Descriptions of Rituals

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Although the presentation of customs and rituals may refer to several actions, what makes them descriptions rather than narratives is a general approach that takes alternatives into consideration. If a series of possible events depends on many factors and a text presents all of these factors and alternative possibilities, the end result is a description. This is most obvious in simple texts (shown in the example of a product leaflet), while in sophisticated narratives such as a novel, descriptions of rituals tend to be from the characters' viewpoint instead of the narrator directly. The examples to be analysed have been taken from a medical leaflet providing patient information, an ethnographic text by Bronislaw Malinowski, and two twentieth-century popular novels (sci-fi and fantasy, respectively), The Dispossessed *by Ursula K. Le Guin and* Eric *by Terry Pratchett, followed by a post-colonial novel, Avarind Adiga's* The White Tiger.

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When Aristotle declared that tragedy is more philosophical compared to historiography, he highlighted a fictional story's potential for relaying abstract description, namely that fiction may relate what the world is like. Fiction's ability to depict includes the kinds of necessities and probabilities that regulate the world, which Aristotle found more interesting (i.e. more philosophical) than the mere notation of events. When narratologists, however, explore the role played by descriptions in a text, they do not focus on the descriptive of it; they rather tend to appreciate the narrative potential of a description.[1]

Even if we define a narrative through action, occurrence, event, or change of state, many types of texts can be found that seem to describe an abstract scheme rather than narrate, even if these texts either mostly

[1] For example, when Mieke Bal reaches the conclusion based on the analysis of the description of Rouen in *Madame Bovary* that the description also narrates, she seems to sing the praises of description due to its narrative potential and ability to inform the reader of what is taking place in the character's mind.

or exclusively relay acts. The two most obvious examples are the recipe and the instruction manual. When a recipe starts with the proverbial "Take two eggs," an act has already been prescribed for the reader. The second-person singular may indicate that the addressee is identical to the would-be actant, or a general subject, yet readers will probably visualize themselves starting the chain of actions by taking two eggs. Nowadays recipes more frequently start with the following: "Ingredients: 2 eggs…" yet then continue to provide directions, such as "Separate the eggs, combine the egg yolks with sugar, etc." Every sentence tells an action or an event, all of which leads to changes of state (at least for the eggs);[2] the recipe may still be viewed as not reporting or narrating the preparation of a dish, but rather describing how to do it.

It can be said that a script is neither a narrative nor a description, but a completely different text-type. Seymour Chatman considered it a good idea to keep the number of general text-types rather low and subsequently only worked with three of them: narrative, description, and argument (6–12). Based on the current state of narrative studies, according to which the category of narrative can include anything in which something happens (such as film, drama, painting, newspaper articles or even Facebook posts) I prefer to say that a narrative is not necessarily told in indicative mode, but can also be imperative, conditional or optative. While instruction manuals and product leaflets could be regarded as narratives in the imperative or the conditional mode, I argue that they should rather be seen as descriptions. Does the categorization of descriptions and narratives depend on the frequency of verbs in actual wording? The example I provide is an information leaflet for a pain killer, which is full of verbs, although mostly in -ing form, but is still far from being narrative.

> *Tell your doctor and stop taking [the] tablets if you experience:*
> - Unexplained stomach pain (abdominal pain) or other abnormal stomach symptoms, indigestion, heartburn, feeling sick and/or vomiting.
> - Unexplained wheezing, shortness of breath, skin rash, itching or bruising (these may be symptoms of an allergic reaction).
> - Yellowing of the eyes and/or skin (jaundice).
> - Severe sore throat with high fever (these may be symptoms of a condition known as agranulocytosis).

[2] I use the word "event" to refer to any change of state, as in what Peter Hühn calls "event I," which is different from "event II" of some importance that makes a narrative interesting, relatable, or eventful (Hühn 80–82). Wolf Schmid only would call the latter an "event" (Schmid, *Narratology* 2–5; Schmid, "Eventfulness" 233–34).

- Blurred or disturbed vision (visual impairment) or seeing/hearing strange things (hallucinations).
- Fluid retention e.g. swollen ankles (this may be a sign of kidney problems).[3]

Many events and multiple changes of state are mentioned in this passage, yet the diffuse, abstract, alternative nature of the events challenge narrativity. The "you" featured as both subject and addressee of the discourse is completely general; although the subject's physical condition is highly important, the text does not situate him or her in any particular way. Similarly, it is important to note that most of the events will not happen; if everything goes well, none will. If the following style of language were used, this text would be undeniably narrative: "John experienced a stomach pain, which he could not explain, therefore he told his doctor and stopped taking the tablets." This chain of events is only one of the options that the text offers since John cannot experience pain *or* another abnormal stomach symptom since the possibilities are not organized into any meaningful structure. The undefined, vague and general nature of the agent and the lack of circumstances surrounding the actions probably also undermine narrativity. The "you" in the leaflet is a function, not an agent. As a reader, I can perform the function if I experience this or that symptom, but I also imagine several different people experiencing it as well. When the verb is connected to an empty agent-function, it only creates a narrative via the concrete process of actualization. In lieu of this, I find it more appropriate to call this type of a text a description: in the example I discussed above, the verbs describe a pain killer by means of its possible effects.

The use of the connective "or," which could also introduce every line in the list of symptoms, is a feature which I view as an index of description. If the patient experiences one of the symptoms, he or she will tell the doctor; if the patient does not experience any of them, the sufferer will continue taking the tablets. The doctor's reaction may depend on which particular symptom the patient has experienced. The alternative concretizations depend on the body of the agent. In alternate cases, other factors may also influence the course of events. Based on my interpretation, a text that tries to map all the possibilities is a description rather than a narrative, even if the text deals with actions. This may not only be true when a text relates the ideal scenario in a hortative mode (how to use medication safely, how to prepare a meal

[3] Package leaflet: Information for the user, Ibuprofen 400 mg film-coated tablets https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/files/pil.7352.pdf

properly, how to construct a piece of furniture etc.), but also when it describes how something is done in a community.

As a counter-argument, one may refer to highly developed literary narratives that contain alternative or bifurcating story lines. Robert Coover's much discussed short story from 1969, "The Babysitter," is a conglomerate of narrative fragments comprising only a couple of lines each; many of these fragments mutually exclude each other. Some novels offer alternative endings, which undeniably lends them the air of the experimental without undermining their narrativity, at least in retrospect. The most oft-mentioned example of this kind is probably John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but I would also like to take this opportunity to mention Mór Jókai's 1875 novel, *Az élet komédiásai* [*Comedians of Life*]. Bifurcating story-lines are rather common in several popular genres. DVD editions of television series, for example, may often contain alternative endings, not to mention video games. Normally, if any of the possible listed events happens, the need for (narratable) action is created, while the list itself is only a description of possibilities. Coover's story can be interpreted as describing a general babysitter's network of relationships, including everything that can happen to her. However individualized the babysitter may seem to be, if everything happened to her that could occur theoretically, she becomes the abstraction of a general type.

Despite this, a story that bifurcates at the end does not make the text descriptive; for this to happen, all—or at least many—of the possibilities must be mapped. Classical epic poetry already established this habit by either indicating alternative story lines or possibilities that "almost" happened. Telemachus tried three times to string his father's bow in vain, and if Odysseus had not indicated his dissent, Telemachus may have succeeded during the fourth time (21.128–129). Such "almost-episodes" are far from rare in epic poetry (cf. Nesselrath). Mentioning that something could have happened otherwise—even if it renders a non-event a part of the narrative discourse—is not the same as mapping how a ceremonial (or even everyday) routine can or should be performed depending on variable circumstances. There is no recipe, no established scenario for how to kill your wife's suitors when you return home after twenty years. This entire narrative could have feasibly happened otherwise. As a counterexample, a sacrifice is regularized in every detail, including reactions to any possible event. I therefore classify a text as descriptive if it explains an ideal course of actions in a hortative mode (what should be done so that medicine has the proper effect, how to prepare a dish, how to build a bookshelf, etc.) while also relaying

how an act is performed within a given community. As a result, I therefore regard conditional and disjunctive conjunctions (if, or) as possible indications of the descriptive.

Representations of customs or rites can additionally be regarded as iterative narratives, such as in the following example of a tribe that sacrifices a goat to their Moon deity every new moon. Functions are circumscribed here, too, since the concrete agents may change with every iteration. A different goat is sacrificed every month, at times the priest may be different. The personal identity of those attending the rite may change as well, but the public does not change as a community: perhaps it is the act of attending the rite that renders them a community. In any event, the role of the goat and the priest is always the same, while some rules most likely regulate what qualities are needed to play these roles. Some narratives represent the agents with sufficient concreteness, while other texts describe rather than narrate rites, even if a rite is a chain of actions.

Representations of rites, customs or ritualized customs can be encountered in several kinds of literary, non-literary and semi-literary texts. My first example is taken from an essentially descriptive text; while ethnography is primarily the field of writing down (or describing) a people, ethnographic works also contain countless narrative elements, as can be seen in the description of the habit of the *katuyausi* found in Bronislaw Malinowski's seminal work *The Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia* (269–273). The expression, *katuyausi*, means the "amorous expeditions of village girls to other communities." If the girls of a village decide to hold a *katuyausi*, they choose an intermediary "to arrange the date and conditions of their prospective visit to the boys of the other village." This ritualized custom has neither a special date on the calendar nor an obligatory setting and may depend on various conditions. If this is a narrative, the characters are girls and boys from two different villages, but the series of events may happen between any pair of villages; the identity of the intermediary always changes, but the functions remain constant. The girls leave their village "as a rule early in the afternoon," which means that the time of the day may change depending, for example, on the distance to the target village. They then walk to the selected village in a completely decorous manner, sit down in the village grove and start doing their make-up and arranging their hair or adjusting their appearances while maybe singing or playing music. "When they are ready to receive, they sing the song which is the previously arranged signal for the boys to come nearer." The song that functions as a signal may be one of the conditions negotiated through

the intermediary. Malinowski thus explains the "ceremony of choice": "According to custom, the initiative in pairing off should come from the hosts, and each guest has to accept any offer made to her as a matter of etiquette." However, everybody knows the inner hierarchies of both communities, therefore "the choice is largely based on anterior intrigues and attachments" rather than random attractions. Quoting the presentation of the choice/proposal ritual in its entirety is worthwhile for the purpose of demonstrating how many alternatives the text lists; a participant can obviously perform only one of them during a single *katuyausi*, although different participants can perform several of them simultaneously, while some options may not be fulfilled at all.

> Each boy then ceremonially offers a small gift to the girl of his choice—a comb, a necklet, a nose stick, a bunch of betel-nut. If she accepts the gift she accepts the boy for that night as her lover. When the boy knows the girl well he presents the gift himself. If he does not or if he feels too shy, he will ask help of an older man, who hands over the offering with the words, *'kam va'otu'* (*va'otu*—visiting present, present of inducement), 'So-and-so gives it to you; you are his sweetheart.' Very rarely does a girl refuse or ignore such a present; if she did, she would greatly offend and mortify the man. (271)

The boy offers one of four possible gifts (of course, the list is not necessarily complete or excludes other options), and he does so either directly or through an intermediary. He asks for help if he does not know the girl well, or even if he knows her well, but is shy. Although the intermediary utilizes a fixed formula, this form contains a variable, namely the name of a mandator. Due to etiquette, the girl accepts the gift and the proposal, but in very rare instances she may decline to accept. What renders the passage as a description rather than a narrative is the listing of possible alternatives along with the use of loosely defined functions as actants instead of characters, such as girl, shy boy, an older man. It must be mentioned that even this ceremony displays local variations since it is "carried out … in a less delicate manner in the southern villages."

While Malinowski praises the "strict decorum" of the *katuyausi*, he simultaneously begins telling a story of decline, which already seems to represent a genuine narrative. In the good old days, girls of a village did two, three or four such excursions every year, but already the first missionary had the *katuyausi* forbidden, therefore

> the regulated and decorous custom … has fallen into decay. But even while I was in the Trobriands, parties of girls from Okaykoda visited Omarakana,

> and from Kaybola went to Kwaybwaga; also the Kwaybwaga girls avenged themselves on their lovers by going on *katuyausi* to Vilaylima. Early in my stay at Omarakana in 1918, a number of such guests came, at harvest time and ostensibly to admire the yams, and I was even able to photograph them and to watch the earlier part of the proceedings. (272)

The concrete settings, the exact naming of characters and dates and the continuous presence of the protagonist-observer "I" render this excerpt into an ambitious singular narrative. Yet what this passage actually relates to is not what a *katuyausi* is and how it is performed or what its rules are, but how the custom is declining due to the oppressive influence of the missionaries and how the ethnographer could nonetheless gather information regarding a type of ceremony that is becoming increasingly rare.

In contrast to Malinowski's ethnographic approach which is for the most part interested in making generalizations, lists the alternatives and tries to take every possibility into consideration, Malinowski sometimes refers to individual cases or characteristic stories. To represent Melanesian attitudes toward unsuccessful marriage, adultery and jealousy, the author cannot utilize a general scenario; in lieu of a universally valid ritual, Malinowski (114–121) provides a kind of collection of stories. As such, the author names the characters and the settings found in every story while it is clear that the ending always depends on the characters' personal decisions. These texts form miniature narratives that mostly contain a tragic ending and exist independently of one another. Each story in this series begins with a reference to characters, settings and source of information, such as "In a small village near Omarakana there lived a man called Dudubile Kautala, who died in 1916 … and whose funeral I attended" (117). The Melanesians do not have any generally describable system of rules regarding how to ruin a marriage or what to do when a marriage has gone wrong, except what Malinowski summarizes in the following: "In each of these cases it was open to the woman simply to leave her husband" (120-121). Maybe "simple" procedure (i.e. when people follow social norms and rules) cannot be narrated:[4] a normal function is rather the object of description, in which the agents are indicated in broad brushstrokes, while individual, norm-breaking choices cannot be described. The latter case demands the usage of narrative. In the case of rituals and formalized customs individual, non-normative behavior is obviously out of the question.

[4] As Tolstoy famously expressed this insight in the first sentence of *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Rituals or automatized schemes of actions are not rare in novels either, especially if a novel represents a world with which readers are obviously unfamiliar. Such a novel has to explain many things, including even basic procedures at times. Several types of this kind of a novel exist. A historical novel introduces its readers to the alien world of the past; even realist novels can seem to "discover" the life of a social group or region based on the supposition that readers do not know anything about the said group or area. The following three examples displaying this tendency have been taken from works that force readers to confront an even deeper level of strangeness: novels that belong to the genres of fantasy, sci-fi and post-colonial literature.

Given that the reader's main object in reading a novel generally lies in the story, entailing information about customs and rituals may be important, yet still tends to happen within the context of relaying a character's experience (or maybe knowledge), be it the character's direct report of the experience, free indirect discourse, or a third-person-singular narrative utilizing a character's focalization. Terry Pratchett's *Eric* is a fantasy novel which makes use of travel narrative patterns by actually telling the story of a magic journey through both space and history. The episode of Eric's visit to the Tezuman Empire, at which time his wish to "rule the world" becomes true, begins in the manner of an ethnographic text or tourist guide: the omniscient narrator offers a short introduction to the characteristics of the Tezumen:

> The Tezuman Empire in the jungle valleys of central Klatch is known for its organic market gardens, its exquisite craftsmanship in obsidian, feathers and jade, and its mass human sacrifices in honour of Quezovercoatl, the Feathered Boa, god of mass human sacrifices. … The Tezumen are renowned on the continent for being the most suicidally gloomy, irritable and pessimistic people you could ever hope to meet, for reasons that may soon be made clear. (Pratchett 52–53)

The omniscient narrator explicitly retains some information and lets the characters discover what is occurring. When the characters realize or experience something, the narrator might explain this aspect or put it into perspective. For example, Rincewind, Eric's confused and incompetent "daemon" guide, remembers and tells Eric that "The Tezuman priests have a sophisticated calendar and an advanced horology" (51). Two pages later the narrator tells us why: "It was true about time measurement as well. The Tezumen had realized long ago that everything was getting worse and, having a terrible literal-mindedness, had developed a complex system to keep track of how much worse each succeeding day was" (53).

The Tezumen genuinely accept Eric as the Ruler of the World and therefore offer him huge baskets of jewels as a tribute. The first phase of a ritual is narrated, without either explaining to readers that there is a second part to follow or offering any explanation of its inner logic. Rincewind, however, realizes that the carvings on the pyramid represent the Tezumen's plans for the second phase, namely "what they intended to do to the Ruler of the World" (68). "He would be left in no doubt that they were annoyed. He might even go so far as to deduce that they were quite vexed." Rincewind sees a contradiction between the tribute of jewels and the planned torture-to-death of the Ruler, but Ponce da Quirm, a professional traveler (and fellow prisoner at this point) explains to him: "Well, he is the Ruler. … He's entitled to some respect, I suppose." What follows after this direct quotation is Rincewind's inner reasoning reported in free indirect discourse:

> Rincewind nodded. There was a sort of justice in it. If you were a tribe who lived in a swamp in the middle of a damp forest, didn't have any metal, had been saddled with a god like Quezovercoatl, and then found someone who said he was in charge of the whole affair, you probably would want to spend some time explaining to him how incredibly disappointed in him you were. (Ibid.)

The ritual, however, is not actually described in this novel. The obvious reason for this is that the ritual will not occur: it is only a ritual which the Tezumen imagine and long for, one that is represented visually, yet remains undescribed. What is told instead is the story of a character learning the ritual and understanding why it is supposed to work that way. This type of a narrative, however, cannot take alternative scenarios into account and subsequently therefore steers clear from a description of how this act is generally done in the given society.

This example from *Eric*, however, does not prove that a description of customs including all their alternative scenarios is impossible within the pages of a novel. In Ursula K. Le Guin's sci-fi novel, *The Dispossessed* (1974), when the protagonist Shevek moves to the capital of the anarchist moon Anarres and is accommodated in a single room, he experiences loneliness as a moral burden. The narratorial voice (maybe quoting Shevek's inner thoughts in free indirect discourse) explains why a single room is a problem for a member of the Anarres community.

> As a child, if you slept alone in a single it meant you had bothered the others in the dormitory until they wouldn't tolerate you; you had egoized. Solitude equated with disgrace. In adult terms, the principal referent for single rooms

> was a sexual one. Every domicile had a number of singles, and a couple that wanted to copulate used one of these free singles for a night, or a decade, or as long as they liked. A couple undertaking partnership took a double room; in a small town where no double was available, they often built one on to the end of a domicile, and long, low, straggling buildings might thus be created room by room, called 'partners' truck trains.' Aside from sexual pairing there was no reason for not sleeping in a dormitory. You could choose a small one or a large one, and if you didn't like your roommates, you could move to another dormitory.… A person whose nature was genuinely unsociable had to get away from society and look after himself.… But for those who accepted the privilege and obligation of human solidarity, privacy was a value only where it served a function. (Le Guin 170)

Different scenarios for various, possible plots are listed in this excerpt circumstantially. There is a normal way to live (always in a community), with some special occasions for separation (mainly for copulation), and all the possible reasons for changing the normal train of events are taken into account. However, the different solutions for those "egoizing," or being totally unsociable garner the moral censorship of the community. While none of these alternatives to a normal way of life were actually taken by Shevek himself, they obviously were and will be by several people on Anarres. This passage therefore does not offer a narrative in this instance, but rather a description of how things work in this particular world, including which life-paths can be chosen there and a demonstration of the background to the protagonist's moral struggles.

In Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger*, Balram Halvai, an Indian entrepreneur, tells his life story in a series of letters to the Chinese prime minister who wants to learn about the success of some Indian entrepreneurs as a generalizable example. The self-narrative is continuously combined with commentaries that explain the rules and mechanisms of Balram's own society to the foreign visitor. This version of the postcolonial novel therefore represents an inverse of the utopian travelogue; while in a utopia the traveler is usually given a guided tour in order to understand the workings of the perfect society better and then retells the acquired knowledge after returning home, in Adiga's novel the reader receives the native guide's speech directly, not to mention that Balram always discusses the imperfectness of his world. He furthermore tends to interpret events taken from his own life as examples of general customs, except for when he emphasizes that what he did was exceptional, a rare counter-example which breaks the rule in a very singular way. This strategy sometimes makes it possible to describe customs with all the possible alternatives in detail.

An example of the technique described above can be found in the passage which discusses elections in India. Elections do not play any role in the protagonist's career history since the local authorities in the democracy depicted in the novel officially report a unanimous result once the decision regarding which party's bribe will be accepted has been reached. Voters are not even allowed to enter the polling place. The narrator tells the story of one electoral campaign, but after reaching the point when the power groups reach their agreement, makes his father speak: "It's the way it always is…. I've seen twelve elections—five general, five state, two local—and someone else has voted for me twelve times" (Adiga, chapter "The Third Night"). This is one person's experience, from which one should not conclude that every voter always contemplates the elections from a passive distance that is heavily tinged with resignation. The next two pages then depict an alternative form of behavior. While this represents an individual case, the narration continuously emphasizes that the alternative kind of behavior is also frequent, and has its own, well-developed scenario, too. "On the day of the election, one man went mad. This happens every time, at every election in the Darkness."[5] Or: "They were trying to dissuade him, but only halfheartedly. They had seen this happening before. They wouldn't able to stop this man now" (ibid.).

In this case "going mad" means that somebody tries to vote. This eventuality is therefore also possible: "it happens every time" that some individuals really want to vote at the election. Although the narrator only mentions the one case he had witnessed, he still makes it clear that this is an alternative which is encoded in the election ritual. When the exemplary madman reaches the polling place, the counting of votes has already been completed; the result is declared (the vote was unanimous), and the congratulatory posters are being hung. When the erstwhile voter declares his intention to vote, he is slain by the police. This is the ritual of election: after a harsh campaign the elite groups make a deal among one another, then in the midst of colorful ceremonies (but without any involvement on the part of voters) the election ends with unanimous result, followed by a spectacular celebration of the winner. Anyone who actually wants to vote is killed. The narrator also makes it clear that this was neither the standard procedure during this single event nor in his father's time, but has been present throughout all the time since then. During the time of narration, he is wanted for murder and lives with a fake identity in Bangalore, far from his home village.

[5] Darkness is Adiga's metaphor for the impoverished areas of rural India.

Yet he is still registered as an active voter every year: "The police know exactly where to find me. They will find me dutifully voting on election day at the voting booth in the school compound in Laxmangarh in Gaya District, as I have done in every general, state, and local election since I turned eighteen. I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth."

The narrator tells the story of himself experiencing election for the first time in his adult life, but by emphasizing the fact that this is the way all elections have occurred every time, since this time and everywhere in the Darkness, while additionally representing both possible means of action (staying away from the polling place or going there), the narratorial commentaries transform the singular narrative into a general description of a social ritual.

It would most likely be nearly impossible to locate a description in a literary text in which nothing at all happens, in which time is not a feature, nor does any verb appear apart from that of *to be*. This circumstance, however, does not automatically mean that description is also narrative. When a narrative explains how an act must be done or how something is usually done in a community, the telling of different, sometimes alternative actions becomes the description of the rites and rituals that belong to a given community.

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Opisi ritualov

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Čeprav lahko predstavljanje običajev in ritualov zajema različna dejanja, je razlog, da gre za opise in ne za pripovedi, v splošnem pristopu, ki upošteva tudi alternativne možnosti. Če je niz potencialnih dogodkov odvisen od mnogih dejavnikov in besedilo poleg vseh teh dejavnikov predstavi tudi alternativne možnosti, je končni rezultat namreč opis. To je najočitneje pri preprostih besedilih (kot pokažemo na primeru reklamnega letaka za izdelek), medtem ko so v kompleksnejših vrstah pripovedi, kot je denimo roman, opisi ritualov običajno podani z gledišča likov, ne neposredno z gledišča pripovedovalca. Primere za analizo smo vzeli z zdravstvenega letaka za informiranje bolnikov, iz etnografskega besedila Bronisława Malinowskega, dveh popularnih romanov 20. stoletja, *The Dispossessed* Ursule K. Le Guin in *Eric* Terryja Pratchetta (prvi je znanstvenofantastični, drugi pa fantazijski roman), ter postkolonialnega romana Aravinda Adige *The White Tiger*.

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