support from the text is not suitable. The Quranic term “*Lahwul Hadith*” – vain talk - was expounded by those who disallowed the singing as singing is unsound. While looking into the commentaries and interpretation given by the Quranic exegetes, we come to know, that scholars did not limit the interpretation to singing and music rather, their main concern was whatever song contained prohibited things that led astray from God’s way. Not only that, the term itself did not decisively indicate directly that singing is not allowed rather it may have multiple

⁴⁹ Al-Luqman 31:6.

⁵⁰ Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith no. 5590. The grade of the Hadith is *Muallaq* but there are more similar narrations mentioned in other Hadith books (أخرجه البخاري موصولاً وصورته معلقاً بصيغة الجزم : التخریج (5590) مطولاً باختلاف يسير)

⁵¹ Narrated by Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, English translation, vol. 5, Book 36, Hadith 4020. The *isnad* of the Hadith is *sahih*.

aspects. Along with this, this term must be understood in which context the verse was revealed upon the Prophet (PBUH). Having a look at the historical background of these verses reveals that there were some elements deliberately carried out negative propaganda against the prophet (pbuh) and His message. The Quranic language was a standard that drew the attention of people due to its rhetoric and rhythm which made the opponents think seriously about finding a method that could stop people behind the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Therefore, they started to sing competing with the revelation. This negative and unscientific effort was condemned by these verses.⁵²⁵³ Ibn Hazm says that this claim is groundless due to three reasons; “Firstly, there is no evidence whatsoever that the Prophet (PBUH) forbade singing. Secondly, their judgments are going against other companions and followers. Thirdly, the context of the verse on which they based their argument is in direct contradiction to their verdict for Allah”⁵⁴.

As for the Hadiths which were brought by the opponents are in a position that cannot be accepted due to having weak elements that have. The Hadith prohibiting *Maazef*-the musical instrument which was narrated in Sahihul Buhari, is a hanging Hadith – *Muallaq*-which is a kind of unsound according to Hadith experts because the link between the reporters is missing at the beginning unlike the case continuous Isnad – *Muttasil*- where the link is apparent. Advocates of the lawfulness of singing and listening to songs disparaged the Hadith narrated by ibn Maja regarding condemning singers as weak. Along with that, proponents provide some authentic Hadiths for their argument such as the fact that while the Prophet (pbuh) was with Aiysha, there were two female singers with her, the singing song with the Ansar about the day of *Buath*”, when Abu Bakr said twice, “Musical instrument of Satan” and scolded them for singing at prophet's house but Prophet (pbuh) did not object to them rather asked him to let them continue. This prophetic approach teaches that Islam is maintaining a flexible position in terms of singing and singers. Another Hadith also presented in this regard that at a wedding function, the prophet (pbuh) asked Aiysha

⁵² Ibnu Kathir, *Tafsir Quran al-Aleem*, vol 3 (Dubai: Dar al-Wafa, 2003), 6.

⁵³ Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami li Ahkam al-Quran*, vol 8 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub Ilmiyya, 2004), 36-38.

⁵⁴ Ibn Hazm, *al-Muhalla bil Aasar*, vol. 12 (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 2001), 322-324.

“Have you sent female singers to sing for the bride” Ibn Maja. Along with that, it can be stated that al-Gazaly is regarded as one who exerted the utmost effort to refute the claim of opponents and gave an Islamic ontological background in favor of songs⁵⁵.

It can be observed that two parts have been controversial in Islamic literature, music, and female, which means whether the musical instrument is allowed or not, and likewise, the position of female participation in the aesthetic event is also debatable. Even though divergent views exist regarding singing with music, it is evident that using music is not prohibited unless it exceeds its limit. As far as the female voice is concerned, it is also permissible as long as its performance is decent.⁵⁶⁵⁷ Muhamed Al Gazaly argues that diversions, songs, and music, invariably fall into permissible acts because the juristic maxim which is “the origin in things is permissible” grants permission for the songs and music, so long as they are in the frame of Shariah guidance.⁵⁸ It seems the permissible approach mostly relies on general restrictions that are supposed to be made by Islamic parameters.

It is evident that even though two divergent views concerning singing and listening to songs exist in Islamic tradition, the position that allows the singing is sound and expressive. It is incredibly important to highlight that this does not mean that all forms of songs and music are allowed but those who supported the permission of singing, music, and listening to songs, have provided certain conditions that must be considered and maintained. Briefly, demarcations and prerequisites can be illustrated as follows; *Firstly*, the content should conform to the moral code of Islam. It is unlawful to contain seductive lines and licentiousness. *Secondly*, performance is equally crucial as far as singing is concerned. When the performance is seductive and the pronunciation itself positively indecent, those who have sick hearts and weak wills can be affected negatively. *Thirdly*, while singing, the singer should not present prohibited things such as drinking alcohol or displaying the bodies

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* (Beirut: Dar ibnu Hazim, 2005), 739–759.

⁵⁶ Muhammad Imara, *Al-Gina wa al-Musiqa Halal Am Haram* (Cairo: Nahdat Misr, 1999), 29–31.

⁵⁷ Yousuf Al-Qaradawi, *Fiqh al-Ghina Wa al-Musiqa* (Cairo: Makataba al-Wahba, 2013), 46–48.

⁵⁸ Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Al-Sunnat al-Nabawiyyat bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Hadith* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 2010), 65.

of women and propagating licentiousness among men and women. *Fourthly*, avoiding excessive involvement in singing and listening to songs and music despite they are in line with *Shariah* compliance. *Finally*, it cannot be an instrument to promote racism, violence, and extremism.⁵⁹

Islam itself did not preach rigid and firmness rather its guidance is more flexible considering human tendencies and nature. Islam is not a religion that urges some ritualistic activities in the name of spiritual enhancement. Rather, its teachings cover physical, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional aspects that every human being possesses naturally. When the human gets bored, he is allowed to be involved in entertainment that brings him relaxation and happiness. Ali bin Abi Talib said: “The hearts get bored just as the bodies do, therefore you should always supply them with novel and useful pearls of wisdom”. In addition to this, aesthetic sense and its manifestation are highly motivated as per the guidance of Islam as illustrated above. That can be poems, novels, literature, song, music, painting, calligraphy, and so on and so forth. In this sense, singing and music with certain conditions are allowed to get amusement and entertainment.

Employing Songs and Music for Enhancing Religious Understanding in Pluralistic Sri Lanka

Music has been extensively studied for its ability to influence human emotions and thinking patterns positively. Research has shown that music therapy, particularly improvisational music therapy, can lead to behavioral improvements in autistic children, such as increased eye contact.⁶⁰ Music programs have also been implemented in various settings, including juvenile detention centers, with the aim of improving mental and physical health, fostering pro-social behaviors, and reducing recidivism rates.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Diversion and Arts in Islam*, 46-50.

⁶⁰ Kim, Jinah, Tony Wigram, and Christian Gold, “The Effects of Improvisational Music Therapy on Joint Attention Behaviors in Autistic Children: A Randomized Controlled Study”, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 38(9) (2008), 1758-1766. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-008-0566-6>.

⁶¹ Barrett, Margaret S. and Jane Baker, “Developing Learning Identities in and Through Music: A Case Study of The Outcomes of A Music Programme in an Australian Juvenile Detention Centre”, *International Journal of Music Education* 30(3) (2012), 244-259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761411433721>.

Since diversion, songs, and music, became accepted phenomena among the public, the majority of people enjoy these to different degrees, in the meantime, it has the potential to influence the thought process of human beings and thinking patterns, it appears that this can be a vital tool for restoring healthy understanding among diverse communities. There are multiple methods such as speeches, conversations, discussions, essays, books, novels, and so on are being traditionally utilized for the purpose of enhancing healthy relationships among the communities. Among them, the songs and decent music directly touch the emotional side and heart which is crucial to make a bridge among the communities. Community music engagement has been identified as a tool that can facilitate social cohesion by creating a sense of belonging and connectedness among community members.⁶² Studies have also highlighted the role of music in fostering social change, building relationships, and enhancing communication between individuals, particularly in diverse communities.⁶³

Sri Lankan pluralistic context has faced misperception in the recent past that requires alternative methods that can provide actionable remedies to ethnic conflicts and social unrest. In comparison to other communities living in Sri Lanka, the Muslim minority community did not pay due attention to the aesthetic contribution. This concern can also be identified as a crucial factor for misunderstandings or for others who are unaware of Muslims' real culture and thinking patterns. In this sense, Sri Lankan Muslims can play a vital role in shaping robust relationships among diverse religious and ethnic communities by utilizing this platform, and songs systematically.

Researchers are of the view that certain steps are to be carried out to translate into practice in Sri Lankan multi-religious circumstances; Sri Lankan Muslims must be educated about Islamic aesthetic aspects and the aesthetic contribution of Muslims throughout history to global art and culture. Some effective songs

⁶² Merwe, Liesl van der and Janelize Morelli, "Explaining How Community Music Engagement Facilitates Social Cohesion Through Ritualised Belonging", *Religions* 13(12) (2022), 1170. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121170>.

⁶³ Rabinowitch, Tal-Chen, "The Potential of Music to Effect Social Change", *Music & Science* 3 (2020), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204320939772>.

that contain the true message of Islam in terms of peace and social cohesion in the local languages through employing decent music need to be produced and publicized to reach whole communities. For this fruitful process, potential and effective singers and aesthetically skilful personalities must be trained consistently to promote healthy understanding among Sri Lankan communities through effective diversions. This kind of effort will create a positive mindset among neighbouring communities about Muslims by ensuring the availability of song literature. Sri Lankan Muslims also can collectively contribute to the art, song, and music with the collaboration of experts from other communities in this field, maintaining *Shariah* restrictions, which could immensely contribute to restoring harmonious relationships and national unity. Growing aesthetic contribution in the Muslim world to songs that are more relevant to the multi-religious context of Sri Lanka can be beneficial. At the same time, some proactive measures need to be carried out in order to lessen or illuminate the songs that provoke extremism, violence, and misunderstandings about religions and communities. Instead, planned and effective songs containing positive messages that could draw the attention of all societies must be promoted and encouraged.

It can be stated that the alternative tool of song and music can bring the following output and impact on socio-ethnic relationships in Sri Lanka:

I. Fostering Understanding and Appreciation:

Muslims and non-Muslims in Sri Lanka can better understand and appreciate one another because of Islamic music. Language boundaries are frequently overcome by the melodies and lyrics of these songs, enabling people from diverse origins to connect on a deep emotional and spiritual level. Non-Muslims can develop greater empathy and respect for the Muslim community by learning about its values, beliefs, and cultural practices through listening to Islamic music. The use of Islamic music can help in navigating the complex political and social landscape in Sri Lanka, where ethno-nationalism often influences societal boundaries and identities.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Bart Klem, "Islam, politics and violence in eastern Sri Lanka", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70(3) (2011), 730-753. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002191181100088x>.

II. Creating a Shared Cultural Space:

Islamic songs serve as a platform for the creation of shared cultural spaces in which Muslims and non-Muslims can come together to celebrate shared ideals. Islamic melodies are frequently performed as a unifying influence at festivals, public events, and interfaith gatherings. These musical expressions create an atmosphere of inclusivity, fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening the bonds between communities.

III. Enhancing Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation:

Islamic music can help to improve interfaith interaction and cooperation. These songs promote dialogue by conveying spiritual and global messages that encourage people of different faiths to engage in meaningful dialogue. Non-Muslims have a better knowledge of Islam and its contributions to society through appreciating the beauty and depth of Islamic melodies. This mutual understanding lays the basis for interfaith collaboration and collaborative efforts toward common goals including social justice, peacebuilding, and community development.

To actualize the above objectives, the following possible opportunities can be optimized in Sri Lankan context:

I. Islamic Songs in Public Events:

In Sri Lanka, numerous public events have effectively combined Islamic melodies to promote interfaith understanding. Islamic music, for example, is played alongside songs from other faith traditions at multicultural festivals, religious ceremonies, and national festivities. This inclusion allows individuals from all walks of life to appreciate the creative and spiritual qualities of Islamic songs, breaking down barriers and encouraging conversation.

II. Collaborative Musical Projects:

Collaborative musical initiatives featuring both Muslim and non-Muslim artists have also been shown to be helpful in bridging cultures. Musicians from varied backgrounds collaborate to create songs that include Islamic ideas in many musical genres. These efforts not only promote the beauty of Islamic melodies but also Sri Lanka's common artistic and cultural legacy. Through shared creation, collaborations promote harmony, dignity, and

appreciation for one another. Participating in community songs is a useful technique for promoting social cohesion by giving residents a feeling of connection and belonging.⁶⁵

III. Community Initiatives and Outreach Programs:

Islamic songs are used in local communities' community initiatives and outreach programs. For example, educational institutions and community centers host events where Islamic songs are played, asking individuals from all walks of life to participate. These efforts foster connection, dialogue, and the exchange of cultural experiences. Non-Muslims are actively involved in such activities, which fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance, helping to peaceful coexistence.

This demonstrates the positive impact of Islamic songs and music in bridging communities, fostering understanding, and promoting interfaith dialogue in Sri Lanka. By embracing the power of music, these initiatives pave the way for a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the aesthetic expression of songs that could contribute to human interaction and the exchange of cultural dimensions. The diversion in its different forms within the framework of Islamic *Shariah* could be a magnificent tool for enhancing broken relations among diverse communities in a multi-religious context like Sri Lanka. The role of songs in promoting interreligious understanding is very clear and that is relevant to the Sri Lankan context. It is known that there is unrest between Muslims and non-muslims in Sri Lanka⁶⁶ and the use of these astatic features creates a sense of community and promotes interreligious understanding in Sri Lanka specifically between Buddhists and Muslims.

⁶⁵ Merwe, Liesl van der and Janelize Morelli, "Explaining how community music engagement facilitates social cohesion through ritualised belonging", *Religions* 13(12) (2022), 1170. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121170>.

⁶⁶ Mohamed Imtiyaz Abdul Razak, S. Ratnajeewan Hoole, Amjad Mohamed-Saleem and V. Ameerdeen, "Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: An Opportunity Lost for Conflict Transformation", *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4(7) 2015, 79-89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2641361>.

This research primarily found that hostile attitudes about diversion such as songs and music that have dominated the Sri Lankan Muslim mind is a crucial factor for the lack of involvement of Sri Lankan Muslims in aesthetic activities, especially songs and music. This study concluded that Islamic teachings paid due attention to amusement in its various forms that make humankind happy with certain restrictions such as compatibility of content and performance, promoting moral values, enhancing relationships among the communities, and maintaining a middle approach in enjoying diversion as suggested in the book of *Fiqh al-Ghina Wa al-Musiqah*.⁶⁷ This positive position concerning aesthetic manifestation paved the way for multiple contributions in terms of art and culture. The effective use of song as an incredible tool for harmonious relations and national unity in pluralistic Sri Lanka must be taken into account and considerable contribution must be made.

This study recommends that Muslims take part in national aesthetic events promoting peace and sustainably living with others and can contribute collectively to the collaboration of other communities in this field. This study found that Islam is in a positive position in terms of using songs with music to promote peace and social harmony but with some restrictions. This study also recommends that Sri Lankan litterateurs and intelligentsia should take some initiatives to raise awareness about the significance of employing songs in restoring harmonious relationships. In addition to this, they should pay due attention to producing qualified singers and artists who are able to impact immensely on national unity and harmony.

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⁶⁷ See; Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Fiqh al-Ghina Wa al-Musiqah*.

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