



DANGEROUS ADVENTURES: USING ORAL HISTORY AND FAMILY RECOLLECTIONS TO RECONSTRUCT MALE KISSI SOLDIERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR OF THE BURMA CAMPAIGN OF 1943-1945.

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ABSTRACT: *Kissi soldiers from Sierra Leone served as part of the Allied Forces in the Burma Campaign of 1943–1945, yet their experiences remain marginal in mainstream military histories. Existing archival records provide limited insight into how these men interpreted danger, displacement, and survival in a foreign war. This article uses an ethnographically informed historical reconstruction grounded in oral histories from the families of two deceased veterans and supported by archival records and secondary literature. Six narrative vignettes—fictionalised but historically grounded—are used to illuminate the cultural, sensory, and moral frameworks through which Kissi soldiers understood their wartime experiences. Analysis reveals that Kissi soldiers navigated the Burma Campaign through culturally grounded logics of ritual protection, ancestral presence, and ethical obligation. Their interpretations of danger, death, and environmental dislocation were shaped by cosmological frameworks carried from Upper Guinea. Racialised labour expectations placed disproportionate physical burdens on African troops, while personal objects and ritual practices served as emotional anchors. Post-war reintegration was marked by silence, spiritual imbalance, and reliance on community-based cleansing rites in the absence of institutional psychological support. Conclusion: By centring Kissi epistemologies, this article expands the cultural and comparative dimensions of Second World War history. It demonstrates that African soldiers were key to the Allied victory, active interpreters of global conflict whose embodied, moral, and cosmological experiences deepen our understanding of trauma, resilience, and the long-term implications of wartime service for men's health in contemporary Sierra Leone.*

KEYWORDS: Burma campaign, Kissi culture, Royal West African Frontier Force, Sierra Leone, Soldiers, Veteran, 81st 82nd Divisions.



INTRODUCTION

The Burma Campaign of 1943–1945 was one of the most physically and psychologically demanding theatres of the Second World War. Burma—now Myanmar—became a brutal and strategically vital battleground where Allied and Japanese forces fought through dense rainforest, monsoon rains, unfamiliar wildlife, disease, and the tactical ingenuity of Japanese troops. Among the Allied forces deployed to this unforgiving front were thousands of West Africans, including men from the Kissi ethnic group of Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. Their presence resulted from colonial recruitment strategies, wartime labour demands, and the British Empire's reliance on African soldiers to sustain global military operations. Only men were recruited into the RWAFF and deployed to Burma.

Despite their courage and sacrifice, Kissi soldiers remain largely invisible in mainstream historical narratives. Their experiences are seldom recorded in detail, and their voices rarely appear in official archives. This invisibility reflects broader patterns of colonial erasure, racialised military history, and the marginalisation of African perspectives in global war memory.

To address this gap, the article draws on family oral histories, narrative vignettes, and ethnographic interpretation to illuminate Kissi cultural frameworks, embodied experiences, and interpretive practices. By foregrounding how Kissi families remember and transmit wartime stories, the article reconstructs a narrative centred on African epistemologies rather than colonial archival perspectives. This approach reveals that Kissi soldiers made sense of the Burma Campaign through culturally grounded logics of ritual protection, ancestral presence, ethical reasoning, and embodied knowledge—rather than through the strategic or geopolitical frameworks that dominate conventional military histories.

In doing so, the article contributes to global histories of the Second World War by showing how this world war was lived, interpreted, and survived through local Kissi cosmologies. It also advances comparative empire studies and military anthropology by demonstrating how African soldiers carried portable cultural frameworks into new theatres of war, using them to navigate danger, interpret misfortune, and sustain resilience.

Historical Background and Literature Review

The Burma Campaign has long been framed through the lens of British and Allied military strategy, with classic accounts by Allen (1984) and MacDonald (1995) emphasising the brutal terrain, logistical strain, and tactical complexity of jungle warfare. However, within these influential narratives, African soldiers remain largely peripheral. More recent scholarship, such as Tembo (2018), brings the presence of the West African Divisions into clearer focus. These authors highlight the endurance, adaptability, and racialised expectations that shaped African deployment, while Lunt (1988) and Killingray (2010) draw attention to the colonial hierarchies that structured their battlefield experiences and later shaped how their service was remembered. Public history has added further texture: Jones's (2015) documentary and Phillips's (2015) book, adapted into another documentary by Al Jazeera (2012) that narrates the story of Britain's African army, have helped bring African voices back into the story of Burma.

Understanding why Kissi men enlisted in the Royal West African Frontier Force requires turning to studies of colonial recruitment. Killingray (1986) shows how British officials relied on racialised notions of African "martial races", while Jackson (1989) situates these ideas



within the broader machinery of imperial wartime logistics. Stapleton (2011) situates African military service within the longer histories of colonial governance and post-independence state formation. Wesseling (1996) adds an essential layer: the Kissi, once a unified people under powerful warrior chiefs, were divided among Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. This fragmentation, a result of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 and the partition of the African continent by colonial masters, shaped the Kissi people's cross-border identities and the political conditions under which soldiers were recruited.

Anthropological literature provides the cultural grounding necessary to understand how Kissi soldiers interpreted danger, death, and displacement. Thornton (1980) traces the deep continuity of cultural traditions across generations, while Amara, Ngayenga, and N'Dayma (2018) show that initiation into the Poro society (*Toma Pon-Doh*) embeds Kissi boys in rites of protection and warfare, where charms, ancestral invocation, and spiritual mediation shape communal understandings of conflict and moral obligations. Griffiths (1986) adds a crucial geographical perspective on the Sierra Leone–Guinea border, and N'Dayma's (2019) novel, *The Old Virgin and the Beast*, offers a literary lens on Kissi men's experiences of global soldiering, return, and the emotional afterlives of war.

The social consequences of wartime service have been explored more broadly in West African historiography. Byfield (2014) examines post-war transformations that reshaped families and communities, while Schmidt (2005) analyses political mobilisation in Guinea during late colonial rule. Mamdani (1996) provides a theoretical framework for understanding colonial subjecthood, and Ferguson (1999) offers comparative insights into African modernity and the shifting expectations placed on returning labour migrants and veterans. Comparative military histories by Strachan (2004) and Aboagye (1999) help situate Kissi soldiers within a wider African martial continuum. Their analyses show how African forces historically balanced local knowledge with externally imposed military structures, helping explain how Kissi recruits adjusted to the unfamiliar terrain and operational pressures of Southeast Asia.

Collectively, the existing scholarship provides a valuable foundation but leaves significant gaps. Kissi military history remains comparatively understudied; African war epistemologies are insufficiently integrated into analyses of the Burma Campaign; labour regimes and coercive recruitment infrastructures are rarely foregrounded; gendered dimensions of Kissi soldiering are largely absent; and the reintegration of Kissi veterans into fragmented cross-border communities has yet to be systematically studied. Addressing these gaps is essential for producing a historically grounded, culturally informed account of Kissi participation in the Burma Campaign—one that moves beyond imperial archives to centre on Kissi voices, cosmologies, and lived experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs an ethnographically informed historical reconstruction grounded in the oral histories of a Kissi RWAFF veteran's family. Because African soldiers, especially those from smaller ethnic groups, appear only fragmentarily in colonial archives, official records often obscure the emotional and cultural worlds through which they understood the Second World War. In response to these archival silences, the author draws on the intimate archive of family memory, including the recollections of the veteran's widow, and her six living children. My analysis is also grounded in first-hand familial knowledge as the son and nephew



respectively of two Burma Campaign veterans. I was born and grew up with them in rural Sierra Leone following their return from the war, and this lived proximity forms a crucial part of the evidentiary base.

Oral narratives are treated as situated knowledge, shaped by gender, kinship roles, age, and temporal distance. Guided by ethnographic sensibilities, the analysis attends to storytelling conventions, silences, emotional registers, and the moral frameworks through which Kissi families interpret wartime service. These accounts are read alongside existing historical and anthropological scholarship to reconstruct a culturally grounded understanding of the veteran's experiences.

The article is organised around six historically anchored narrative vignettes. A vignette in qualitative research is a short, carefully constructed scenario used to elicit participants' views, reasoning, or decision-making in a safe, indirect, and ethically sensitive way (Murphy et al., 2021). It presents a realistic yet hypothetical situation for participants to respond to, allowing researchers to explore attitudes, values, and interpretations of a specific topic. The presented vignettes are rooted in oral testimony and regional military history, with analytical commentary accompanying each, linking personal memory to broader historical and ethnographic debates on African participation in the Burma Campaign.

Kissi People and the World War II Burma Campaign

Geographical Location and Social Organisation

The Kissi people inhabit a tri-border region spanning eastern Sierra Leone, southeastern Guinea, and northwestern Liberia, the catchment area of the Meli River and the Makona River, which are tributaries of Sierra Leone's Moa River, as one approaches the foothills of the Futa Jallon Highlands of West Africa from Eastern and northeastern Sierra Leone (Borbor-Sawyer, 2018). This landscape is defined by forest-savannah ecologies, river systems, and long-standing patterns of mobility that have historically shaped Kissi social life (Griffiths, 1986). Their communities are organised around ancestral authority, age-grade systems, male and female secret societies, and strong norms of collective responsibility. These structures have long supported local defence groups and warrior traditions (Amara et al., 2018). Such traditions emphasised endurance, bravery, and the use of protective rituals and charms believed to shield warriors from harm or misfortune. As a result, Kissi men were considered good soldier material and were targeted as one of the ethnic groups suitable for recruitment into the British colonial army.

RWAFF and the Colonial Recruitment of Kissi Soldiers

The Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF), established in 1900, became the central British colonial military institution in West Africa, recruiting from Nigeria, the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Sierra Leone, and The Gambia (Haywood & Clarke, 2015). As Stapleton (2022) argues, recruitment in West Africa was shaped by colonial racial ideologies, chiefly authority, economic pressures, and long-standing cross-border mobility. In Sierra Leone, preferred "martial" groups—such as the Mende, Temne, and Kissi—were targeted through tribal chiefs who served as intermediaries. Amid widespread economic hardship, limited rural opportunities, the appeal of monetary wages and mobility, many young men were drawn into military service. Wartime expansion intensified these dynamics, sometimes leading to coercive practices as colonial governments pressured chiefs to meet quotas. Overall, recruitment created



a politically charged military labour system that forged new soldierly identities within the RWAFF while remaining deeply rooted in local social structures.

Many recruits joined the Sierra Leone Battalion, later absorbed into the 81st and 82nd West African Divisions deployed to Burma. Oral recollections, including those shared by a veteran's wife, indicate that Kissi men enlisted not simply because of colonial recruitment pressures but because military service reconfigured social value: it elevated family prestige, provided wages unattainable in subsistence agriculture, and offered the prospect of mobility beyond village life. Yet the transition from rural Kissi rhythms to the regimented world of the colonial army demanded profound bodily and social adjustment. This archival reality is mirrored in my own family's oral history. When my father and uncle occasionally spoke about their early training, they described it as a regime designed to reshape the body into an instrument of labour and endurance—drills, parades, long-distance treks, and portering practice with heavy loads strapped to the back or balanced on the head. Diana Martins, daughter of a British recruitment officer posted to Sierra Leone in 1941, recalled that RWAFF recruits were regarded as "of fine physique", averaging around six feet tall and capable of carrying up to 80 pounds (lbs) on their heads over long distances (Mitchell, 2019). Such descriptions reveal how colonial military authorities racialised physical capacity, treating African soldiers as a reservoir of extractable bodily labour. Although our father never discussed his Burma experience with us (his children), yet, his discharge papers describe him as "exemplary", a "steady type of NCO", suggesting disciplined endurance under harsh conditions.

Firsthand accounts from Ghanaian veteran Sgt Frederick Siegfried Arkhurst (Arkhurst, 1945) and Nigerian veteran Isaac Fadoyebo (Fadoyebo, 1999) further illustrate the labour-intensive nature of the Burma campaign—long-range patrols, portering supplies or wounded comrades, constructing roads and bridges, and engaging in direct combat. Osei-Poku (2022) demonstrates that such labour was not peripheral but structurally indispensable to Allied operations in the Arakan and Kaladan theatres where the RWAFF soldiers were deployed, forming a critical component of the strategic momentum that enabled eventual Allied victory.

Narrative Vignettes with Analytical Interludes

In this section, the six constructed vignettes centre on two returned veterans (both now deceased)—Sgt Momoh Kamiendor and Private Sahr Dandu—whose families have granted permission for their names to appear in this article. All other characters are fictional. The vignette characters' names were created using RWAFF recruitment naming conventions. As our mother recalled, her husband and elder brother were assigned new names/identities when they enlisted in the army. She contrasted this with the way initiation into the Kissi Poro or Sande societies results in the initiates acquiring new names.

RWAFF enlistment records show that recruits were assigned composite military identities formed by pairing a given name with the name of their home village. This toponymic system was more than an administrative convenience; it operated as a mechanism of colonial governance, binding each soldier to a traceable social and spatial network. In cases of desertion, District Commissioners or Army Officers routinely proceeded to the recruit's village of origin, where relatives could be detained or pressured until the absconder returned to duty. Military nomenclature thus functioned as a disciplinary technology, leveraging kinship and locality to secure compliance. The fictional characters who appear in the vignettes that follow adopt this



same naming convention, reflecting the archival logic through which African soldiers were rendered legible to the colonial state.

Narrative Vignette No. 1 — The River Crossing

The River Crossing

The rain had been falling nonstop for three days. It poured in sheets that blurred the edges of the world, turning the jungle into a shifting curtain of water and shadow. Sergeant (Sgt.) Momoh Kamiendor, a Kissi man from Kono District, stood at the edge of the Kaladan River, watching the swollen water churn against the makeshift rope bridge the engineers had set up the night before.

He tightened the leather pouch tied around his neck. Inside was a small bundle of herbs and a strip of cloth marked with white kaolin. His uncle, a healer, had prepared it before he left home. “This will confuse the eyes of your enemies,” the old man had said. “And it will remind the forest spirits that you are not alone.”

Sgt Momoh did not know whether the spirits of this foreign land could hear him. The trees looked different, taller and darker. The air smelt of rot and strange flowers. However, he felt the weight of the pouch against his chest and took comfort in its familiarity.

“Move!” The Commanding Officer gave the orders. “We cross now!”

Sgt Momoh stepped onto the rope bridge. The river roared beneath him. The rain hammered his helmet. Halfway across, a burst of gunfire cracked from the far bank. Japanese soldiers, hidden in the underbrush, opened fire. A soldier on the rope bridge was hit, his body jerked from left to right, and fell into the river, instantly swallowed by the raging current. One innocent soul lost forever in a foreign land.

Sgt Momoh dropped to his knees, tightly gripping the rope. His heart pounded, and his training kicked in. He whispered a Kissi prayer under his breath – words his parents had taught him long ago. Then he rose and abseiled across the bridge to the other bank of the river, followed by his comrades one after the other, each taking an offensive position along the banks of the Kaladan River on landing as commanded. Only a single casualty was sustained on this occasion. It could have been worse.

Analytical Interlude: Embodied Danger and Cultural Anchoring

Embodied vulnerability defined much of the African soldiers’ experience in Burma, where river crossings under enemy fire were among the most perilous moments of the campaign. The Mayu, Kalapanzin, and Kaladan Rivers in the Arakan region of operations (**Figure 1**) were fast-flowing and unpredictable, forcing troops to abseil from rope bridges, wade through deep water, or ferry across while exposed to Japanese machine-gun fire. African units were often placed in the first assault waves because British commanders believed their endurance and mobility—shaped, in their view, by experience in bush warfare—made them suited to these high-risk operations.

Their ability to move through dense jungle, shoulder heavy loads, and maintain cohesion under fire made the West African divisions indispensable to the Allied advance. However, it also exposed them to a level of physical danger that far exceeded that borne by many other units.



The terrain itself became an adversary: mud that swallowed boots, rivers that surged without warning, and long marches that pushed bodies to the edge of collapse. As Fadoyebo's (1999) account makes clear, these were not occasional hardships but the daily conditions under which African troops fought and survived. River crossings, in particular, condensed the full spectrum of bodily risk—fatigue, fear, the weight of equipment, and the ever-present threat of enemy fire—into moments where a single misstep could mean disappearance into the current. Such experiences were emblematic of the wider burdens African soldiers carried throughout the Burma campaign, where their labour, endurance, and vulnerability were woven into the very fabric of Allied operations.

Cultural anchoring served as a crucial counterpart to this embodied vulnerability. Just as their bodies were exposed to gunfire, disease, and environmental hazards, their spiritual selves required protection through longstanding ritual technologies. Protective charms were carried not as superstition but as extensions of the social and ancestral networks that defined personhood in Kissi cosmology. Ethnographers note that such objects function as “portable social worlds”, binding individuals to lineage spirits and ritual specialists even when far from home. Scholars, including Ferme (2001), emphasise that danger is never merely material; it is relational, emerging when ties to the ancestral order are weakened. For Kissi soldiers, charms restored equilibrium, grounding them amid the dislocation of war.

Environmental strangeness intensified psychological strain. The dense, humid, and acoustically unfamiliar Burmese jungle—alive with insects, strange wildlife, monsoon winds, and unseen movements—contrasted sharply with the ecological rhythms of Upper Guinea. This dislocation disrupted the relational balance through which Kissi people interpret well-being and danger. Anthropologist Richards (1996) shows that West African combatants often interpret foreign landscapes through existing cosmological frameworks, reading unfamiliar terrain as spiritually unsettled or lacking ancestral protection. In Kissi culture, personhood depends on alignment among body, place, and ancestral spirits (Nabieu, 2018). However, when deployed in Burma, this alignment was profoundly disrupted. Hence, navigating the strange Burmese landscape required not only military adaptation but also cosmological recalibration. Charms and amulets brought from home assisted in this recalibration.

Narrative Vignette No. 2 — The Jungle Patrol

The Jungle Patrol

The jungle was eerily quiet, too quiet, Sergeant Major Tamba Buedu thought. He raised his hand, signalling the patrol to stop. The men crouched low, their rifles at the ready. The air was thick with humidity, and the smell of damp earth clung to their skin.

Sergeant Major Tamba Buedu listened. He had learned to read the jungle the same way he once read the forest trails back home in his Kissi Tongi Chiefdom. In Sierra Leone, silence signalled that a wild beast, like a leopard, was nearby. In Burma, it meant the Japanese were watching.

He signalled to Private Fayia Kowadu, another Kissi soldier, to move forward. Sergeant Major Tamba Buedu slipped into the underbrush, his steps quiet. Minutes went by. Then a single shot was fired.



The patrol moved forward quickly. They discovered Private Fayia on the ground with blood spreading beneath him. A Japanese sniper had shot him from above. He died in a foreign land, fighting a war for his masters.

Sergeant Major Tamba Buedu knelt beside him. Private Fayia's eyes were open, staring at the canopy. Sergeant Major Tamba Buedu placed a hand on Private Fayia's chest and whispered in Kissi, "Go well, brother." Your ancestors will meet you."

He took the small charm off Private Fayia's wrist and put it in his own pocket. It was a Kissi tradition, a way of bringing the dead home when their physical bodies could not make the journey.

Analytical Interlude: Death, Ritual, and Moral Obligation

The Kissi soldiers deployed to Burma experienced the war not only as a military campaign but also as a profound encounter with environmental, spiritual, and relational dislocation. The dense, humid, and acoustically overwhelming Burmese jungle created a sensory world radically different from the Upper Guinea landscapes that typically anchored their sense of balance and protection. In Kissi cosmology, well-being depends on alignment among person, place, and ancestral presence. The unfamiliar terrain, therefore, produced more than tactical anxiety; it also generated spiritual unsettlement, a sense that the protective forces of home were distant or muted. Ethnographic work by Sesay (2017) shows that Sierra Leonean communities interpret social and spiritual disruption through relational cosmologies, relying on symbolic acts and ritual practices to restore equilibrium when established structures are unsettled. These practices reaffirm moral order, sustain ancestral relationships, and provide culturally grounded pathways for managing uncertainty and re-establishing communal stability.

Within this worldview, death carried layered significance, distinct from the colonial masters' military view of a war casualty. Instead, Kissi soldiers understood the loss of a comrade not merely as a military casualty but as a spiritual transition requiring proper acknowledgement. In their culture, the dead remain socially active, influencing the living through ancestral presence and moral authority. Ensuring that a fallen comrade's spirit was guided and recognised was essential to preventing spiritual restlessness within the group. Far from ritual specialists and kin networks, soldiers improvised gestures of care—quiet invocations, respectful handling of bodies, and safeguarding charms and personal items for eventual return to families, who would arrange special burial or transition ceremonies for the deceased (Amara & N'Dayma, 2018).

The act of "carrying the dead home", whether literally or symbolically, expressed a profound Kissi obligation to sustain social bonds beyond death. When repatriation of a body was impossible, families and ritual specialists relied on an accepted procedure involving the Kissi Penny—a locally minted metal currency used not only in trade but also as a ritual medium for transporting a deceased person's soul back to their kin for proper funerary rites (Amara, 2018). Within the Burma war theatre, this logic shaped soldiers' responses to loss. They sought to ensure that no comrade was left abandoned—spiritually, socially, or cosmologically. Such acts reaffirmed collective identity, transforming death from an isolating rupture into a moment that re-anchored the group within a shared moral and ancestral order. This resonates with broader African conceptions of death as a transition into continued relational existence, in which ancestors remain active members of the moral community and the past endures within the living world (Freerks, 2024). Material objects carried by the living—charms, amulets, final



messages—functioned as conduits through which the presence of the dead continued to circulate, sustaining relational continuity even amid the dislocation of war (Bolten, 2020).

Narrative Vignette No. 3 — The Long March

The Long March

The column stretched for miles, winding through the jungle like a dark snake. The men carried everything: ammunition, rations, medical supplies, even parts of dismantled artillery. The terrain was too steep for vehicles, and the burden fell on human heads and backs.

Corporal Fallah Taidu, a Kissi porter-turned-soldier, felt the straps of his pack cutting into his shoulders. His legs burnt, and sweat stung his eyes. However, he kept moving. In his village, he carried rice sacks from the farms to the drying huts built at the back of his father's compound. This load was the same, he told himself—just heavier and with bullets.

A British officer rode a mule alongside the column. “Good pace, lads,” he said, as if he were commenting on a Sunday stroll.

Corporal Fallah Taidu gritted his teeth. He had learned not to expect praise. African soldiers were strong, the officers said to themselves. They could endure anything. However, endurance had a cost.

When they finally stopped, Corporal Fallah Taidu collapsed to the ground, exhausted and thirsty. He took a swig of the water bottle he carried strapped to his waist belt and reached into his pocket, pulled out a small stone he had brought from home, a smooth river pebble he had carried since childhood. He rubbed it between his fingers, grounding himself in memory.

Analytical Interlude: Labour, Endurance, and Colonial Expectations

For West African troops in the Burma Campaign, labour was not a peripheral duty but a defining feature of their wartime experience. Because of steep gradients, dense jungle, and the near absence of motorable routes, African soldiers were routinely deployed as human transport, carrying ammunition, rations, medical supplies, wounded colleagues, and even artillery components across long distances. They also provided road-building labour in the jungle. This physically demanding work pushed African bodies to the limits of endurance, with days of marching in monsoon rain, battling leeches, mosquitoes, mud, heat, and disease. The physical exertion and strain proved fatal, as dehydration, collapse, and tropical illness intersected with relentless transport, road building, or combat duties. Recent scholarship shows that African military labour in foreign theatres often involved forms of embodied risk that exceeded the dangers of formal combat, revealing the uneven distribution of hardship within colonial armies. Parsons (1999) demonstrates that African troops were routinely assigned the most physically punishing and hazardous tasks considered too difficult for other units—exposing them to exhaustion, disease, and environmental threats even when they were not directly engaged in battle. This pattern underscores how the burdens of imperial warfare were unevenly allocated, with African soldiers absorbing a disproportionate share of the bodily risks that sustained Allied operations.

These labour patterns were not incidental but emerged from racialised colonial expectations. British officers routinely framed African endurance as innate—an ideology that cast West



African bodies as naturally adapted to heat, strain, and physical hardship. Such assumptions legitimised assigning African troops a disproportionate share of punishing tasks, from portage to road cutting, while obscuring the skill, discipline, and tactical competence they brought to the campaign. Nugent (2019) demonstrates that colonial administrations routinely essentialised African physicality to legitimise unequal burdens of exertion, embedding these assumptions within broader systems of labour extraction and racialised governance. As Busumtwi-Sam and Kashyap (2025) demonstrate, racialised global narratives portray certain populations as naturally resilient or predisposed to hardship. This framing naturalises bodily risk and conceals the coercive political structures that generate vulnerability, making exploitation appear biologically or culturally inevitable. This logic was central to colonial West Africa, where military planners mobilised racialised constructions of African endurance to justify excessive labour demands and obscure the exploitative foundations of imperial military practice. Amid the strain of jungle warfare, memory and small material attachments became quiet reservoirs of resilience. Removed from the sensory and spiritual landscapes that anchored their identity, Kissi soldiers turned to personal objects—charms, cloth, family tokens—to steady their emotions. These items condensed kinship, ancestry, and moral obligation, offering a portable sense of continuity when formal support structures were absent. Their practice of carrying protective objects into Burma mirrors Fubah's (2019) argument that material forms embody ancestral presence: such objects enabled RWAFF soldiers to sustain moral protection and cosmological balance, keeping them tethered to lineage spirits despite the dislocation, danger, and spiritual unfamiliarity of the Burma front.

Narrative Vignette No. 4 — The Night Voices

The Night Voices

The jungle at night was a completely different world. During the day, the canopy filtered sunlight into shifting green patches, but at night, the darkness was thick, suffocating, and alive. Private Halie Kunduma lay in his shallow foxhole, his rifle across his chest, listening to the sounds drifting through the trees.

He could hear crickets, rain dripping from leaves, the distant rumble of artillery, and something else – a whisper. He held his breath. The whisper came again – soft, rhythmic, almost like chanting. He nudged his colleague beside him on the left, a Mende soldier named Lance Corporal Vandy Kpetewoma. On the other side, at a precise distance, was Private Nyuma Sandaru, camouflaged and well blended into the jungle environment.

“You hear that?” Private Halie whispered in Mende. He speaks fluent Mende, but Lance Corporal Vandy does not speak Kissi.

Lance Corporal Vandy nodded. “Japanese,” he said softly, almost like a faint whisper. “They call to their spirits before they attack.”

Private Halie felt uncomfortable; a shiver ran down his spine. He recalled the stories his uncle, the village blacksmith, told him about the forest spirits of home – how they could imitate human voices and lure hunters into danger. He wondered if the spirits of this unfamiliar land did the same. The whispering grew louder. Then it stopped, and silence returned.



Private Halie's heart raced. He clenched his rifle tighter. He whispered a Kissi prayer under his breath, asking the ancestors to protect him. The darkness closed in around him, thick as a Kissi country cloth (Kolama-kissio).

Suddenly, the jungle exploded with gunfire. Private Halie fired blindly into the darkness, the muzzle flash lighting the trees for an instant. Shadows moved, and men shouted. The air filled with the smell of gunpowder and wet earth. When the firing finally stopped, the jungle fell silent again. The voices did not return. Even the insects went mute. Pure silence, but Private Halie could not relax or sleep. He was on duty.

Private Halie leaned back in his foxhole, trembling. He was not sure whether the whispers were those of Japanese soldiers, forest spirits, or simply his own fear. However, he knew one thing – the nights in Burma had their own language, and he was still learning how to listen.

Analytical Interlude: Fear, Soundscapes, and Cosmology

Nightfall in the Burmese jungle brought a form of danger that Kissi soldiers experienced as simultaneously sensory, cosmological, and moral. Dense canopy, thick undergrowth, and near-total darkness rendered vision almost useless, making hearing the primary means of threat detection. The nighttime soundscape—shrill insects, shifting branches, distant movement, and sporadic gunfire—created a sense of continuous uncertainty. Soldiers described the jungle as "talking", capturing both the density of sound and the anxiety of not knowing which sounds signalled danger. Schmidt (2013) shows that African soldiers in unfamiliar war environments became increasingly vulnerable when forced to rely on sound rather than sight, as acoustic dependence heightened uncertainty and risk, making hearing their primary mode of situational awareness.

For Kissi soldiers, sound was never purely tactical. In Kissi cosmology, sound is a communicative medium through which unseen forces make themselves known. Ancestral presence, spiritual imbalance, and disturbance often manifest as auditory signs. In Burma, soldiers encountered a soundscape that was overwhelming and illegible. A rustle might signal an enemy patrol, a wild animal, or a spirit displaced by violence. The inability to visually confirm a sound's source intensified this ambiguity. As Ferme (2001) shows, ancestral revelation in Upper Guinea cosmologies often appears through bodily disturbances, sudden signs in the forest, and episodes of misfortune—manifestations that signalled not only guidance but also the profound cosmological imbalance produced by fighting in a landscape severed from ancestral land, where the absence of lineage spirits heightened vulnerability and intensified the need for ritual protection.

The jungle's acoustic distortions deepened this uncertainty. Dense vegetation warped distance and direction, making nearby sounds seem far away and distant ones seem close. This form of acoustic compression collapsed the boundaries between self and environment, producing a sense that danger could emerge from any direction. Studies of West African sensory experience show that unfamiliar soundscapes can destabilise perception in precisely this way, heightening vulnerability when hearing becomes the dominant mode of situational awareness (Stoller, 1989). This acoustic terror is mirrored in my own family's oral history where, our mother recalled that her brother had informed her that the moonless nights in the Burma jungle felt as though they were "pressing in" on the soldiers. In that dense, suffocating darkness, soldiers shifted from relying on sight to using their bodies as listening instruments—tense, alert, and



finely attuned to every tremor in the acoustic field. Each faint rustle or distant movement carried significance, demanding interpretation as they navigated a landscape alive with unseen dangers.

The Burma Campaign also brought together soldiers from multiple West African ethnic groups—Kissi, Mende, Temne, Kru, Yoruba, Hausa, Asante, Fante, Wolof, and others—each with distinct acoustic cosmologies. As a result, nighttime conversations became spaces for inter-ethnic exchange, where soldiers compared their interpretations of sounds and blended their explanatory frameworks through collective listening, co-creating a shared cultural map of the battlefield. Jones (2015) documented reports, corroborated by veterans, of fear of the unknown, which was ever-present in the Burma theatre of war, especially at night.

Narrative Vignette No. 5 — After the Battle

After the Battle.

The battle had lasted just twenty minutes, but it felt like hours. Smoke hung in the air, blending with the scent of burnt vegetation and blood. The ground was covered with shell casings, broken branches, and the bodies of African and Japanese soldiers.

Sergeant Momoh walked slowly through the clearing, his boots sinking into the mud. His men followed behind him, silent. They had dislodged the Japanese from the ridge, but the victory felt hollow.

He paused beside the body of a young Japanese soldier. The man appeared to be no more than twenty years old. His helmet lay a few feet away, and he still clutched his rifle. His eyes were open, gazing at the sky.

Sgt Momoh knelt beside him. He felt a strange heaviness in his chest. The Japanese soldier's face reminded him of his younger brother back home in Mafindor Chieftdom.

Private Sahr Dandu approached. "Sergeant", he said quietly, "should we search them?" These two have developed a special relationship and look out for each other.

Sgt Momoh nodded. "Only look for any clues that may help us advance. Be professional and be careful."

As Private Sahr moved away, Sgt Momoh reached into his pocket and pulled out a small kola nut. He placed it gently beside the Japanese soldier's right-hand side.

"May your spirit find its path," he whispered in Kissi.

He did not know whether the Japanese believed in ancestors or whether their spirits wandered like those of his own people. However, he knew that death deserved respect.

When he stood up, he felt the eyes of his men on him. Some nodded. Others looked confused. However, no one questioned him.

As they moved on, Sgt Momoh felt a quiet resolve settle over him. War had taken him far from home, but it had not taken his humanity.



Analytical Interlude: Moral Ambiguity, Respect, and Cross-Cultural Ethics

For Kissi soldiers in the Burma Campaign, the treatment of the dead—whether comrades or enemy combatants—was guided by a deep cosmological ethic rather than military protocol alone. In Kissi's thought, the dead remain socially active. Their transition to the ancestral realm depends on proper ritual handling through the ceremony of '*crossing the river*', which has two forms: a '*small river*' crossing performed on the 4th day after burial for men (3rd day for women) and a '*big river*' crossing performed on the 40th day after burial for both sexes. By tradition, Kissi society owes an obligation to the deceased kinsman, to assist their soul's journey to the ancestral realm (Amara et al., 2018). Neglecting a body risks spiritual imbalance or contamination. Even amid battle, soldiers sought to uphold these obligations, believing that the dignity of the dead reflected the living's righteous integrity.

This ethic extended beyond their own ranks. Encounters with Japanese casualties often produced moments of reflection that complicated colonial narratives of racialised enmity. While British officers framed the Japanese as a fanatical enemy, Kissi soldiers sometimes responded with empathy. Personal charms, family tokens, or protective objects found on Japanese bodies resonated with their own wartime practices, revealing shared logics of protection and vulnerability. As Stapleton (2022) demonstrates, African soldiers operated within overlapping ethical worlds: the racialised discipline of the colonial army and the culturally grounded moral frameworks that shaped their understandings of obligation and human dignity.

Cultural continuity sustained these ethical orientations. The offering of kola nuts, a symbol of respect, hospitality, and spiritual transition, was among the most striking examples. Soldiers placed kola beside the bodies of comrades and, occasionally, near Japanese remains as a gesture of recognition. This act expressed a cosmological truth: death demands acknowledgement, and the boundary between self and other collapses in its presence. Such ritual adaptations, our mother reminded us, enabled Kissi soldiers to preserve cultural coherence in foreign environments while fighting a war.

These practices reveal the traditional ethical standards observed by Kissi soldiers despite rigid colonial discipline. Small acts, such as arranging a body, offering an invocation, or refusing desecration, were assertions of autonomy within an imperial system. Small acts, such as arranging a body, offering an invocation, or refusing desecration, were assertions of autonomy within an imperial system. Obeten (2024) shows that indigenous African rituals operate as moral technologies for restoring harmony, managing conflict, and re-establishing social order. Through such practices, individuals create culturally meaningful ways to respond to uncertainty or disruption, using ritual action to stabilise relationships, affirm agency, and maintain coherence amid shifting or oppressive conditions. Horton (1993) similarly shows that African ritual systems operate as practical modes of reasoning and ethical action, allowing individuals to interpret misfortune and maintain moral coherence even under coercive conditions.

Narrative Vignette No. 6 — Surviving Veterans Coming Back Home

Surviving Veterans Coming Back Home to Sierra Leone

The large ship—known locally as Man of War or Manawa—entered Freetown's natural harbour just after sunrise. Warm air drifted across the deck, carrying the familiar scents of



salt, palm oil, and wood smoke, smells Sgt Momoh had not breathed in for more than two years. As he stepped onto the wharf, the sounds of the city washed over him: traders calling out prices in Krio, Temne and Limba, children laughing, metal clanging from the dockyards. Everything felt familiar yet strangely distant, as though he were returning to a dream he once lived.

*The returning soldiers were housed in large military tents erected at Wilberforce Army Barracks for a week before being dispatched to their home Districts. On the morning of departure, a military truck carried them to the main railway station in downtown Freetown. A railway officer barked instructions as the long black locomotive hissed and released steam, the words **Sierra Leone Railway** painted proudly on its side. Sgt Momoh had ridden this train only once—after his initial training at Daru—but never imagined he would survive the war to board it again.*

He climbed into a wooden carriage with other veterans, including his friend Private Sahr Dandu and Corporal Fayia Kongoma. The benches were hard, the windows open to the humid air. When the whistle blew and the train lurched forward, a tightness gripped his chest. The rhythmic clatter of the wheels—steady and insistent—felt almost soothing.

As the train travelled eastward, it passed villages, forests, and open fields. Women paused their rice pounding to wave; children ran alongside the tracks, shouting greetings. At each station—Waterloo, Bauya, Moyamba Junction, Manor Dase, Bo—crowds gathered to welcome the returning soldiers. Some cheered; others watched quietly, unsure how to greet the men who had travelled to a war they could scarcely imagine.

Entering the Eastern Province—Blama, Kenema, Hangha, Segbwema, Daru, Pendembu—the landscape grew greener, the air heavier with the scent of earth and rain. Sgt Momoh rested his head against the window frame, watching palm trees blur into streaks of green. He had imagined this moment countless times in Burma: hearing Kissi, Kono, and Mende spoken around him, feeling home soil beneath his feet. Nevertheless, as the train drew closer to Kailahun District, unease settled in his stomach.

Pendembu, the terminal station, was overflowing with people. Drummers played, women ululated, and families surged forward as soldiers stepped down. Sgt Momoh's father pushed through the crowd, tears streaming down his face. He embraced his son tightly, as if afraid he might vanish again.

“You have returned,” he whispered. “The ancestors have brought you back.”

Sgt Momoh nodded silently. He had never seen his father cry. The familiar scent of burnt palm-kernel oil and cheap perfume clung to the older man's clothes, yet beneath the warmth of the embrace, Sgt Momoh felt the distance between who he had been and who he had become.

After two days rest in Pendembu, the family continued to their home village. That evening, the elders performed a cleansing ceremony. Libations were poured, invoking the ancestors to wash away the shadows of foreign lands. A healer brushed Sgt Momoh with special leaves dipped in special fluid held in a calabash, murmuring prayers to release the spirits of war.

Later, as the fire crackled and insects sang, Sgt Momoh sat alone. From his pocket, he drew a foreign coin he had carried from Burma. Turning it in the firelight, he felt its coldness—an object from another world that refused to let go.



His younger brother, Tamba Hoyei, approached with two younger relatives, Kundu and Fondo. "Tell us about the war," Tamba asked.

Sgt Momoh stared into the flames. He thought of river crossings, night whispers, long marches, encounters with Japanese soldiers, and comrades buried in distant soil. He opened his mouth, but the words dissolved.

"Another time," he said softly.

Tamba nodded, suddenly aware that his brother had changed, changed by the war experience. The cheerful, carefree young man he once knew had returned quieter, more inward-looking, and carrying burdens he could not yet share. Still, he felt relief—his brother had come home. Many families had not been so fortunate.

As the two younger boys drifted to sleep, the two brothers remained by the fire, the weight of unspoken stories settling gently between them.

Analytical Interlude: Reintegration, Silence, and the Weight of Memory

When Kissi soldiers returned home from the Burma Campaign in 1945, ritual practices, emotional dissonance, and social expectations shaped their reintegration into village community life. Although communities celebrated their return, re-entering everyday life was far from seamless. Kissi cosmology recognises that war leaves spiritual residue—traces of violence, fear, and contact with the dead that cling to the body and spirit. To address this, families and ritual specialists performed cleansing rites to restore balance and reintegrate the soldiers into the community's cultural and spiritual fabric. Ritual practice, as Nwoye (2022) explains, works to restore balance in moral worlds unsettled by violence, cleanse spiritual pollution, and repair ruptured relationships with the community and ancestors. Through communal witnessing and symbolic renewal, such rites reaffirm belonging and address the spiritual, relational, and cosmological consequences of warfare, enabling moral identity to be reclaimed and reintegrated.

However, ritual reintegration did not erase the emotional dissonance many veterans experienced. Soldiers who had spent their youthful years navigating the sensory intensity of the Burmese jungle—with its acoustic dangers, ambiguities, and constant proximity to death—often found village life strangely quiet and disorienting. The rhythms of farming, kinship obligations, and communal gatherings felt familiar yet distant. Veterans struggled to reconcile the intimacy of home with memories of violence, fear, and loss. Although these experiences align with what is now recognised as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, such frameworks did not exist in 1945. Ethnographic studies of Sierra Leone show that long-term psychological distress is often managed informally within households and neighbourhoods, with limited institutional support (Shaw, 2002). Silence, therefore, became a primary coping mechanism.

Many veterans avoided discussing the war, not because of shame, but because their experiences were difficult to translate into local idioms of understanding. The sensory world of Burma—with its unfamiliar spirits, religion, foreign dead, and inter-ethnic military life—did not map easily onto Kissi village narratives of personhood and cosmology. Social expectations of masculinity further reinforced silence, with men expected to endure hardship without complaint, to "*hold their heart*" and continue with life. Mieth (2015) showed that silence in Sierra Leone often functions as a culturally grounded strategy of resilience. Drawing on



ethnographic research, she argues that many Sierra Leoneans view “*talking talking*” about wartime experiences as unnecessary, risky, or socially disruptive. Instead, silence enables social cohesion, protects individuals from reopening trauma, and reflects local norms that prioritise endurance and forward-looking recovery. Resilience then emerges through everyday practices, relationships, and spiritual frameworks, highlighting the need for mental health approaches that respect culturally specific modes of coping.

DISCUSSION

This article has shown that Kissi soldiers’ experiences in the Burma Campaign cannot be understood through conventional military narratives alone. The vignettes demonstrate how soldiers drew on embodied skill, ritual knowledge, and culturally grounded reasoning to navigate danger, interpret the unfamiliar Burmese landscape, and sustain themselves far from home. Their actions reveal that protective charms, ancestral invocation, and ritual gestures were not symbolic residues of “tradition”, but essential technologies of survival embedded in a relational cosmology (Richards, 1996).

Environmental dislocation intensified these dynamics. The dense, acoustically unstable Burmese jungle disrupted familiar sensory and spiritual rhythms, producing uncertainty that required continuous recalibration of meaning and protection (Fadoyebo, 1999; Phillips, 2015). At the same time, Kissi soldiers’ labour and endurance were shaped by racialised colonial expectations (Okia, 2012). Yet our relatives’ accounts of their Burma experience reveal how memory, material attachments, and cultural obligation transformed endurance into a moral and cosmological practice.

Bolt and Cilliers (2025) show that colonial health systems in British Africa were structurally underdeveloped and racially stratified. This broader pattern of institutional neglect formed the backdrop against which returning Kissi veterans in 1945 received no psychological support, relying instead on silence, ritual cleansing, and household-level care—coping practices that continue to shape men’s help-seeking in Sierra Leone today.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Kissi soldiers in the Burma Campaign reveal a culturally mediated history that exceeds conventional military narratives. Their participation was shaped not only by the physical demands of jungle warfare but also by the ritual knowledge, ancestral ethics, and moral reasoning they carried from Upper Guinea. These interpretive frameworks shaped how Kissi men understood danger, misfortune, comradeship, and survival in a foreign war theatre.

Through reconstructing their experiences using narrative vignettes grounded in archival traces and oral histories, this article brings visibility to African soldiers whose contributions remain marginal in global accounts of the Second World War. The vignettes show how Kissi soldiers navigated environmental dislocation, processed death through culturally meaningful practices, and sustained resilience through ritual and collective solidarity. They also demonstrate that these men carried portable ethical worlds that travelled with them across continents.



This analysis contributes to a more inclusive and culturally attuned history of World War II—one that recognises African soldiers as historical actors whose interpretive worlds deepen our understanding of global conflict. It also exposes the long-term consequences of structural neglect: the absence of psychological support for returning soldiers prefigured persistent failures in contemporary men's health strategies, which continue to overlook culturally specific forms of suffering, silence, and emotional endurance. The struggles of returned Kissi veterans underscore the need for men's health policies that acknowledge historical trauma, engage with local cosmologies of well-being, and address the social conditions shaping how men seek or avoid care.

By centring Kissi epistemologies, this study reframes African soldiers not as peripheral labourers but as historical actors whose interpretive worlds travelled with them across continents. Their experiences deepen our understanding of global conflict, showing how African cosmologies shaped the ways individuals confronted war, made sense of violence, and rebuilt their lives afterward.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should extend beyond a single family narrative to include the fast dwindling remaining RWAFF veterans in Sierra Leone and multiple veteran lineages, strengthening the historical record before it disappears. Scholars should examine how Kissi soldiers' wartime experiences shaped their reintegration into society and how these dynamics influence intergenerational patterns in men's health, emotional expression, and help-seeking. Further work is needed to understand how local cosmologies—ritual cleansing, ancestral presence, and spiritual repair—intersect with biomedical mental-health models. Comparative studies across Sierra Leonean ethnic groups can illuminate culturally specific responses to trauma. At the same time, interdisciplinary collaborations can support the development of gender-responsive, culturally grounded health policies informed by historical trauma.

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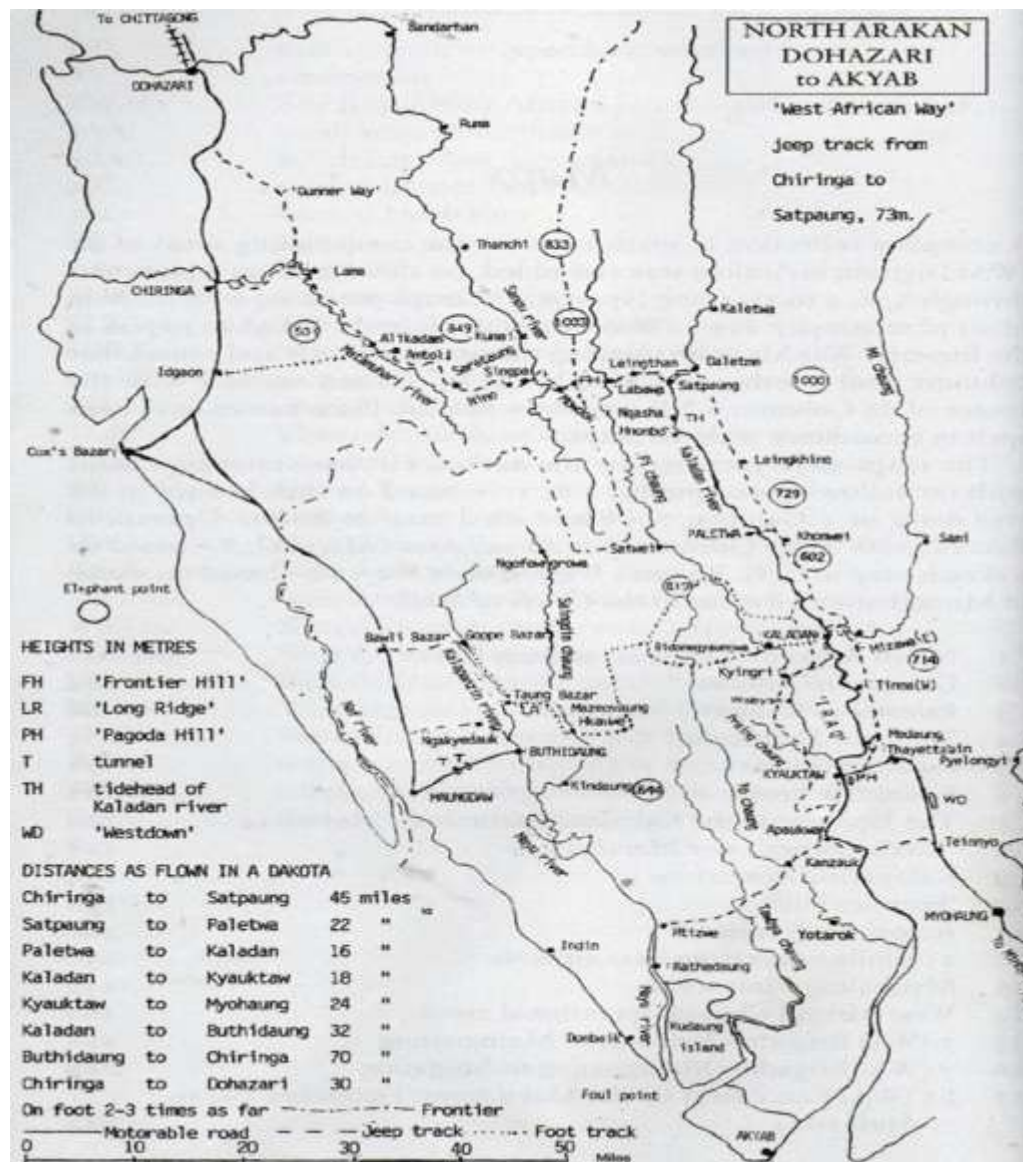
Dedication: This paper is lovingly dedicated to my father, Sergeant Sahr Momoh Kamiendor, and my uncle, Private Sahr Dandu, two courageous Kissi men who enlisted in the Royal West African Frontier Force as teenagers and endured the “dangerous adventure” of the Burma Campaign during the Second World War. Their strength, resilience, and unwavering commitment to duty continue to inspire every page of this article.

I honour my 98-year old mother, the widow of Sgt. Momoh and younger sister of Private Dandu, whose memory, wisdom, and steadfast support have guided this paper from its earliest moments. I also acknowledge my six living sisters each of whom has offered their full consent and encouragement.

Together, we remember our four late sisters (two that died in childhood and two as adults), whose presence remains deeply felt and whose spirits continue to shape our family's story.

This dedication stands as a tribute to all of them - those who served, those who waited, and those who remember.

Figure 1: RWAFF Deployment map in Burma (credit – Charlie Gilbert).



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