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## ***Foundation Nation 2017 Convocation***

*Theme :*  
*'Releasing the sound from the Tip of Southern Africa'*

*Back to the Centre*

***Presented by Dr Ruben Richards***

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# Back to the Centre

by  
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Program Director, The Board of Directors of the FNR, Hilary and Clive in particular, customary leaders, international guests, ladies and gentlemen, all protocol observed. Thank you for the invitation to address this Convocation. It is not coincidental that this Convocation takes place at the foot of Table Mountain – the mythical table of hospitality – the table around which our forefathers and mothers have dined for centuries – and the very table that has and continues to welcome visitors to our shores. It must also not escape our attention that we are sitting in the oldest building in South Africa, the Castle of Good Hope, once a symbol of oppression. I congratulate the FNR for boldly reclaiming these spaces and redefining them as places of healing and restoration rather than the trauma of the past centuries.

I have entitled my speech: *Back to the Centre* – a core theme of my forthcoming book. For too long the foundation nation has been occupying the margins of society. It is time for them to take their rightful place in South African society. It was my hope to launch my next book at this Convocation but the publication process is like the person travelling from Cape Town to Johannesburg by car – which got a puncture – and the driver realised that there was no spare wheel in the boot. So it took much longer than planned to reach the destination.

I hope that within the next month or two my book will be on the shelves. With your permission I will share some insights from the *almost ready* book which has turned out to be two volumes.

## Context

South Africa today, some 23 years after the arrival of democracy, faces a watershed moment in its history, where it is grappling to make meaning with a most searing narrative of its past, trying to deal with a contradictory and volatile present and attempting to craft a future that will be inclusive, viable and sustainable.

It is in this most critical moment of time that South Africa must either address the injustice of its disturbing past and re-author an inclusive and restorative narrative or face the consequences of the unravelling and alienation that results from dreams that have been deferred.

It is in this context that my forthcoming book *Bastards of Humans-the unspoken heritage of coloured people*, was born, as a contribution to the rebuilding process within a nation that must come to terms with the deeply scarring effects of the dispossession, dehumanisation, alienation and destabilisation that is our inheritance from colonialism and Apartheid.

I must point out, at the outset, that my book must be seen as a part of the process of reflecting, re-interpreting and re-crafting a national narrative that is incomplete and imperfect, from which critical pieces have been excised, distorted or completely dislocated from their appropriate context.

Within this framework it therefore follows that my book is primarily aimed at interrogating the disposition and conditions and representation in this national narrative of the Coloureds, a significant population group within the South African nation.

Recognising that there already exists a large body of work on the Coloureds in South Africa, my book seeks to add to the discourse by looking at how, over four centuries, a people's location in the historical narrative shifted from the centre, where they are owners and custodians, to the margins, where they have very little agency.

One of the major inspirations for my book has been the post-apartheid Khoi and San indigenous resurgence, which has proliferated across the social, cultural and political landscape since the advent of democracy. This resurgence movement, essentially built on calls for identity recognition, cultural reconstruction and land and human rights demands is a phenomenon that over the last few years has gained significant traction in the broader South African narrative.

From my interactions with and observations of this movement I came to understand that the Khoi and San resurgence is a natural cultural and identity assertion promoted and protected by the South African constitution. It is comprised of South African citizens of Khoi and San descent who have asserted their right to recognition, restitution and restoration as the progeny of South Africa's foundational peoples.

The leaders and activists associated with this movement claimed that their ancestors had been viciously dispossessed of their land, subjected to genocide and slavery, divested of their indigenous title, culture, identity, language and suffered intense discrimination under colonialism and Apartheid.

They further asserted that their issues were matters of national interest that had been sidestepped at the multi-party CODESA (Congress of a Democratic South Africa) negotiations and horse-traded for expediency to facilitate the transition from apartheid to democracy.

What most probably is an indication of the urgency and potency of the Khoi and San resurgence and the recognition, restitution and restoration agenda it has championed, is that it has found critical traction in the broader South African body politic. This is clearly demonstrated in the fact that there are two bills currently under consideration in parliament where this agenda, albeit in limited form, has been incorporated into the Traditional Affairs Bill and the Land Restitution Bill, which are due for deliberation this year by the national assembly and the national house of traditional leaders.

I personally came to interact with this resurgence project after a directive was issued from the South African presidency that land restitution legislation be amended to facilitate the claims of the Khoi and San who were dispossessed before the arbitrary 1913 cut-off date which is codified into the constitution as the marker for restitution.

Following the presidential directive Rural Development and Land Reform minister Gugile Nkwinti initiated a forum for dialogue with the affected Khoi and San descendants, through their representatives. The first of these engagements by Minister Nkwinti was the KhoiSan Kimberley Dialogue 1, which was convened at Kimberley on 15 April 2013. First-hand accounts from several delegates who were present at this encounter suggest that this vibrant and somewhat chaotic event was a vehicle through which the Khoi and San leadership ventilated their core aspirations and grievances to government.

My specific involvement came just prior to the KhoiSan Dialogue 2 convened at Kimberley from 10 to 11 April 2014, when I was appointed as the facilitator of this gathering comprising approximately 1000 delegates who had been identified as the most prominent and influential leaders of the Griqua, the San/ Boesman, the Korana, the Nama and the Cape Khoi - these being identified by government as the dominant Khoi and San groupings in South Africa.

Presiding as facilitator in the plenary sessions and sitting in observing the smaller breakaway sessions at this conference, I was acutely aware that the issues related to colouredness, loss of identity and critical cultural attributes was a matter of deep concern to these leaders.

Here I was also exposed to numerous narratives, from across the country that were not part of the official or mainstream South African narrative.

The volatility and intensity of the debates in both the plenary and the breakaway session always revealed another critical element, which is that there was a sense among the majority of the delegates that they were not being heard, that their narratives were not being taken seriously and that robustness of the debate could also be attributed to the fact that they felt they had been silent too long and that it was time to speak about that which had been better left unspoken and therefore unaddressed.

The fact is that many of the delegates specifically questioned why their stories, their heroes, their contributions to this country and their acts of resistance against their dispossession and dehumanisation was not part of the mainstream discourse, did not appear in history books, and was not part of the basic or tertiary educational curriculum.

As a facilitator, seeking to create a safe arena where these critical matters could be ventilated and addressed, I was acutely aware of the fact that they had raised a critical point, namely that there is a dearth of information on many of the issues raised.

This contribution, therefore, is partly my respectful response to those leaders who brought these matters so eloquently to my attention at the Kimberley 2 KhoiSan Dialogue.

## **Africa has nothing to contribute – A personal story**

The Khoi and the San are of course recognised as one of the oldest of the African peoples, indeed of the human species.

However, one of the realities of our present situation, as also of the recent past and our narrative into antiquity, is that there has been a denial of what Africa and its peoples mean to the world and much distortion or even outright omission of Africa's contribution to the development of the world as we now know it.

One of my earliest lessons, when I came to understand the true depth of the prejudice against African contributions to the development of the human race, came very early in my adult life, surprisingly during an academic stint at an institution of higher learning in what was considered a fairly progressive country. That was about 26 years ago (i.e. 1990), when I was a post-graduate divinity student in Zurich, Switzerland. I was 30 years old.

During a discussion with one of my professors on knowledge and intellectual heritage, he remarked directly to me and quite emphatically, "The only contribution your continent has made to the world is music and dance." He continued, "No major discoveries of note or contributions to intellectualism have emerged from Africa."

Besides being jolted and shocked, I was stunned. I was not expecting such commentary from this otherwise warm and welcoming European (he was German) academic.

Much later in life I realised that my professor's comments were somewhat representative of classic German Idealism as espoused by late 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831) who asserted, among others, that "Africa has no history".

I had until this moment taken as self-evident a number of truths about the positive contribution of Africa to humanity. My clandestine political education during my late teenage years came via some of the banned political pamphlets produced by the exilic ANC and Communist Party which I read during the late 1970s and early 1980s. These polemical rather than academic writings made me feel sufficiently confident to politically articulate an anti-apartheid cause using my personal life story to get audiences to empathise with the 'black struggle'. But I was now in an academic and intellectual environment that demanded a different and somewhat dispassionate articulation of the value and contribution of *my* continent and *my* people to civilisation.

I was too ignorant and ill-informed to offer a rebuttal, besides being scared, to have an intelligent conversation with my professor for whom I had the profoundest respect in terms of his academic prowess. He was a very proud German and a dedicated Hebrew Bible scholar, my chosen field of academic interest at the time.

I did not study history, let alone African history, in any serious shape or form during or after high school. While history was one of my high school subjects, it was reduced to memorising dates and names without understanding or critically engaging the context. Consequently, I had no point of reference to provide anyone, let alone my professor, a counter argument other than an emotional argument as a victim of apartheid racism.

It is instructive to note, here, that the critical driving force of the Apartheid system was not its military machinery but its ability to impose its philosophy of education. In this regard, one of the most telling comments was made by Dr Hendrick Verwoerd in 1953, then Minister of Native Affairs and later Prime Minister (1958 to 1963). Verwoerd said:

"If the native in South Africa today in any kind of school in existence is being taught to expect that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a big mistake ... There is no place for him [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour.

... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live."

The education system as defined by Apartheid (as was the case during Colonialism) was the primary tool used by a small white minority to mind-control a black majority into submission and subservience. Apartheid-style education was the cornerstone of the grander design of enforcing subjugation, entrenching notions of the inferiority of the African and the superiority of the *white man*, or the European.

The philosophy of education as articulated by Verwoerd was probably not an aberration by rather a living example of mainstream European thinking *vis-a-vis* the education of people of colour. Verwoerd bluntly stated that the destiny of Africans are to be 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'. With such a view of the humanity and potential of black people it is no wonder that any investment in the education of blacks would be seen as a terrible waste – in fact a sin – a waste of God's resources. Logically then, black people were not to be encouraged to dream of nor desire higher education because, as JN le Roux, a National Party politician said in 1945, "*We should not give the Natives any academic education. If we do, who is going to do the manual labour in the community?*"

In 1953, a then young member of parliament, who later became State President, namely PW Botha, addressed the House of Assembly in August 1953 saying:

"We must accept that the non-European in South Africa in his level of civilisation is hundreds of years behind the European, and he can only insist on the same privileges and rights as those enjoyed by the European in South Africa today when he reaches that stage that the white man has reached."

It is worth noting the recent fallout resulting from a comment on social media by Helen Zille, a South African politician, current Premier of the Western Cape and former leader of the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party. Zille tweeted that not every aspect of European colonialism was bad. Her tweet went on to say "For those claiming legacy of colonialism was *only* negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water, etc." Zille almost immediately withdrew her message, and apologised, saying her tweet was not in support of colonialism. There are currently calls for her to be removed from her position. Her own political party has distanced itself from her comments and have charged her for bringing the party into disrepute. As this book goes to print, Helen Zille is appearing before the disciplinary committee of her political party for her tweets.

Panashe Chigumadze's article reflecting on the firestorm caused by Helen Zille's tweet poignantly remarks:

Zille's comments and the broader myth of the White Saviour are very much in line with the paternalistic origins of liberal thought in South Africa ... Her [Zille's] remarks should not surprise us. Her sentiments highlight how central the erasure of black and non-European modernities is to settler colonial thought.<sup>1</sup>

Time has swiftly moved on since being pushed by my German professor. I gradually become more possessive, proud and knowledgeable of *my* continent. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, I so wish I had already been versed in the works and ideas of fellow South Africans like Christian Ziervogel (1938), Govan Mbeki (1939), Walter Sisulu (1950), Hosea Jaffe (1952), Ben Kies (1953), and others, as well as international scholars such as Basil Davidson (1966) and Stanlake Samkange (1971). I wish I had been exposed to the 8 volume *Cambridge History of Africa* series published between 1975 and 1986, and the invaluable UNESCO sponsored eight volume-collection called *The General History of Africa*.<sup>2</sup> These thought leaders, scholars and publications certainly existed.<sup>3</sup> If I had been familiar with them, especially the thought leadership of the South Africans like Ben Kies and his seminal paper on the contribution of non-Europeans to civilisation, I would have had some answers for my professor.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, I would have been able to identify, in the assertions of my professor, traces of the Hegelian assertion that *Africans-have-no-history* and consequently *Africans-have-no-civilisation* myth and the *Hamite hypothesis* which asserts that “any signs of past progress detectable among Africans must have been the fruit of intrusion from the north; more exactly ‘white’ intrusion from Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The value of hindsight**

As I look back on my encounter with my beloved German professor, I feel like such an idiot – so ill-informed – so ignorant – so uneducated – so embarrassed. If I were more widely read and moved in different intellectual circles, I would have been aware of the dominant Eurocentric intellectual assumption namely that “a people or peoples known as Hamites were responsible for any progress of history that might be identifiable in Africa, *because the Negroes (the Africans) were too primitive to be able, on their own, to embark on any such progress [italics is my emphasis]*.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chigumadzi, P (2017) Helen Zille and the myth of the white saviour.

<http://www.timeslive.co.za/sundaytimes/opinion/2017/03/19/Helen-Zille-and-the-myth-of-the-White-Saviour>

<sup>2</sup> This groundbreaking work, now freely available online, was the first of its type to present the entire history of the African continent. The collection sheds light on the pre-colonial era and interweaves Africa's destiny with the rest of humanity's, examining its interaction with other continents and the role of Africans in the dialogue between civilizations. The project was facilitated by UNESCO and inaugurated by a meeting of Experts for the Drafting and Publication of a General History of Africa, Addis Ababa, 22 to 26 June, 1970. The first of the eight volumes was published in 1981. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/general-history-of-africa/volumes/#c181073>

<sup>3</sup> African Saga – A brief introduction to African history (1971).

<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Adhikari, a leading Cape Town based scholar on coloured identity has, as part of his PhD research, analysed the writings of 20<sup>th</sup> century coloured intellectuals and their views on coloured identity. These include the works of Dorothy Hendricks and Christian Viljoen (1936), Christian Viervogel (1938), Maurice Hommel (1981), Richard van der Ross (1986 [subsequently 2016-In Our Own Skins], and Roy du Pre (1994). Adhikari's doctoral thesis was published in 2005 under the title, Not white enough, Not black enough – racial identity in the South African coloured community (Double Storey Books, Cape Town).

<sup>5</sup> Davidson, Africa in History: page 11.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson, page 12.

Should I blame Apartheid education and censorship for my lack of knowledge? Or shall I blame my parents and my sheltered, conservative and fundamentalist Christian upbringing? Or shall I just blame myself or my culture? Perhaps the oft and sadly quoted joke applies here, namely that if you want to hide a secret from black people then publish it in a book because they (i.e. blacks) don't (i.e. can't) read.

From the arguments which swayed the countries of the world to overwhelmingly declare apartheid as a crime against humanity, it is certainly clear that the vast majority which voted on this United Nations General Assembly resolution were convinced that the apartheid education system was an essential part of this design to undermine the majority.

Also, a critical component of apartheid ideology is that it ensured radical censorship of any contrary theories of race, and perfected white superiority to the extent that it was entrenched in law and sanctioned by the Christian church. How bizarre that the church (and religion in South Africa in general) would nurture such pro-white racist dogma!<sup>7</sup> And by the way, as recent as 1913, the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa debated whether the SAN (pejorative - Bushmen) were humans or animals. The vexing question debated by the church leaders was, "Do they [Bushmen] have a soul?"

I suspect that a few decades from now people will find it difficult to believe that my generation actually lived through apartheid – one of the most vicious and racist systems of governance, identity and ethnicity manipulation in the world, where debates about the humanity of people of colour was the only real issue. I would like to believe that human equality is a pervasive 21<sup>st</sup> century assumption even though in some places it is still not a dominant practice. My own children who belong to the born-free generation (now aged 25 years and 21 years) find it difficult to comprehend how their parents could have lived through such a system of discrimination and dehumanisation, often rated among oppressive systems as second only to nazism.

The fact is that I am part of a generation who were eye-witnesses with first-hand participant and victimhood experience of living through the Apartheid system. It really happened. My children's question is: So what did you do about it dad?

### **The 1990s – dawn of a new era**

The late 1980s and early 1990s was an intriguing time globally. The geo-spatial map of the world was being redrawn. Traditional ideological schisms were radically questioned and overturned. For example, Václav Havel, a Czech writer, philosopher, political dissident was appointed as president of Czechoslovakia (1989-1992) and the first president of the Czech Republic after the Czech-Slovak split. Mikhail Gorbachev facilitated the dismantling of the 'cold war' USSR. He was head of state from 1988 until its dissolution in 1991.

Europe was undergoing dramatic changes with the east-west divides no longer defining European identity. The orthodox east which was dominated by communism began to interface

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<sup>7</sup> See Vosloo, RR (2015) "The Bible and the justification of apartheid in Reformed circles in the 1940's in South Africa: Some historical, hermeneutical and theological remarks" in Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2015, Vol 1, No 2, 195–215.

with the protestant and catholic west which was dominated by capitalism. The collapse of Berlin Wall which divided east and West Germany, but symbolically also divided eastern and western Europe, came tumbling down on 9 November 1989 signalling the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union. This was the era of Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* ("openness") and *perestroika* ("restructuring") and his reorientation of Soviet strategic aims, all contributing to the end of the Cold War. In short, this was a period of dramatic realignment of the ideological tectonic plates of European society and global politics.<sup>8</sup>

The 1990s was a similarly fascinating for South Africa. It signalled the beginning of the end of apartheid with the release of Mandela from 27 years of imprisonment by the Apartheid government. The Apartheid government was now definitely in the last throes of it clutching to white minority rule and white supremacy as a guiding ideology and socio-cultural system in South Africa, the last global bastion for legalised white supremacist existence. Of course, apartheid did not start in 1948 when the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa. Rather, apartheid must be interpreted as the hard edge and logical outcome of embedded European colonial ideology practiced over a few centuries in South Africa.

Here we were; my wife and I, as students in Europe, the very source of white supremacist ideology, and the custodians of the colonial oppression of my South African ancestors. I began to process and understand Europe as the definer and thief of my identity, culture and intellectualism. Frighteningly, I realised just how Europeanised I had become – how thoroughly assimilated I was into 'western' European culture – from my birth. I suppose that happens if your people and culture have been colonised by Europe for almost 400 years. I realise that I had more in common with fellow Europeans than my indigenous fellow South Africans.

As indicated above, my first post-high school studies and career took the form of technical engineering related education for my blue collar work. I was learning (i.e. being apprenticed) to become a tradesman (i.e. fitter and turner). It would be another ten years before the intellectual horizons of my world broadened beyond subjects like internal combustion engines, strength of materials and engineering drawing, to the social sciences including philosophy and sociology. After qualifying and working as a tradesman in the heavy engineering sector, and after a personal spiritual awakening, I registered for fulltime study at seminary but then went on to complete an undergraduate degree in the social sciences at the University of Cape Town with a major in religious studies and a minor in social anthropology.

How ironic that I was now pursuing post-graduate study in Hebrew Bible and Christian theology, in Europe, the very continent that was the source of so much pain and trauma linked to my identity, heritage and intellectual incapacity, according to the University of Cape Town's diagnosis 'academically disadvantaged'. Not to say that people of colour did not study in Europe during previous centuries. This did happen but was the exception rather than the rule.

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<sup>8</sup> My wife and I had visited eastern Europe during the mid 1980s and again in the early 1990s. The details of how we crossed over into the forbidden communist country is for another time. Let's just say that being students in Europe during this time afforded us the privileged to get a *before* and an *after* perspective and a firsthand feel for the mood in Europe during these days of dramatic change. Interestingly, we were students at an institution in Switzerland which, among others, served as a safe haven for intellectual and religious refugees from communist eastern Europe. Their perspectives were fascinating to hear in a classroom setting. What a privilege to have such an experience and perspective.

I come from a community where successfully completing high school was just a dream for many, let alone university education. My own parents only finished primary school education. For me to be pursuing higher and post-graduate education in Europe was a bridge too far, given my background and socialisation which told me that university education was 'not for me'. Furthermore, given my cultural circles, it was certainly not the norm to pursue university education, and most definitely not abroad.

I have since learned that a dominant European motivation for absorbing African students like me was primarily to 'civilise us through education', Europe's contribution to improving our humanity. In colonial times the trade-off and expectation was that individuals from Africa pursuing studies abroad would serve the interests of Europe in Africa. This was the case already during the early 1600s (before the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652) when local indigenous Cape Town cultural and business leaders such as Xhoré and Autshumato were taken abroad to learn English (London) and Dutch (Jakarta) in 1613 and 1632 respectively. Today, notwithstanding visa restrictions and financial challenges, it is more common and somewhat easier for South Africans to pursue educational opportunities outside South Africa. Based on the present day difficulty of getting a visa, it appears that Europe does not really want us there. The recent Brexit decision taken on 23 June 2016 (i.e. the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union) and Europe's increasing intolerance for foreigners, has turned a regular visa application process into a near terrorist interrogation session.<sup>9</sup> Allow me to share a very recent experience.

During early 2016, I was invited to address a group of European Union politicians and development specialists in Brussels, Belgium. It was a one day assignment that I was asked to perform. In order to get a Schengen visa I had to undergo a face-to-face interview, submit three months personal bank statements, show proof of paid accommodation in Brussels, bring proof of a paid return airticket, and proof of my residence in South Africa, as well as a formal letter of invitation to Brussels. After paying a substantial visa application fee, I had to wait a few days after which I was issued a visa valid for that one day that I was going to be in Brussels, with sufficient time for me to get to and from the airport and return to South Africa, immediately. The only missing piece of my journey was an armed escort to ensure that I boarded the aeroplane and returned home. By way of contrast, European passport holders such as Germans, for example, can travel and enter unhindered to 172 of the earth's 192 countries - without a visa.<sup>10</sup>

The reverse is not true. Europeans and a few other nationalities do not require a visa to conduct a similar assignment in South Africa. They are free to come and go through South African immigration as they please. We are a welcoming people, I think. Or are we naive.

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<sup>9</sup> Not all European countries are anti-foreigner. Germany, under the leadership of Angela Merkel, is the best example of a European nation demonstrating practical commitment to absorbing and integrating foreigners and refugees. The Schengen visa application process for non-refugees, nevertheless, remains interrogative.

<sup>10</sup> Scheid, A and Barlag, L (2016) A short history of the passport - Thoughts on global mobility from a critical European perspective. <https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/short-history-passport>.

## **Conclusion**

The details which I have shared in this short speech begin to tell the story of how the foundation nation who once were the owners of the land and the economy became sidelined, abused, and relegated to the margins of the very society where they once occupied centre stage. Our forefathers and mothers were the original people and owners of the land. For many of us, even such an assertion is foreign and militates against what we have been indoctrinated to believe namely that when the colonisers arrived here in this very city of Cape Town, they arrived to an empty land. My book will address these matters in more detail.

Let me conclude by recognising that it is easy to lament the past. It is even easier to remain a victim. It is easier to remain in the margins.

But it is time that we shed our learned helplessness and reclaim our rightful place in the South African narrative. And dare I say that such a place is in the centre and not back stage. However, my question to you tonight is: Are you ready to take centre stage – are you ready to move back to the centre. I leave you with that challenge and wish you well as you spend the next 2 days discussing matters pertinent to the restoration of 400 years of dehumanisation at the hands of colonialism and racism. My best wishes to you all.

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