Mythical and ritual constituents of the city : Eléments mythiques et rituels constitutifs de la ville

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Roderick Lawrence and Claude Raffestin

"Un mythe exprime, relève et codifie une croyance; il préserve et renforce la moralité il garantit l'efficacité du rite et contient des règles pratiques de conduite. Le mythe est donc un ingrédient vital de la civilisation humaine; ce n'est pas un conte futile mais un récit empreint d'une force active, façonné par des principes actifs. " Bronislaw Malinowski

On pense souvent que toute activité humaine dérive soit du non-rationnel, non-utilitaire mystique et sacré, soit du rationnel, utilitaire, bon sens et profane. Il en résulte que les comportements dictés par un mythe ou un rite ont souvent été considérés comme appartenant à des pratiques imaginaires, magiques ou religieuses. Toutefois, une telle vision dualiste induit en erreur. Cela s'est produit lors des travaux de recherche en sociologie, en anthropolgie ainsi que dans l'élaboration des théories d'architecture d'urbanisme. La présente étude affirme que la ville est une construction humaine à plusieurs dimensions. Elle ne devrait pas uniquement être considérée comme une solution rationnelle aux problèmes de l'habitat, du marketing; de la communication et des transports. La ville est plutôt comme un palinseste, constitué de couches successives chacune chargée d'histoire de culture, de politique et de symboles. Cette étude prétend que les quartiers urbains contemporains se sont appauvris en partie à cause d'une mauvaise interprétation de la nature composite (tant rationnelle que non rationnelle) de la ville. Chaque ville se compose de nombreux éléments culturels y compris mythes et rituels. Des rites et des mythes sont à l'origine de la fondation et de l'aménagement des villes ainsi que le cours de la vie quotidienne à travers les civilisation humaines. La présente étude propose des définitions et des interprétations de mythes et de rituels dans différents contextes urbains. Dans un deuxième temps, elle affirme que, bien qu 'ils aient été ignorés par l'occident en général et par les scientifiques en particulier, le mythe et le rituel ne devraient pas l'être aujourd'hui.

Mots clés: culture urbaine; mythes; rituels; planification urbaine
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The city is a human construct par excellence. It is founded by sedentary people who choose to cultivate a particular portion of the landscape. The location of a site for the construction of a city is meant to respond to sets of criteria which a town planner, a surveyor or a geographer would usually classify in terms of its accessibility, climate, available resources, geological conditions and perhaps other rational parameters. Nonetheless, there is abundant evidence today that the siting and the layout of a city are also considered in terms of cosmological beliefs and ideals. These beliefs and ideals have been communicated throughout history, either by written prescriptions, or orally by myths. These myths deal simultaneously with a local environment (e.g. the city) and the universe (e.g. the cosmos). In principle the former is meant to reflect the latter, and explicit relationships are identified between humanity, other forms of life and the cosmos.

One value of myths is that they are visionary. Images are construed and used to interpret and cultivate the landscape, including the siting and layout of cities. Once the territory of a new city has been chosen it is commonly demarcated from its surroundings by a set of conceptual, behavioural, judicial, symbolic, political and physical boundaries. In essence, human-made boundaries are construed in otherwise nonbounded space and time. These boundaries distinguish between "here and there" or "this and that", which include the anthropos and the cosmos, as well as the city and the country.

Since the earliest human civilizations people have used diverse kinds of boundaries to order and control their relationships with other constituents of their local environment and the cosmos. Several anthropologists, including Leach (1976), have discussed how "this" and "that" are distinguished from each other by the use of conceptual boundaries. Given that such boundaries are fundamental constituents of human culture, they should not be overlooked in studies of the foundation, the meaning and the use of cities. Nonetheless, whereas many published studies have examined the siting, the layout and the morphology of cities, too few have simultaneously examined their underlying conceptual foundations using an integrative perspective. Therefore, this paper argues and illustrates that it is important to identify and comprehend the multidimensional nature of the city, both at one point in time and over an extended period.

It is generally recognized that often boundaries have explicit material dimensions, like those of the ancient city with massive fortifications. Nonetheless, the frontier between Italy and Switzerland, or the boundary between my house and that of my neighbour, may only be defined by a line on a map or an ordonnance. However, these representations of boundaries

(recurrent in geography and town planning) do not indicate their political and legal, nor their socio-pyschological dimensions. Nonetheless, as Rykwert (1976) has shown, for example, a Romano Etruscan belief in the sacredness of land titles and the inviolability of property boundaries was transmitted and applied throughout the Roman Empire. The legal existence of a new Roman settlement was accompanied by an elaborate foundation act that preceded any construction work on the chosen site. The rectangular boundaries of the new settlement were attributed a religious connotation, because they not only delimited but also symbolically protected the sacred territory of the future city from other constituents of the cosmos. These boundaries were ritually defined by the initial furrow on the surface of the land. The furrowing of the soil was performed by the founder of the new settlement using a bronze plough. The line cut by the plough and the soil it displaced inside the boundary of the future city were considered sacred, whereas the span of the future gateways into the city (that were not furrowed) were subject to civil jurisdiction. Subsequently, the Romans employed diviners to perform purification rites using sacrificial animals that consecrated the boundaries. The city was formally founded only once these rites had been completed, and only then could the construction of the city begin.

This example could be illustrated by numerous others from different societies in each continent of the world. Collectively they show that in order to comprehend the multi-dimensional nature of cities it is instructive to analyse their conceptual and symbolic dimensions by identifying and studying the mythical and ritual constituents of the siting, layout and use of cities. In order to achieve this goal the next section of this paper presents and illustrates interpretations of myth and ritual. Then the paper considers their pertinence in the contemporary western world, in general, and with respect to urban life, in particular. The paper concludes by requesting and suggesting a reorientation and diversification of discourse and praxis about the city and daily urban affairs.

WHAT ARE MYTHS?

In societies dominated by a quantitative, scientific world view, it may seem unjustified to evoke the notion of myth. On the one hand, this scepticism would be justified if myths were only fictitious fables that have no verification. On the other hand, this scepticism is unjustified given that mythos and logos are not mutually exclusive, but they have the same etymology and meaning. Both refer to those reasons, words and discourse that are personified as the source of order embodying patterns of relationships between humanity, other forms of life and the universe.

Myths are a fundamental constituent of human cultures found in all societies since the earliest civilisations. Myths help people to make sense of the universe, and their lives in it, in a comprehensive way. They are not to be misinterpreted as historical statements that can be validated: "Myths do not seek to answer questions in the manner required by modern science" Stewart (1989, p. 18). Rather, they restate, recreate and communicate the existence of the universe and of human life. People use myths as charters for their lives. Myths provide a source of meaning for the origin of humanity, and they enable people to acquire a sense of control of that which cannot be verified.

Several contributions by anthropologists show that myths are culture specific semantic communication systems that enable people to explain unobservable or unknown entities and events in terms of observable phenomena (Leach, 1968). In this sense, all human societies have spoken and/or written fables that function as myths of origin (Turner, 1968). Creation myths form a specific set of myths that transgress the realm of institutional or formal religion. This type of myth is not meant to seek unqualitifed answers to questions beyond the comprehension of ancient human civilisations. Rather, being an integral part of culture they provide "an organic timeless flow of images and narratives within which such questions were bypassed altogether, because the "answers" of mythology come from deep levels of unconsciousness, in which universal patterns or intimations are apprehended" (Stewart, 1989, p.6).

Myths commonly include discourse on the local (known) environment or habitat of people and the universal (unknown) environment. Myths are narratives that describe how one state (e.g. chaos) became another (e.g. the cosmos). In creation mythology there are two predominant models. The first is an image model that commonly adopts an anthropomorphic form (e.g. a human being) or a specific element of the environment such as a tree (e.g. the tree of life). In some applications of this model the origin of humanity precedes the appearance of animals and plants. This conceptual ordering of creation is the antithesis of the scientific concept of evolution commonly accepted today.

The second model in creation mythology is the directional model which attributes directions to the cosmos that are value-laden. There usually are six directions, namely east, south, west, north, above and below. As Stewart (1989, p. 19) noted, although there are distinct geographical and cultural differences between India and Ireland, the societies in these countries shared "the common heritage of the Six Directions as actual zones in the land". This conceptual ordering of the universe was not restricted to Indo-European civilisations, because oriental societies, including the Chinese throughout several dynasties, adopted it too.

The layout of Chinese cities, their urban quarters and their buildings express and communicate these conceptual orders which include cosmology, ideals and beliefs (Needham, 1956; Wheatley, 1971). For more than a

millenium, the Chinese have used customs and rituals called feng-shui with the aim of integrating people, their activities and the landscape. Generally, it is believed that the good will of divine powers can be transmitted only in favourable geographical circumstances to establish harmony between the human settlement and the universe. Following consideration of the local features of the landscape, prescriptions and symbols aided the selection of sites for cities, palaces, dwellings and burial grounds. Then rites were performed to consecrate the chosen site. These rites are only performed on the propitious days prescribed in the annual almanacs. These almanacs contained astronomical information about the definition of agricultural cycles, and the dates that should be avoided or used for building construction (Knapp, 1986). These days were attributed with good and bad fortune for preparing building sites, for erecting the structural timber framework of buildings, and for installing the doors and the cooking stove within. By adhering to these customs and prescriptions, it was believed that favourable circumstances for the future inhabitants would be ensured.

It is noteworthy that many of the customs just mentioned are no longer practised in the People's Republic of China, where political ideology has overriden folklore. Consequently, authentic myth and ritual that were transmitted from generation to generation over more than a millenium have been surpressed. However, these customs are still common in Hong- Kong and Taiwan, where they are performed by carpenters and masons. Although these specialists are skilled craftsmen they are not just technically competent, because they are considered to be skilled magiciens who are employed to insure the prospect of good fortune by integrating the habitat and the cosmos of the present, to the past and to the future.

INTERPRETING RITUAL

There is little consensus about the meaning and use of the term ritual and how rites should be understood. The word ritual derives from the latin word ritus, which has been used since the 14th century to mean a social convention or habit. Since then there have been two predominant interpretations of ritual. The first commonly refers to an activity, or sets of activities, that cannot be justified solely by a means-to-end type of explanation of human behaviour. The second interpretation refers to sets of customs specifically associated with religion. Consequently, ritual can be contrasted with ceremony, customs, and routines, that form a part of daily activities. Despite the differences between these interpetations, both imply that ritual refers to "a category of behaviour that follows customs in which their relationship between the means and the end is not intrinsic" as Goody (1961, p. 59) has discussed.

One fundamental purpose of ritual in traditional societies is to articulate the movements of individuals and groups with respect to their physical environment (e.g. their habitat and its surroundings) and their social environment (e.g. between social groups and across the life-cycle). In principle, rites are a means of boundary regulation and control. They involve a physical, social and temporal separation from an initial state of being, then a marginal or liminal phase, followed by the assimilation to a new condition or the reassimilation to a previous condition (Gluckman, 1962). This approach implies that it is necessary to distinguish between rites of religious practice and the ritualization of social relationships in traditional societies. According to Gluckman, in the ritualism of formalized religion, the behaviour of the participants does not reflect the diverse social roles and relationships of the members of the congregation. In contrast, the ritualization of social relationships in the daily affairs of traditional societies is

"a stylized ceremonial in which persons related in various ways to the central actors, as well as these themselves, perform prescribed actions according to their secular roles; and that it is believed by the participants that these prescribed actions express and amend social relationships so as to secure general blessing, purification, protection, and prosperity for the persons involved in some mystical manner which is out of sensory control."

Rituals articulate ideals, beliefs and values about the way human individuals and groups, their immediate environment and the cosmos are interrelated. Myths and rituals do not make clear-cut boundaries between these constituents of the universe; nor do they dissect time into specific units, because past, present and future form a continuum. The enactment of rites occurs between people who share and communicate meaning and values about their lives. In principle, rituals are binding. They illustrate the dependence people feel toward other individuals and their society. Therefore they require communal participation. Indeed, as Pottebaum (1992, p. 88) notes, the quality of a specific rite is largely proportional to the level, frequency and quality of the behaviour of the participants.

If rites are intended to communicate between people, it is important to decipher what they mean. According to several social anthropologists, it is possible to identify the symbolic meaning of a rite by analysing the diverse uses of ritual symbols and practices in every day life. L6vi-Strauss (1955) interprets ritual as integral with human thought at an abstract and metaphysical level. His interpretation implies that ritual is a language and that rites arc specific acts, akin to speech. Hence it is instructive to decipher sets of rules that underlie rites. In this sense, the meaning of ritual can be studied by analysing its content in context. This context is dynamic and culturally dependent: many rites are performed at significant times in the seasonal cycle (e.g. at the summer or winter solstice, or at the vernal or autumnal equinox); at liminal stages in the

life-cycle of individuals and groups (e.g. rites de passage associated with birth, puberty, marriage and death), at times of natural catastrophes (e.g. famine, drought, flood and epidemic) and for the consecration of property (e.g. the foundation of a new city and the construction of a new building). According to Gluckman (1962, p. 23) there are four types of ritual, and it is useful to distinguish between them.   These are:

1. Magical action including the acts of mystical powers and substances.
2. Religious action including the cults of ancestors.
3. Substantive or constitutive rituals that reflect or alter social relationships by reference to mystical notions.
4. Factitive rituals that increase the productivity or strength, or purify and protect the material well-being of a group.

Substantive and constitutive rituals includes rites de passage, whereas factitive rituals includes the foundation rites of cities that were practised in many traditional societies.

In each of the above-mentioned situtations, the participants in ritual believe that a rite can invoke power that will alter the state of the world. Consequently, the ideals and beliefs accompanying ritual behaviour distinguish the latter from all other kinds of behaviour.   Accordingly, Harrison (1913) stated that ritual can be intrepreted as a dramatisation of myth.

Given the evidence that myth and ritual have been constituents of the conceptual foundations of cities in many civilisations, it is necessary to consider their relevance for the siting and layout of contemporary cities. In the Preface to his historical analysis of Romano-Etruscan urban culture, Rykwert (1976) criticizes the layout and design of modern cities. He also deplores recent approaches applied in town and country planning based largely or solely on functional, economic and other rational parameters. However, although he argues that expressive and symbolic systems should be included in city planning he does not indicate how his historical study can help overcome the shortcomings he has identified. This complex subject will be considered in the next section of this paper.

THE PERTINENCE OF MYTH AND RITUAL IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN SOCIETIES

"One need only ponder what people mean in our time when they counsel us to "be realistic". They mean, at every point, to forego the claims of transcendence, to spurn the magic of imaginative wonder, to regard the world as nothing but what the hard facts and quantitiave abstractions of scientific objectivity make it out to be ....Science is our religion because we

cannot, most of us, with any living conviction   see around it ....We live in a world whose consciousness of reality ends at the scientific perimeter, hence a world growing more idolatrous by the hour...." Theodore Roszak

The preceding interpretations of myth and ritual show that they are closely interrelated. Collectively, they enable individuals and groups to establish an intimate relationship between themselves, and also with the primordial and generative logic of the cosmos that transcends human society. Both myth and ritual can be interpreted as systems of signs that organize abstract conceptual relationships in terms of concrete images (Geertz, 1968). Hence they serve as catalysts for speculative thought rather than as models for secular behaviour. Whereas empirical language refers to objective facts, myth and ritual refer to "the quintessence of human experience, the meaning and significance of human life" (May, 1991, p 26). Collectively they enable the formulation of "a science of the concrete" which is no less rationale, nor illogical than "the abstract science of the modern world" (Geertz, 1968, p. 405). According to May (991, p. 25) the denial of myth is part of "our refusal to confront our own reality and that of society."

Although there are numerous differences between traditional societies and those of the contemporary western world, the latter do have recourse to myth and ritual. Yet they do not necessarily have the same idioms as those of our ancestors. In Switzerland, for example, William Tell is still a national hero, while in North America the ancient frontier myth has been reinterpreted by novelists, playwriters and those film-makers who characterised the Lone Ranger. Despite these and other examples it has been increasingly common in the western world to label myths as fictitious tales. Nonetheless, the summer solstice is celebrated in many countries including Sweden where it is a national holiday. Elsewhere, the beginning of Spring is widely celebrated around a Maypole on May Day in some rural communities, whereas it has been transformed into a holiday for urban workers in many countries. In the domestic realm, house warming parties (pendre la cremaillere) are given when moving into a dwelling unit. Last but not least, rites de passage associated with birthdays, christenings, confirmations, marriages and deaths are celebrated (van Gennep, 1909). These rites enable individuals and groups to define and communicate their self-, social- and place identities.

Despite the omnipresence of ritual in daily life, there can be little doubt that rites are not as common today in relation to urban planning and architecture as they have been. For example, when a new city, such as Canberra was planned as the capital of Australia earlier this century, the chosen site was primarily selected for political and functional reasons largely to counteract the rivalry between authorities in Sydney and Melbourne, whereas the characteristics of the extant landscape were considered of secondary importance. Such parameters overlooked an adequate supply of potable water for the new

city. This kind of reasoning led the official town planner to radically modify the landscape by constructing a large artificial lake. When Canberra was founded the national government did organize a ceremonial occasion. However, this occasion was meant for a selected group of invited officials, when pomp and ceremony negated any participation by members of the community.

The example of Canberra can be complemented by the foundation of other new cities (such as the British New Towns, Brasilia, New Delhi, Washington) as well as other contemporary approaches in urban planning (such as the forced displacement of communities for urban renewal projects or other developments in many countries). These approaches to urban planning underline the fact that it is the processes underlying the foundation and development of contemporary cities that should be examined in tandem with the material characteristics of urban quarters. In principle, apart from small numbers of self-build communities, the processes and practices in contemporary cities are imposed by a limited number of property owners and professionals on the whole community. In fact the community remains voiceless. In such circumstances there are obvious reasons why historical precedent for ritual in urban environments cannot be reapplied in a meaningful way, unless certain principles are borne in mind. These principles can be considered after answering the following questions:

Ql - What are the mythical and ritual constituents of urban technological culture in the western world?

Q2 - Have ancient myths and ritual become obsolete and replaced wholly or partly by other beliefs and practices owing to the valorization of technology, materialism and progress?

Q3 - What myths and rites reflect the current beliefs and ideals of individuals, groups and communities in western urban societies that are rapidly changing?

Q4 - What prerequisite conditions are necessary if ancient and modern myths and ritual are to assume a significant role in the foundation of new cities and the conduct of urban affairs?

Social anthropologists broadly agree that there is more ritualisation of social relationships in traditional societies compared with modern, industrialised societies. Many reasons have been given for this difference. Gluckman (1962), for example, examines the transformation of social roles and functions stemming from feudalism. He synthesizes many contributions on this subject to argue that the gradual yet steady shift from "multiplex" and "diffuse" social relations (defined by the multiplicity of social roles of an individual in a traditional society) to monodimensional social relations in modern contemporary societies, has been coupled with the spatial and temporal segmentation and specialization of social roles and functions. This change illustrates that an

integrative, holistic world-view common in traditional societies has been replaced by a segregated and segmented one in contemporary societies. Consequently the "rational" has been distinguished from the "irrational" and ethical values, moral beliefs and judments have become demarcated from the social organisation of daily affairs.

The explicit segmentation and segregation of many constituents of daily life in modern urban societies is for instrumental not moral purposes. Given the fact that social, spatial and temporal distinctions are more formalised in these societies compared with traditional ones, there is less need to use ritual for symbolic differentiation in contemporary urban affairs.

The above-mentioned differences between traditional and contemporary societies are the result of the conceptual, material, legal, and political reordering of our world which began many centuries ago (Eliade, 1959). It can be traced back to the early history of Christianity and the role of institutionalized religion. From the third century A.D. the clergy of the Church deprecated ancient myths and rites handed down by the Greeks and Romans. The clergy argued that only the Christian doctrine was True, whereas any other interpretations were pagan and false; consequently they were prohibited. Nonetheless, the Church ignored the wealth of myth and ritual transmitted through the ages that Christianity had already adopted, including the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, the legends of Christmas and Epiphany, and Satan who personified evil and hell. This example serves to show that authentic myth and ritual which had evolved since the dawn of human civilisation where explicitly challenged by an elite who intended to impose their beliefs and ideals based on intellectual and professional interpretations. This kind of intervention has recurred thoughout human civilisations, and it has not been restricted to institutionalized religion. It has also had a significant impact on many constituents of human life including the siting, foundation, layout and use of cities, their urban quarters and the dwellings of the inhabitants.

Traditionally the siting, layout and construction of cities and buildings resulted from the unselfconscious ordering of (what is commonly termed today) rational and irrational parameters. The case of China summarized above illustrates this approach. In contrast, contemporary cities and their buildings result from explicit intentions formulated by administrators, politicians and corporate clients, as the example of Canberra shows. Hence the ancient city was governed by complex rules and conventions - including rites and prescriptions - that were widely shared and understood by the indigenous population. Both the implicit conceptual parameters and the human-made environment evolve incrementally over time. However, when there are more abrupt societal changes stemming from the unintended consequences of rapid technological innovation, the diversification of construction materials and the specialization of social functions and roles, these incremental adaptive changes

were replaced by rapid and decisive developments. Consequently, today the time taken to accomplish the task of erecting a building has been attributed an intrinsic cultural value, whereas traditionally this task was temporally defined by prescriptions in almanacs. Today, in western societies, these and other tasks are measured econometrically by the number of people hours, whereas in countries like Hong-Kong and Taiwan they are still prescribed by eternal time. This distinction illustrates the supremacy of an instrumental and rational approach in the western world, which has become the rationale for recent developments in many academic, scientific and political circles.

Some contemporary economists, statisticians and systems analysts claim that quantitative instruments can be applied to evaluate qualitative values as if the latter are analogous to quantifiable material objects. When this approach cannot be applied, as in the case of myth and ritual, the latter are classified as irrational and then they are discredited. For many they then become obsolete. Consequently, beliefs and ideals that reflected longstanding preoccupations about the origins of the universe, the development of the cosmos, and the status of homo sapiens in relation to all other biological organisms have been relegated to backstage and/or overriden by more recent preoccupations. These concern the nature of progress defined precisely in terms of material wealth, economic growth and technological innovations. Such preoccupations have been coupled with scientific discourse about the genetic and biological determinants of human life and society. This discourse does not include human beliefs, ideals and values. Rather, the innate struggle with other humans and groups to use resources at the expense of all other species has been used frequently by politicians and economists to advocate principles of laissez-faire and market economies. In essence, individuals no longer have ideals and beliefs about the universe and the cosmos, because they have become fully preoccupied in themselves.

The preceding overview suggests that without communal bonds, and devoid of the opportunity to participate in the foundation and construction of cities, too many citizens today are excluded from urban life. Yet isn't this the antithesis of the role of citizens and the purpose of the polis ?

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented and illustrated some generalized interpretations of myth and ritual and some particular examples in relation to the siting, layout and use of cities in several civilisations throughout history. It has been argued that myth and ritual should be studied in order to understand the multidimensional nature of the city. The paper then showed that although myth and ritual are omnipresent, they have acquired different idioms in contemporary

urban societies compared with ancient ones. The reasons for these di
are numerous. In this paper attention has only been given to the suj
of authentic myth and ritual by institutionalized religious doctrine
political use of ceremony at the expense of citizen participatioi
foundation and use of cities, and by the replacement of an integrative
world-view (common in traditional societies) by the increasing segment;
specialization of many characteristics of contemporary urban life.

In ancient Chinese, Greek and Roman civilisations the c
considered as the privileged locus for public debate on the relationships
the cosmos and human society. Collectively, beliefs, ideals an
behaviour ensured a harmony between the good will of the universal or
the well-being of the citizens of the city. In essence, myth and ritual
just the means of expressing and communicating self-, soci, place-
identities but also the guarantee for ontological security.

Certain types of ritual that are performed in traditional societi
magical performance and formal religious cults) may not seem compatil
the beliefs and ideals of many individuals and groups that are at
contemporary urban societies. Yet, although the threats of drought, l
warfare have not been fully controlled by scientific or technological
today rituals are not commonly practised to deal with anxieties abot
threats. Nonetheless, the orgins of humanity, the development of
civilisations from primal parentage, and the conceptual foundations of
societies and their settlements have been and still are metaphysical qui
For many, these questions have not been answered satisfactorily
contributions of scientific enquiry, which often refute or deny the pertin
ethical and moral orders. The dilemma of much current debate abou
societies is that it does not account'for the ambiguity between the "ration
the "nonrational" interpretations of human civilisation. Such dualistic of
thinking are outmoded. Until they are replaced by an integrative hi:
perspective, the layers of contextual meaning attributed to the city will c
partially understood.

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