

Season with Money, Knowledge, Civilisation, and Exchange: Culinary Herbs and Spices during Colonial Rule in the Congo (1885 to 1960)

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ABSTRACT: Eschewing both ‘exotic exploration’ narratives and ‘Red Rubber’ accounts, this paper explores how herbs and spices featured in colonial rule in the Congo (1885-1960) in itself. It outlines which spices and herbs were cultivated in the Congo during this period, how they reflected Belgian conceptions of African culture and the colonial endeavour, and whether these live on. In the distinct narrative it creates, the roles of herbs and spices range from propaganda to experiment.

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Many histories of herbs and spices focus on how adventurous and epicurean Europeans undertook arduous journeys to the far corners of the globe to get hold of coveted spices and herbs. They describe how small leaves, nuts, and flower buds set in motion a global imperial trade. Particular attention is paid to how trade and conflict went hand in hand with intellectual and culinary exchange, in part driven by Europeans’ enduring fascination with ‘exotic’ cultures. No such narrative exists for the second wave of European colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth century, which targeted Africa in general and the Congo specifically. Belgian colonialism here is generally captured in entirely different narratives, namely ‘Red Rubber’ accounts of violent exploitation and ‘Congo crisis’ stories of a chaotic decolonisation.

This paper does not go looking for the ‘classic’ herbs and spices narrative in the Belgian Congo. Neither does it fit herbs and spices into prevailing stories of colonial exploitation and misrule. Rather, it crafts a new imaginative and enticing account. Firstly, it outlines which herbs and spices were cultivated in colonial Congo and their part in the Belgian colonial economy. Subsequently, it explains how herbs and spices give insight into how Belgian colonials perceived of Congolese culture, the colonial enterprise, and their own colonial role and identity. It touches upon the post-colonial period to explore how particular attitudes live on and have been altered. Within this story, Congolese conceptions of spices and herbs are not a particular focus. These merit a whole new paper which would be beyond my expertise.

Financial Footnotes

The idea that the colonial endeavour in the Congo revolved around violence, greed, and racism, and was nothing like the imperial trade endeavours which occurred a few centuries

earlier was already in place when Léopold II, the King of the Belgians, privately owned and exploited this region. The forced extraction of rubber in particular sparked a worldwide wave of humanitarian protest. This led to Belgium taking over the Congo in 1908. It remained in Belgian hands until 1960. The Belgians clarified that they would not repeat past mistakes. They argued that they, in collaboration with the Congolese – the Belgians supplied capital and knowhow, the Congolese labour and taxation – would create wealth from which both Belgians and Congolese would benefit. On the ground, this came down to a harsh capitalist endeavour, based on minimally compensated Congolese toil.

Initially, the Belgian colonial economy mainly focused on the extraction of minerals and agriculture, both by Europeans and Africans, was minimal. After the First World War, efforts were undertaken to develop the agriculture, but it would always play second fiddle to the industry. It was based on plantations producing cash crops, such as coffee, and obligatory cultures, such as cotton, both involving forced labour. Congolese agriculture and landownership were only encouraged after the Second World War. Only a fraction of agricultural produce, herbs and spices were only sporadically mentioned in (statistical) surveys of the Belgian colonial economy. Accordingly, there are no real systematic overviews of the types and quantities of herbs and spices that were grown during colonial rule.

Herbs and spices do regularly crop up in colonial documents which give a sense of what happened on the ground, including botanical works and periodicals, such as *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge* [Agricultural Bulletin of the Belgian Congo]. Colonialists came across a wide variety, including pepper, vanilla, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, mace, nutmeg, cayenne pepper or pili-pili, tamarind and various green herbs, generally described as ‘fine herbs’. Some herbs and spices grew naturally in the Congo, while others had been introduced. Many were not only used for cooking, but also for medical and aromatherapeutic purposes. Colonialists paid most attention to pepper, vanilla, nutmeg, cloves, and ‘fine herbs’.

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Cloves, made from the aromatic flower buds of the *Syzygium aromaticum* tree from the *Myrtaceae* family, were initially only grown on the Moluccas (initially called ‘the Spice Islands’). Traders spread the plants to, among others, Zanzibar, an island off the East African coast. It was part of the trade empire of the sultan of Oman, which spanned Africa, Arabia, and Asia. Via these overseas intercontinental trade routes, cloves were introduced into Africa and subsequently grown and traded here before colonialists arrived. Presumably, they tapped into this trade, rather than actively cultivate cloves themselves.

Pepper is made with the fruits of the plants of the pepper family or *Piperaceae*. *Piper Nigrum* is the species most known and used for culinary ends. This specific species was introduced into Africa via trade between Europeans and Asians, which was maintained during colonial rule. There was also a wide variety of endemic pepper plants, generally shrubs which grew on tropical forest trees. These were harvested when and where colonialists and Africans with good climbing skills encountered them, rather than cultivated

systematically. The term pepper was also used to describe capsicum peppers, flowering plants from the *Solanaceae* family, which also grew in the Congo and which were also called 'pili-pili'. Accordingly, the difference between pepper and capsicums is not always clear in colonial sources.

Vanilla is created from the orchids of the *Vanilla* genus. Various types grown across the world, including the Mexican *Vanilla planifolia* – largely considered the best type – were spread to Africa via trade centred around Madagascar, a big island east of mainland Africa. Colonials also came across various 'wild' African types of vanilla, for example, in Nala in the north east of the Congo.¹ Vanilla was actively cultivated in 'vanilleries' in a handful of places in the Mayombe and Bas-Fleuve, and Kasai region. The White Father missionaries in Baudouinville (Moba) and the Botanical Garden of Eala, just outside of Coquilhatville (Mbandaka), also has a few plants. Once picked and dried, the vanilla was transported in small glass tubes.² It usually ended up in perfume or confectionary and desserts. Colonials were also not ignorant of its aphrodisiacal reputation.³

Nutmeg is made from the seed of trees from the *Myristica* genus. Again, trade and conflict spread it from the Moluccas to the African heartland via a Zanzibar or Madagascar detour. In the Congo, the trees often grew close to water, for example, along riverbeds. Nuts were collected by hand or perhaps obtained via existing markets. Colonials also attempted to grow mint, sage, lemongrass, and lavender, mainly to turn into essential oils. As these 'essais' [trials] failed, is it most likely that these herbs were not grown for consumption.⁴ More success was achieved with thyme, parsley, and laurel.

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Growing herbs and spices was a time-intensive occupation of individuals – given that they had money for equipment to spare – rather than something done by state-supported big enterprises with large private capital and armies of labourers which supported most of the colonial economy. As it was a labour-intensive activity, the men involved, mostly settlers, missionaries, botanists, and businessmen presumably worked together with their Congolese servants, cooks, labourers, and mission pupils. Due to the complicated nature of the work, the relatively good working conditions (in comparison to a mine pit), and the personal character of the collaborations, cultivating herbs and spices presumably did not involve forced labour. As African labour was cheaper than European labour, it did allow for reducing some of the costs. Some of the herbs and spices were sold locally, others were exported. The favourable tariffs further partially made up for the relatively high costs.

Further processing, packaging, and selling happened in Belgium, for example, in places such as the *Comptoir des Epices* [Spice Counter], a family company set upon in 1925 in Brussels.⁵ From here, the spices and herbs were sold in Belgium and abroad, including France and the French colonies and the Congo. On the whole, the Belgians, known for beer, chocolate, and hearty stews, were not big spice and herb consumers. Most Belgian dishes could be made with about a dozen herbs and spices, including pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon,

gloves, juniper, thyme, laurel, and vanilla, the so-called '*panier traditionnel*' [traditional basket]. Gingerbread is the most fragrant Belgian food item. The Belgian spice and herb diet did not really change during the colonial period. Furthermore, the Congo was not the new and only place from where the Belgians could get the limited amount of spices and herbs they required. In the heart of Europe, Belgium was firmly embedded in trade networks which already delivered these products. In theory, a colonial could buy pepper that was grown in the Congo either directly or via a metropolitan detour, but it most likely came from other places. As such, the Congo did not have the same reputation as the 'Spice Islands' had during Early Modern period.

Due to their high production cost, low yield and the limited demand for what were not novel products, herbs and spices were only produced on a small scale during colonial rule. Doing so would not allow a colonial to return from the Congo as a rich man. 'Congolese' herbs and spices were thus a financial footnote in the industry-focused Belgian colonial economy. They were most certainly not a financial impetus for a large scale 'exotic spice trade'. This story, however, does not need to end here on account of a meagre financial chapter. Looking at how herbs and spices fit in with Belgians' attitudes towards African culture and conceptions of the colonial endeavour and their own place in it, will allow for beefing it up. This involves reading correspondence, cookery manuals, ethnographic and botanical works between the lines, in search of overlooked clues.

Herbs and Spices as Markers of Colonial Conceptions

From 'Curiosities', Propaganda, and Vitality...

Until 1900, the small number of Belgians and other Europeans in the Congo were engrossed with exploring, surviving, and setting up the colonial administration and economy. Most believed that the 'superior' colonials needed to civilise the Congolese by imposing their habits, language, and religion. In comparison, the 'underdeveloped' Congolese culture was, at best, seen as 'pristine', untouched by influences of the industrialised world, and, at worst, as 'barbaric'. From this perspective, most colonials were largely disinterested in how Congolese consumed spices and herbs. Some were fascinated by 'curiosities', such as the habit of some tribes to season their food with the ground aromatic bark the *Xylopias* tree.⁶ Others noted how current Congolese habits, such as adding vanilla to brewages made with coffee and cocoa beans, resembled those of their own pre-modern ancestors.⁷ A few considered the Congolese preference for the *Solanaceae* pepper over *Piperaceae* pepper a sign that they were ignorant about what 'real' pepper was.

In propaganda – one of few means for Belgians to get a glimpse of 'their' Congo, due to the relatively small flow of goods and people between metropole and colony – references to herbs and spices had a double function. In the booklet *Congo Belge en Images* [the Belgian

Congo in Images] they firstly ‘proved’ that the Congo had natural riches in abundance, but that the Congolese had failed to turn them into wealth and that the Belgians would ‘help’ them to do so. These works emphasised the ‘courageousness’ of the explorers and botanists who had risked (and occasionally lost) their lives mapping the Congo and its spices and herbs. David Livingstone, the famous British explorer, missionary, and doctor claimed to come across so many nutmeg trees on the riverbeds in the centre of the Congo that he not once, but twice wrote down in his diary ‘who planted the nutmeg trees in Katanuta?’. Verney Lovett Cameron, a traveller from Dorset, reported that he had encountered a ‘bed of nutmeg trees that was 40 to 50 meters long’ and left ‘the ground covered with nutmegs’.⁸ Also markets where herbs and spices were traded, for example, in Oudjiji and Nyangué on the banks of Lake Tanganyika, which were attended by up to 3000 people, were paraded in propaganda.⁹ That these in fact proved the interconnected and industrious nature of precolonial Congo and thus undermined colonial claims of its ‘discovery’, was not registered.

References to herbs and spices in propaganda also had to reassure readers that the African herbs and spices were as good, if not better, than those found in ‘the East’ – traditionally considered the best – and thus warranting, no requiring, exploitation. Richard Burton, another famous British traveller, found a ‘good-smelling heavy sample’ of nutmeg in Uswi, north of Unyamwési, which he claimed was ‘really superior to the product from Zanzibar’. It was also reported that ‘in Maniema and Urua, there is a [red] pepper [...] the size of a marble [...] which is so strong that the Arabs, who eat pepper by the handful, cannot stomach it’.¹⁰ The first generation of colonials, generally single young men who stayed in the Congo for a few years, might have tasted some African nutmeg or some pepper, but mainly stuck to their own condiments. In the Bas-Congo [Kongo Central], they only had to pay 0.20 francs for salt, pepper, and oil, the only ‘condiments’ deemed necessary to turn wine, meat, butter, vegetables, and eggs – typically Belgian ingredients – into meals for two days in 1899.¹¹

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For those who found themselves without cook and uncertain about their cooking skills, Albert Page wrote *Guide Pratique de la Cuisine au Congo* in 1909.¹² This sensible booklet contained no less than four pages of recipes with a very Belgian staple, the potato. Among others souffles, galettes, and mash, could all be made with just four ‘condiments’, pepper, thyme, parsley, and laurel. A colonial who got nervous or excited by the thought of making Page’s ‘*pommes de terre à la Bangala*’ [Bangala (another word for Lingala, a Congolese language) potatoes], quickly found out that it contained precisely the same herbs and spices as most of the other dishes. Similarly, serving ‘*Croquettes à la Congolaise*’ [Congolese Croquettes] to the Apostolic Delegate from Rome seemed more like a missionary ‘*plaisanterie*’ [joke], than a real attempt to introduce him to Congolese herbs and spices.¹³ One of the few recipes which required a spice which could have come from Congolese surroundings was ‘*crème à la vanille*’. It turned out to be another Belgian recipe, rather than something more experimental.

Season with Money, Knowledge, Civilisation, and Exchange

For the Belgians in Belgium curious or concerned about what their compatriots were eating, *Congo Belge en Images* explained that it was perfectly possible to grow ‘Belgian’ fruit, vegetables, and herbs in the Congo. A man testified that he could easily made a ‘classic’, a salad of tomatoes and mayonnaise, not a dish known for its unusual herb and spice mix.¹⁴ By eating ‘proper’ Belgian food, colonials not only wanted to maintain their connection with their own country, but also ensure that they remained healthy in a climate deemed insalubrious for them. The limited interest which colonials initially showed in herbs, spices, and recipes which were off *their* beaten track, reveal their hesitation to engage with the unknown and strenuous effort to cling on the familiar. Was there more room for discovery and experimentation after 1910?

...To Science, Insight, and Experimentation

The expansion of Belgian colonial rule from 1910 onwards went together with the boom of ‘colonial sciences’, including botany. Various botanical exploration trips were undertaken, while botanical gardens and agricultural schools mushroomed in Belgium and the Congo. In the garden of Eala in Coquilhatville (Mbandaka), visitors could see a neat overview of the ‘wild’ African flora. They could even smell some ‘special specimens’, such as vanilla and pepper plants, which other gardens, such as the one in Kisantu, did not have. Head of the Botanical Garden of Brussels between 1912 and 1931, Emile De Wildeman, an expert on Congolese plants – despite having never set foot in the Congo – put this feat down to the efforts of ‘valiant’ plant collectors in the Lower Congo.¹⁵ These institutes had connections with those in other countries and colonies, for example, the garden of Buitenzorg in Java (Dutch Indies) and the one in Kew. Together, they collected and exchanged specimens and information mainly to get better insight into how to grow crops in the most economical manner.

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The vanilla and pepper plants in Eala were thus first and foremost objects of botanical knowledge, colonial economy, prestige, and danger, rather than of culinary curiosity. Lively debates about them, however, reveal a considerable interest in questions directly related to the actual consumption of pepper and vanilla. Botanists compared the different types of ‘African’ peppers and vanilla and their degree of piperine and vanilline. The key question: how did these varieties relate to the ‘common’ pepper and vanilla plants and could they replace or substitute them? As sophisticated as their chemical analyses and classifications looked, a good part of their work also came down to tasting and smelling the pepper and vanilla. They also wondered which of the many complicated procedures to pollinate, grow, harvest, and conserve vanilla – the plant required a lot of care, specific growing circumstances, and a good dose of luck – would work and be practically feasible in the Congo. Uncertainty about how to grow pepper and vanilla and the prestige of actually pulling it off thus went hand in hand.

Short on time, botanists drew on the insights of other scientists and administrators responsible for agriculture. As the latter were mainly tasked with ensuring that the Congolese

collected enough cotton, finding ‘the right pepper’ was not particularly high on their agenda. Due to their poor training in botany, let alone culinary sciences, they often just added to the confusion. Botanists eventually managed to conclude that most vanilla and pepper plants could only be used and sold regionally and that only some could be cultivated for export. Quickly more questions and problems arose. How could they ensure that the ‘Congolese pepper’ was acknowledged as an equivalent of the ‘original’ one, so it would stand a chance on the market? How could they stop vanilla manipulations, which not only happened in the overseas *‘vanilleries’*, but also in European depots, resulting in overly expensive products with an inferior taste and health consequences? Deciding which type of pepper and vanilla could be cultivated and eaten thus strongly revolved around the question of profit.¹⁶

The new discussions about how Belgians could eat and sell a Congolese spice were paralleled by a growing interest in Congolese society and culture. The history of Africa and Congolese eating habits and words for particular food items were no longer deemed irrelevant, but things worth looking into. A history of the missionary endeavour in the Congo in a Catholic periodical mentioned that pepper trade from and to Central Africa had existed since the fifteenth century, until the Portuguese king forbade it out of fear of competition. De Wildeman outlined how trade had spread vanilla across the globe from Mexico.¹⁷ Herbaria meticulously noted how particular spices were called in the many languages spoken in the Congo. Pepper, for example, was called ‘embongwa’ in the Bambesa region. The Mongwandi called it ‘gbomboli’. In the Lingala dialect, it was known under various names including ‘boloko, bololoko, and pilipili’.¹⁸

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In his ‘descriptive sociological’ work about the Baluba (Luba) people, Scheut missionary Father Pierre Colle noted that this ethno-linguistic group in the centre and south of the Congo did not seem too keen on herbs and spices. Although *‘exitants’* [stimulating and (even sexually) arousing things] pili-pili or cayenne pepper were abundant in the region, the Baluba did not use them, according to Colle. He put the custom of not consuming particular plants down to beliefs that they were a ‘special sign’ of a tribe, like a ‘coat of arms’, making them forbidden for consumption. He did wonder whether some tribe elders merely prohibited eating certain herbs and spices purely to assert their influence.

Although colonials’ interest in African herbs and spices was genuine, they continued to see these through European-tinted glasses. They mostly looked for the spices and herbs they already knew and whether African ones could replace them, rather than discover new ones. Histories of vanilla and pepper were fitted into narratives of how Europeans explored, traded, and scientifically innovated the riches of non-European countries. Colonials first and foremost drew on their own observations and only in the second instance supplemented these with Congolese insights. Accordingly, they presumably overlooked certain Congolese herbs and spices because they did not use them, confused their names, and gave their own spin to certain customs.¹⁹

Season with Money, Knowledge, Civilisation, and Exchange

The first real experiments occurred at a time of change for the Belgian Congo. From the 1940s onwards, *évolués* [evolved people], middle-class Congolese who aspired to 'be like the Belgians', had become more prominent. Achieving this assimilationist goal required, among others, eating and seasoning food like the Belgians. In foyers, places in cities where Congolese middle-class women were taught how to be 'good' mothers, wives, and housewives, they also learned how to make Belgian food, which seemed rather grey and bland in comparison to what they were used to.²⁰

From the 1940s onwards, the Belgian population in the Congo also visibly expanded. Colonials increasingly brought their wives and families and stayed longer. Although 'becoming Congolese' was not in order due to their inherently colonial role, some wanted to dip their toe in Congolese cuisine. *Poulet moambe* [moambe chicken] was the 'typical' dish which they most often attempted. This chicken stew with tomato, onion, and palm nuts was usually served with finely cut cassava leaves and baked cooking banana or plantain.²¹ It generally contained pepper, occasionally some nutmeg and laurel, but it was the pili-pili which gave it its distinctive taste. Presumably, this dish was many Belgian colonials' first encounter with this spice. They most likely got the recipe from their Congolese cook or perhaps from one of the Congolese women in the *foyers*. There was in practice room for exchange in places where in theory a one-sided 'civilising mission' took place.

Exchange not only occurred with Congolese cuisine, but with cuisines from all over the globe. The somewhat deceptively titled *Livre de Cuisine du Congo* [Book of Congolese Cuisine] not only aimed to reassure women that they could put decent food on the table despite the lack of particular products.²² It also contained various unfamiliar recipes, such as one for 'Savoury Pudding', made with salt, pepper, and fine herbs. This typically British dish ended up in the *Livre* because it was a translation of a booklet written by a British woman, presumably the wife of a Protestant missionary, minority figures in a colony dominated by Catholic missionaries.²³

Recipes for freshly made ravioli with nutmeg and for an 'Indian delicacy with cheese', a mixture of cheese, eggs, bread, macaroni, pepper, onion, and curry powder – it was steamed for four hours and served with cheese sauce (!) – presumably baffled colonials. The use of curry powder showed that it was impossible to keep the Congo free from foreign influences, as the colonial authorities so strenuously endeavoured, simply because it was a node in an increasingly globalising economy. As a result, Belgians in the Congo more quickly attempted dishes with herbs and spices from other cuisines than Belgians in Belgium. Growing Belgian usage of unfamiliar herbs and spices reflected a growing genuine interest in Congolese surrounding and the world beyond the Congo which had increasingly come into reach. The resulting experiments did not revolve around recreating 'authentic' dishes, as we might do today. Rather, they were a form of fusion cuisine, foreshadowing the weird dishes 1980s cuisine would produce.

Smelling and Tasting Past, Present, and Future

The story of herbs and spices and colonialism in the Congo does not end in 1960, when the Congo became independent of Belgium. For former colonials, herbs and spices make a bygone 'better time' vividly come back to life. The daughter of one stated: 'Never did I digest the flight from the Congo (in 1960). I was born there and experienced the nicest years of my youth there. The Congo still lives in my memories and I want to return if I ever get the chance. Especially the smell I will never forget, the sweet smell of vanilla.'²⁴

From the 1970s onwards, Belgian tastes became more multicultural. This was in first instance due to labour migration from Maghreb countries and Turkey, rather from its former colony, like in Great Britain. In the long run, this also triggered interest in Congolese cuisine, albeit not something which matched the British curry craze. In restaurants mainly in the multicultural *Matongé* quarter in Brussels, Belgians can sample a dish which was already relatively popular in colonial times, *poulet moambe*. Most often it is 'adapted to the Belgians' palette, as they are still not that accustomed to fragrant or pungent food. They can also taste dishes and spices which colonials never did. While most Belgians eating here are curious or want a change of culinary scenery, some are prompted to reflect on why such dishes were not available in Belgium before 1960.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is believed that many herbs and spices remain unknown and under-consumed. This is blamed on lacking interest and investment from the government, instability due to armed conflict, and infrastructural and economic problems; elements which have roots in and resemble the colonial past.²⁵ Somewhat reminiscent of that past, missionaries 'help' Congolese to grow and sell spices. Aided by UNICEF and a local charity, Spiritan Father Lucien Favre and Baka people in the North of the Congo harvest wild pepper.²⁶ Members of the Congolese diaspora in Belgium have also taken the spice stage. Sandrine Vasselín Kabonga discovered in her father's cupboard a jar of pungent pepper which 'summoned up the smell' of the Kivu, the eastern Congolese region where she was born and raised. Smelling and tasting a kilo of pepper sent by her aunts, befriended restaurateurs and traders confirmed its 'uniqueness' and urged her to bring it on the market.

Rather than tapping into existing structures, she deliberately chose to sustainably harvest and export the pepper with local Congolese directly affected by conflicts in a country that has seen little peace since 1960. She also wants to 'reveal African treasures' and avoid ancestral knowledge going lost like in the past. Pepper which was initially only sampled by a handful of Europeans, is now a fixed value in Michelin starred restaurants and luxury food markets.²⁷ Spice and herbs thus pertinently reveal how people deal with a past which feels irrevocably over or underexplored for some and still very present and crucial to their identity for others, allowing them to question the lasting inequalities which it has fostered.

This paper has not tried to make the narrative of the 'exotic spice and herb trade', in which herbs and spices are equated with wealth, exploration, and exchange, work for the colonial Congo. Neither has it considered them minor and thus relatively unimportant exceptions which

prove the rule of ‘Red Rubber’ narratives of violence and exploitation. Instead, it has crafted a less straightforward narrative in which particular economic circumstances and specific attitudes towards African culture and colonialism are seen in tandem. In this narrative herbs and spices simultaneously signal prestige, propaganda, knowledge, identity, economic toil, experiment, past, and future. This paper has shown how they were a complex means for Belgians in the Congo to make sense of surroundings in which they had both the best and most difficult time of life.

Notes

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