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**THE MEANING OF DEATH:
SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO ANALYSIS OF SYNCRETIC PROCESSES
IN THE CULT OF SANTA MUERTE**

1. INTRODUCTION.

1.1. Among the multitude of phenomena covered by anthropology and religious studies, the synthetic processes are of the sort that calls for a semiotic analysis by its very nature. It is hard to imagine how to interpret and model phenomena such as image overlap of figures from different cultures, reciprocal translation of ritual elements into belief systems or a change in the interpretation of an established symbol under a different religious system without using at least the very basic theoretical tools developed by semioticians.

1.2. In the following part I would like to share a few semiotic-inspired thoughts concerning the observations I made during my fieldwork in Mexico and Guatemala conducted in 2007 and 2008. One of the projects that was carried out concerned a seriously under-researched urban cult of Santa Muerte (Saint Death) – a folk saint presented as a hooded skeleton holding a scythe. The aim of this paper is to indicate such potential areas of interest for anthropology and religious studies where semiotic approach might contribute to a better understanding and a clearer display of the investigated phenomena. It is by no means an exhaustive study of the issue but only a starting point for further comprehensive and interdisciplinary investigations.

1.3. The cult of Santa Muerte gains popularity not only in Mexico, but also in the neighboring countries of Guatemala, Salvador and the U.S.A. Apart from the extensive coverage by the popular press and a wide selection of publications for the devotees, for many years the cult has been overlooked by most anthropologist. Among the important scholarly studies on the cult, there is only a book written by Perdigón Castañeda (2008), a photo catalogue with comments by Adeath and Kristensen (2007), articles by Flores Martos (2007) and Malvido (2005), and a couple of unpublished dissertations and theses, with a monograph by Fragoso Lugo (2007).

1.4. Saint Death is one of the informal Mexican folk Saints. In its most popular version, the cult of Santa Muerte is but one of the forms of typical Mexican folk Catholicism. The Catholic patterns such as crossing oneself, saying rosaries, novena prayers and Mexican Birthday Songs dominate the

paradigms of communication with Saint Death. Adoration of the image of Saint Death as well as the act of making apple, candy or tobacco offerings on the altar, is an essential element of the cultic practice. There is also a number of urban curers having Santa Muerte as their patron saint. In comparison to the orthodox Catholic customs, the cult's rituals and prayers are usually performed to express a demand or a wish and often gravitate toward magical practices.

1.5. According to Mexican historians engaged in investigating the origins of the Saint Death image, the representation of a scythe-carrying skeleton as an object of adoration in Mexico and Guatemala is to be traced back to the skeletal figures such as Justo Juez, or Presagiadora, patrons of the 17th and 18th century Buena Muerte religious associations (*cofradías*) (Malvido 2005: Perdigón Castañeda 2008). Even more evident is the influence of the Guatemalan cult of skeletal folk saint San Pascual originating in the 17th century (Navarrette 1982). Nevertheless, the oldest documented signs of existence of the Santa Muerte belief system in its proper form, related to the skeletal figure of, at least grammatically, feminine gender, and containing a set of appropriate rituals, symbolism and iconography trace back merely to the 1940s.

1.6. For a couple of decades the cult was performed individually or in small groups on a rather limited scale and went under the radar of public attention. In the 1990s, the cult started to rapidly develop in major urban areas, mostly in the capital. At the same time, Santa Muerte appeared for the first time in a public discussion. An altar of Saint Death found during a police investigation in the house of Daniel Arizmendi López, a famous kidnapper and leader of an organized criminal group, made the folk saint an attractive subject for the popular press. The press discourse of the time declared Santa Muerte a patron saint of the criminal underworld. Journalists from *La Crónica* and *La Prensa*, along with a number of popular novelists, excelled in sensational stories on the allegedly satanic and perverse cult of death and human sacrifice. In 2001, Enriqueta Romero Romero established the first street altar of Saint Death opened for public view, located in the Tepito district of Mexico City. Monthly rosaries dedicated to Santa Muerte have been performed and pilgrimages from various parts of Mexico have begun to arrive ever since. Dozens of similar altars and shrines have emerged in various districts of the city and throughout the country. The newspapers like *La Jornada* and *El País* have made an effort to present the cult in an unbiased way. It has been noticed that the cult gains popularity particularly among the lower strata of society: the hostesses, small tradesmen or workmen.

2. THE VIRGIN DEATH.

2.1. The ritual, the iconography and the belief system associated with the Santa Muerte figure borrow from most diverse sources and the most immediately recognizable one is the Christian language of representations and symbolism. As Flores Martos (2007) rightly points out, despite the common opinion the image of Santa Muerte has much more in common with the Virgin of Guadalupe than with Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlantecihuatl, the pre-Hispanic Aztec gods of death. On the visual level, the resemblance between Santa Muerte and the Virgin of Guadalupe becomes clear in the depictions of

the former with a halo and dressed in a tunic. A splendid example of how these two images overlap is the representation of Santa Muerte reproducing, in the form known as *piadosa*, the classic composition of Pietà, on which the Saint Death holds a human corpse and assumes the pose of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus Christ. On the lexical level the isomorphism between these two figures is perceptible, for instance, in the frequent use of a phrase „cover us with your saint cloak“ during the rosary prayers at the Tepito altar addressed to Santa Muerte. The phrase is characteristic of the prayers dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Similarly, one of the most frequently used epithets describing the skeletal saint, „our Mother“, is also characteristic of the Virgin Mary (particularly the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican context). Both figures are associated with lunar symbolism. Although it does not constitute a common feature of the cult, there are instances of recoding these visual and lexical identifications directly to the belief system, so that Santa Muerte is sometimes believed to be identical with the Virgin of Guadalupe.

2.2. The abovementioned examples of multilevel syncretic overlap bear a strong resemblance to the patterns of “contamination”, as described by Boris Uspienski in his comprehensive study of syncretic processes in the cult of Saint Nicolaus in Ruthenia (Uspienski 1985). Thus we might assume, that there are features of syncretic overlap which appear regardless of a particular cultural context.

2.3. It is not uncommon to directly associate Santa Muerte with other folk saints within the realm of the Mexican folk Catholicism. She is occasionally held as identical with San Pascual, as the wife of Jesús Malverde, or as Niño Fidencio’s helper. The Mexican spiritualist tradition, closely related to folk healing practices and popular esoteric in the urban context, also remains in a circle of mutual influence with the cult of Saint Death. The most popular spiritualist current in Mexico – Marian Trinitarian Spiritualism – has developed an eclectic hierarchy of spiritual beings where *Hermana Blanca*, identified with Santa Muerte, holds a prominent position. Saint Death is identified with Yemayá in the area of the Veracruz port as the White Flower of the Universe (*Flor Blanca del Mundo*). Yemayá is one of the saints (*orishas*) of Santería – an Afro-Christian religious system originating from Cuba. In her incarnation as the White Flower of the Universe, Santa Muerte is depicted as a well-shaped, beautiful woman. The emphasis is put on her motherly, feminine aspects. A Yemayá statuette is also to be found on Saint Death’s street altar of Tepito (Mexico City). The street at which the altar stands is marked with pictograms characteristic to Santería.

2.4. Santa Muerte has many names. Among the most common ones are: the Saint of Saints (*la Santísima*), the White Girl (*Niña Blanca*), and the Sister of Light (*Hermana de Luz*). She is often tenderly called one of a variety of diminutives such as the Skinny One (*Flaquita*).

2.5. The astonishing effortlessness with which the Santa Muerte cult absorbs countless elements of heterogenous visual codes, ritual grammar and belief systems is a result of many factors.

2.5.1. First of all, from the colonial times on, the religious panorama of Mexico has been shaped by the interaction of distinct belief systems and religious practices of various origins: indigenous, Christian and Afro-Christian.

2.5.2. Secondly, the informal practices associated with Mexican folk Catholicism and the individual character of curers' healing performance result in a somewhat latitudinal approach towards interpretations of the Santa Muerte image.

2.5.3. What is more, despite ongoing attempts to unite the devotees of Saint Death, there is no single acclaimed institution gathering the cult members. As a result, there is no formal canon of laws or a precise liturgical scheme that would limit the variety of cult practices.

2.5.4. Additionally, human remains in Mesoamerican cultures had different symbolic meaning and had been inscribed to a system of beliefs and values separate from that of the European context. Even in Europe, a skeleton image generates distinct meanings, connotations and preferred interpretations. Think *danse macabre* of Middle Ages and Baroque, *Totenkopf* - an SS uniform badge, or CD covers of numerous heavy metal music groups, to bring only a few random examples. The image of a human skeleton is loaded with different meanings in different cultural contexts but at the same time its various representations hold notable resemblance and it is so because they are modeled after a universal anatomic phenomenon. Thus, this striking and easily recognizable image stimulates the creation of links between distinct systems of meaning.

2.5.5. Another factor that influences the „semiotic voracity“ of the Saint Death cult is its growing popularity in a modern (or post-modern, if you prefer) consumer society drowning in a flood of multimedia information. On one hand, it provides an easy (and superficial) access to the most diverse and exotic spiritual traditions and visual conventions associated with a skeletal image. On the other hand, the contemporary globalized culture bears a tendency toward transformation of each and every aspect of human life into a product which might be selected and optionally combined with other products in a custom way, similarly to a shopping mall merchandise. This feature is linked to the emergence of the so called „shopping-mall self“ of the members of a consumer society and manifests itself through an extraordinary commercialization of the Santa Muerte cult and a flood of products designed and made especially for the devotees.

3. DEATH AS A PRODUCT.

3.1. One could learn a lot about the commercial aspect of the cult through glossy magazines for Saint Death devotees. A glossy magazine has its own characteristic design. Regardless of the subject, e.g. fashion, music, cars or folk saints, its content is segmented and syntagmated according to the fixed rules of the logic of commerce and determinants of a particular magazine genre. The magazine's subject, regardless of its individual character, is inevitably transformed into a commercial product.

3.2. The most popular magazine for the devotees of Saint Death is *Devoción a la Santa Muerte*, issued by Mina Editores. Colorful covers of the magazine always present a Santa Muerte statuette in one of its countless varieties. Garish headlines like „New“, „Extra“, and „Gratis!!!“ – a standard in yellow

press, catch the eye of a passer-by. Also, there is usually a bonus such as a calendar, a poster or a paper figure of Santa Muerte included in the issue. The content includes photos of altars, letters from the readers to the editorial, ritual formulas (or should we say recipes?), explanations of the symbolic meaning of particular iconographical details and, of course, advertisements. The latter may help the researcher determine the magazine's target reader as well as the spiritual context in which the commercial aspects of the White Girl cult are placed. Thus, we come across advertisements where urban curers offer services like energetic cleansing (*limpias energéticas*), Tarot reading, magic practices, protecting against negative influences, or helping in the matters of health, love, money and other personal problems. Placed beside them are advertisements of horoscope hotlines, fortune-telling chat rooms offering Tarot, Viking Runes and numerology reading, as well as Feng Shui accessories and tutorials. Products associated with Santa Muerte, such as DVDs with ritual instructions are combined with other merchandise, like candles, in bonus packs. There are also examples of other magazines promoting themselves in *Devoción...*, such as *Mundo esotérico* whose advertisements emphasize the affinity of Saint Death commercial image with the popular, eclectic esoteric pertaining to the currents of the New Age in a broad sense. A persistent emphasis on the alleged ancient origins of the spiritual tradition on sale – one of the characteristic features of the commercial esoteric – is manifested in the *Devoción...* magazine through cyclic articles on death cult in the pre-Hispanic Mexico.

3.3. The logic of commerce requires constant shifts in packaging of the same product, and the new, exotic labels are most welcome. In this aspect of the Santa Muerte cult, the freely adopted elements of diverse ritual and mythical languages become semantically reduced, recoded and uniformized in order to become a recognizable, ready-made, user-friendly product easily combined with the rest of available merchandise. The esoteric hybrid of Santa Muerte Tarot Cards might serve as an excellent example. Another symptom of the same process is the enormous and continually increasing range of mass-produced accessories exploiting Saint Death's image: statuettes, pendants, necklaces, t-shirts, even mobile phone wallpapers. This impetuous multiplication of forms and ritual-mythical multilingualism driven by the logic of commerce obviously impacts the language of representations, ritual grammar and mythology of the popular Saint Death cult.

3.4. Initially, the folk-Catholicism-influenced cult activities were performed on a modest altar, which in many cases consisted only of a small piece of paper with Santa Muerte's likeness and a few customary offerings. At present, the ritual is becoming increasingly extended and elaborated, relying on a multitude of purchasable accessories: statuettes, candles, lotions or powders adjusted to a specific ritual. The structure of the altar has also changed. As a rule, the altars made by urban curers and numerous devotees are composed of a multitude of various representations of Saint Death. On a mythological stratum the reception of Santa Muerte image is also changing. There is, for instance, an emphasis on the alleged pre-Hispanic roots of the cult, along with its supposed inter-religious universality, a feature which in earlier times, if appearing at all, had never been of much importance.

4. LIFE STORY OF A DEATH DEVOTEE.

4.1. Boris Uspieski, in his description of the process of construction of a historical text by a historian and the cases of constituting an involuntary narrative of a dream sequence prior to awakening, introduced a concept of semantic dominant (Uspieski 1998). It is a factor which inculcates an order in the initial chaos of a certain text, enables its segmentation and establishing the syntagmatic relations, so that it becomes a meaningful entirety.

4.2. In the case of a historical text, the phenomena described in diverse sources (e.g. memoirs, chronicles) are separated from or linked with each other from the perspective of a certain event following them in a cause-effect relation. In the case of a dream, Uspieski gives an example of a door slam that appears in a dream as a gunshot arranging the dream's content into a defined narrative sequence culminating with the gunshot. The usefulness of the semantic dominant concept in the field of anthropology and religious studies applies, among others, to a life story analysis.

4.3. Life story, a narrative of an informant that concerns his own life, constitutes a very useful text for anthropologists, folklorists and historians of religion to work on. Life story of a committed believer could be considered in categories of a semiosis of an autobiographical text influenced by a certain myth. According to Uspieski, a myth might be understood as an ontologically primal text which determines the importance of occurring events. However, the ontological primacy of a mythical text is not necessarily corresponding with situating the events described by the text in the past. Beside the cosmogonic myths, where the primordial events have determined the existing order of things, we also come across other myths, like those referring to a cyclic sequence of events where the issue of the beginning and a chronological succession is lost in a maze of parallel universes (e.g. the Puranic myths of Hinduism), or eschatological myths determining the importance of occurring circumstances mostly from the perspective of the anticipated final events (e.g. the Last Judgment).

4.4. *Confessions* of Saint Augustine are a model example of an autobiographical text semiosis, where the function of semantic dominant is carried out by the God figure. The sequence of events that constitute a meaningful whole out of Saint Augustine's life is seen as determined by God's will, described as headed for a fixed destination and full of supernatural interventions. The author of *Confessions* interprets particular events as signs of warning, confirmation, etc. A semantic code which determines the reading and composition of a set of events that constitute the autobiographical text is established. Without the concept of God, the very same events could be simply overlooked or interpreted as random and meaningless. The emphasis laid by the narrator on certain facts as the carriers of meaning or as the elements determining other events (the segmentation and syntagmatisation) is *a priori* determined by his world view. Thus a world view becomes a tautologic system. A feedback is constituted between justification of a world view based on suggestive life events and a determined selection and interpretation of these elements that results from the fixed world view.

4.5. In the case of Santa Muerte cult, the critical point of a life story narration is usually the first experience of Saint Death's power, presence or intervention. It sometimes appears as an initiation

illness, but mostly in the form of fulfillment of a request directed to the White Girl. Recovering after a severe illness or a granted wish trigger an overall semiosis of the text of events. The devotee starts to see his/her own life as a sequence of meaningful events. A success is ascribed to Santa Muerte's intervention, a failure becomes a result of one's own negligence, sin and omission of the divine signals. Petty events become important, accidental dropping of a watch might be read as a clear signal that the time of a visit is over. The traumatic experiences intensify the tendency toward semiosis of the preceding events and eventually towards reading them as supernatural signs meant to warn the devotee of the approaching catastrophe.

4.6. For an anthropologist, application of the concept of the semantic dominant to the analysis of a life story might serve as a complementary method. A thorough examination of the segmentation and sintagmatisation of autobiographical texts and placing them in a comparative perspective might shed some light on previously unrevealed features of a determined belief system, such as the implicit aspects of its symbolic patterns, hierarchy of values etc. On the other hand, this method gives an opportunity to highlight processes of internalization of a certain religious world view by individuals or determined social groups, a specific mode of adjusting a religion to given socio-cultural conditions.

5. SAINT OR DEATH?

5.1. One of the most striking features of the Saint Death image is its paradoxicality. The paradox is for the most part based on a contradiction between the Santa Muerte image reception among her devoted followers and the reception of her representations by the laymen. This dissonance might be figuratively expressed as a conflict between the noun and the adjective in the „Saint Death“ denomination.

5.2. The way of reacting to the sight of a human skeleton is certainly culturally coded and highly depends on the context. For instance, a small child, unaware of the provenance of human remains and its culturally determined meaning, is not likely to express fear and probably will not pay much attention to the remains or may even attempt to use them as a toy. Now, let us take an example from the other side of this process of semiosis - a skillful pathologist. Because of his work environment he is accustomed to the image of human remains to such an extent that when faced with a skeleton, he automatically exceeds the reception typical for his cultural community, so rather than panic, shrink or engage in an existential reflection, he is perfectly able to read the information contained in the image and concerning sex, age, and the death cause of a given individual. Regardless of these boundary cases, a dominant reception of human remains in Europe and postcolonial countries, such as Mexico, could hardly be described as positive. The most common connotations include the negatively valorized phenomenon of death, deftly avoided in our everyday reflections. Human skull and bones might also be popularly associated for instance with a warning sign, heavy metal subculture (quite often followed by an association with satanism), pirates and so on.

5.3. However, in the context of Mexico there are additional connotations which seem to somewhat diminish the negative emotional charge triggered by contact with the discussed image. The famous All Saint's Day fiesta traditionally abounds with depictions of human remains. Among other things, ready-made sugar skulls are sold almost everywhere and the custom of composing altars with offerings for the deceased quite often becomes an integration party for work colleagues or school children. Furthermore, one of the most widespread images of death in Mexican popular culture is that of Catrina, a skeleton wearing a Victorian dress, which is also an often sight among the All Saint's Day depictions. The Catrina motif appears in Mexican art since 19th century, employed by many of the famous national artists, such as José Guadalupe Posada, or Diego Rivera. Initially an image popular amidst the artistic-intellectual elites, Catrina quickly entered the popular imagery and appears in countless forms of souvenir figures, illustrations, printed designs etc. Another example is an image of a scythe-carrying skeleton called La Muerte, one of the figures in *lotería mexicana*, a very popular Mexican game for children. Considering human remains as one of the leitmotifs of the pre-Hispanic iconography that forms a part of the contemporary Mexican cultural heritage, one might say that the image of a skeleton constitutes a crucial element in the visual lexicon of Mexican culture as such.

5.4. Nevertheless, the reception of Santa Muerte image by her devoted followers generally opposes the popular reading of her depiction. In private theologies her role is that of an angel or a particularly powerful saint. The devotees often describe her as motherly, benevolent, beautiful, sweet, sometimes even joyful. The attitude of a believer towards the White Girl and a figure that represents her is altogether very personal. The devotees tend to focus on her folk saint features such as the alleged power of granting wishes, working miracles or protecting the followers. The existential-metaphysical questions associated with her function as the death often remain aside. If these questions are addressed at all, Santa Muerte is generally seen as a messenger of God, a distinguished being with a mission to guide the followers to the other side. According to many devotees, the decision of terminating someone's life is made by God himself, therefore he is the only one responsible for the fact of death.

5.5 The omnipresent paradox is particularly striking on the lexical level in phrases spoken by the devotees, such as: „Than I said to this man: in the name of the Saint Death – do not kill me!“, „Saint Death has saved my life“, or „Saint Death makes your life less bitter“.

5.6. Although the devotees normally describe the White Girl as kind and benevolent, it is said that she protects and grants all wishes of her zealous believers, regardless of the positive or negative character of their intentions. One might cast an evil spell just as well as the cure for it with the help of the very same saint. There is no doubt about Santa Muerte's vast popularity among drug dealers, prostitutes and kidnappers. Nevertheless it is important to note that this kind of paradoxicality constitutes one of the typical features of Mexican folk Catholicism. Evil spells could also be cast with the help of orthodox saints like the Virgin of Guadalupe or Saint Anthon. In order to attract numerous wealthy clients, the prostitutes might perform magical rituals dedicated to various saints, i.e. Saint Martin.

5.67 From the linguistic-semiotic point of view, we might consider poetry as a specific form of language, functioning, above all, as a generator of untypical, multidimensional meanings. In poetry, the paradox is one of the most moving, effective figures of speech, or stylistic means. Accordingly, a paradox might be understood as closely related to metaphor. The semantic surplus and openness, a capacity to produce new meanings and apprehensions characteristic of a metaphor, is carried out through an unconventional identification of two distinct phenomena. The power of a metaphor depends in some measure on the tension, initial semantic distance separating its elements. These are also the features of a paradox. Notwithstanding, the latter combines elements initially opposed. As a result it generates new meanings and apprehensions in a much more striking and indeterminate manner, creates the highest possible tension between the combined elements.

5.8. An encounter with a paradox might introduce semantic, and to some extent also epistemological derailment. A sudden case of reversal coding compels one to focus, forces to take a glance from a different angle, sometimes even to revise a considerable part of the given system. One of the sources of excellent, and well-known examples of a witty employment of this extraordinary power of paradox are the writings of Oscar Wilde.

5.9. The revision of a given system of meanings caused by an encounter with a paradox might be compared to discovering anew parts of one's own language. This kind of experience is known to people pertaining to the Western culture, who have recently learned Latin or Greek. New meanings, and relationships emerge from our every-day vocabulary and what previously has been recognized as familiar and common, suddenly becomes unusual, profound, inspiring.

5.10. In the particular case of religious phenomena such reversal coding and a change in the connotation system, they are parts of the initiation procedure, a tool that enables distinguishing the initiated from the uninitiated, the esoteric from egoteric. The unconventional reading of a symbolic text strengthens the sense of elitism among the devotees and unites them in opposition to the laymen.

5.11. In time, even the most powerful metaphor as well as its close relative, the paradox, is likely to become conventional and be turned into an idiomatic expression. As a result, we are dealing with an opposite process, which in turn might be compared to learning of a foreign language. We accustom ourselves to this formerly strange and obscure system and our confidence in the command of it increases gradually.

5.12. The Santa Muerte devotees accustom themselves to the initially striking image of their patron saint. They start to see through its somewhat repulsive surface. The scythe-carrying skeleton becomes a protecting, motherly saint, associated with family holidays and festivals and a great number of positive life experiences. Getting through to the cryptic meaning, the reversal decoding, becomes conventional.

5.13. On the lexical plane the process of accustoming is often expressed by conferring nicknames. As it has already been mentioned, the Santa Muerte devotees are using a lot of diminutives when referring to their patron, such as the Skinny One (*Flaquita*), the Little Saint (*Santita*), or the Cute Little Girl (*Niña Bonita*).

5.14. The abovementioned process is nevertheless dynamic and runs in cycles. The social reaction to the image of Saint Death makes it virtually impossible to completely forget about the common reception of it. As a result its paradoxal character is recalled again and means that the process of accustoming with the image has to be repeated.

5.15. Additionally, the paradox as a means of expression constitutes one of the distinctive features of the language of the Christian and Oriental mysticism. It emphasizes the supernatural quality, inexpressibility and omnipotence of the Absolute. Paradox also appears in a number of mythologies in order to present the original cosmic forces. The androgyne figure, a motif from European alchemy and Hindu mythology, among others, constitutes one of the finest examples of this issue (see Eliade 1965).

5.16. In his attempts to describe the basic emotions of a human being facing the sacrum, Rudolf Otto speaks of the paradoxical „mysterium tremendum et fascinans“. According to another pioneer of the phenomenology of religion, Gerardus van der Leeuw, paradoxicality is one of the main features of the power which constitutes a central concept of all belief systems.

5.17. It seems that in the case of Santa Muerte, the multidimensional paradoxicality of the image goes hand in hand with devotees' conviction of her exceptional power and efficiency in miracle working. On the other hand it enables the adjustment of the saint's image to personal and divergent world views and lifestyles of her followers.

Photographs:



Fig.1. A portable street altar in Mexico City.



Fig.2. Santa muerte as *piadosa*.



Fig.3. Customary offerings.



Fig.4. Yemayá at the Tepito altar.

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