

Notes on traditional South Asian ecology: the “village” and the “forest”

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Abstract

These short notes offer an overview on the two physical and metaphysical dimensions that constitute the space perspective in the Hindu cultural ideology: the reality of kṣētra and vana. The conception of these two realms encompasses a huge quantity of issues that intensively influence the Indian social sphere. This study regards the differences and analogies between kṣētra (the village) and vana (the forest). The dualism presented in this perception demonstrates in which way these contrasting spaces are connected and how they are meant to be in an eternal conflict. The separation is marked by the border's sign and the conflict is caused by the intrinsic nature of the two dimensions. The orderly features of the village and the chaotic property of the wild nature permeate the social dynamics of life. Considering the complexity of this space interpretation, the following observations will further analyze the topic with an interesting outlook on the Kondh folklore, through a reference to the pālṭa bāgha case. In addition, beyond the representative interference between kṣētra and vana, it is crucial to explore the modality through which the idyllic image of the village has been reflected on the Indian artistic production during the modern era.

Keywords: space perspective, *kṣētra*, *vana*, dualism, conflict, *pālṭa bāgha*, artistic production.

1. Introduction

As introduced by A.M. Shah in his descriptive essay “Village”, the Indian territorial network is known as an articulated land of villages. Data of the 2001 census of India report approximately 638.000 villages with a population of more than 741 million people. During the British Raj (1858 – 1947) the village population constituted as much as 90% of the total. Nowadays, this percentage is gradually decreasing, also because of the strong changes that the *village society* is progressively undergoing. The phenomenon of migration from the villages to the cities involves an important number of individuals, who find themselves readjusting their microcosm within the urban scenario. Migrant villagers frequently become part of the marginalized reality of the *slum*, which, somehow replaces the “urban village”.¹

¹ The following analysis is intimately related to the subject of the MA thematic seminar “Village (South Asia)” held in the academic year 2019/2020 (Prof. Luca Maria Olivieri) Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The decision about this study, complexity of the spatial dimension of the

The shape of the village is designed to house at its centre the most sacred and purest place: the temple. The central area is designed as the place where law and order regulate the relations among the entire society. Whoever ventures towards the boundaries of the village, starts a physical and metaphysical journey towards the dimension of the forest: the impure and unknown place *par excellence*. Hence, the consequent distancing from the central fulcrum causes relevant contamination: the strongest apprehension and anguish according to the Hindu Brahmanic ideology.² This cultural anxiety perfectly explains my first point, i.e. that the boundary's sign is essential to understand the symmetrical division between *kṣētra* and *vana*. Furthermore, as for the village conformation, every single borough (*tāṅka*) is inhabited by the same cast (better known as *jāti*). The highest and most noble casts occupy the pure heart of this emblematic space, the lower and impure ones occupy the marginal and suburban areas (Shah 2014: 1-2). My second point is that, in agreement with A.M. Shah, the spatial body of the village is closely linked to the social field. This relationship implies in absolute terms that the concept of hierarchy runs through the entire space in question. Every cast offers its complete collaboration in the economic and social activities of the village (ibid.: 2). My third point is that the unitary and mutually supportive character of the microcosm of the village is central to the understanding of the same exemplary model of caste-partnership praised by the Hindu ideological scheme.

2. *Kṣētra* and *vana*, the eternal struggle between *dharma* and *adharma*

The symbolic formula *kṣētra/vana* represents the *quaestio* of these notes. The symmetry between *kṣētra* and *vana* is reflected in the dyad *grāma/aranya*. *Kṣētra* or *grāma* corresponds to the cultural and structural domain where the law blends

village, has been stimulated by the lessons attended during the MA's Seminar, in particular by the lecture hosted by Antonio Rigopoulos.

² Patrick Olivelle is a notable academic in the Indology's research field. He focuses on *Dharmasūtra* and *Dharmaśāstra*, the great juridical texts of the Indian Subcontinent, analyzing Hindu law and underlining the systematic obsession of “pure and impure” dominion. He asserts that the terms “pure” and “impure” present a concrete and tangible connotation, directly dependent on the circumstances; these two notions refer to the ongoing situation and contact which could contaminate the human being. Olivelle points out that, as the juridical code of *Dharmaśāstra* explains, these two dimensions are not related to the *varṇa* (caste) notion (better specified as *jāti*) because their structure is completely autonomous. Instead, the “pure and impure” dominion represents the concrete effect and the transitory element; this isn't a permanent reality, the dynamic feature is the essential aspect of its existence. *Varṇa* symbolizes the ontological background of the pure and impure condition. The most significant moment immediately after the corruption through contamination is undoubtedly the purity restoration that signifies a relevant human and social achievement. Patrick Olivelle in one of his specialized studies displays a meticulous lexical list that illustrates the complexity and the articulation of the several Sanskrit terms that indicate the pervasive definition of “pure” and “impure” (Olivelle 2011a).

with the concept of society; this is the microcosm of the old Ārya civilization and the cradle of the Vedic religion. The village symbolizes both the dimension of the most sophisticated virtue of mankind (the language) and the seat of the sacraments' (*saṃskāra*). The most important *saṃskāra* is undoubtedly the marriage (*vivāha*) and the marital union is the central aspect of the *civilitas*. In this context, the human being fulfills all his noble duties (including offering sacrifices) in the social dimension; furthermore, the village is the ideal place where the three special debts, which I will analyze in the following chapters, are remitted. *Grāma* is the supreme space of *dharma* that constitutes the typical organization and disposition of the *societas*, and it represents the complete security and purity that characterize the village community.

In opposition to that, we have the intriguing reality of *vana*. The latter is the place where the wild nature dominates: the obscure element that frightens the social being. The forest is the wild animals' (*mṛga*) habitat where all appears unknown to the human *conscientia*. It is the domain within which the dark side of *dharma*, *adharmā*, takes root. In such a circumstance, therefore, disorder and chaos are unleashed (Olivelle 2011b).

The organized *dharma* constitutes the flawless dimension. On the other hand, to accept an *adharmic* circumstance can lead a man to seriously fail to comply with the social rules. Due to the implicated metaphysical connotations, that can create a real shock in the social order, *aranya* represents the living world of the ascetic, the opposite side of the civilian and structural model (ibid.). As for my perception, in the Hindu society, the ascetic figure represents, a rather hostile personality, given the impure environment in which he lives, or rather, goes to his death. After having successfully crowned his spiritual *mokṣa*, the ascetic soul flies away from the social duties and, he's considered to be equivalent to a dead person. He reaches the supreme stage of *saṃnyāsa*, and for this reason, a physical approach with the hermit—who is metaphorically dead—is equivalent to corrupted contamination. At the same time, the village community honors and respects the hermit, offering him meals doing his begging activities. Therefore, the anchorite symbolizes an ambivalent character.

In conclusion, an ascetic figure causes not only turmoil but also a fascinating admiration between people living in the social world. Between society and asceticism there is a recurrent metaphysical struggle that is equivalent to the dispute between *saṃsāra*³ and *mokṣa*, where the former represents the civil values and culture, and the latter, the anti-cultural model, that

³ *Saṃsāra* is a Sanskrit term that could be translated as “world”. This definition is connected with the cycle of life, death and with the rebirth dimension: it is for this reason that the most known symbol for this unique concept is the wheel. The essential vehicle of the uninterrupted circular process is recognized in the *karman* (the action).

is the liberation of the soul and the freedom that characterize uniquely the primitive ascetic.

3. *Āśrama*, stages of life: the core of responsibilities and the route to the *fuga mundi*

The Hindu social model (known as casts system) relies on series of *lakṣaṇas* (indicators) that define the features of the various *varṇa*. The main *lakṣaṇa* is endogamy, one of the fundamental prerogatives in the Hindu social sphere. Endogamy regulates the marital union between people of the same or compatible *jāti*. The marriage’s sacrament (*vivāha*), which completes itself with the blessing of the progeny, reveals the highest virtue and the strongest obsession of the Hindu world. Unfulfilling the endogamic model is associated with the contemptible and abhorrent idea of the chaos that alters the traditional vertical organization of the casts. Non-compliance of this precept subverts the *kula* conception, the family unit: the basic component of the village community.

In Hindu theology, the stages of human living are defined under the term *āśrama*. They were probably conceived in the 5th century BCE. Our oldest evidences derive from the earliest *Dharmasūtra* texts. The comprehension of *āśrama* is essential to deeply understand the articulated social and human dispositions and the importance of the duties of the *kula*. Furthermore, this analysis is essential to understand the *fuga mundi* that characterizes the last breaths of human life. This system is composed of four “modes of life”, which will later be replaced by the term “stages”. This is the description of every “stage of life”.

Brahmācarya: every *dvija*⁴ male individual must, pass through the first stage called the “Brahmanic apprenticeship”. During adolescence, the young male introduces himself to the Vedic studies at the Great Teacher’s abode where he will spend twelve years of his life. In this period the student will be initiated to the traditional rituals and the *mantra*. Through the Vedic initiation, the youngster starts for the very first time his symbolic contact with the adult life’s responsibilities, officially ending that period of the life in which carefreeness is the predominant characteristic: childhood.

⁴ Literally “twice-born”, it indicates the three highest casts in the Hindu social hierarchy (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya* and *vaiśya*). These three special groups are entitled to receive the rite of initiation called *Upanayana*, one of the main sacraments (*saṃskāra*). During the ceremony the subject obtains the sacred thread, *yajñopavīta*. The male *dvija* male has some important privileges as the opportunity to study the sacred *Veda*. This group is naturally different from the so-called “once-born” class that is represented by the low caste of *śūdra*.

Grhastha: it represents the phase in which the male *dvija* becomes a father. This period is the most connected with the social and organized dimension and symbolizes the first approach to society. It combines the most relevant burdens: becoming the head of the household, keeping the ritual fire, primarily the domestic one, and marrying a woman that will offer him the blessing of the offspring. So, in this period every male individual must become a *pati* (“lord” and “husband”) and must unite with his *patnī* (“lady” and “wife”). In the Hindu religious mentality, only a married man is complete in living experience. However the superior benefit is constituted by the progeny as they maintain the chain of *gōtra*, the ancestral clan (Olivelle 1993). This familiar achievement is the most important one.

During the first two stages, the *social man* has to adhere to the “three debts”. In the Brahmanic culture, three special debts are attributed to the mankind at birth: the first is dedicated to the ancestors, which is settled through the offspring’s blessing; the second is addressed to *ṛṣi*, achieved through the study of sacred scriptures; the third is dedicated to the deities, fulfilled through the rituals (sacrifices). Only the married man, in the presence of his wife, possesses the noble duty and the right to execute the traditional sacrifice. The wife’s participation, even though passive, is necessary to the ritual’s completeness (ibid.)

Vānaprastha: this is the retreat’s period; the ideal place of this emblematic phase is the forest. Once the man has fulfilled all his social responsibilities and absolved the noble role of being a father, he appears to be completely ready for the ascetic experience and starts his life in the wild nature. At this time he can also pursue his life of isolation with his *patnī*. This is the period of the spiritual and physical self-abandonment.

Samnyāsa: this is the phase of the spiritual *fuga mundi*, the renouncement period. In this moment the individual undergoes a primordial and natural revival. The return to the primitive dimension is possible only in the *vana* realm. Now I would like to focus on an interesting and intriguing personality: the *samnyāsin*. I refer here to the studies of Patrick Olivelle, who illustrates with extreme meticulousness the ascetic figure’s complicated dynamics (in particular Olivelle 2011b), and Antonio Rigopoulos (Rigopoulos 2010). The *samnyāsin* carries out a cultural renouncement that is a complete refusal of the dwelling, the speaking skill, the rules’ dimension, even of the body necessities. It is a life’s abandonment *tout court*. Thus, entering this phase through a funeral ritual, the *samnyāsin* is regarded as being a living dead. He renounces to his birth name, to all the interpersonal relationships with others, and all his belonging, giving up his life. From this moment onwards, the ascetic figure will always pursue a nomadic and begging life (*bhikṣu*), completely refusing to settle in a specific area. This

concept is also linked to the idea of absolute non-existence, being the ascetic a fugacious and fleeting character. Above all the mentioned changes which the *saṃnyāsin* goes through, the most significant is, by all means, the loss of his previous caste, which entitles him to be regarded as *avarna*. Moving away from the *societas* and entering into asceticism, the *saṃnyāsin* does not need to follow any rules and social prescriptions anymore, indeed, he chooses not to use the language as the mean *par excellence* of communication of the “social man”. The ascetic completely conforms himself to the horizon of animality and adapts his life to the *vana* realm, returning to a pre-cultural reality of union with the surrounding environment. The overarching reason for his path lies in a quest to liberate the self as an individual from all the limitations and constraints that bind him in life. The ideological vision of the ascetic explains that the truth of life is not *dharma*, but its reverse reality: *mokṣa*.

4. The dualism of the animal dimension and the severe nutrition rules

The *kṣētra* and *vana* antinomy is characterized by the *other* dimension of the animals. This dimension is constantly recalled through a contrasting dualism: domestic animals, known as *paśu*, which pervades the space of the *kṣētra*, and wild beast, known as *mṛga*, which occupy the mysterious area of the *vana*. *Paśu*, the animal that resides inside the civilized dimension, is symbolic for the village community. The *paśu* animals par excellence are the goat (*ajā*) and the cow (*go*), both live inside the farm and the latter is charged with a strong religious *taboo*. By contrast, *mṛga* lives without restrictions inside the untamed and wild nature of *vana*. The undomesticated animals are, by all means, the deer and the tiger (see Addendum. 1, below). The animal of the forest is intimately significant within the ascetic dimension; the beast is indeed the only life’s companion of the hermit, from which his most intrinsic behavior derives. His attitude resembles that of the wild animals, and for this reason the ascetic is intimately linked to the deer and, on the opposite side, to the cow. The term *gocārin* is usually associated with the imitation of the cow’s peculiar eating habits (Olivelle 2011b).

The complexity of the dual spatial dimension connected to the animals impact on the particular Brahmanic diet *taboo*. Indeed, the insisting differentiation between the enigmatic “pure” and “impure” concepts involves an immense number of issues, including nutrition. In this regard, there is a redundancy in Hindu ideology regarding the *topos* of the village’s borders. The animals that gravitate to the village are perceived as unfamiliar, as they are the closest to *societas* (e.g. the dog). The animals that are perceived “allowed to be eaten” by the eating norms, are those which are positioned between the human beings’ habitat and the forest (in the pastures, or rivers: e.g. the buffalo). The wild beasts are configured inside the impure domain and those people who enjoy them are contemplated as barbarians (e.g.: the great felines).

So, this exemplary and ideal animal is neither *grāmya* (which lives in *grāma*, the village) nor *āraṇyaka* (which lives in *araṇya*, the jungle). Thus, I find it relevant to claim that the influential strength of the animal's habitat is thoroughly reflected on the human world and that the border is the actual divider between the "pure" and "impure" domains.

5. Addenda. Two short case-studies

5.1 The exemplary vana beast and the incarnated strength of nature: the pālta bāgha case

The current chapter offers the possibility to develop the argument regarding the village and the unfamiliar wild world. This analysis highlights the indigenous reality of the ethnic group of Kondh, in Orisha. Data are based on a survey carried out in Phulbani, in Kandhamal district (Orisha) (Beggiora 2014). The tribe is defined as PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group). Its people live in a protected reserve in a pure and primitive equilibrium with the wild nature with which they are tied in an intimate relation. In this specific case the "domesticated" dimension is embodied by the buffalo that is traditionally sacrificed by the Kondh community and the enigmatic chaos of the *vana*, on the other hand, is perfectly incarnated by the tiger. In this paragraph I would like to focus on a particular man-animal interaction with a specific reference to the event of therianthropy. In this case-study, the *āraṇyaka* beast *par excellence*, the tiger, is the main character of the wild universe, the place where energy surrounds enigmatically the typical fascination of this beast. The phenomenon of therianthropy is conceived as a figurative metamorphosis from human to animal form. This mutation is part of the tribal folklore of the Kondh group, but is perceived as a mere aspect of local superstition. This peculiar manifestation is indicated with the term *pālta bāgha*⁵ and is explained as a figurative transformation from man to tiger. This phenomenon occurs in the middle of the night and it consists in the metaphorical wandering of the soul outside the physical dimension, followed by a symbolic roaming into the jungle where the animals mutation becomes real. The tiger normally attacks the villages expressing its violence against enemies; in this moment the animal oversteps the *vana* habitat. This metamorphosis remains in a dreamlike dimension. The R.E.M sleep phase (Rapid Eye Movement Sleep) is an emblematic moment for the reading and interpretation of the body movements of man destined to metamorphosis. It is in this temporal arc, which coincides with the instant preceding deep sleep, that is possible to trace certain signals and some specific

⁵ This term derives from the linguistic tradition of Orisha (is an Oriya term). *Pālta* is related to the meaning of mutation's form and *bāgha*, like the Hindi word *bāgh* designed the "tiger".

gestures, present in the body language, connecting the individual to the feline world. Through this accurate analysis it is possible to distinguish who could become the feline’s abduction object.

The tiger represents one of the main characters inside the great Hindu pantheon. Ideologically, it presents a strong divine feminine attribute that flows into the *śakti* symbology and it represents the incarnated strength of nature. The tiger’s ideal prey is not the human being; the essential cause of its attack is linked to a metaphysical upheaval in the shamanic cosmos which arise from a conflict between the local space and the surrounding nature. In the Kondh’s cultural dimension the aggressive fury of the feline is interpreted as the phenomenon of *pālṭa bāgha* (Beggiora 2014).

I would like to underline that the chaotic *pālṭa bāgha* sphere represents the fundamental importance of the maintenance of the social order in the village cosmos and of the restoration of the canonic layout that is essential for the social system. For this reason, the human being’s main responsibility is to renovate an ideal equilibrium between nature and man; this is the life’s achievement of Kondh folk reality.

5.2. The uncontaminated village as the undisputed character of artistic primitivism

The historical context taken into consideration has at its center the Indian Subcontinent, suppressed by the British Raj (1858-1947), willing to gain independence and acquire a cultural redemption after many years of subjugation. The feeling which recalls a radical separation and a strong rejection of the British cultural and artistic expressions is deeply embodied by the 20th century *Swadeshi* movement, which led the “Hindu civilization” to become widely celebrated. The intellectual core of the rising Hindu nationalism is located in Bengal: indeed, this period is referred to be the “Bengali Renaissance”. The artistic primitivism, which I will analyze further in the following paragraphs, is set in this enigmatic period.

I’ve had the chance to observe that primitivism, placed within the artistic production of the 20th century, usually reflects the profile of the village, which becomes the undisputed protagonist of the artwork and which suggests a metaphorical revival of the pure and uncontaminated pre-industrial dimension. The Indian village is depicted in a multitude of interpretations, and, its representation is, by all means, coherent thanks to the rudimentary techniques, colors, shapes, and subjects applied in the paintings. In the following paragraph, I briefly describe some of the most iconic characters of the artistic environment in question.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) played one of the major roles in the Bengali artistic arena. Winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, he

represented one of the leading members of his high-class family, which was a landmark for the intellectuals of that time. It is Tagore that revived the idea of the microcosmic space of the village as a pure and genuine dimension. He was dually involved in primitivism, the conceptual subdivision consists of a public and private dimension: playing in the former, the artist highlights the perspective of the anticolonial struggle, while in the latter, he focuses more on introspection looking into his psyche.

Tagore deemed that the radical detachment from the Western model was detrimental to Indian artistic progress, indeed, although he was one of the major advocates of the *Swadeshi* movement, he perceived nationalism and the refusal of the Western style in a different way. It follows that, unlike the other radical supporters of the movement, he was favorable to the opening up towards the Western society in order to promote cultural exchanges between the two artistic models. In the Birbhum District of West Bengal, Tagore expanded the school founded by his father in 1921, the *Śāntiniketan*, which will eventually become a symbol of the anti-colonial struggle. The school presents a unique cultural environment and in its contemplative surroundings embodies the artistic “environmentalism” of Tagore (Mitter 2007: 65-80).

Now, I would like to shift my attention on two female artists: Amrita Sher Gil and Sunayani Devi. They are the very first female artists to be recognized on the scene of the Indian Subcontinent.

Amrita Sher Gil (1913-1941): her identity is divided, being of both Hungarian and Indian origin. Her painting modality is imbued with this metaphorical rift that reflects a deep disintegration and discomfort. Her pictorial style shows a rare introspection, a turmoil and a melancholy that identify her artistic expression as completely different from the canonic rural primitivism that was flourishing at the time. The new movement, indeed, was akin to reproduce the village as a dimension of happiness and as a special genuineness.

The personality of Sunayani Devi (1875-1962), Rabindranath Tagore’s niece, embodies a figure at the antipodes of Amrita Sher Gil’s personality. Sunayani Devi is the typical Indian housewife, always devoted to her beloved husband. Unlike Amrita’s experiences in the great artistic academic circles in Europe, Sunayani grew as a self-taught painter, so she had the chance to link both her professional life with the private domain as a wife (Mitter 2007:36-44). Thus, the domestic realm portrayed by the artist is, by all means, incomparable to Amrita Sher Gil’s experience, which is characterized by a remarkable unsteadiness.

By analyzing Sunayani Devi’s paintings, the application of a considerable amount of mythological and religious subjects with human and emotional connotations is observable. This can be explained by the fascination of the

painter towards a prominent artist of Indian realism, Raja Ravi Varma⁶. There are many points of reference for the artist, but the Czech-Austrian art historian and long-time Philadelphia lecturer Stella Kramisch (1896-1993) identified two fundamental ones in her painting. The first one is the Bengal’s manufacture, and the second derives from the “Kalighat”⁷ paintings (ibid.). Amrita Sher Gil and Sunayani Devi were the first two female artists who had the possibility to change the common understanding of the woman as a side character in Indian artistic movements by creating a strong and long-lasting effect on their professional lives.

6. Conclusions

The continuity of the topics explained in this study develops an extended discourse about the “Indian village”. The analysis permits to observe the different perceptions and the complicated dynamics of the animated life of the village. The crucial *focus* is about the division between two particular spaces: *kṣētra* and *vana*. This parallelism shows constant repercussions among communities presenting a real footprint on the fruition of the microcosmic space. The ordinate administration of the village is dictated by the *societas*; to the other side the wild nature is characterized by the ascetic’s experience and its *fuga mundi* that metaphorically disobeys to the structural realm. Thus, a conflictual hiatus between *dharma* and *mokṣa* appears.

The reality of the Khonds results extremely interesting because of its independent traditional dimension and for its shamanic features. The *pālṭa bāgha* case undoubtedly lead to comprehend meticulously the spatial and metaphysical domain (Beggiora 2014). There are two spatial spheres and the place *in between*

⁶ Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was born in one of the Indian “princely states”, in the Travancore state (Kerala). He was educated at court and in his life he was always surrounded by the courtly environment. In the history of the Subcontinent he has been perceived as the first well-known artist. In his painting style is observable a relevant influence from the European artistic scene. The contact with the greatest European artists has produced a huge opportunity for the master of art who combined his fascinated modality with the realism, the rendering of volumes and a lot of sophisticated techniques. The subjects of the painter, through the representation of mythological heroines of the Indian epic, symbolize the female universe. In his painting are meticulously reflected the human sentiments and the sensuality of the female body (Mitter 1994: 179-217).

⁷ *Kalighat painting* represents an artistic movement that promoted, in its history, the popular expressions of art. Kalighat is the name of a borough in Kolkata, its name derives from the holy temple of Kālī where the neighbourhood itself is located. In this artistic arena, groups of artists, called *patua*, produced paintings on a paper support. The scenes reproduced described in a vivid and genuine way. Unfortunately the rapid development of the metropolis in the 1800 caused a progressive migration of artists that arrived in Kolkata and started producing paintings for the holy temple’s devotees. Due to the urban expansion and the enrichment of the *elite* class, the *patua* groups of artists conformed their artistic discipline to the new target’s necessities and tastes. Through this mutation, the support’s materials and the painting techniques changed; thus the painter introduced the watercolor and tempera.

is represented by the border's mark. The wild beasts, overstepping the margin and appearance in the community of village provoke an unpredictable and overpowering turmoil. The approach of the *mṛga* to the social realm symbolizes the encounter between *kṣētra* and *vana*. This is the cataclysmic event that connects the two parallel universes and this is the moment when the occult conflict unleashes.

Concluding this analysis is observable that the topic of the village embodies an infinity of articulations that lead to a deeper understanding of the problematic sphere of the space that, in this case, is composed by two antithetical worlds which demonstrate a close relation and a strict separation at the same time.

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