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Chapter 5

Out of the Shadows: Re-envisioning the Debate on Ritual Abuse

Michael Salter

Presently there is no profession or body of literature with a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of multiperpetrator child sexual abuse in developed nations. In the absence of an established discourse, some survivors of multiperpetrator abuse and their advocates have developed the language of "ritual abuse" to articulate their experiences and generate new models of care and self-management. The initial focus of ritual abuse discourse was on ritualistic forms of multiperpetrator abuse. Over time, "ritual abuse" has developed into a category of abuse that encompasses diverse forms of sexual violence that have been marginalised by mainstream debates on child abuse.

In the literature on ritual abuse, survivors and their advocates have tended to minimise or camouflage the commercial forms of sexual abuse experienced by survivors. This approach is common amongst Western discourses on abuse and trafficking, which are embedded within colonial constructions of the Western nation-state as "civilised", safe and free of systemic human rights violations. By reframing the organised sexual exploitation of children in terms of "cults" and perverse religiosity, ritual abuse discourse is complicit within a dialectic of denial that displaces multiperpetrator sexual abuse in the West onto minority groups and developing nations.

Child trafficking and sexual slavery are emerging as global concerns from which no country is immune. In the international arena, it is well recognised that some forms of sexual abuse by perpetrators of human trafficking are ritualistic in nature. This has yet to be addressed by policy-makers or law enforcement agencies in the West. In the twenty-first century, the challenge for those of us who work with survivors is to move beyond the stasis of hysteria, broaden our evidence base, and work towards an interdisciplinary and empirically grounded understanding of slavery, trafficking, and ritualistic forms of sexual abuse in the West.

Ritual Abuse as Discourse

Since the phrase was coined in 1980, "ritual abuse" has evolved into

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a discourse with its own vocabulary and literature. A diverse number of men and women throughout the developed world have come to identify themselves as "ritual abuse survivors." They have in common a life story of organised sexual abuse involving multiple abusers ("multiperpetrator abuse") with ritualistic features, and a range of severe trauma-related and dissociative disorders (Young, Sachs et al. 1991; Bloom 1994; Leavitt 1994; Jonker and Jonker-Bakker 1997). Survivors' health needs are complex and they characteristically go unmet, although ritual abuse survivors' interests are represented by a small number of non-government organisations, and there is an established body of psychological expertise on the treatment of ritual abuse survivors (Sinason 1994; Ross 1995; Mollon 1996; Fraser 1997; Sinason 2002). There is no authoritative definition of ritual abuse, and the term is used by survivors, and by supportive professionals and academics ("advocates"), to refer to both an abusive act, and a category of abuse. As an act, ritual abuse is generally understood to refer to sexual abuse that occurs within a ritual or ceremony, a position encapsulated by McFadyen, Hanks and James (1993, p. 37): "Ritual abuse is the involvement of children in physical, psychological or sexual abuse with repeated activities ('ritual') which purport to relate the abuse to contexts of a religious, magical or supernatural kind." In the narratives of survivors, ritual abuse is often linked to other rarely acknowledged forms of abuse, such as extrafamilial abuse, the production of child pornography, child prostitution, and paedophilic sadomasochism (Driscoll and Wright 1991; Hudson 1991; Smith 1993). Over time, some survivors and advocates have come to use the phrase "ritual abuse" as a category for any experience of sadistic or organised sexual abuse, particularly those that are marginalised by mainstream child abuse discourses.

Debate on ritual abuse has been limited largely to questions about the existence of ritual abuse and the "truth" of the accounts of survivors. This debate has been enacted in both the academic and mainstream media, with a variety of professions and opinions represented within the ideologically-polarised camps. The bulk of opposition to "ritual abuse" has come from organisations and activists who hold that a significant proportion of allegations of sexual abuse are the result of mass hysteria and psychotherapeutic malpractice. The sceptic's position on ritual abuse is most clearly articulated in the theories of "false memory syndrome" and "moral panic," which suggest that survivors have drawn on social processes (such as psychotherapy) and cultural images (witchcraft, Satanism, etc) to construct their narratives, and that therefore their narratives are confabulations (e.g. Victor 1993; Guilliatt 1996; Ofshe and Watters 1996; Showalter

1997; Nathan and Snedeker 2001). In what is arguably a misapplication of social constructionist theory, sceptics have successively decentred survivors' lived experience and repositioning their narratives—in fact, the issue of "ritual abuse" as a whole—as disembodied textual productions that can be analysed and critiqued from afar. These positions were popularised in media reports and books throughout the 1990s, and whilst both "moral panic" and "false memory syndrome" have been robustly critiqued (Herman 1995; Hunt 1997; Olio and Cornell 1998), they continue to inform public and academic debate to some degree.

There has been little thought given to the social construction of ritual abuse discourse by people who hold survivors' accounts to be largely true. Whereas sceptics have argued that survivors' accounts are entirely fabricated, survivors and advocates have treated one another's narratives as naturalistic productions unshaped by social context or cultural milieu. Nonetheless, the briefest purview of ritual abuse literature provides ample demonstrations of the progressions of survivors and advocates from wordless shock towards the language of "ritual abuse". Hudson (1994) provides an insight into the key moment in which she connected "Satanism" to the extrafamilial abuse of her young clients:

> It became apparent that neither I nor the combined experts of several local investigative agencies had previous experience with this particular form of multi-level/multi-perpetrator/multi-victim case. For instance, we understood the modus operandi but we did not have the motivation. Sexual perversion—yes. Child pornography—yes. Sadism—yes. But why? Finally, one parent said "It sounds like Satanism." I asked "What's that?"...
>
> ...If anything was going to be done to solve this conundrum, I would have to do it myself. So, since 1986, I have studied in depth the available literature on contemporary occult theory and practice. I have become aware of the destructiveness of certain cults and I have learned something of the techniques of cult-related sadistic abuse. (74)

Hudson's account is not unusual in the manner that the least explicable aspect of survivors accounts becomes, paradoxically, the explanatory lens through which the client's entire experience is viewed. Unlike child pornography and sexual sadism, ritual sexual activity eludes contemporary psychological and criminological analysis. As seen in Hudson's

case, clinicians confronted with ritualistic multiperpetrator activity have often drawn on the existing literature on cults to fill in the gap in their understanding. In doing so, they have positioned ritual as the primary, and eventually definitive, aspect of the experiences of multiperpetrator sexual abuse, which has driven the development of ritual abuse discourse.

This emphasis on ritualistic forms of multiperpetrator abuse, and the consequent designation of perpetrator groups as "cults", is problematic in that it presumes that the "ultimate end" or purpose of perpetrator groups is perverse religious worship. Survivors rarely, if ever, report that their primary experience of abuse is ritual sexual activity, and, where the belief systems of ritually abusive groups has been analysed, they appear idiosyncratic and synthetic, rather then doctrinal and systematic (Kent 1993b, 1993a; Scott 2001). The frequency of survivor's reports of non-ritualistic extrafamilial abuse, and exploitation in child pornography and prostitution, also challenges the argument that perpetrators primary motivations are religious in nature (Finkelhor and Williams 1988; Bybee and Mobrey 1993; Jonker and Jonker-Bakker 1997). For many survivors, their primary abuser was a parent or relative (Driscoll and Wright 1991; Smith 1993), and their life histories include abuse within intrafamilial, extrafamilial, ritualistic and commercial settings (Lorena and Levy 1998; Scott 2001). In ritual abuse discourse, "cult" serves as an umbrella term for these fundamentally distinct contexts of abuse, and "cult member" designates all the abusers who assault the child, whether they are family members, perpetrating group members, or paying clients of the group. Within the "cult" frame of analysis, non-ritualistic and "mundane" experiences of abuse are minimised or ignored, and all abusers are presumed to be motivated by a spiritual conviction. The available evidence does not support the notion of a homogenous taxonomy of ritually abusive perpetrators and groups presumed by this position.

Ritual abuse discourse has tended to provide functionalist explanations for ritual forms of abuse. In the literature, ritualistic forms of abuse are most often characterised as either an attempt to perpetuate a perverse belief system (Core and Harrison 1991; Ryder 1992; Smith 1993; Boyd 1996), or to control and silence children during sexual exploitation (Hudson 1991; McFadyen, Hanks et al. 1993; Pooley and Wood 1994). Both of these accounts presume that perpetrators enjoy a transparent understanding of their own motivations, and of the full consequences of their actions. This presumption flies in the face of research findings on cognitive distortion and empathy deficits in sexual offenders (Abel, Gore et al. 1989; Blumenthal, Gudjonsson et al. 1999; McGrath, Cann et al. 2004). The functionalist account provided by ritual abuse discourse employs a dichotomy between belief and practice that enables commentators to avoid discussing the least palatable aspects of survivor's disclosures; the role that the body and pleasure has to play within the perpetrator's ethos of sexual terrorism and atrocity. The predominance of paraphiliac elements in ritual abuse survivors stories adds weight to Lanning's (1992) argument that multiperpetrator ritual activity is not necessarily "religious" in nature, but may be more closely related to sadistic pleasure-seeking and sado-sexual experimentation. For perpetrators, ritualistic forms of abuse may have intrinsic identity-affirming, status-building, knowledge-creating or thrill-seeking value within abusive familial or subcultural environments.

Regina Louf, a survivor of the infamous Belgium child prostitution scandal, testified to the use of ritualism within a perpetrating group, describing how children were "initiated" into the group through a drugged mock-marriage to "Satan." However, her account emphasised the polymorphously perverse sadism of the group members, who found pleasure in the transgressive nature of illegal sexual practices. Children were victimised within the group for years, although Louf challenged the notion that group members were "paedophiles" at all:

> I find the expression "paedophile network" misleading. For me paedophiles are those men who go to playgrounds or swimming pools, priests ...I certainly don't want to exonerate them, but I would rather have paedophiles than the types we were involved with. There were men who never touched the children. Whether you were five, ten or fifteen didn't matter. What mattered to them was sex, power, experience. To do things they would never have tried with their own wives. Among them were some real sadists. (Louf quoted in Bulte and de Conick 1998)

Whilst Louf's account is commensurate with narratives of ritual abuse, she resists the totalising script of "cults" and "cult members." Louf describes instead her grandmother and mother's responsibility for her sexual exploitation, the child traffickers who procured her for organised abuse, and a clientele of sado-sexual adventurers who found pleasure in "the power to decide over pain, life and death" (Bulte and de Conick 1998). The ritual activity Louf described was neither the primary function nor expression of the perpetrating group, but rather, inextricably bound up within a black market in sexual terrorism fed by abusive families.

Kluft, Braun and Sachs (1984) use the term "pseudo-normal veneer" to describe the stable, nurturing facade that many abusive families maintain to camouflage their true nature from observers. Louf's account troubles the "pseudo- normal veneer" not only of transgenerationally abusive families, but of her society as a whole. Her testimony suggests that complex criminal infrastructure can be constructed and maintained within developed nations over long periods of time to facilitate the traffic in child prostitutes and pornography, and that this trade is largely dependent on the complicity of exploitative parents. In contrast, ritual abuse discourse strenuously protects core cultural images of the "family" and "society" by displacing child trafficking and sexual slavery onto "cults", and then sublimating those crimes beneath a framework of perverse religiosity. It should not be surprising that, to date, there is not a single Western government that has responded comprehensively to the issues raised by the life histories of ritual abuse survivors. Where ritually abusive networks are uncovered, it is usually by accident rather then the product of law enforcement or surveillance (see Kelly 1998; Lyman, Johnson et al. 2005). Survivors and advocates are wont to blame this inaction on the sceptics who have discredited them and the public that has ignored them. I contend instead that the psychosocial dynamics of "ritual abuse" discourse reinforce individual and collective forms of denial, creating a hermetically sealed mechanism that contains, negates, and ultimately silences, the very voices that constitute it.

The Displacement of Sexual Slavery

Ritual abuse survivors and advocates are not alone in their reluctance to acknowledge commercial abuse and the role of the family in child trafficking in the West. These are recurring forms of denial throughout the broader debates on child sexual abuse and child trafficking. In policy and law enforcement, "the paedophile" is characterised as fixated, deviant, homosexual, more likely to have large numbers of victims and to share these victims with other offenders (Willis 1993). In contrast, sexually abusive fathers, and men who abuse girls, are considered "regressed" offenders who commit less frequent and less serious abuses "in the context of a normal sexual preference structure" (Howells 1981). These typologies were initially introduced by Groth and Birnbaum (1979), and they continue to be highly influential today, although they are based on strict distinctions between intrafamilial/extrafamilial and heterosexual/homosexual offenders have been contested by research (Abel, Becker et al. 1988; Abel and Osborn 1992).

The hegemony of a paraphiliac definition of "paedophilia" has created a disenabling environment for the serious consideration of multiperpetrator and commercial child sexual abuse. When the only policy lens on child sexual abuse is mental illness, then the factors that drive multiperpetrator abuse—such as profit, subcultural norms, social bonds and familial control—become invisible. The enduring appeal of Groth and Birnbaum's typologies to policy-makers may lie in it's displacement of "real" paedophilia onto the homophobic stereotype of the extrafamilial, homosexual pederast, which neatly circumvents uncomfortable questions around the prevalence and frequency of incest within the family and sexual attraction to children within the general community. Research has consistently demonstrated that a substantial minority of "normal" men self-report sexual interest in children (Crepault and Couture 1980; Briere 1989; Malamuth 1989), and one study found that a quarter of a sample of male volunteers demonstrated physiological arousal to a child that equalled or exceeded arousal to an adult (Hall, Hirschman et al. 1995). The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates that child pornography constitutes 20% of all pornography on the Internet (2003: 3), and so we can presume not only that many men are active consumers within the child sex trade, but that their interests are being catered to by profit-driven, organised groups and networks.

Despite evidence of a substantial pool of men in the community with a sexual interest in children, as well as a multi-billion dollar black market in child pornography, there has been very little research undertaken into organised abuse, child prostitution and child pornography in the West. The paucity of discussion and consensus can be seen in the absence of a standardised vocabulary to describe the phenomenon. Descriptions of multiperpetrator abuse ranges from "sex rings" (Burgess, Hartman et al. 1984), "poly-incestuous families" (Faller 1991), "trauma-organised systems" (Bentovim 1992), "multi-dimensional child sex rings" (Lanning 1992), "Satanist abuse" (Sinason 1994), "organised sadistic abuse" (Goodwin 1994), "network child sexual abuse" (Cairns 2000) and "prostitution rings" (Cambridge Area Child Protection Committee 2006). Each of these definitions accords priority to different aspects of multiperpetrator abuse, without necessarily acknowledging the complex array of relationships and abuses which constitute these cases. Very little is known about multiperpetrator abuse, the nature of perpetrator groups, or the experience of children victimised in multiperpetrator contexts. Research into multiperpetrator or ritualistic abuse has tended towards surveys of psychotherapists and clinicians regarding their encounters with survivors (Youngson 1994; Andrews, Morton et al. 1995; McMinn and Wade 1995; Bottoms, Shaver et al. 1996; Schmuttermaier and Veno 1999) or overviews of the symp-

toms and experiences of small samples of survivors (Burgess, Hartman et al. 1984; Kelley 1989; Snow and Sorenson 1990; Driscoll and Wright 1991; Smith 1993; Lawrence, Cozolino et al. 1995). Few researchers (Kent 1993b, 1993a; Itzen 1997; Scott 2001) have been willing to undertake qualitative research with survivors to explore the complex dynamics of multiperpetrator abuse and the inner world of perpetrator groups.

Lacking a well-developed empirical or theoretical base, policy-makers in Australia have formulated speculative models of "organised paedophilia" that marry the homosexual pederast of "paedophile" discourse with stereotypical, Mafia-like visions of organised crime. The Paedophile Inquiry of the Wood Royal Commission was announced in 1996 to address allegations of organised paedophile activity in the state of New South Wales, Australia. The Inquiry treated intrafamilial and extrafamilial abuse as mutually exclusive categories, and its primary focus was on homosexual perpetrators and male victims (Cossins 1999). A number of submissions were made to the Paedophile Inquiry regarding multiperpetrator sexual abuse involving female victims, familial abusers and ritualistic behaviour, and Wood's (1997) dismissal of these accounts neatly summarises the implicit barriers to understanding shared by both the public and professionals:

> While it must be recognised that apparently respectable and successful members of the community do commit child sexual abuse, a quantum leap in credibility is required to suppose that they would do so in the bizarre, ritualistic way described, which includes the infliction of serious, even fatal injury and mutilation upon their own children. (671)

Woods' response is reflective of a widespread belief that intrafamilial abuse involves non-aggressive and relatively harmless sexual acts (Stermac, Hall et al. 1989). Whilst Wood could accept that intrafamilial abuse occurs, he was unable to accommodate sadistic sexual violence within his frame of reference for parenting, the family and society at large. After dismissing testimony suggesting that intrafamilial abusers were complicit in the extrafamilial sexual exploitation of their children, Wood investigated networks of homosexual offenders without significant result.

Broadly speaking, there is an unwillingness amongst policy-makers and law enforcement in the West to consider forms of sexual abuse that challenge their epistemic assumptions about transparency and predictability of their social world, and the impermeability of its regulatory systems.

Recent allegations of ritual sexual activity and multiperpetrator abuse in indigenous communities in Australia (Jones 2006; Khadem 2006; Overington 2006; Smith 2006), and in migrant African communities in Britain (Clayton 2004; Vallely 2005; Woolcock 2005), have sparked timely responses from the government and credulous media coverage. In contrast, parallel claims of ritualistic, multiperpetrator abuse in urban communities in Australia and Britain (Brindle 1990; Humphries 1991; The Independent 1991), and the successful prosecutions of white ritually abusive perpetrators, (Shaw 1993; Tate 1994; Davies 1998; Towers 1998; Oberhardt and Keim 2004) have prompted neither supportive media coverage nor a targeted response by authorities. This differential is reproduced in the international arena, where, in 2002, the United Nations designated "the misuse of some ritual practices to intimidate women and girl victims of trafficking" as a research priority (Committee of Human Rights 2002). Other international organisations have noted the association between ritual sexual activity and child trafficking in developed nations (Beddoe 2005; United Nations Children's Fund 2005; Amnesty International UK 2006). As yet, the only international non-government organisation that publicly recognises ritualistic forms of abuse in Western countries is the International Organisation of Migration (2001). The United Nations and its agencies have remained largely silent on the matter, despite submissions and presentations on the ritualistic abuse of children in Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, England, Germany, Scotland, and the United States (Muntarbhorn 1992; Sarson and MacDonald 2004).

Accounts of multiperpetrator abuse evoke the "body horror" that accompanies the abject violation of physical integrity, a type of horror that the West locates outside itself and defines itself in oppositional relation to (Taylor 1998). Spectacular forms of violence are produced by the Western media as characteristic of "zones of fear" overseas, in contrast to the apparent order, safety, and transparency of the developed nation. Narratives of multiperpetrator and ritualistic abuse challenge this distinction, bringing "exotic" forms of violence into the normative spaces of the every-day, such as the family, day-care centres and churches. Survivors' life histories undermine faith in the efficacy of Western systems of law enforcement and governance, in the omniscient eye of the media, and in the fundamental benevolence of fellow citizens. Whilst the public, media, and policy-makers have largely rejected the accounts of survivors in urban and white communities, similar claims of multiperpetrator and ritualistic child abuse in black communities and developing nations has not met the same resistance. This differential may be explained by a prevailing anglo-

ethnocentricity that associates ritualistic and sadistic forms of violence with racial and cultural "otherness."

Across a range of discourses, the issue of multiperpetrator sexual abuse has been displaced onto gay men, black communities, and developing nations, and sublimated within homophobic and racist stereotypes. Ritual abuse discourse is complicit in this pattern of displacement with its emphasis on cults and perverse religiosity over and above poly-abusive families and commercial sexual exploitation. The actors in this dialectic of denial range from sceptics to survivors, from journalists to clinicians, from policy-makers to the general public. They may be diametrically opposed to one another within their own sphere of debate, however, what they have in common is a desire to protect and maintain the premises upon which citizens of developed nations base their understanding of their social world. The life histories of survivors of multiperpetrator and ritualistic abuse disrupt these fundamental beliefs, and discourses on child abuse and human trafficking have been shaped, at least in part, by a desire to contain and negate the full impact of survivors' disclosures.

Beyond Denial and Displacement

The 'bizarreness' of the ritual ordeal, and the severity of victims' psychological and physical distress, belies the commonplace nature of the ties that bind victims to their abusers. Ritual abuse discourse, and other discussions on child abuse and trafficking, has traditionally located non-normative forms of relationships (Satanic cults, networks of predators, etc) at the heart of organised criminal activity. However, accounts of survivors of multiperpetrator abuse (Itzen 1997; Lorena and Levy 1998; Scott 2001) paint a picture of the heterosexual family as the primary site for the organisation and camouflage of extrafamilial abuse, where a child may be prepared from birth for a lifetime of sexual exploitation by family members and their contacts. Ritually abusive groups are often constituted of two or more extended, poly-abusive familial networks who trade their children with one another and with other groups (Bentovim and Tranter 1994). Kelly notes "just as with domestic violence and child sexual abuse, most trafficking is more mundane, involving everyday, routine power and control relationships." (Kelly 2003)

Addressing multiperpetrator sexual abuse in the West requires an expanded vision of "child sexual abuse" that can accommodate notions of slavery, trafficking, and ritualistic forms of sexual abuse. "Trafficking" and "slavery" are implicitly racial constructs that are rarely applied to Western-born victims of sexual violence. There are striking similarities

between the description of child trafficking networks in Africa and ritually abusive perpetrator groups in the West. The International Organisation of Migration (IOM) notes that, in Africa, "[c]hild trafficking networks are secretive, informal, and involve rituals and cults" (2005: 83), mirroring the description of European paedophile networks provided by a German high commissioner as "secret societies" with "many different criminal organisations in active connection with each other, networks, and alliances that remain unrecognised and undetected." (Paulus 1999 in International Organization of Migration 2001: 2108) The complicity of victims' parents in extrafamilial abuse, and the involvement of female perpetrators in managing and grooming children within the abusive network, has been noted in both developed and developing nations (Finkelhor and Williams 1988; Itzen 1997; Scott 2001; Pearson 2003).

Cross-cultural commonalities in sadistic ritual activity in organised sexual exploitation of children include forced captivity, churches and shrines as a site of ritual activity, sexual assault, animal sacrifice, ritual scarification or branding, torture, the harvesting of bodily tissue or fluids to make a "blood pact" or "curse", the viewing of dismembered body parts and the forced ingestion of taboo substances such as blood (Somerset 2001; di Cortemiglia 2003; Zimmerman, Yun et al. 2003; Aghatise 2004; Amnesty International UK 2006; Houreld 2006). Terror, silence and obedience are common responses to ritual abuse amongst trafficked women and children in both the West and developing nations (Kelly 2003; Aghatise 2004). Given the similarities between child trafficking groups in Africa and Europe, it is no surprise that the IOM has found linkages between them:

> The counselling centre Zartbitter in Cologne has for years frequently learned about the exploitation of minors in the framework of satanic rituals and the production of so-called "snuff-movies." *"Children who have participated in cults report to us that primarily dark-skinned babies have been abused," says an employee.* (International Organization of Migration 2001, 108–109, my italics)

Evidence from around the globe suggests that ritualistic forms of abuse are intrinsic to child trafficking and organised sexual exploitation. The precise role that ritual forms of abuse play in child trafficking has yet to be understood. Ritualistic abuse is not fully accounted for the paraphiliac model of "paedophilia" discourse, the functionalist model of ritual abuse discourse, or the profit-driven model of trafficking discourse. Fresh lens

of analyses are required to move towards an understanding of perpetrator behaviour as embodied, social and iteratively related to (rather then determined by) ideology, profit and subculture. In searching for new and more comprehensive frameworks of understanding, the multidisciplinary approaches of Scott (2001) and Noblitt and Perskin (2000) may offer a new direction. They have opened ritual abuse up to the insights of anthropology, social theory and phenomenology, and, in doing so, moved beyond the insularity that has transformed the field of ritual abuse into an esoteric psychological curiosity, patrolled by "experts," and unable to draw from, or contribute to, related disciplines and bodies of theory.

In the narratives of survivors and advocates, the trauma of the ritual ordeal has overshadowed the mundane, everyday relationships that constitute child trafficking in the West, and the banal spaces of everyday life that camouflage it. Our challenge in the twenty-first century is to look beyond the costumes, ritual props, and perverse symbolism of perpetrator groups to confront the simple, brutal forms of exploitation and financial exchange that drive the traffic in the bodies of ritually abused women and children in the West.

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