



Research article

Rooted in Marriage Rituals: Exploring the Ecospiritual Connection between Trees and the Kudmi Community of Jharkhand

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Abstract

Humans are inherently social beings, intricately woven into the fabric of culture, tradition, and religious beliefs. These elements not only arise from individual faith systems but also extend to form the foundation of familial and communal harmony. In Jharkhand—a state in eastern India known for its rich tribal diversity—traditional communities live in close association with nature. Among these, the Kudmi community stands out for its distinctive cultural practices rooted deeply in the ethos of *Jal* (water), *Jungle* (forest), and *Jamin* (land). Their worldview is shaped by an interconnectedness with nature, where every element—from trees and rivers to the soil they till—is perceived as sacred and spiritually alive. This paper seeks to explore the eco-spiritual relationship between the Kudmi community and the natural environment, with a specific focus on marriage rituals. For the Kudmis, marriage is not just a social contract but a sacred union sanctioned by both ancestral spirits and natural forces. Trees hold symbolic and functional importance in these rituals. For instance, specific trees are chosen for worship, offerings, and ritual performances, symbolizing fertility, protection, and continuity. The selection of the marriage site, the planting of saplings, and the invocation of forest spirits all underscore the Kudmis' reverence for nature as a living entity. Furthermore, marriage rituals often include practices such as the *Bahar Ghar* (ceremonial hut) being constructed using locally sourced forest materials, and the *Bali* (sacrifice) being offered beneath sacred trees. These practices demonstrate a profound eco-spiritual connection wherein the act of marriage becomes a reaffirmation of the Kudmi community's bond with nature. By analyzing oral narratives, ethnographic accounts, and field-based observations, this paper attempts to underscore the philosophical dimensions of these rituals, highlighting how ecological awareness and spirituality coalesce in Kudmi customs. Through this lens, the study not only emphasizes the importance of safeguarding indigenous traditions but also advocates for a broader understanding of sustainable living as practiced by communities that view nature not as a resource, but as a relative.

Keywords: Kudmi Community, Marriage Rituals, Nature, Eco-spirituality, and Jharkhand.

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Introduction

Rituals and *lok kathas* (oral folk narratives) are vital elements of celebration, religious practice, and festivals among tribal communities in India. These traditions serve as living repositories of cultural memory, encapsulating age-old belief systems that have been passed down orally from one generation to the next. They reflect not only the cosmological worldviews of Indigenous communities but also their profound connection to the land they inhabit. Over the years, many of these practices—long overlooked or dismissed as primitive—have been rediscovered and reevaluated through critical, anthropological, and ecological lenses. As a result, tribal or Adivasi customs, rituals, and oral traditions are gradually gaining recognition as essential components of sustainable life models, deeply embedded in ecological wisdom and community values.

The word ‘Adivasi’ itself carries its meaning, comprising two words: ‘*adi*’ and ‘*vasi*.’ ‘*Adi*’ means ancient, old, or earliest, and ‘*vasi*’ means inhabitant. Therefore, the *Adivasi*, or the earlier inhabitants of the land, are closer to Mother Earth. Their oral tradition is the key to a sustainable life. *Adivasi* culture personifies all natural entities and forces of nature, such as trees, stones, water, land, fire, sky, wind, and sun. Their gods and goddesses also reside on those hills; therefore, they worship the hill spirit, water spirit, village spirit, house spirit, solar deity, and fertility or vegetation deities. The names of these spirits and deities vary among different tribal groups, but the entire pantheon is essentially rooted in and derived from nature. The term *Adivasi* itself is revealing—*Adi* (ancient or original) and *Vasi* (inhabitant)—it signifies “the original dwellers” or the earliest inhabitants of the land. The *Adivasis* have traditionally lived in close harmony with nature, not merely relying on it for survival but venerating it as an extension of their spiritual and cultural identity. For them, the forest is not just a resource—it is a relative—every element of nature, whether animate or inanimate, is imbued with life and meaning. Mountains, rivers, trees, stones, animals, and celestial bodies are often deified or seen as the abodes of spirits and deities. This personification of nature translates into a worldview where ecological balance, spiritual reverence, and social conduct are tightly interwoven.

In the *Adivasi* cosmology, various spirits and deities like the hill spirit, water spirit, village spirit, house spirit, the sun god, and the fertility goddess govern the natural world. Although names and narratives may differ across tribal groups, the pantheon remains grounded in nature. The divine does not reside in a distant realm but lives within the environment itself. Therefore, rituals often involve direct communion with nature, be it through animal sacrifice beneath a sacred tree, offerings made to a village pond, or hymns sung under the open sky. So, the oral tradition is not just a means of entertainment or moral instruction but also tool for environmental stewardship, social bonding, and spiritual fulfillment.

Trees, in particular, occupy a central position in *Adivasi* belief systems. They are revered as sacred entities and considered essential to life’s basic needs: *khan* (food), *paan* (water), and *sthan* (shelter). Beyond their ecological utility, trees are also seen as guardians, healers, and witnesses to human life. Sacred groves, known as *Sarna* or *Jaher Than* in various *Adivasi* traditions, are central to the communal identity and rituals of these communities. Specific trees, such as the *Sal* and *Mahua*, are worshipped, often representing spirits or being used as altars for ritual performances.

This ecological reverence is not exclusive to tribal belief systems. Even ancient Hindu texts, such as the *Rig Veda*, acknowledge the sacredness of the forest. "The *Rig Veda* (X.97) states

that plants are those that grew in old times... much earlier than even the shining ones [devas] ... The *Rig Veda* (X.146) invokes the forest as Aranyani, a jungle deity (Krishna, 2014, p. 6)". The *Rig Veda* is one of the most important and earliest texts of the Hindu religion. Hymns for various rituals are scripted in this Sanskrit Vedic¹ collection. It names trees as *Vanaspati*. *Vana* means forest, and *pati* means lord, so trees are greeted as the lord of the forest. The tribal community acknowledges the power of the lord of the forest, which is evident in the community's rituals. Marriage is a great family event for all communities. Individuals, families, communities, and society are involved in this ceremony. Trees hold immense significance in this event, especially among the tribal and the Kudmi communities of Jharkhand. Among the many ceremonies that celebrate this eco-spiritual bond, marriage holds a particularly sacred place in tribal societies. For the Kudmi community of Jharkhand, marriage is not merely a union between two individuals; it is a profound communal event involving ancestors, nature, and deities. Every phase of the Kudmi marriage—right from matchmaking to post-marital rituals—is embedded in nature-oriented customs. Sacred trees are invoked for blessings; ritual spaces are constructed using forest materials; and songs passed down through generations extol the virtues of living in harmony with nature.

This study aims to investigate the central role trees—and, by extension, the forest—play in the marriage rituals of the Kudmi community, highlighting the broader eco-spiritual worldview that informs their way of life. Through an analysis of ethnographic records, oral narratives, and ritual performances, the paper aims to highlight the intricate relationships between ritual practice, ecological ethics, and cultural identity in tribal Jharkhand.

Jharkhand and the Kudmi Community

Jharkhand is an eastern state of India, formed from the words 'Jhar' and 'Khand.' Jhar means bush or forest, and khand means land; therefore, Jharkhand means the land of the forest. It was separated from Bihar on November 15, 2000. It is not only famous for its waterfalls, hills, natural beauty, and minerals, but it is also popular for its tribal tradition, rich culture, and simplicity. Thirty-two tribal groups², including the Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Kharia, and Ho, are present in the state with people from other religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Each has its language, lifestyle, culture, and tradition. The Kudmi community shares many cultural similarities with the tribal communities of Jharkhand. This community is also known as the Kurmi, Kudmi Mahato, Mahato, Mahanta, or Kudmi Mahanta community. In Jharkhand, Kudmis are also referred to as Dhonr Kudmi. The term 'Dhonr' is associated with snakes or Nagas³, suggesting a deep-rooted ancestral connection to the Nagas—believed to be among the earliest settlers in the region, predating the arrival of the Mundas (Mahato, 2012, p. 49). Traditionally, the Kudmis are a rural, agrarian community and communicate in the Kudmali language. The Mahatos' native region includes areas within Chotanagpur⁴ as well as

¹ Sanskrit is an ancient language of the Indo-Aryan branch. The *Vedas*, the earliest literary texts, are written in the Sanskrit language.

² For details, please visit: <https://www.jharkhand.gov.in/Home/AboutTribals>

³ Nagas: Naga is a name of the clan in this particular context. The people whose clan is Naga is called Naga bansi (clan) people

⁴ Chotanagpur: Chotanagpur is a plateau. It is in eastern India and covers most part of the Jharkhand state.

neighboring parts of West Bengal and Odisha. Its heart lies in the erstwhile Manbhum⁵ district. A well-defined territory bounded by the four rivers, Damodar, Kangsabati, Subarnarekha, and Vaitarani, it has been part of lower Jharkhand, where the Mahatos have co-existed with tribal communities" This statement says that the Kudmi community have good relation with tribal people and they choose residence area at river basins of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha border area for their agricultural purpose. Currently, the Kudmi community is fighting for tribal status. They held tribal status until the 1921 census. Later, they are listed as Other Backward Classes in the 1931 Census (Mahato, 2012, p. 44). Besides their identity conflict, they continue to live the same traditional way of life. Most festivals, such as Bhadu, Tusu, Rohin, Bij Puniha, Nawa Khai, and Ahira, are associated with the Kudmi community, which is primarily based on agriculture, particularly paddy cultivation. They greet and express gratitude to Mother Nature through these festivals and rituals. Nature plays a significant role in family events, such as the birth of a child, a wedding ceremony, and the passing of a community member. The Kudmi marriage ceremony is a ritual-based event that unites two individuals, their families, and the broader society.

Marriage and Tree Marriage

Marriage is a sacred rite of human life. The sacred rite that marks the beginning of a new relationship is also a ritualistic event. There are many rituals associated with marriage, such as haldi, mehndi, and the exchange of garlands, among others. It varies according to community, caste, religion, and region. Writer Devdatta Pattanaik, in his book *Marriage: 100 Stories Around India's Favourite Ritual*, opines that marriage marks the union of *Prakriti* (matter) and *Purusha* (spirit) (Pattanaik, 2021, p. 03). *Prakriti* brings in new wealth, status, pleasure, and security, ushering in the next generation, who can inherit the family name and estate. *Purusha* forces the couple, the family, and the community to accommodate new ideas, emotions, problems, and solutions. Marriage can be defined as a mutual responsibility and relational commitment that has a divine and spiritual connotation. One popular Vedic mantra is recited during the marriage ceremony.

*Yad etad hridayam tava
tadastu hridayam mama,
Yad idam hridayam mama
Tadastu hridayam tava.*

"That heart of thine shall be mine, and this heart of mine shall be thine." (Muller and Max F, 1879, p. 50)

This marriage pledge is the third of the four mantras of the pledge from the Upanishad. In the Hindu religion, the bridegroom recites these Sanskrit slokas, addressing his bride, for their joint dwelling.

*Soma arkaś ca yuvāmā vṛṇīmahe te devāso yajñīyāsaḥ śṛṇotana |
agniḥ patiḥ br̥haspatiḥ sukhāvahaṃ vāyuḥ sumnair vi yunaktām ṛtāyubhiḥ ||*

⁵ Manbhum: It was a name of the district of the East India during British Raj. At present it is part of eastern jharjhand and and western part of West Bengal.

"Soma and Surya, we choose you both. Let the divine beings, worthy of worship, listen to us. May Agni (fire), Brihaspati, and Vayu (wind) bless this union with happiness and righteous life." (Griffith, 1896, p. 634).

The bride and bridegroom both ask for the divine blessings of all natural powers, including *Vayu* (wind), *Surya* (sun), *Agni* (fire), and *Kandramas* (moon), through these marriage mantras. All these mantras, rituals, and customs emphasize the complex process of marriage that knots couple with love.

The Kudmi community of Jharkhand, as well as the border areas of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, follows some Hindu marriage customs and rituals similar to those of the Santhals, Mundas, and other tribal communities. There are four forms of marriage among the Kudmi Mahatos:

Dekha Suna Biha or common negotiating marriage

Sangha Marriage or Widow/Widower remarriage

Dhuka- Dhuki or love marriage

Tana Biha or Marriage by elopement (Mahato, 2012, p. 110)

These categories of marriage are very much prevalent among other tribal groups. *Biha* is a colloquial word of *Vibaha*, which means marriage. *Dekha Suna Biha* is a common marriage. It involves a lengthy, ritualistic process and requires more engagement from kith and kin. *Sanga Biha* is a marriage of a widow or a divorcee. *Dukha Dhuki*, or love marriage, is another type of marriage within the Kudmi community that allows for the re-socialization of young couples if they are found to have had premarital physical relations. *Tana Biha* which is essentially a form of marriage by elopement.

Common marriage, or *Dekha Suna Biha*, is divided into five parts. These are: *Dekha Suna*, *Ashirvadi*, *Lagan*, *Kankon Bandha*, *Sindra Dan*. *Dekha* means seeing, and *Suna* means listening. The first ritual of Kudmi marriage starts with the *Dekha Suna* process. The arranged marriage is initiated by a middleman, typically someone from the same community. When the bride's side is ready to welcome the groom's relatives, the middleman and the groom's family go to see the bride's house. If the bride's side wishes to move forward with the relationship, a date is set to visit the groom's house. The later date of *Ashirbadi* is fixed if both sides agree. *Ashirbadi* means the blessing ceremony. Kith and kin of the bride and bridegroom come to bless the bride with jewelry that is made of silver or gold, generally. Traditional dresses, such as the *dhoti* and *kurta*, are given to the bridegroom, and the *Lagan* ceremony is performed. The final marriage date is then fixed at that time. *Lagan* means divine hours to meet. Turmeric, oil, sweets, and other materials are exchanged between the bride and the groom's side for *Lagan* rituals. The bride and the groom are smeared with oil and turmeric by married women and bridesmaids. The *Kankon Bandha* ceremony is part of a process that involves a pseudo-marriage, also known as the Tree Marriage ritual. *Bandha* means to tie, and *Kankon* refers to the wrist. After that, the groom sets out for the bride's house, where many other rituals are performed, and finally, *Sindra dan* is performed. *Sindra*, also known as *Sindur*, is vermilion, and 'dan' means offering. The groom places *Sinduar* on the bride's forehead, and finally, the marriage ritual of the Kudmi community is complete.

The tree marriage ritual is a form of pseudo-marriage and is part of the *Kankon Bandha* ceremony. This practice is found among several communities in Jharkhand, including the Kudmi, Koiri, and Munda. It reflects deep-rooted beliefs in nature's spiritual presence and the

community's interaction with cosmology and local customs. In this ritual, the groom is supposed to marry a mango tree, specifically *Mangifera indica*, and the bride is supposed to marry a mahua tree, specifically *Madhuca longifolia*. Before setting out for the bride's house groom, his mother, and kin women gather under a mango tree with one winnowing basket that contains *diya* (earthen lamp), *atap chal*⁶ (rice), *allo suta*⁷ (thread), *sindoor* (vermilion) and one *ghati*⁸ (small pot) of water. First, the groom sprinkles water on the bark of the mango tree, then draws one line of *sindoor*. One long *allo suta* is rounded three times by the kin assistant of the groom. He touches this *allo suta* on the bark of a mango tree, and then this *suta* is clung between the little toe of the left leg and left ear. It is also rounded three times. Later, that *suta* is untied, and one wristband or bracelet is prepared with that *suta* and leaves of that mango tree. Finally, this wristband is tied to the right hand of the groom. Then, the groom sits on the lap of his mother and chews a mango leaf. Groom's kin women also support chewing the mango leaf. This ritual is called *amlo khawa*. *Amlo* means mango, and *khawa* means eating. With these rituals, the pseudo tree marriage of the groom is ended.



Figure. 1. Kudmi tree marriage ritual of the groom's side. Photographed by Hare Krishna Kuiry, July 03, 2022.

The same rituals are performed by the bride as well, but her ritual is conducted with a mahua tree. Both the bride and the groom seek blessings from the elders and the trees. After this, the

⁶ Unboiled rice; rice that has been dehusked from paddy but not boiled or parboiled. Unlike regular rice, which is typically boiled and then dried before use, *Atap Chal* is raw rice used in many ritual practices.

⁷ Raw thread; *suta* means thread, and *allo suta* refers to thread in its untreated form, sometimes strengthened using rice starch in general usage, but in this case, it remains in its raw, natural state.

⁸ A small container or vessel (often a brass or earthen *lota*), used in rituals.

rest of the marriage rituals proceed, including *sindoor daan* (the ritual of applying vermilion), and continue until the completion of the long marriage ceremony. This form of tree marriage is performed in the case of *Sangha Biha*, where the groom must first marry a banana tree. This symbolic or pseudo-tree marriage is a distinctive custom of the Kudmi community. Through this practice, the Kudmis seek blessings from nature for a harmonious conjugal life, reflecting an eco-spiritual worldview.

Ecospirituality is a compound term formed by combining the words 'ecology' and 'spirituality.' This theoretical perspective falls under the domain of deep ecology, which establishes a connection between living organisms and the natural world or environment. The term 'ecology' encompasses a broad concept that includes communities, ecosystems, living beings, and their surrounding environments. Ecology thoroughly examines the relationship between living things and their surrounding environment. Spirituality adds value, morality, and a sense of gratitude to human life to maintain a healthy ecosystem. Ecospirituality teaches us to take a closer look at our spiritual life, which creates a rhythm with our ecology. The environmentalist Sister Virginia Jones opines, "Ecospirituality isn't just a philosophy or prayerful way of life. It has been a passionate call to action." (Bonfiglio, 2017, p. 01) Here, the actions are understood as rituals or expressions of spirituality that human beings practice through various forms of nature worship. Sometimes, this takes the form of worshiping gods, goddesses, or spirits, while at other times, it is celebrated as festivals and life events.

The agrarian community, the Kudmis, are worshipers of nature. Their spiritual practices harmonize with the growth of nature. This community is also very much aware of the power of nature, which is the source of all positive strengths. Spirituality denotes religion, and religion connects all religious practices. As the Kudmi community is nature worshipers, their praise for nature is reflected in their daily activities, way of life, rituals, lok kathas, fairs, and festivals. Kudmis' marriage ceremony, especially the tree marriage ritual, exemplifies a deep ecospiritual connection. The groom and the bride perform a pseudo marriage, respectively, with a mango tree and a mahua tree. These tree marriage rituals, known as *ambiha* and *mahul biha*, have a symbolic significance. It is believed that the mango tree represents the male gender, while the mahua tree represents the female gender. Kudmali writer Bhagwan Das Mahato says, "There are reasons behind choosing these particular trees, mango and mahua, for tree marriage ritual among the Kudmi community. Kudmi ancestors chose the mango fruit because it is compared to the male reproductive organ or male progeny, and mahua has intoxicating power and numerous medicinal beneficial components that are quite similar to those of females. Another reason is that earlier Kudmi peasants had only two wishes: bountiful crops and flourishing for the upcoming generation. As these two trees have countless fruits, therefore these are symbolic representative Kudmi groom and bride (Mahato, 2018, pp. 95-98)". This comment can also be analyzed to understand how the socio-religious circle of the Kudmi community interacts with gods, goddesses, ancestors, and fellow community members.

"The flower of the mango is called *Manjari*, which is highly spoken of in Sanskrit literature as an object producing sentiments of sexual feeling in the hearts of lovers" (Krishna & Amirthalingam, 2014, p.193)

Writer Nanditha Krishna also discusses the symbolic representation of the mango in her book *Sacred Plants of India* (2014), which is very much relatable to the Kudmali writer Bhagwan Das

Mahato's previous comments. Mango leaves have numerous uses in various sacred events. It is often decorated at the entrance of houses during marriage ceremonies or other special events. It is also placed on a Kalash, or a sacred pot, for worship. The mango leaf is also a symbol of fertility, prosperity, and a happy married life. Therefore, a Kudmi groom starts his beautiful journey of marriage after taking a blessing from nature's most sacred tree, the mango. This tree-marriage ritual is not just a rite or practice. Instead, it helps us to take responsibility for our nature at an individual level. Mango leaves are not allowed to be picked from the branches at night. Cutting down a premature green mango tree is a sinful act. The Kudmi community is very sensitive about their surroundings. Sometimes, the Kudmi youths are not allowed to taste these fruits until they get married to a mango tree, though they plant and make a mango grove on their land. The strong connection between ecology and spirituality is palpable in every step of the Kudmi community's rituals. This community chooses the Mahua tree for the tree marriage ceremony, which has definite ec- spiritual significance. The Sanskrit word 'madhu' means honey. The word 'Madhuca,' which is a generic name of the Mahua tree, has been derived from that Sanskrit word. According to a local belief, Lord Mahadeva's blessing remains with this Mahua; therefore, this honey tree is worshiped and respected as a manifestation of the lord.

"Kalidasa has spoken very highly of the beauty and delicacy off the flower and describes Parvati wearing a garland of mahua flowers at her wedding in his drama Kumarasambhava." (Krishna, 2014, p.151)

Besides all these mythical and religious associations, the Mahua tree has huge medical uses. Its flower helps to cure infections in the respiratory system and alleviate coughs. It can also help cure itching, skin diseases, and other conditions. Kudmi and the other tribal communities have made immense contributions to protecting and conserving the Mahua tree through their ritual, customs, and religious practices.

Ecospiritual Perspective

Ecospirituality is a compound term formed by combining the words 'ecology' and 'spirituality.' This theoretical perspective falls under the domain of deep ecology, which establishes a connection between living organisms and the natural world or environment. The term 'ecology' encompasses a broad concept that includes communities, ecosystems, living beings, and their surrounding environments. Ecology thoroughly examines the relationship between living things and their surrounding environment. Spirituality adds value, morality, and a sense of gratitude to human life to maintain a healthy ecosystem. Ecospirituality teaches us to take a closer look at our spiritual life, which creates a rhythm with our ecology. The environmentalist Sister Virginia Jones opines, "Ecospirituality isn't just a philosophy or prayerful way of life. It has been a passionate call to action." (Bonfiglio, 2017, p. 01) Here, the actions are understood as rituals or expressions of spirituality that human beings practice through various forms of nature worship. Sometimes, this takes the form of worshiping gods, goddesses, or spirits, while at other times, it is celebrated as festivals and life events.

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Ecospirituality is deeply grounded in the daily lifestyle and religious celebrations of the Kudmi community in Jharkhand. Trees and plants have a vivid impact on the life of this community. Apart from mango and mahua trees, other trees and plants, such as bamboo, turmeric, sal, dhau, basil, *dub ghas* (scutch grass/*Cynodon dactylon*), and akanda (giant calotrope/swallow-wort), hold various significance in the Kudmi marriage. Bamboo trees, used for decorative purposes or the making of *Marua* or canopy-like Mandap, symbolize the flexibility of relationships and fertility in the Kudmi Community. Sal leaves and the branches of the Karam tree must be used in the marriage ceremony of the Kudmi community because these are symbols of holiness. It is believed that their gods reside in these karam trees and sal leaves. Plates of sal leaves are used for serving food, and the branches of the Karam tree are placed on the wedding canopy or mandap, known as a *marua*. Mango branches, leaves, and banana trees are also kept at the *mandap*. Those are symbolic references to a happy conjugal life. Turmeric powder is an essential ingredient in a marriage ceremony. The paste of turmeric is applied over the body and face of the bride and groom on the occasion of Lagan. It symbolizes divinity, purity, prosperity, and fertility. There is hardly any auspicious occasion that is completed without the sacred basil leaves. It has immense religious and Ayurvedic medicinal importance. Scutch grass and basil are both used in wedding rituals. Akanda flower garland is worn by the bride and groom in the Kudmi marriage. Both bride and groom exchange their akanda garland at the time of the garland exchange ritual before the *sindra dan* ritual. Akanda flower is used in the worship of Lord Shiva or Mahadeva. Basil is used in the worship of lord Vishnu. Although the Kudmi community claims to be part of a tribal community, numerous Hindu influences can also be seen in their rituals. However, tribal similarities are more prominent in the Kudmi community's way of life, rituals, lok kathas, and religious celebrations. Kudmi marriage rituals of the Kudmi community are a complex ritual process that showcases a strong connection between humans and nature and how the latter becomes an integral part of the community's life. Actually, Kudmi marriage rituals are rich in symbols that connect the body, soul, and nature. In a nutshell, it can be said that the Kudmi marriage is a perfect example of the amalgamation of ecology and spirituality.

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