THE POWER OF POWDER:
LIFE-FORCE AND MOTILITY IN CUBAN DIVINATION

Martin Holbraad
Along with ‘temtin’ and ‘toboo’, the Oceanian term ‘mana’ is one of the few words that have crossed over from the language of ethnographic report to the vocabulary of anthropology – and, partly by that virtue, it has become one of the general lexicon of Euro-American intellectual discourse (Bracken 2007). In this sense, the term has become something of a signifier-totality, whose role is to...
To have the power of aché as a diviner, one must be properly consecrated as a babalawo and this, most crucially, involves receiving and knowing how to use the consecrated equipment, charged with the power of aché. No powder no power, so to speak. Conversely, the secret knowledge required to prepare aché powders and use them for Ifá is possessed only by babalawos - a term they translate from Yoruba as 'father of secrets'. In other words, preparing and using these powders is within the power of babalawos exclusively - so 'no power no powder' also.

The Power of Powder

So, aché is excessive like mana: power and powder, abstract and concrete, concept and thing. But I would argue that this does not index an autonomy, as Levi-Strauss would have it. Nor, for that matter, are we faced with an ordinary ambiguity to be compared, for example, with the English concept of love, which can hardly be said to have a single meaning that incorporates filial and erotic senses. For, while babalawos certainly distinguish between the different senses in which they use the word 'aché'—no one is confused about the difference between power and powder—they also assume (and, if invited, explicitly draw) a clear logical connection between the two senses. To have the power of aché as a diviner, one must be properly consecrated as a babalawo and this, most crucially, involves receiving and knowing how to use the consecrated equipment, charged with the power of aché. No powder no power, so to speak. Conversely, the secret knowledge required to prepare aché powders and use them for Ifá is possessed only by babalawos - a term they translate from Yoruba as 'father of secrets' (Menéndez 1995: 51). In other words, preparing and using these powders is within the power of babalawos exclusively - so 'no power no powder' also.

It is worth being clear about the logical status of this mutual implication, since it goes to the heart of the 'anomalous' aché poses - the heart of the problem about concepts and things. For there are two ways of glossing this implication that make it appear quite unnatural, so to speak, though clearly 'natural' - or even 'irrational', as the old phrase has it (Spetter 1985). The first would be to gloss the implication in causal terms: no powder no power and vice versa, because each is a necessary causal condition for the other. The problem, then, would simply be one of showing why certain people believe - to use a hackneyed word - in such seemingly strange causal sequences. We can all understand how, say, gunpowder was a necessary condition for the power of the Conquistadors, and, conversely, the gunpowder's power was predicated on its Spanish makers' privileged knowledge of how to produce it. Why might Cuban diviners posit an analogous relationship between their power and their powder, given that no causal efficacy seems 'actually' to be involved?

The problem with this causal gloss is that it does violence to the ethnography. For, like all causal sequences, the circular one proposed here is cast in terms of logically contingent relations between discrete elements. On such a view, aché-powders and aché-power are first posited as logically independent from one another and then related 'externally' by what philosophers call 'physical' necessity. This hardly tallies with how their reaction to my suggestion that I might start divining with Jewish equipment, for them the notion of powerless powder, and of powerless power, is not just untenable as a matter of fact, but rather inconceivable as a matter of principle. A babalawo who hasn't been properly consecrated with aché powder just isn't a babalawo. And powder that hasn't been prepared properly by a babalawo—father of these secrets—just isn't aché. In other words, the relationship between power and powder is, philosophically speaking, 'internal': each is defined in terms of the other. This suggests an alternative gloss on the mutual imp-
ignores its irreducibly and power as an analytic implication, one effectively is that by treating the relationship between powder in Ifá—this analysis in terms of logical necessity is makes them mutually definable in this way. Why, in other words, do Danish diviners consider these two concepts mutually constitutive while we, presumably, do not?

Persuasive though it may seem—inasmuch as it reflects the internal relationship of power and powder in Ifá—this analysis in terms of logical necessity is just as inadequate to the ethnography as the causal account, though for opposite reasons. The problem here is that by treating the relationship between powder and power as an analytic implication, one effectively ignores its irreducible practical character. True, for a babalawo it is enough to contemplate what his power means to know that it requires consecration with odudu and not, as we insist on thinking in these terms, we can only articulate ache as a paradox, as Lévi-Strauss and others did.

The strategy of this paper is based on the idea that this negative analytical predication actually prescribes a positive methodology that may lead to an analytical resolution. If ache is to be taken as both what we call a concept and what we call a thing, then it follows that the logical status of powder has to be worked out, that is the point that this logical operation presupposes a practical one, it is only because ache/powder is actually efficacious that it can be used to produce babalawo 'with ache' (ie with power) who can consecrate individuals, provided they have been consecrated with powder, not because the meaning of powder logically implies its power (like 'thing' in the Ifa 'Head of State'), but because the powder itself gives them power. (And vice versa for powder). In other words, the difference between the relationship of power and powder and that described by an ordinary analytic statement is that while the latter states a conceptual identity, the former implies a real transference (of powder that gives power and of power that gives powder).

At this point my account of this dilemma will appear even more paradoxical, at least to those, of what I've done is consistent with the causal analysis that it distorts the logical implication that binds power and powder, only to reject the logical analysis on the grounds that it distorts the causal relationship. Which is it: logical or causal? But I would argue that this appearance of contradiction is a consequence of the Procureur's character of the analytical choices we seem to have at our disposal. Indeed, we may note here that the distinction between causal connection and logical identity, which renders ache/contradictory, is corollary to the distinction between things and concepts. It is precisely because ache does not fallasily into either of the latter categories that it does not lend itself to analysis in terms of either of the former relations. If ache/powder is both a concept and a thing, then it is not as if we could conceive of it as variable quantities which, as we have seen, they cannot be. If they were concepts, then their internal connection would be a purely deductive matter, whereas, as we have seen, it is not. So, properly speaking, ache is neither thing nor concept but rather a bit of both: an indeterminate thing and a concept that literally transfers itself. Clearly, for babalawo, as we insist on thinking in these terms, we can only articulate ache as a paradox, as Lévi-Strauss and others did.

On this hypothesis, which—as we have seen—is motivated by the ethnography, the task is to understand ache in its very excess. And the opportunity for doing so is there, in the ethnography of the things, itself, in powder. For, with the axiom of concept versus thing discarded, the ethnography of things like powder can no longer be assumed to be about 'interpreting' them in terms of the meanings the people we study 'attach' to them. Things may carry their own context within themselves, as Marilyn Strathern has put it, writing of other things (Strathern 1990). So the logical status of powder is that of analytical reversal, viewing relations as logically contradictory. It seems as if what I've done is constitute a problem deities and humans mutually constitute each other in the relationships that divination implies, one would be denying the very condition that leads clients to the diviners in the first place, namely that the deities are transcendent most of the time, so that the diviners' powers are necessary in order to dictate them into relation. In this sense, relation and transcendence are symmetrical in Ifa cosmology, so a choice of giving priority to one over the other must be false (cf. Harvey 1990). Therefore, the analytical questions remain: how might these concepts be related, other than by antimony?

Powder gives us the answer, and to see this we may pay attention to its role in divination. As we saw, powder gives the surface of the divining board, powder provides the backdrop upon which the deities 'write'. Reality, in other words, is 'written' on power. By this means, power (the 'concept') is literally constituted by the things to which it would otherwise be assumed simply to 'apply'. Its intension is modified by its extension, if you like, by what one might call a relation of 'hyper-metonymy' (imagine a crown that didn't just signify royalty, but actually constituted its—a 'magical' crown, then).

This suggests a logical reversal that goes to the heart of the strategy of this paper: the 'problem of transcendence.' The problem, which babalawos have the power to solve, amounts to the danger that Orula and babalawos in a sense will lose their power, as the transcendence, permanently separated from humans in the 'beyond'. Such a state of affairs would render all aspects of Ifa radically impossible, including not only divination, but also initiation, consecration, sacrifice, and magic, all of which are premised on the idea that deities and humans can enter into relations with each other. But the 'analytic' statement is that the crisis of the oracle, mortal asking the deities for divine favour, does not necessarily imply that Orula der to elicit them into relation. In this sense, relation and transcendence are symmetrical in Ifa cosmology, so a choice of giving priority to one over the other must be false (cf. Harvey 1990). Therefore, the analytical questions remain: how might these concepts be related, other than by antimony?

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... Relation and transcendence are symmetrical in Ifá cosmology, so a choice of giving priority to one over the other must be false. Therefore, the analytical question is how relation and transcendence might themselves be related, other than by antinomy. Powder gives us the answer, and to see this we may pay attention to its role in divination.

Anthropologists tend to describe the cosmologies as systems of classification. The assumption is that cosmologies are populated by different entities (gods, ancestors, spirits, and so on) that relate to one another in different ways (hierarchically, genealogically, temporally, or whatever). Cosmologies can be charted by placing these entities in relation to each other in conceptual space—or, indeed, on paper—according to their differences, characterising their relations in the spaces that are provided—notationally or graphically—between them. Now, try imagining a figure-ground reversal on such a chart, as in an Escher sketch. Cosmological elements now feature not as self-identical marks relating to each other externally in space (the ‘scheme’, the ‘paper’), but are rather extended across the spaces that previously divided them. What was assumed to be a scheme of entities, now appears as a field of relations, so that the differences that previously distinguished one cosmological element from another ‘extensively’ now become ‘intensive’ characteristics of those elements themselves, now conceived of as ‘self-differentiating’ relations. Showing that such a ‘plane of immanence’ (2007: 155) underlies pan-American notions of myth, spirits, and shamansm, Viveiros de Castro writes:

While Viveiros de Castro does not add the priority of motion over rest to his list, it is clear that such a logical reversal, which I have argued is necessary to make sense of the ‘intrinsic capacity’ of Ifá deities to move from transcendence to immanence, is confluent with his argument. Of course, a full discussion of these analogies and their possible breakdowns would involve far-reaching comparisons between Amerindian ‘animism’ and Afro-American ‘polytheism’—‘spirits’ versus ‘deities’, so to speak. Here, I shall only make use of the analogy with Viveiros de Castro’s argument on virtuality to make two points—one positive and one negative—that may help to sharpen my own argument on motility. Both points pertain to the question as to how Viveiros de Castro’s use of the concept of ‘intensive difference’ fairly in relation to the problem of deities’ transcendence which, as we have seen, áché has the power to solve.

Firstly, it will be noted that the point of analogy between the virtual and the motile lies precisely in the idea of potentiality, which is a common corollary of both (see also Holbraad 2008a, 2008b). As we have seen, if áché forces us to conceive of the ±ads of Ifá as motions, it also allows us to think of the ±ads as hav-
The potential to become immanent in divination, so as to enter into relations with the babalúaxon that invoke them. In this sense, being motions, odos are also 'potential relations'. Analogously, if for Viveiros de Castro spirits are virtual in the sense that they are 'self-differential', then they too should be construed as potential relations 'inasmuch as their self-difference amounts to the potential to be 'something other than themselves' (Levy-Bruhl 1926.76).

Indeed, more than just analogous, these two senses of 'potential relations' stand in a relationship of logical implication. For the odos' potential to enter into relations with humans is premises on what Viveiros de Castro calls 'self-difference'. Odos do not simply 'travel' from the beyond of mythical transcendence to the here and now of the living body, for their 'motivation' is not one of a self-identifiable entity. As we have seen, the capacity of odos to reveal themselves in divination implies a transformation, which in turn reflects the one Vivian and de Castro envisages for Amerindian spirits. As they conceived as 'paths' of Orula or as deities in their own right, the odos are 'posited' as characters that reside somewhere in the here and beyond as variable mythical guises, only to be 'substituted' during the divinatory séance, first as configurations of the palm-nuts and then as 'images' on the 'ashé' powder. In other words, odos can relate to 'others' just because they can 'other' themselves, inasmuch as their motion from transcendence to immanence is premised on their capacity to 'self-differentiate'.

The upshot of this is that the motion of the odos as 'they come out' on the divining board should not be conceived in spatial terms at all, but rather in ontological ones. Ashé, then, is the space in which ontological transformations happen, and its role in the divining board as a 'register' (regis) is both 'ontological' and through and through. In the motile universe of the iṣẹ divination board, the very act of registration on the surface of the divining board—as the babalúaxon fingers move through the powder to reveal the ashé—is not an ex post facto representation of an already pertaining state of affairs, but rather an act of ontological transformation in its own right, for it is in this act that the odos is 'substituted' as an immanent presence in the séance.

Indeed such an analysis of ashé as the premise/catalyst of transformation can arguably be generalised in iṣẹ, beyond the immediate context of divination. Goldman's (1996) paradoxical appeal to the notion of 'esence' (e.g. "both general and individual") is perhaps unnecessary. Building on my earlier argument about ashé in divination, an alternative approach would posit odos not as diversified essence, but as the premise of diversification itself. Orisha 'have ashé' precisely inasmuch as they are able, qua motions, rather than entities or relations, to 'become' the various elements of the world: stones, plants, animals, humans... These, in turn, 'belong' to the orishas just in the sense that they are there; they are varied outcomes of the orishas' motile becoming, and hence 'have ashé' also.

This, arguably, is the significance of the ritual requirement in iṣẹ (and Santería) that all consecrated items be physically 'loaded' with ashé-powders. This includes not only babalúaxon Orula deity and the divinatory images that go with it (see above) but, also, all the other deities practitioners receive as 'loaded' idols at different stages of their initiatory career (Holbraad 2008a), as well as the initiates themselves, who are 'marked' with ashé-powders at various parts of their body during initiation. Just as the powder babalúaxon use on their divining boards is powerful as a surface on which Orula's ashes can come 'out', so consecrated idols and initiates are powerful ('have ashé') as conduits that render the presence of the relevant orishas immanent, particularly as and when this is required in ritual. In light of our earlier analysis of the role of powder as the pervious 'ground' on which deities manifest as immanent 'figures', it makes sense that the powder should also be the 'active ingredient', so to speak, of consecration. Admittedly, its role as motile ground here is—literally—not as graphic. Powder is not itself marked, but rather is either 'loaded' in noble portions into secret cavities of the idol-deities, or used to 'mark' the bodies of neophytes. One is tempted to say that the power of these pinches of ashé-powder is precisely metonymy, though only on the proviso that this is a 'hyper-metonymy' in a strict and pertinent sense (see also above). Unlike ordinary metonymy in which a part comes to stand, symbolically, for the whole (e.g. Crown for King), the pinches of powder that are used in consecration do not merely 'stand for' the whole from which they are 'appropriated', but rather 'constitute' as wholes in their own right. This follows from a second, 'prosaic', property of powder. As a pure multiplicity of particles, powder is not only pervasive, as we saw, but also 'partible': even pinches of powder constitute wholes, inasmuch as no qualitative difference (other than quantity) distinguishes them from each other once they are consecrated (cf. Reed 2007). So even in consecration powder does not actually display motility as it does in divination, it does retain literal the property (viz. perviousness) that would allow the motion to be rendered 'actuated', and thus is powerful in the same sense—all, indeed, of principle.

Be that as it may, it is clear that in consecration powder is power in the same sense as it is in divination; namely, as a pivot for the ontological transformation of the orishas from a state of transcendence in the 'beyond' to a state of immanence in the consecrated items. This brings us back to a second point of comparison with Viveiros de Castro's notion of 'self-difference'. For it should be noted, that the kind of ontological transformation that is at stake in iṣẹ is in significant ways different from the ones Viveiros de Castro had in mind in the Amerindian context. One could visualise the contrast in terms of a spatial metaphor of 'horizontal' versus 'vertical' transformations (Hugh-Jones 1996, Pedersen 2001). Viewed in this way, Viveiros de Castro's account of spirits is 'horizontal' inasmuch as it is essentially aneristic. Spirits are conceived as endlessly multiplying, like 'forests of mirrors', and their multiplicity is irreducibly qualitative inasmuch as it implies 'modulations' of form (2007: 163) - of 'orontic forms', we might say, mutating from species to species, from spirit to human, microcosm to macrocosm. As opposed to iṣẹ, on the other hand, in accordance with its imperial associations in West Africa (see Bascom 1991, Peel 2003), presents the question of deities' potential for transformation in irreducibly vertical or, as practitioners also put it, 'hierarchical' terms. What I have in mind here is not primarily the much debated ranking of iṣẹ deities in the forms of a systematic 'pyramid', whose historical evolution, as David Brown has argued convincingly, is heavily bound up with Christian and other 'theologising' influences both in Africa and in Cuba (Holbraad 2008b). The point here, rather, is that these deities’ verticality is the cosmological premise upon which such rankings are conceived, namely the idea that deities can be characterised by their degree of ‘distance’ from the human world. Brown writes:

If the orishas are as multiple as Americanian spirits, each of their ‘paths’ taking a different ontic form, their multiplicity is nevertheless ‘vertically’ distributed. They differ from the Americanian paradigm in that their ontic transformations also imply shifts in what one might call ontological status, since their multiple becoming is indexed hierarchically as a ‘continuum’ of relatively proximate and relatively distant manifestations. Indeed, the distinction between shifts of ontic form and of ontological status allows us to conceptualise the difference between (horizontal) shamanism and divination as the respective modes of divine disclosure in Azarquia and in iṣẹ. The shamanic ability to call spirits, explains Viveiros de Castro, is a matter of Orula’s where non-shamanic Isu is ‘partially material’ in the forest, for example, shamans see spirits (Viveiros de Castro 2007: 159-160). This makes sense, since the problem that spirits present to humans is that they are not always clearly ‘there’ and ‘here’. By contrast, in Amerindian contexts the problem of transcendence (see also Holbraad 2004, Holbraad and Willerslev 2007). True, such a notion of iṣẹ is, in this respect, an improvement on the Melanesian notion of divination is seen. This follows

[Santería cosmology involves a kind of monism that seems to support the claim that it diversifies within various modalities that constitute all that exist or can exist in the universe. This essence, which is strictly immaterial to the Melanesian notion of essence [...], is referred to in Candomblé as ashé. The diversification of ashé is initially manifested in the divinities themselves, the Orishas, since each of them incarnates a specific modality of the general essence. In turn, each of these Orishas constitutes a whole in its own right. This follows from a second, prosaic, property of powder. As a pure multiplicity of particles, powder is not only pervasive, as we saw, but also ‘partible’: even pinches of powder constitute wholes, inasmuch as no qualitative difference (other than quantity) distinguishes them from each other once they are consecrated (cf. Reed 2007). So even in consecration powder does not actually display motility as it does in divination, it does retain literal the property (viz. perviousness) that would allow the motion to be rendered ‘actuated’, and thus is powerful in the same sense—all, indeed, of principle.

(2003: 127, references omitted).]
thless, the distance admitted by the "potential" relations of the virtual is not of a kind that allows us fully to make sense of deities' transcendence. A matter of ontic form, rather than ontological status, the potentiality of virtual spirits is that of transforming themselves horizontally into what they are not ("becoming-other"), whereas the vertical axis of transcendence to immanence implies transformations that are also constituted as shifts between "orders of otherness" ("becoming-other/kinds-of-other"); if you like.

The idea of motility, I argue, is able to capture these differences between difference. By distributing virtual differences among a motile motion, with its particular capacity to "self-scale" in terms of the formal relations of "distance" and "proximity" (which, as we have seen, the notion of direction implies), we effectively add a second dimension to the concept of "becoming-itself." Perhaps, the clearest way to express this is in terms of the structuralist distinction between "syntagmatic" and "paradigmatic" relations. Virtual continua relate differences paradigmatically. Motile ones relate differences syntagmatically. Motile ones relate than syntagmatically, which is to say that they relate them ordinally, in sequences that provide them direction in terms of asymmetrical (positional) relations of "before" and "after." So, no less "intensive" than their virtual counterparts, motile differences are nevertheless more sophisticated from a logical point of view, in that they are able to render two dimensions of difference—paradigmatic "form" and syntagmatic "status" (or "position")—at once. Both dimensions are needed in order to articulate the problem of transcendence, which, as we have seen, is so central to Ifá cosmology. Motile deities' transformations allow them to enter into relations with humans. And the fact that these transformations scale themselves as changes of ontological status shows that deity-human relations are not given as cosmological fait accompli, but rather have to be accomplished by eliciting the deities from the relative ontological distance of transcendence to the relative proximity of immanence.

Conclusion: Motile Things Are Motile Concepts

So, the answer to the question as to why adhé/powder is power is that, in Ifá, powder provides the condition under which deities—de-human, mythic, of the "beyond"—can manifest themselves immanently and, thus, enter into relations with the everyday world of the living. If deities' moves to immanence are here not functions of their own doing, then adhé/powder is an essential ingredient for eliciting such moves, since it allows them to be articulated as such—articulated as concepts, transformed, in other words, on the surface of the divining board as a series of intensive motions (inward displacements) of powder that reveal the "figures" of Orúkú ada. By way of conclusion, however, we may note that the analytical distinction draws our attention go beyond the immediate concern with adhé to the broader question that motivated it, namely the relationship between concepts and things. To see this, consider the strategy of the argument itself. As a response to earlier failures to account for mana's systematic transgressions of the ontological distinction between concepts and things, my suggestion from the outset was that an ethnographic analysis of the "excess" of adhé might provide a conceptual frame within which such transgressions may no longer register as logical absurdities. Driven ethnographically by the logical connection practitioners of Ifá draw between powder and powder, I proposed to experiment with the idea that the conceptual properties of adhé (as power) could be delineated with reference to its concrete characteristics (as powder)—thus, methodologically, revoking the axiomatic distinction between concepts and things. This line of inquiry led to the analytics of motility which, as we saw, renders sensible the otherwise absurd-sounding claim that powder is indeed power and vice versa. One may want to wonder at the circularity of this argument. After all, if the ethnographic analysis of adhé had to begin from the stipulation that concepts things may be identical, then how can it also purport to show it? The circularity involved, however, is arguably virtuous. Recoding the ontological distinction between concepts and things in order to show that the concept of power is identical to powder would be viciously circular if all it had produced were a confirmation of its own premise. However, the approach has offered more than that. Proceeding from a stipulative identification of concepts with things, it has yielded the analytics of motility. The circle is virtuous precisely because motility does not merely presuppose a collapse of the concept/thing divide but, rather, provides its logical justification. So, if the initial stipulation allowed us, like Wittgenstein's ladder, to get to the concept of motility, then that concept in turn allows us to discard the ladder of mere stipulation, and accept a novel logical framework that denies the axiomatic dichotomy of concepts versus things.

For the conclusion can only be this. If the motility of powder dissolves the problem of transcendence versus immanence for babalawos, then motility also dissolves the problem of concept versus thing for us. And this, because the latter problem is just an instance of the former. After all, the notion of transcendence is just a way of expressing the very idea of ontological separation. And ontological separation is what a non-motile logic posits at the hiatus that is supposed to divide concepts from things. Motility, on the other hand, turns the idea on its head that ontological differences do not amount to separations at all, but rather to intensive and "self-scaling" transformations. Thus, just like a motile logical universe powder can ē power, deities can ē marks on the divining board, and so forth, so concepts and things can also ē each other. All it takes is to stop thinking of concepts and things as self-identical entities, and start imagining them as self-differential motions.

1 Such terms of relation are effective inasmuch they are the closest modern Euro-Americans come to transgressing their own axioms—asking, say, a Foucauldian about 'power' is comfortably comparable to asking a Polynesian about mana. However, the notion that such terms, in themselves, may also be theoretically illuminating is misleading, since they do not offer a way to connect difficult concepts with a single explanation (Vivieros de Castro 1999a: 79; see also Keesing 1994).

2 In a longer version of the present paper (Holbraad 2007) I trace in some detail the development of the anthropological debate about mana, from the 19th century onwards.

3 Translations from the Spanish text are mine.

4 Hubert and Mauss express exactly this point when they write that the idea of mana ‘not only transforms magical judgements into analytical judgements but converts them to a priori to posteriori arguments, since the idea dominates and conditions all experience’ (Mauss 2001: 156). Saul Kripke put the possibility of a posteriori analyticity on the philosophers’ table almost a century later, though not much to our use here since to think that adhé are anything but ‘rigid designators’ – as the terms of a posteriori analytic truths, for him, must be (eg ‘water is H2O’ – 1980: 48-9).

5 I have made a parallel argument regarding the role of money in Ifá cosmology (Holbraad 2005).

6 The act of consulting the oracle is commonly referred to as ‘looking at one’s self with Orúla or registering one’s self with Orúla’ (mirarse con Orúla, registrarse con Orúla). See Keesing 1984 and 1985 for a critique of the tendency in Melanesian ethnography to view mana as a ‘diffuse substance’, as opposed to ‘a process or a state’ (1985: 203). The tendency, he argues, is characteristic of ‘European, not native, theologians’ (ibid.), by which he means anthropologists.

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