

## **A small ritual and three phases of the process of elaboration in group psychoanalysis**

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### **Abstract**

Using an extended clinical account, I draw attention to two questions that are important to understanding the therapeutic efficacy of the small psychoanalytic group. The first is the relationship between therapeutic efficacy and the implementation of rituals, which confirm the transition from one condition to another in life, or which allow the sharing of experiences that may otherwise remain confined to a restricted private state. The second relates to the phases through which expression, sharing and the transformation of lives and spiritual states occur. I identify three of these phases: work phases, phases of engrossed silence and phases of emotional and congratulatory exchange.

**Key words:** Transformation in K and evolution in O, Rites of passage, Therapeutic efficacy, Aridity/generosity, Sterility/fertility

The birth of Agata's son – she was the first of the group's participants to conceive and bring a child into the world – was marked with a small ritual. The ritual – introducing the newborn to the group – will go on to be repeated and become customary. The group, in fact, will reveal itself to be particularly fertile, not only in its ideas, but also in terms of children. All the participants – apart from Marisa – will have one or more children during the period of their analyses.

### *Some information about the group*

I will report the salient moments that occurred during the two sessions. First, however, I wish to give some details about the group's situation at this time. The group was made up of seven participants and myself. The age of the people in the group ranged from twenty-five to forty years old, with the exception of Marisa, who had recently turned fifty.

I will add that, in the weeks immediately preceding the two sessions I am going to recount, the interest and fantasies of the participants were focused most strongly on Agata's labour and the imminent birth of her baby. Agata – for her part – showed herself to be particularly generous, coming to the sessions right up until the day she went into labour.

### *The Monday session*

Monday is rainy and unusually cold for the end of June. After about a quarter of an hour, those present seem to have come to the conclusion that, contrary to what I had promised in the previous session, Agata and the newborn won't attend.

Marisa explains why she's convinced of this fact and at the same time offers understanding words as she faces up to Agata's absence. "In this awful weather, it definitely wouldn't have been easy for Agata to leave the house, get in the car, strap in the newborn and come to the group."

The failure of Agata and the baby to arrive – notwithstanding Marisa's understanding words – leaves an atmosphere of slight disappointment. There are a few minutes of silence.

Isotta – as though she is granting the signal to proceed without Agata and the baby – takes a little bag of red sweets out of her handbag and passes them around. Everyone takes one or more than one. Isotta explains that her sister has just graduated. In her village it is customary to offer sweets to celebrate important occasions. The colour of the sweets changes according to the event: white for baptisms, communions and marriages, red for graduations.

Isotta goes on to say that her parents came to Rome for the graduation. Her mother was very anxious. "She asked me about every little thing, 'What should I do?' 'What should I wear?' 'Does my hair look OK?'". After a certain point, Isotta couldn't handle it any more and said to her, forcefully, 'Remember, you're the mother!'

As soon as Isotta had finished speaking, Roxana recounted an outing she had made on Saturday evening. During the weekend, her husband had a work commitment, and she – unusually – had decided not to stay at home by herself. She called two friends, who convinced her to go out dancing. In the club, lots of men approached her. In the end, she and her friends stayed out until four in the morning. Roxana finishes the story, saying that she is satisfied above all because she felt no sense of guilt, on the contrary, she woke up on Sunday morning and was in a good mood all day.

At this point, something happens that is very unusual in relation to the group's usual way of functioning. For more than an hour, not one of the members recounts a dream or refers to a problem. Instead, they all talk about singers and bands. "Do you know that group..." "When I was fifteen I liked..." "Who? The one that sang...".

I listen to these conversations feeling as though I am having some kind of out of body experience. I am hit with a strong, unpleasant tiredness, that wears off somewhat as the session continues.

When it is about to finish, I intervene: "There are, in my opinion, many reasons that might explain how relaxed the session was today. The main one could be that most of those present preferred to wait for Agata and

the baby to get here. Talking about music and singers probably had the effect of creating a relaxed atmosphere that would be suitable for them". After the session ended, another possible explanation occurred to me for the unusual way it had gone. It's possible that the vague excitement that I detected in Roxana's story, and in the conversation about singers and songs that followed, could have been a tactic employed by the group members to keep feelings of depression and exclusion at bay. I certainly experienced them. During the session – as I said – I felt left out and a little tired. Perhaps, myself and the members of the group divided up roles: I was more in contact with the feelings of loss and exclusion from the failure of Agata and the newborn to arrive, while the others experienced the festive feelings connected to the birth.

### *The Thursday session*

Walking into the room, I notice an atmosphere of togetherness, focused and rather enthusiastic. All the group members are present. Agata has arrived and is on great form. She is sitting comfortably with the newborn in her arms. She is breastfeeding. In front of her sits Bernard who looks a bit embarrassed. Roxana has taken the spot next to Agata and looks visibly moved.

Alex is a lovely and very expressive baby. He's thirteen days old today. As I sit down, Agata says (as if to justify herself) "I'm breastfeeding because it's the best way to keep him quiet."

The session is characterised by a succession (it occurred three or four times) of brief phases (each lasting around five or ten minutes) during which different collective moods are present and different types of activities (also periods of no activity) develop in the group.

It is a little as though theatre-goers might avidly describe to one another their reflections and fantasies related to a scene they have watched or are about to watch, intensively discussing it for a few minutes; then falling into meditative silence; then going to the foyer to have a drink and exchange compliments and friendly words.

These phases can be defined more precisely in the following way:

- a) "Work phases": I recount fantasies or dreams with associations from the group members and I set out to develop and understand these fantasies and more generally, that which happens in the session. Bion (1970) would speak of the *Transformation in K*. The transformations in K (*Knowledge*) correspond to the quest to know someone or something.
- b) Phases of "engrossed and intense silence": it is as if everyone were enjoying something that required concentration and silence more than words. Spurling (2008, pp.526-7) writes, with reference to situations of this kind, that they are realised in the dual

psychoanalytic *setting* as well as in the group: “[...] The dreamy, isolated condition of the patient can be considered as his or her being in contact with a primitive mental state which wants to nourish itself, above all as a way of avoiding something. Such a condition could be seen as a prelude to some form of Self-experience or that which Balint has called “an experience of life becoming simpler and truer” (Balint 1968, p.135). On these occasions the “non-communication” of the patient should be seen as a positive contribution [to the analytic process] (Winnicott 1954), that requires the analyst to adopt a stance that permits the analysand to complete his or her experience”. Employing the language of Bion (1970), one can talk about these phases in terms of *Evolution in O* and of putting oneself in *Unison with O* (the mother, divinity, ultimate reality).

- c) Phases of “emotional and congratulatory exchange”: Agata is invited to share details relating to the experience of giving birth and breastfeeding. Participatory gestures are made towards her and the newborn. Roxana – for example – takes Alex in her arms, to give Agata a break. Isotta sends round the sweets again. These phases of exchange seem to me to be a continuation of the atmosphere of regression and gentle excitement that had characterised the second part of the preceding session (Neri 2009). I retain that these phases of emotional and congratulatory exchange do not only have the function of warming people up, but also one of creating and maintaining a favourable climate for emotional contact, counterbalancing the predominantly serious and conscientious effect of the other two phases.

In the Thursday session the three phases alternated in a way that was particularly clear and defined. The processes corresponding to the three phases, however, are active in any group analysis that is functioning properly. It can be difficult to distinguish them in such a clear way, because they present themselves in a mixed-up fashion. They can be established throughout a long series of sessions, instead of in a single session. However, the substance of their work and of their interaction does not change.

#### *Work phases*

During the session’s “work phases”, all the women in the group – apart from Elsa – recount a dream of motherhood. The men do not recount dreams, but are very active in the work of elaboration and comprehension. It is probably that they identify less with Agata; and that

– in this particular event in the group's life – the difference between the sexes was felt more acutely.

I will report the dreams and their associations. There are no interventions of mine to state. The running of the session, in fact, did not require me to intervene with interpretations or comments.

Remaining silent for a long period is not my usual method of participating in a session. This session and the one preceding it are, for different reasons, exceptional. In the first, I was busy trying to process my feelings of unease and depression that arose from the unusual way the session progressed. During this session, however, the group's functioning was so productive that it did not require my interventions (Neri 2003).

Marisa: "I dreamt I was pregnant. This gave me the right to have priority use of the bathroom. I was in a large room, like the kind you find on motorways or in hotels. On several sides of the room there were numerous toilet cubicles. The room was tidy, clean and pleasant. A cubicle became free and I went to go in, but two little old ladies jumped in front of me. I decided not to say anything. The two women were elderly; and I wasn't really in a rush. In the dream, as I said, I was pregnant; however, at the same time I was aware that for me the age of having a baby had passed.

Yet I distanced myself from this knowledge, thinking: "It's true that I am a little older! It means I will have a smaller baby".

Carlo: "The room with many toilet cubicles ... could it be the group's room? The way you described it, and in particular the arrangement of the toilets on different sides of the room, that's like our places here."

Marisa: "Yes, it was a place I was passing through, but it had a familiar feel to it."

Bernardo: "In the dream you thought you would have a baby and that the baby would be smaller... do you mean that the baby would be small in size?"

Marisa: "The fact the baby would be small has to do with how I've always thought about myself. I've never had the feeling of being young, even when I actually was young. I have only ever had the feeling of being small: small in the sense of not being fully developed, of not being fully a woman. This way of thinking about myself lasted for a long time. It lasted until just a short time ago. During the past year of analysis, however, this idea, fortunately, has changed. Now – when I think of myself and also when I am with others – I think and act like a woman who is more or less my age, a woman who is more or less fifty years old."

Carlo: "I – when I heard Marisa speak about having a smaller baby – I thought something different to what she's explaining to us now. I thought Marisa was comparing her experience (and also our experience) with that of Agata. Agata actually has had a son, she has had a wonderful experience. Marisa and the rest of us are sharing in Agata's experience; in a certain sense, we all have a small baby."

Roxana recounted the second dream of the session. In this dream – as in Marisa's – joyful and depressive sentiments were present simultaneously. In Roxana's dream, however, the sentiments of depression and loss, caused by noting the fact that she had not had her own child, were not accompanied by such a strong ambivalence as was present in Marisa's dreams and associations.

Marisa – as her dream shows – on the one hand "looks down on" the experience of giving birth and bringing a child into the world, comparing it to going into a toilet cubicle ("I was pregnant, it was my turn to go into the cubicle"); on the other hand, she does not know how to accept the reality which she is being forced to face up to ("I would bring a baby into the world too, even if it was a small baby").

Marisa seems to be saying that she isn't too old; it's the other two women appearing in the dream who are elderly, and she lets them go in front ("Two little old ladies jumped into the queue in front of me; I decided not to say anything").

Roxana, however, also seems to have experienced Agata's pregnancy, above all in anticipation of a pregnancy of her own. In fact, in Roxana's dream the feeling of loss, because it is not she who has had a child now, is counterbalanced by a strong sense of the body and bodily sensations, which are activated by her identification both with the mother (Agata) and with the newborn (Alex).

Roxana: "I had a dream too...it was split into two parts. In the first, I found myself on a beautiful terrace overlooking the sea. Actually, the terrace was not overlooking the sea, but was right down at sea level. The water lapped at it and little waves washed over it. The light was beautiful: it was not broad daylight, but dusk; and so it wasn't completely bright, but there was still enough light. In the second part of the dream, the water was darker and I immersed myself in it. I got in and out of the water several times. I was soaking wet. This part of the dream must have had to do with Agata's labour: in fact, someone had given birth. It wasn't me that had given birth, but my sister-in-law. My sister-in-law, for some reason, had not been able to keep the baby; and she entrusted it to

me. The newborn was wet, like after birth, when they are still a little waxy. I was wet too. I didn't know how to dry the baby. Then, however, I wiped him against my body and in this way I was able to dry him."

Carlo: "You were wet like the baby... perhaps you could have been inside a mother's stomach too."

Isotta: "To me, going in and out of the water, being wet, makes me think more of sexuality than being inside a mother's stomach."

Roxana: "When I came out of the water, I felt good."

Bernardo: "In the dreams you've recounted over the past few months, the water was always very dark; here, however, it seems that there was still enough light, even if it wasn't broad daylight."

Elsa: "You immersed yourself just when the water got darker... it's strange."

Roxana: "For years, after the death of my father, I dreamt of dark water. Now, I feel better: I am freer... it's like a weight has been lifted. Maybe the dark waters are connected to the memory of my father, which I now feel able to get closer to, with less sadness."

Marisa: "To me the fact of whether the water was dark or less dark doesn't seem so important, but more that in this dream, Roxana immersed herself voluntarily. In the dreams of the past months, in contrast, she stayed on the water's edge or else she fell in and risked drowning."

Roxana's dream – as we have seen – is marked by the presence of both slightly depressive experiences ("It was getting dark.", "The waters were getting darker.") and joyous experiences ("The light was beautiful.", "I wiped the newborn against my body and I was able to dry him.").

In the third dream of the session – that which Alessia recounted – however, these feelings are not present, but instead a reflection on how she can get pregnant and what happens to the body of a woman who is pregnant.

Alessia's dream is certainly related to Agatha's having given birth, but it is also connected, above all, to her upcoming marriage. The date is drawing closer; and with marriage, the possibility that she could get pregnant is also nearing. Alessia – when she is awake and conscious – can't fully accept the idea of having a body that contains something that is alive and growing beyond her control. She has begun the group analysis in order to face a complex series of problems, among them a fairly serious case of anorexia. Her anorexic symptomatology is now almost completely resolved; but an uncertainty around how to see and feel her body persists. When she dreams, Alessia is able to do that which she cannot do when she is awake. That is, she tries to construct – in an

artistic and experimental way – a space that represents the inside of her body and the space shared by a couple.

In the very first part of the dream – as we will see – Alessia seems to rely above all on her experience of being present during Agata's pregnancy. I am referring to the initial part of the dream, which she introduced with the words “I was pregnant, too”. However, afterwards, Alessia changes her point of reference; she no longer makes reference to Agata, but to an artist-figure. This artist, probably, is a personification of one of her creative *States of self*. Alessia, in fact, is a highly original and innovative set designer. The artist-friend who appears in the dream, however, does not only represent one of Alessia's *States of self*. At the same time, it is also a way of representing how the analyst and the whole group work.

Alessia: “In my dream I was pregnant, too. It was quite a complex dream. In this dream, I was looking at the work of an artist friend. The work was done in a particular way: images were superimposed onto one another, so that at first glance they did not seem to be related. However, looking at the work from a certain distance and from a particular angle, the superimposed images allowed you to see two figures woven together that formed a kind of space.”

Isotta: “Were the two figures you and Alessandro, your fiancé?”

Alessia: “Yes, Alessandro was definitely there in the dream.”

Agata: “This artist friend makes me think of your job as a set designer.”

Alessia: “Yes, and also of Dr. Neri's work.”

Marisa: “A space was created?”

Alessia: “A kind of space.”

Bernardo: (trying to help Alessia reach a conclusion): “So, were you pregnant or weren't you?”

Alessia: “In the dream, I was definitely pregnant. My stomach was sticking out.”

Alessia's dream demonstrates how, from a dissociative state (“images that seemed not to bear any relation to one another”) one can arrive at a sense of greater completeness (“together, the images superimposed onto one another allowed you to see two figures intertwined”). The dream also shows how from a situation that wavers between two- and three-dimensionality (“a kind of space”) it is possible to arrive at three-dimensionality (“my stomach was sticking out”).

In the final dream recounted in the session – Isotta's dream – there is a complete change of perspective from the dreams recounted earlier by Marisa, Roxana and Alessia.

Isotta, in recounting her dream and moreover, through the associations that accompany it, suggests seeing the birth-event not solely from the perspective of the woman who is pregnant or who could be pregnant, not

solely from the perspective of the woman who gives birth, not solely from the perspective of the newborn that emerges from the waters in birth, but also from the point of view of the person who attends the birth: the child who is getting a new brother or sister.

Isotta: "In the dream, I was being followed by a monster. Then I stopped, and I was able to enter into a more friendly relationship with him. It was like in one of those films, like *Alien*."

Marisa: "The first times you came to the group you really gave me the impression of someone who was being followed and was running away."

Bernando: "Perhaps by coming to the group, Isotta has been able to stop running."

Marisa: "*Alien* is the film in which a woman is pregnant with an extraterrestrial being?"

Isotta: "Yes... monsters that come down from space and colonise a spaceship."

Carlo: "Then there's a battle inside the spaceship?"

Isotta: "Yes, that's the film. I don't want to talk about that, though, but about something that is on my mind and which seems to me to be very important. When I came into the group room today and saw Agata and Alex, I was surprised. I had expected that Agata wouldn't come just with Alex, but also with her daughter Donata."

Agata (turning to Isotta): "That's a very affectionate thought. I also – as I was coming to the group – thought of my daughter. Donata didn't come with me today – with me and Alex – because she's busy. Donata, now... after Alex's birth ...seems to have picked up her life and activities again. Throughout the whole of my pregnancy she was so happy about the fact that she was going to have a little brother. Then, soon after the birth, she started to show signs of unhappiness. I felt that these protests were a positive thing, because it seemed to me that Donata was able to express her need for me to give her attention and also that she felt free to express her feelings of hostility and rejection."

Bernardo: "I'm the eldest of seven siblings."

Agata (continuing her speech, as if she hadn't heard Bernardo): "What's been really surprising, though, is how her brother behaves with her. Before Donata even enters the room, or even just when he hears her voice, Alex starts moving, his expression changes, he turns to face her."

Carlo (turning to Isotta): "Other than the sister you talked about, do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Isotta: "Yes. I have a brother who's ten years younger than me. When he was born, I was already quite old and I was able to follow the whole process of the birth. But I don't remember ever seeing my mother with a pregnant belly."

Marisa (also turning to Isotta): “Is the brother you’re talking about the one who still lives at home with your parents?”

Isotta: “Yes, that’s him... before the session finishes, though, I want to express my gratitude to Agata, for the way in which she has shared her pregnancy with us.”

### *Some reflections*

The first reflection relates to something that changed between the Monday session and the Thursday session. During the Monday session, there was a clear division of roles: I had experienced feelings of exclusion and loss while the others felt euphoria and excitement. These feelings were expressed in the dreams. In Marisa’s dream, the pride at being pregnant (“...I dreamed I was pregnant, this gave me a right...”) co-exists with the pain of noting that the possibility of having a child has gone (“... the age of having children was past”). In Roxana’s dream, the dark waters of mourning for the loss of her father (“... the water was darker now...”) are mixed up with the trepidation of holding a newborn close to her (“...I wiped him against my body...”)

The second reflection relates to placing oneself in contact with a nucleus of potent fantasies – such as those having to do with pregnancy and birth – which behave on the one hand as a consistent and positive amplification of life and personal experiences, on the other as an experience of persecution and anxiety. In her dream, Isotta is being followed by an extraterrestrial monster. In Alessia’s, the different images superimposed could form a couple, but could also remain a simple, ephemeral juxtaposition. Alessia, moreover – in the course of the discussion with the other members of the group – demonstrated a limited ability to face any destabilising intrusions coming from the people around her. When she has to respond to Marisa’s perplexed question (“So... they created a space?”) she is uncertain about what she actually dreamed. Only when it is solicited and in a way supported by Bernard does she manage to respond clearly: “In the dream I was definitely pregnant”. The risks of dissociation and failure, then, while temporarily distanced, always remain in the background.

A third reflection relates to the productive effects of multiple perspectives. I am referring to the multiple perspectives from which the events of pregnancy and birth are considered. I am also referring to the multiple perspectives with which every single dream is interpreted. This theme touches on a very important question in group psychoanalysis and I will return to it in a subsequent work. Now, however, I want to talk a little more about the two phases – distinct from the “work phase” – that were present and alternating in the Thursday session.

### *Phases of engrossed silence*

I referred in a detailed way to the dreams recounted during the “work phases”. I also reported the associations and observations made regarding the dreams. I have found myself, however, in some difficulty reporting that which happened during the phases of “engrossed and intense silence”. The very nature of what happens in these phases (remaining engrossed in silence) makes it difficult to give an account of it through a verbal report. I will try to offer some indications on this, not through a report, but with some annotations that more accurately specify what the group is experiencing.

The chief characteristic of the session that I just recounted is how the silences positioned themselves between the recounts of dreams (together with their accompanying questions and comments) and the expectation of something that would come later and which would be interesting and exciting. Moreover, the silences in Thursday’s session were not sullen and tormented, but on the contrary, it felt as though the group members were working with their minds and their hearts. In short, they were silences of expectation and elaboration, silences in which many things were happening.

It is as if what was said during the work phases immediately preceding had given the group members evidence of something emerging, that did not form part of the usual way in which they had always thought of themselves and the group.

As though they found themselves faced with a puzzle, a blind alley which they had gone down to complete their reasoning and accounts. They weren’t able to solve these puzzles with further discussion, but only with a leap of logic and enlightenment. In the silence, perhaps, the group members were faced with the necessity of making this leap (Corrao 1985). When the conversation resumed, in fact, the participants often said something that showed how they were able to see the group, themselves, and their problems in a new light.

I also have another idea. I thought that in the silence, the individual members of the group would have completed the task of reporting what had been said, to themselves and to the problems that gnawed at them. To describe this work, one can employ the expression *Commuting from the group to the individual*. I cannot expand on this concept here. I shall limit myself to saying that in using the term *Commuting* I mean not only the passage of emotions and ideas from an individual dimension to the collective, but also the inverse passage that goes from the group to the individual. With *Commuting*, I return to the notion that emotions and ideas – in passing from one dimension to another – are transformed and take on different forms and qualities (Neri 1997).

### *Phases of emotional and congratulatory exchange*

I shall also remark on the third type of phase that alternated in the Thursday session: the phases of “emotional and congratulatory exchange”.

These phases can be aligned with the *warming up* that is practised in the psychodrama. In psychodrama, however, the *warming up* happens just once, at the start of the session; in this case, however, the phases of emotional and congratulatory exchange are repeated several times. To speak simply of warming up would risk, then, diminishing their scope and importance.

I retain that the phases of emotional and congratulatory exchange make a specific and substantial contribution to the analytic work. If these phases did not exist, the group setting would be different and everything that is said in the session would appear – and would be – different. The phases of emotional and congratulatory exchange – for example – help to make observations and sentences, which otherwise could cause harm, warmer and more acceptable. These phases, moreover, help to set the ideas of the group in motion, after it has sustained the impact of very strong accounts, images and feelings.

Their influence makes itself felt, not only on what happens during the “work phases”, but also on the functions at work during the “phases of intense and profound silence”. The warmth and the friendship that they promote do, in fact, facilitate the process of introjecting elements present in the group setting.

The phases of “emotional and congratulatory exchange”, then, have a subtle but vital influence on the complex functioning of the group and constitute an important ingredient of its “Positive sociability”. I will deal with this in another article (Neri 2014).

### *Conclusion*

I would like to conclude by closing the circle. At the beginning of the explanation, I said that introducing Alex to the group was also a small ritual. When I employed this expression I had in mind some ideas of Roland Barthes and of Victor Turner, which I would like to expand upon. Barthes (2002) defines a ritual as:

“[...] that most basic of rules on which the ceremony is based: the ritual.

Ceremony = the arrangement of rules in the emotional framework [...]”

The ceremony (for example, the anniversary, the birthday) protects in the style of a house: it is something that allows feelings to dwell within it.”

The intense and contrasting emotions experienced by the members of the group and by Agata found a home in the recounting of pregnancy dreams and in the successive phases of work, engrossed silence and emotional and congratulatory exchange. This highly important event was enclosed in a perfectly appropriate form. Employing the terms used by Bion (1963), one can also say that a symbiotic interaction was realised between content (the birth, the presence of Agata and the newborn, the emotions and fantasies that they aroused) and form (the group, the procedures adopted, the dreams).

Turner – in *Anthropology of Performance* – confirms that the ritual has its roots in “social drama”. That means, in the concrete processes of the social life where a symbolically significant transformation occurs through a conflict and its resolution. I think that in the two sessions that I have reported here, a social drama was played out. What happened did not only have the sense of affirming the newborn’s right to citizenship in his life, being recognised by the group he had already lived in for nine months, when he was in his mother’s stomach. Rather, the events of these two sessions were also, in a symbolic sense, a solemn anathema against sterility and aridity.

Sterility (the lack of new babies) and aridity (of feelings and thoughts) are dangers against which the psychotherapeutic group is continually battling. The forces that could give mastery to sterility and aridity are cynicism, pessimism, prolonged bad moods, lack of generosity. The abundance of dreams that I referred to in the second session, the gathering of strength to maintain the good mood of the first session were marshalled to ward off the possibility of sterility and aridity appearing and prevailing over fertility and creativity at a crucial moment: the arrival of Agata and the newborn.

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