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Axis Mundi in the Tropics: Uses and Abuses of Eliade's Phenomenology of Religion in the Schelean Maya Studies

ZUZANA MARIE KOSTIĆOVÁ

Department of Religious Studies,
Charles University, Praha, Czech Republic
zuzana.kosticova@htf.cuni.cz

ABSTRACT

Ever since the 1980s, the Maya Studies became seeped with influence of the theories of Mircea Eliade. The article traces the origins and contexts of this influence and evaluates both the results it yielded and the problems it brought to the discipline. First of all, it shows that the way Eliade's influence has been brought to the Maya Studies (mainly via the Maya Cosmos monograph) is seriously problematic, since it does not discuss or even acknowledge the Eliadian origins of its main concepts. This lack of theoretical reflection opened the door to simplifications and misunderstandings, which spread through the discipline. At the same time, the fundamentally empirical character of Maya Studies practically prevented any deeper conceptual discussion of Maya religion. The article therefore calls for a much needed theoretical and methodological self-reflection of Maya Studies and its concepts related to ancient Maya spirituality.

KEY WORDS: David Freidel, Maya Religion, Maya Studies, Mircea Eliade, Religious Studies, Linda Schele

Introduction

Every religious studies scholar that has read the major works on Maya religion of the last four decades must be duly surprised by the enormous influence Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology of Religion had on such books as *Blood of Kings*, *Maya Cosmos*, and other

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classical Maya Studies works (SCHELE – MILLER 1992; FREIDEL – SCHELE – PARKER 1993; SCHELE – FREIDEL 1990). And all the more so, since this influence flourished long after Eliade's heyday in the religious studies was over. Only now have the Maya studies scholars begun to reflect on the theoretical background of their work on religion and to try to divest themselves from Eliade's shadowy omnipresence. The question of how this influence came to be has already been answered by such scholars as Cecilia Klein (KLEIN – GUZMÁN – MANDELL – STANFIELD-MAZZI 2002) and, specifically, Andrei Znamenski (ZNAMENSKI 2007). On the other hand, as far as I know, there has been no intent to take a closer look on the way Eliade's theories were used and interpreted in the Maya studies context. This article's main goal is to fill this gap and bring forth a kind of theoretical and methodological self-reflection of Maya studies and its concept of religion.

This goal is of course not new in and of itself. With the emerging awareness of Eliade's profound influence on the discipline, some authors have started to discuss the situation. I will draw mainly on one of the most telling examples of such reflection, which is Miguel Ángel Astor Aguilera and his 2010 monograph *The Maya World of Communicating Objects* (ASTOR AGUILERA 2010). I consider this book to be a model case of the slowly emerging criticism of Eliade's influence on Maya studies – specifically for the commendable sincerity with which the author states that, for years, he has been using Eliadian terms and concepts without the slightest notion of their original author. One of the main goals of Astor Aguilera's book is apparently to liberate himself from the Eliadian heritage and look for different approaches. As he states, these new approaches lay mainly in the realm of Foucauldian discourse analysis and, from the methodological point of view, an iconosymbolic reconstruction.

I consider this to be a typical example of the vast problem Maya studies finds itself in – and there is one chief reason for it: contemporary Mayanists are largely empirically oriented, and their methodological basis is usually to be found in the disciplines of archaeology, iconography/art history, and epigraphy/linguistics. This situation is due to the specific evolution of Maya studies. Unlike other disciplines, such as classical archaeology, there is still a great deal of work to be done in the actual excavations of the ancient Maya cities. Great discoveries are still made practically every few years, from single inscriptions and murals to entire cities and subterranean cave systems. All this requires an army of specialists, and, as a result, our knowledge of Maya city-states has been advancing in a rapid manner. At the same time, the great breakthrough in deciphering the Maya script came only in the 1950's and it was not until the 1970's that the rapid decipherment of entire Maya inscriptions started to take place. Naturally, quite a lot of work remains to be done in this field. Due to this, most Mayanists busy themselves either with archaeological and iconographical work or with the

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study of the Maya glyphs. Most of the scholarly publications made in the field of Maya religion are thus highly empirical or even factographic in nature, rarely recurring to any overarching theories whatsoever. As for the exceptions that are conscious of Eliade's influence (namely, Davíd Carrasco, Miguel Rivera Dorado, and others; see RIVERA DORADO 2001; CARRASCO 1990, 1991), they usually do not offer larger theoretical and methodological discussions in their works and tend to conform themselves with simply acknowledging Eliade's influence on their writings. I will elaborate on this point further below.

Now how did this situation arise? I intend to show that Eliade's concepts and theories seeped into Maya studies largely unnoticed and that this process is tied to the inner structure and methodological background of the celebrated monographs *Blood of Kings* and, first and foremost, *Maya Cosmos*. While scholars such as Andrei Znamenski or Kocku von Stuckrad (ZNAMENSKI 2007; STUCKRAD 2014) mostly focus on the way Eliade's influence helped to co-create neo-shamanism and to introduce its concepts into several academic disciplines, my goal here is different. I do not mean to criticize Eliade's theory *eo ipso* – as we will see, enough criticism of this kind has already been made, even in Maya Studies (ASTOR AGUILERA 2010). Instead, I wish to show that in Maya Studies, Eliade's theories have been stripped of context and largely disconnected from their original source in Eliade's writings, which were hardly ever explicitly mentioned. Instead, they became a reservoir of vague ideas, a dictionary of concepts and terms, a source of jargon, and (as Michael E. Smith complained, see SMITH 2005) sometimes even a heap of clichés. Consequently, instead of recognizing their specific historical and theoretical origins, Maya studies scholars tended to treat the core concepts and terms as an explicit part of the original, *emic* worldview of the ancient Maya culture.

To borrow an old Czech proverb (originally referring to fire), a theory is a good servant but an evil master. In other words, while we may apply any kind of theoretical approach to almost any kind of material, we must do it consciously and be aware both of the possibilities and limitations of the theory in question. It is true that Eliade's phenomenology of religion is considered severely outdated today, but its application to the ancient Maya culture yielded some important results. However, the way Phenomenology's theoretical apparatus was applied in Maya studies was flawed in the first place, both from the point of view of the rigors of scholarly interpretation and the formal standards of academic work. And, to some extent, the very empirical character of Maya studies is one of the reasons why this happened and why the reflection came so late.

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As I already stated, I am certainly not the first person to explore the connection between Eliadian terminology and Maya studies. The first in this respect was certainly Cecelia Klein and her team, who launched the first critical analysis of sacred Maya kingship in their 2002 article (KLEIN – GUZMÁN – MANDELL – STANFIELD-MAZZI 2002). Michael E. Smith followed suit – in his short 2005 article, he questioned the term "cosmogram" and the careless way it is used in the discipline (SMITH 2005). And, finally, a whole number of neo-shamanism experts came to assess the connection between Eliade, neo-shamanism, and scholarly disciplines. While some mentions appeared already in Robert Waliss' 2003 book (WALISS 2003), it was Andrei Znamenski who explored the theme at length in his 2007 monograph *The Beauty of the Primitive* (ZNAMENSKI 2007). Znamenski mentions Maya studies briefly, tracing an extremely important link between Mircea Eliade, Peter T. Furst, Carlos Castaneda, and David Freidel, but he remains focused on neo-shamanism and therefore less interested in the formal questions of the Mayanists' interpretation of Eliade. The same focus is apparent in *Scientification of Religion* by Kocku von Stuckrad published in 2014 (STUCKRAD 2014). True, Stuckrad dedicates quite a lot of space to the effect of Eliade's theories upon different disciplines, but due to the focus of the book on esoteric currents, the spotlight is directed towards the leading New Age and neo-shamanic figures. Consequently, the Maya Studies problem is left aside.

At the same time, Eliade's influence on the discipline has already been critically discussed by the Mayanists themselves. I already made a reference to Miguel Ángel Astor Aguilera's criticism, which appeared in the introduction to his 2010 monograph *The Maya World of Communicating Objects* (ASTOR AGUILERA 2010). In this sense, this article is not only closely related to Znamenski's and Stuckrad's book, but it also contains a direct response to Astor Aguilera.

Some Methodological Remarks

Probably the best way to grasp the problem methodologically is to make use of Michel Foucault's concept of *discourse* (FOUCAULT 1982; DREYFUS – RABINOW 1984). While Foucauldian theories have been appropriated to a great avail by philosophy, linguistics, history, etc., they remained largely unused by other academic disciplines. Until recently, this was also true for religious studies; however, there is a recent and rapidly growing group of religious studies scholars who make use of Foucault's discourse analysis and its tools. This is well attested by Kocku von Stuckrad's *Scientification of Religion*, probably the most important book that tries to apply discourse analysis in the realm of religious studies and the main methodological model that I hold on to in this text (STUCKRAD 2014). He shows the

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mutual influence between academic disciplines and different esoteric currents (such as astrology, neo-shamanism, and others) as well as the way individual thinkers are sometimes officially recognized by the academia, while at other times they are ridiculed and discursively cast away to the obscurity of esotericism. While there is tremendous potential in the application of discourse analysis to religion itself and the way its official doctrines and hierarchical organizations operate (mirroring the classical Foucauldian interplay between discourse and apparatus), here I will contend myself in following in Stuckrad's footsteps and remaining in the already much-explored land of the relationship between academic disciplines and their material.

Since this article is based in religious studies and intended mainly for a readership with a traditional Maya studies background, I can hardly avoid explaining some very basic things that, while obvious for a religious studies scholar, are very remote to a Mayanist. At the same time and for the very same reasons, I will have to start with a brief sketch of Eliade's most important theses and the reasons he upheld them. Since classical phenomenology of religion is well known to every single religious studies scholar and has been under a severe critical attack from at least the 1970's, the first section will have hardly any import for a seasoned theorist of religion. On the other hand, as there has been little or no serious reflection of Eliades's theories in the realm of Maya studies, a quick overview may certainly come in handy, since it may prevent future misunderstandings (as appear in ASTOR AGUILERA 2010, see below). Again, my main focus here will not be criticism and refusal, but simple hermeneutics. While we remain free to refuse Eliade's opinions (and one can find good reasons to do it), the criticism, I believe, must be fully contextualized.

In the second part, I will sum up how and when Eliade was introduced to Maya studies. This will require an overview of the discipline, working, in Foucauldian terms, with its different discourse formations. There are, I believe, three of them. The first is the early period culminating perhaps with Daniel Brinton – some of its discursive strategies were already brilliantly analyzed by Lindsay Jones and remain out of the scope of the present article (JONES 1997). The second is what I call the Thompsonian discourse formation named after J. Eric S. Thompson, the scholar who dominated the field during most of the first half of the 20th century. Finally, the third is the Schelean discourse formation revolving around Linda Schele, who was one of the greatest figures in the Maya studies of the second half of the last century and whose influence reigned supreme from the 1970's up till now. Most of today's leading Mayanists, both in USA and in Europe, are either Schele's direct colleagues/disciples or were crucially influenced by the monographs she co-authored. I will try to show how the Schelean formation draws inspiration from Eliade – and I will use the term *axis mundi* as an example, to show how this Eliadian inspiration, for good or for worse, survives in mainstream

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Maya studies. At the same time (since I believe this is precisely the core of the problem), I will focus on the formal way Eliade is treated in the discipline. Finally, I will conclude by responding to Miguel Ángel Astor Aguilera's criticism to Eliade and, subsequently, make some suggestions for the future of the discipline.

Eliade's Phenomenology of Religion: the Context and Basic Points

Mircea Eliade was born in Romania, and taught first in Bucharest, then in Paris, and ultimately in Chicago. Although his first works date as early as the 1930s, it wasn't until the 1950s that his writings came to be known in the USA, reaching the peak of their influence in the 1960s and 70s. As we have seen, his most (usually critically) discussed work today is *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, which was first published in English in 1964 and took popular culture by storm (ZNAMENSKI 2007; WALISS 2003; STUCKRAD 2014). However, Eliade authored many other books, such as *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*, etc. (ELIADE 1954, 1958, 1959, respectively). He also edited the massive multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion* that was published posthumously in 1987. Eliade is usually cited as the foremost example of what used to be called the phenomenology of religion – a study of the way people conceive of their religious experiences through specific sets of symbols and phenomena that are understood as more or less typical for religious experience as such. Even though he was somewhat inspired by Husserl's phenomenology, his main sources remain in the realm of religious studies and theology. One that figures prominently among them is Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, a book that tried to capture the essence of religious experience; also Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, a large treatise on the transcultural and comparative approach to religious phenomena, is one of the chief sources (OTTO 1936; LEEUW 2014) .

This group of authors is not to be confused with the contemporary phenomenology of religion, which is focused on accessing religious experience in its purest form and whose empirical methodology is based on interviews and observation. Contemporary phenomenologists of religion often accuse Otto, van der Leeuw, and Eliade of hijacking the term "phenomenology" and disregarding its essential focus on the human experience and perception. In Husserl's original view, we have no actual access to things themselves; we are only able to perceive is the way things present themselves to us; in other words, the image of the object in our consciousness. This is what Husserl calls *Phenomenon*. It is only natural that the problem of human perception became one of the key focuses of his philosophy.

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Contemporary phenomenologists of religion tend to criticize Leeuw, Otto, and Eliade for abandoning Husserl's key point and plunging themselves into writing book after book about different religions and their core features. As James V. Spickard puts it, "their approach might be better seen as describing the religions of various times and places really, really well" (SPICKARD 2014).

However, to do justice to this generation of highly influential scholars, we need to understand where they came from and what they intended to do. The point of their work was not to study the way people perceive and why they do that; their goal was to identify a basic set of religious phenomena or typical ways the "sacred" manifests itself in the world (Eliade uses the term *Hierophany* for this). The ultimate goal of phenomenology of religion is to find phenomena common for most peoples (if not for all humankind) and create a global, comparison-based theory of what religion is and how it works. In this sense, while contemporary phenomenology of religion is focused on the *intentionality* of human perception and the way it reacts to objects, subjects, and processes (thus making it a close kin to Husserl's original concept), the old phenomenology of religion set out to identify *universal religious phenomena* that appear cross-culturally and worldwide.

For a contemporary reader, this naturally seems to be a highly dubious and risky project: we immediately start to consider all the local contexts and specifics that must be omitted in order to make distant cultures and their religions easily comparable to one another. As Eliade himself clearly demonstrates in his introduction to *Shamanism*, the scholars were acutely aware of that:

Conceived in this spirit, this work cannot possibly exhaust any of the aspects that it approaches in its several chapters. We have not undertaken a complete study of shamanism; we lack both the resources and the will for such a task. It is always as a comparatist and a historian of religions that we have treated our subject; admitting which, we plead guilty in advance to the inevitable gaps and imperfections in a work that, in the last analysis, represents an effort towards a synthesis. We are neither an Altaicist nor an Americanist nor an Oceanicist, and it is probable that a certain number of specialized studies have escaped our notice (ELIADE 1964:xx).

What may now seem as a careless approach (at least Astor Aguilera deems it so, as we will see in the conclusion) was actually a great breakthrough and a positive achievement for the early 20th century religious studies. Before phenomenology, the discipline tended to study religions from different points of view that often bordered on reductionism and bias. Its oldest layers were inspired both by Christian theology and by atheist, positivist attitudes; generally speaking, the first religious studies scholars either tried to track the traces of the "one true

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religion" in the doctrine of the "primitive" peoples, or wondered how anyone could ever have believed in such nonsense as supernatural agents. The latter approach was typical for Tylor (who was convinced that religion simply serves to explain the unexplained and will gradually disappear once science takes over), Durkheim (who emphasized the primary role of religion in maintaining social cohesion), Freud (with his idea of religion as a collective neurosis), and Marx (who thought religion was the ideology of the dominant class, and its goal was to subdue the proletariat). With this situation in the background, the newborn phenomenology of religion refused to analyze religion as a mere function of or a substitute for something else and to reduce it to psychological needs, power struggles, social cohesion, or primeval ignorance. Instead, the authors decided to study religion *as such* – to find what exactly is so specific about it, and what the most important building blocks and relationships that form most (or, in the ideal case, all) religions are. Naturally, this project required less attention to what was culturally specific, individual, exotic, and original – instead, it represented a constant search for common motifs, features, and structures. During this quest for universal similarities, many authors unsurprisingly fell prey to oversimplifications, eagerly overlooked what didn't suit them, and sometimes even ended up distorting the image of individual religions so that the resulting general pattern came out as more convincing. At the same time, the broadness of the scope necessarily relied on second-hand accounts, since, for a single person, a full insight in all the cultures of the world would be absolutely impossible to achieve. The phenomenologists were thus typical armchair scholars who mainly worked with secondary sources. And, as we have seen, they admitted it freely.

Before long, this type of methodology naturally incited strong criticism that pointed out omissions, misunderstandings, superficialities, and plain errors. Subsequently, the comparative quest for universalities was largely abandoned and gave way to other methodologies. On the one hand, the growing interest in cultural specifics and the yearning for more accurate pictures of different religions led to associating religious studies with anthropology. This gave birth to what was called "the cultural turn" (with such great names as Geertz, Luckmann, or Berger in its front line), which passed the spotlight to qualitative research and anthropological fieldwork, ultimately leading to the predominance of social constructivism in the discipline. On the other hand, the search for common motifs turned into the search for common structures. This brought together religious studies and structuralism. Both the cultural turn and structuralism appeared in the 1970s–1980's, and their reign continued until the first decade of the 21st century, when cognitive and evolutionary psychology became the hottest new fashion in the discipline. By that time, Leeuw's and Eliade's phenomenology of religion was forgotten for all practical purposes and firmly

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relegated to university textbooks of the history of the discipline. That is, everywhere except for the Maya studies.

Eliade and the Maya Studies

In Maya studies, the main influx of Eliade's theoretical concepts came relatively late, more or less at the point when his heyday in religious studies was already over. Cecelia Klein and Andrei Znamenski convincingly show that the earliest traces of his influence are closely connected to Peter T. Furst, an influential scholar focused on the Huichol and based at the University of California (KLEIN – GUZMÁN – MANDELL – SANFIELD-MAZZI 2002, ZNAMENSKI 2007). Influenced by Eliade, Furst was mainly interested in the presence of Shamanism and altered states of consciousness in the indigenous religions of the Americas (FURST 1976). While the scholars who track the development of neo-shamanism strongly focus on his relationship with Carlos Castaneda (ZNAMENSKI 2007), Klein points out that Furst also made a fundamental re-working of Eliade's concept of shamanism. Eliade himself stressed ecstasy, management of spiritual allies, shamanic journeys, and complex symbolism; he also insisted on the systemic and archaic nature of shamanism, which requires a specific transmission and initiation of shamanic neophytes. At the same time, the Eliadian shamans fulfill a set of social roles: apart from being masters of ecstasy, shamans are also healers, magicians, religious specialists, poets, etc. In contrast to this concept, Furst suggested a common shamanic structure of the cosmos with *axis mundi* connecting a multilayered world, complex symbolism of the four cardinal points and the earth/sky binary opposition, animating life-giving force that connects all living beings, emphasis on man-animal transformation, and the central role of hallucinogenic trance in rituals (KLEIN – GUZMÁN – MANDELL – STANFIELD-MAZZI 2002:388). Compared with Eliade, these ideas were apparently strongly influenced by the spirituality of the counterculture, which was being born at the time, and which would culminate in the onset of the so-called "New Age", neopaganism and neo-shamanism.[1] Furst's works naturally influenced the scholars from California and the American Southwest, but the crucial point came when he presented a paper on possible Mesoamerican "vision quests" at the Second Palenque Round Table in 1974 (FURST 1976). Many influential Mayanists became acquainted with his ideas through this paper, which was

[1] As I already mentioned, the latter phenomenon has been extensively described, including mentions of Furst's role; however, the possible influence of the "New Age" and neopaganism on the Maya studies and related disciplines has never been examined. As for neo-shamanism, see ZNAMENSKI 2007, p. 141, 157-158, 180-187, 195.

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duly published in the conference proceedings two years later. True, Furst's work is often criticized, both for its ideological proximity to neo-shamanism and its somehow problematic methodology (Furst's probably harshest critic was Jay C. Fikes who cast doubt on his research and thus incited a long-standing animosity between Furst and himself, which in the end even escalated to a lawsuit; FIKES 1993). However, regardless of its possible flaws, I believe Furst's work was of a great import for the discipline. The new question of ancient Maya religious experience, rarely addressed by the previous discourse formations, opened new horizons for research and yielded some interesting and thought-provoking results.

As far as I was able to discern, the only Mayanist of that period who constantly and openly quoted both Eliade and Furst was Furst's disciple David Freidel. Freidel's early articles predating *Maya Cosmos* (such as FREIDEL 1992) strictly conform to the required formal scholarly routine – he acknowledges his sources in the text as well as in the footnotes and bibliography. Unfortunately, this was one of the last moments in the mainstream Maya Studies when Eliade openly featured among the cited sources. In 1986, Schele and Miller's *Blood of Kings* came out; a summarily important book on Maya art, which already featured some concepts borrowed from Eliade (SCHELE – MILLER 1992). The tome was published as an exhibition catalogue and therefore, although it contained large textual sections, it had no bibliography worth mentioning, only "suggestions for further reading": these only contained a short list of recommended Mayanist classics of that time and no theoretical treatise at all. True, there are some footnotes to be found in every chapter, but they remain faithful to the essentially empirical and factographic nature of Maya studies, citing articles related to archaeological finds, iconographical studies, and decipherment reports. The one and only fundamental exception is a footnote containing a reference to Peter Furst's abovementioned article published in the *Proceedings of the Segunda Mesa Redonda at Palenque* (FURST 1976). Here, Schele and Miller cite his idea that Maya bloodletting was essentially similar to the "vision quest" of the indigenous populations of the Great Plains (SCHELE – MILLER 1992:185, footnote 13). There is not a single mention of Eliade in the book's 335 pages. As for another important masterpiece, *A Forest of Kings* by Schele and Freidel (SCHELE – FREIDEL 1990), the situation is slightly better. Eliade's name appears exactly four times – in two brief footnotes and in the bibliography, where *Shamanism* is listed (SCHELE – FREIDEL 1990:427-428, footnotes 17, 19). Although this is undoubtedly better than complete absence, he is still not even mentioned in the bulk of the text, and there is no theoretical discussion either of his concepts or the possibilities and limits of their application to the Maya material. The same applies to Furst – two brief mentions of his name in the

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footnotes and his article of "Fertility, Vision Quest, and Auto-Sacrifice" listed in the bibliography. Nothing more.

Naturally, some objections come to mind. We may say, for example, that *Blood of Kings* was intended as a basic introduction to the classic Maya art and, consequently, there was no reason to drown the reader in complex religious studies context. And, in a similar fashion, the foremost goal of *A Forest of Kings* was to reconstruct Maya political history by means of decipherment and subsequent analyses: again, hardly an opportunity for extensive theoretical treatises. On the other hand, such discussion would be absolutely indispensable to a comprehensive monograph on Maya religion such as *Maya Cosmos*. Furthermore, the book's main explicit objective is to research the idea of ancient Maya shamanism – and it even bears the subtitle of *Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*. Surely this would be an excellent opportunity to discuss Maya shamanism's theoretical background in its full extent.

Let us then have a closer look at this monograph, which came to be the Schelean formation's single most important publication fully dedicated to Maya religion. *Maya Cosmos* came out in 1993 as a joined effort by Linda Schele, David Freidel, and a creative writing teacher by the name of Joy Parker, who was hired to secure the book's readability and easier accessibility to the general public. The presence of Parker speaks volumes about the authors' intentions and so do the many short personal accounts of an outright emotional and spiritual nature that are scattered throughout the book and were probably meant to spice up the otherwise dry scholarly text. Naturally, this type of cross-genre approach renders the book particularly vulnerable to criticism focused on its subliminal spiritual message (which is, by the way, openly acknowledged in the Preface; FREIDEL – SCHELE – PARKER 1993:9-14). While the connection to neo-shamanism has been made several times, I believe that the context of the book crosses the confines of the neo-shamanic current and attests to the influence of the larger alternative spiritual milieu.[2] Incidentally, as we will see, the same traces of the so-called "New Age" may be found in the introduction to Astor Aguilera's work.

From a purely theoretical point of view, the book is a parade of reference to empirical research. Archaeology, iconography, history, epigraphy, and anthropology – all combined to

[2] This problem is too complicated to be discussed here in due extent. Briefly, as I pointed out in a recent article, the influence of alternative spiritualities on elite members of the academia is a pressing and basically unstudied problem even in religious studies. Naturally, the situation is far more complicated in disciplines such as Maya studies, which generally lack the necessary tools, context, and theoretical background for this kind of critique. To sum up my position, I believe the influence is not "wrong" in itself. Just as the wave of neo-shamanism in the 1960–80s enriched the discipline with new perspectives and topics, the contemporary alternative spiritualities make us less

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create a general view of Maya religion as inherently based on shamanism with its multilayered, periodically centered world and altered states of consciousness. But even though the book is full of Eliadian concepts (*axis mundi*, cosmogram, the sacred, centering the cosmos, primeval time, etc.), there is only one mention of Eliade's name: we can find it in the preface, where the authors briefly mention Freidel had read his "Archaic Ecstasy" (sic, SCHELE – FREIDEL – PARKER 1993:12). Apart from this, there is no acknowledgement of the origins of the terms used throughout the book, let alone a discussion of the possibilities and limits of their application; I would also specifically like to emphasize that no work of Eliade is listed in the bibliography. At the same time, since Eliadian influence on Maya studies travelled through the writings of Peter Furst, we may at least expect a discussion of Eliadian ideas in Furst's rendering. However, Furst's name is not mentioned at all. Naturally, both of these omissions represent a serious formal flaw – and it had serious consequences. To an unsuspecting reader lacking religious studies background, the authors gave a clear impression that the concepts they are using are entirely of their own design. Furthermore, only a single theoretical work is listed in the extensive bibliography of the *Maya Cosmos*, and that is Edmund Leach's 12-page article "Two Essays Concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time" (LEACH 1961). With this one and only exception, the list remains purely empirical and factographic, focused on concrete findings, decipherments, and iconographical analyses. The authors clearly saw no reason to include any theoretical discussion either in the bulk of text or in the bibliography.

Had this happened to an unknown scholar in an article published in some obscure journal, it would have no lasting effect. But virtually every article about Maya religion that belonged to the Schelean discourse formation and was published during the last decade of the 20th century, as well as the first decade of the 21st, was largely based on *Maya Cosmos* and made extensive use of its concepts and terminology. This applies first and foremost to the co-workers and direct or indirect disciples of Freidel and/or Schele, ranging from Peter Matthews and Carolyn Tate to David Stuart, Karl Taube, Nikolai Grube, and others (a

narrowly focused on such phenomena as gods, religious institutions, and hierarchy and more receptive to other "dimensions of the sacred" (as Ninian Smart would have it) – personal experiences, altered states of consciousness, possible non-dualistic and/or holistic worldviews, etc. However, I believe such influence must be consciously reflected at all times, lest it turns to bias and prejudice and, instead of adding a new and refreshing outlook to our theme, we are blinded by yet another predominant, invisible worldview. In this sense, an analysis of the alternative spiritual milieu's influence on Maya studies would be extremely beneficial – as long as it does not transform either into a naïve welcoming party or into a cleansing crusade (KOSTIĆOVÁ 2018a, 2018b; SMART 1996, 2000).

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seasoned Mayanist easily recognizes here some the most influential names of the last two decades of the discipline). Perhaps the most telling – albeit not very influential – illustration of this is Elizabeth Newsome's *Trees of Paradise and Pillars of the World* (NEWSOME 2001). The monograph is based on a University of Texas doctoral dissertation supervised by Linda Schele, finished in 1991 and published by University of Texas Press ten years later. The book's goal is to interpret Waxaklajuun Ubah' K'awiil's Copan stelae as a cycle unified by the common theme of world trees, centering the world, visions, and altered states of consciousness. Despite our willingness or unwillingness to accept Newsome's conclusions, the book exhibits a fundamentally Eliadian outlook and actively uses a plethora of Eliade's original terms. In one interesting case, the author characterizes the term of *Hierophany*, one of the central terms of Eliade's theories, in the following way: the term „has come to usage to refer to a variety of astronomical or natural events that the Maya perceived as revelatory or divinely ordained" (NEWSOME 2001:233, footnote 3). No reflection of the theoretical context of the word outside of Maya studies is made – and, as the reader already suspects, not a single reference to Eliade appears.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that, as I have already mentioned, the methodological basis of the discipline is largely empirical, bordering on outright factographic. Most Mayanists were subsequently entirely unacquainted with *Maya Cosmos*' theoretical inspiration and took Freidel and Schele's concepts at face value. This created a paradoxical situation. The tools Eliade developed to analyze multiple religions and to find their common patterns were suddenly transposed to a single religion, in which the *etic* comparative scholarly terms were suddenly treated as native and *emic*. *Axis mundi*, as we will see presently, stopped to be an openly *etic* term that described the way different peoples of the world conceive of their relationship to the multiple layers of the world and the symbolic connection between them embodied in long vertical objects. Instead, as I will further document later, it was cast as *emic* and became synonymous with the Maya "world tree", the sacred ceiba that grew in the center of the world (and in every cardinal direction), connecting sky, earth, and the underworld. Few Mayanists realized that by adopting the term *axis mundi*, they were using a theoretical tool developed by a 20th century Romanian scholar; Schele and Freidel's books certainly gave them no clue as to this. And gone was the understanding that this concept (as well as other Eliadian concepts) was developed to examine the hypothesized fundamental interconnectedness of archaic religions by means of comparing their features.

That is not to say that there were no theorists with religious studies backgrounds, fully conscious of the heavy Eliadian influence the discipline was under. Probably the most notable among them was David Carrasco, an author of an eminent and frequently translated introduction to Mesoamerican religions and editor of a theoretical work focused on Eliade's

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heritage (CARRASCO 1990, 1991). On the other hand, his summary of ancient Mesoamerican religions notwithstanding, Carrasco's main area of expertise lies mainly in the Aztec culture and religion, not in the Maya one. The Spanish archaeologist Miguel Rivera Dorado would be another case, just like the Slovak Mayanist Milan Kováč. In the works of these scholars, there is usually a marked difference to the typical Schelean approach: the use of Eliadian terms is conscious and therefore much more cautious; opposite to the typical case when the terms and concepts are simply stated, not discussed or even argued for (as Michael E. Smith pointed out in 2005 in his article about "cosmograms" in Mesoamerica: SMITH 2005). At the same time, in most cases the references are duly made and Eliade's name even sometimes gets quoted in the body of the text (see e.g. RIVERA DORADO 2001).

Another example, this time from Maya studies itself, is what I call the Mexican school – a group of scholars closely related to Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and the leading figures of its Maya studies, namely Mercedes de la Garza Camino, Martha Ilia Nájera Coronado, Laura Elena Sotelo Santos, and Alberto Morales Damián. The members of the Mexican school have religious studies training and as such are well-versed in classical Eliadian phenomenology of religion; consequently, they belong to the minority of Maya scholars who actually cite Eliade in their works (GARZA CAMINO 1984, 2002, 2007). Interestingly enough, the Eliadian influence among the Mayanists of the Autónoma is a very early one, predating even the Blood of Kings. The founding work in this respect is most probably Mercedes de la Garza's *Universo sagrado de la serpiente entre los antiguos mayas* (GARZA CAMINO 1986). The book exhibits a curious mix of Thompsonian and Eliadian influence, due to which I have been inclined to call this school "neo-thompsonian" (KOSTIĆOVÁ 2018a:157-160). In reference to religion, de la Garza and her colleagues tend to emphasize the inherent dualism Thompson attributed specifically to the divine figure of "Itzamna" (deciphered as "Itzamnaaj" by newer epigraphic research) and his function as harmony of opposites (male-female, earth-sky, lizards-birds, sun-rain, sky-underworld, etc.). Naturally, this works very well in combination with Eliade's concept of harmony of dualities, *coniunctio oppositorum* and *hieros gamos* of divinities embodying contrasting principles. Yes, Eliade's theories are accepted at face value and the authors do not specifically discuss them, instead only referring to them; in this sense, they function as a kind of Bible or another sacred text that is supposed to be reverently and enthusiastically quoted but not argued or disagreed with. However, at least the references to Eliade are constantly present throughout the most important monographs of this school, making their theoretical bases clearly visible. Again, we can argue for or against this theoretical background and its concrete usage in the hands of the Mexican scholars. But from the formal point of view, everything remains clear, fair, and above-board.

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Unfortunately, outside of this relatively small group of scholars it has become a habit to use Eliade's concepts without a single mention of his name or citation of his written works. While this is sometimes due to simple omission, in some cases, I'm afraid, the true reason is that the Mayanists in question are unaware of Eliade's very existence. Astor Aguilera's case attests to this most of all.

Eliadian Influence in Practice: the Case of the *Axis Mundi*

The core of Eliade's theory is best described in *The Sacred and Profane* and *Patterns in Comparative Religions*. While the former is mostly focused on, as Eliade says, the "archaic ontology", the latter deals with religious phenomena (such as the sun, moon, aquatic metaphors, vegetal metaphors, etc.) and the way they are conceived in different cultural backgrounds. Again I should stress that the goal is not to emphasize the specifics – in fact, it's quite the opposite. Eliade's method is essentially inductive: by means of processing a large quantity of data, he reaches a general conclusion applicable more or less to all of the cultures he worked with, irregularities notwithstanding. The results of this analysis serve as a map of the realm of the so-called "archaic mind". The very irregularities and original contents of the different religious cultures bring about creative moments through which different religious traditions contribute to the greater variety and ever more complex nature of humankind's religious landscape. As Eliade states in the introduction to *A History of Religious Ideas*, all the different religions show at the same time an essential unity and an incredible reservoir of novelty and originality. And while their core unity remains, the different novelties create religious innovations that consequently spread across the globe and enrich the humanity's spiritual treasury. Eliade postulates an ultimate deep and invisible unity of the history of human spirit (ELIADE 1978).

The word "ontology" used above is the center of the problem: according to Eliade, the "sacred" means "real" and the "real" means "order" to the archaic mind. Consequently, chaos is profane and unreal – human beings are unable to exist within it. In this sense, religions, specifically archaic religions, are a result of the strife to become real, to create for real and to live in a real world. In this sense, even though the shaman's ecstatic flight may be interpreted as essentially chaotic (or *liminal/antistructural* in Victor Turner's words) by a naïve bystander, for Eliade nothing can be further from the truth. By means of altered states of consciousness, the shaman reaches invisible worlds (experiencing the hidden order directly), touches the core of reality, and comes back with powers to restore the primeval order of things, usually sanctioned by gods. The creation and restoration of the order is the primary theme of some of Eliade's best known written works. Specifically, *Sacred and Profane* and

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Myth of Eternal Return tackle the question of both spatial and temporal order established by the gods in the *illud tempus*, the so-called primeval time. The way the world was established in time is regularly replicated by the New Year rituals; the spatial blueprint of the world is mimicked by the outlines and/or core structures of cities, ceremonial centers, and buildings.

So what exactly is Eliadian in the *Maya Cosmos*? Briefly said, almost everything – the great theorist's presence is absolutely all-pervasive. The creation chapter reconstructs the *illud tempus* and the Maya temporal metaphors. The chapter on centering the world and to some extent ensouling the world and raising the tree deals with the spatial symbolism of the center and rituals that sanctify space – in this sense, these three chapters are direct heirs of the chapters on space and time in *Sacred and Profane*. The "Maya Souls" and "Dancing across the abyss" chapters with their stress on supernatural helpers, ecstatic trances, and vision quests are obvious children of Eliade's *Shamanism*. Even the last two chapters on sacred war and ballgame, which have no direct model in Eliade's books, are overflowing with Eliadian symbolism.

To illustrate the point on a concrete case, I will pick what is probably the most frequently mentioned Eliadian term – *axis mundi*, the central pole of the world (SCHELE – FREIDEL – PARKER 1993). This complex idea has been specifically reduced by Maya studies to the concept of a "world tree", based on the obscure Yucatec myth of tree-raising contained in Chilam Balam of Chumayel. The consensual scholarly interpretation reads it as an account of a great deluge and a subsequent re-creation of the world; Munro Edmonson in the 1980s insisted that, in fact, the text describes a ritual of a seating of the *b'ak'tun* (EDMONSON 1986). Schele and Freidel obviously interpret these trees as carriers of the sky, in other words, as mythical, symbolic objects – usually, the Maya studies use the term of *axis mundi* for them.

The *axis mundi* may safely be proclaimed as the most frequently employed Eliadian term of the Schelean discourse formation and, therefore, I will use it as an illustration of how Eliadian inspiration works in the monograph. In Eliade's theory, the term may be applied to any essentially vertical structure of an implicit or explicit heavy symbolical content, which is (or may be) interpreted as (a) standing in the center of the world, and (b) connecting its different strata, which (c) allows "shamans" (Maya kings included) to travel along its trunk. While sacred trees are naturally one of the candidates for such an epithet, Eliade mentions many other phenomena that serve as the *axis mundi* – a central pole of a nomad's tent or Siberian shaman's hut; a sacred mountain; a sacred city; a great temple. However, in the Maya context, the *axis mundi* became practically synonymous with the concept of the "world tree". Additionally, the discipline has established something close to a canonical depiction of the

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world axis, which is mainly seen in the carvings of Pacal's sarcophagus and the Group of the Cross at Palenque. In *Maya Cosmos*, the interpretation goes even further – the "world tree" is identified with the Milky Way, which thus becomes "the original" *axis mundi*. Interestingly enough, Eliade himself quotes such a case in the *Sacred and Profane* – among the Kwakiutl, he says, the sacred tree is identified with the Milky Way. It would be interesting to ask whether the recurrence of this same motif is a coincidence or if there is a causal link. In other words, whether the statement in *Sacred and Profane* was the original cause of the tree's identification with the Milky Way or whether it simply reinforces Schele's and Freidel's argument by transcultural comparison. Since no attention is given to *Maya Cosmos*' theoretical sources, the book itself gives no answers – moreover, the structure of its argumentation appears to suggest that the concepts, terms, reasoning, and conclusions are all Schele's and Freidel's. However, due to the omnipresent parallels between Eliade and *Maya Cosmos*, this is bordering on the impossible.

Another reason for the extraordinary interest in Maya tree symbolism may be found in another layer of Eliade's theories: the ideas of sacred nature and cosmic religion. According to him, the sacred manifests itself through the very structures of the cosmos and, subsequently, many natural phenomena acquire a sacred quality. Through this process, the cosmos becomes a secret code to be deciphered, overflowing with metaphors and symbols. The inherent sacredness of nature, as Eliade says, is often expressed through a metaphor of a "cosmic tree", which embodies the living nature of the world, its cycles of life and death, the qualities of immortality, eternal renewal, omniscience, omnipotence, sacredness, and ultimate reality. This is exactly how Schele and Freidel conceive the great *ceiba* of the Maya rainforest (FREIDEL – SCHELE – PARKER 1993:55, 71, 87-88, 251-252, 393-396). At the same time, they do not fail to make the connection with the myth of the creation. The *wakah chan* ("raised up sky") of the hieroglyphic inscriptions is identified with an authoritative certainty as the very same tree, most probably because of the Chumayel association. Not only spatial, but also temporal foundation of the sacred cosmos is reached – and we have come full Eliadian circle.[3]

[3] In much the same way, Schele and Freidel establish the term „cosmogram", whose indiscriminate use was rightfully criticized by Michael E. Smith (SMITH 2005). Again, the term is Eliadian in origin (although Eliade usually used its Latin equivalent *imago mundi*, see ELIADE 1958) and it denotes a global metaphor of the cosmos reflected in an inner order and specific type of foundation of a city or a temple. In Maya studies, the term is usually applied to cities with typical features (such as cardinal orientation and radial character). In a similar way, triadic structures tend to be interpreted as the reflection of the three stars of Orion that represent the three original hearthstones; curious

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A Response to Miguel Ángel Astor Aguilera

I believe I have sufficiently shown that Eliade's theories have seeped into Maya studies largely unnoticed. At the same time, I gave the reader a taste of the effect it has had and the problems it has brought about. Now the question remains: what can be done with the situation?

Miguel Ángel Astor Aguilera has apparently reached a radical conclusion: we need to see through Eliade's flawed methodology and get rid of it as soon as possible. Here is the essence of Astor's opinion of Eliade:

I cannot help but come to the conclusion [...] that Eliade was convinced he could interpret what indigenous values and concepts were regardless of never meeting the peoples or speaking the language of those whose religion he purportedly understood. I do not doubt that part of what drove Eliade's universal concept of shamanism, sacrality, and an ever-present search by humans for the divine was based on what *he* considered respect for other cultures; however, respect to me means actually trying to understand indigenous concepts in terms of their own native value system, not a universal one based on one's own beliefs (ASTOR AGUILERA 2010:11).

So what should we do instead? Astor suggests a different approach based on Michel Foucault, seeking what he terms "holistic cosmological views" and "holistic, nonbinary views" (ASTOR AGUILERA 2010), which would do away with Eliade's flawed dualism of sacred/profane. In any case, he calls for a fresh and new theoretical approach.

There are some clear problems with this. For one, the Eliadian theoretical apparatus has been integrated into Maya studies way to deeply for it to be purged away easily. As we have seen, some central theoretical concepts used in Maya studies (such as the *axis mundi*) owe their very existence to Eliade and if we refuse the theoretical tool, they would fall apart completely. That, I believe, is ultimately unnecessary. The main problem of Eliadian influence in Maya studies is not the great homage, explicit or implicit, that is paid to Eliade in the discipline: in fact, as I hope to have amply shown, the main problem is the lack of reflection upon it. Maya studies need to recognize Eliade's impact in the discipline and accept his theories as they are: as a tool, a specific method designed for specific uses. First and foremost, we need to ask

structures with chaotic windows and no apparent practical function tend to be called „microcosms". While these interpretations may have their merit, their Eliadian theoretical origin remains basically forgotten.

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ourselves the question of whether the method has been applied correctly – and the question is all the more pressing since it has been given almost no serious attention up to now. This is closely tied to a pressing need for a larger theoretical self-reflection in Maya studies. While its empirical character has undoubtedly yielded great results in these past few decades, it urgently needs to be complemented with theory, lest it gets lost in another spontaneous and unreflected glorification of some future new icon.

And that is my second point. Astor rightfully criticizes intents "to comprehend Maya peoples through a Zen Buddhist lens, while heavily idealizing and romanticizing them, while trying to find oneself because one is disillusioned with being Western" (ASTOR AGUILERA 2010:15). But his own focus on the non-dualistic, holistic nature of Native American worldviews is full of core concepts of contemporary alternative spiritualities, trying to combat the dualistic concept of the cosmos supposedly born of the so-called "Carthesian-Newtonian paradigm" (which, incidentally, Astor mentions – and criticizes – as well; ASTOR AGUILERA 2010:7). Every scholar of the so-called "New Age" can immediately recognize this as a biased idea that serves the contemporary alternative milieu in its discursive war against both traditional religions (specifically Catholicism) and science (KOSTIĆOVÁ 2018b; see also HANEGRAAFF 1996; HEELAS 2009). Astor shows similar tendencies in his criticism of the concept of "religion", which, when applied to indigenous traditions of the Americas, is supposed to distort them and bring about many misunderstandings. In other words, while he loudly refuses one theory's implicit and unreflected acceptance, he at the same time invites an approach which is firmly based in contemporary alternative spiritualities. All of this without an explicit reference to them (and most probably unintentionally).

This fact does not negate Astor's import and the value of the rest of his book. In any case, the distinct flavor of alternative spiritualities is exclusively reserved for the theoretical introduction and the bulk of the monograph does not show the same tendencies. Nevertheless, here we have another reason why Maya studies should broaden its scope and begin a serious theoretical and methodological reflection: because the same thing could happen again.

Conclusion

So to sum up, the goal is not to get rid of Eliade: in fact, many points suggest that a conscious and methodologically rigorous analysis of the relationship between the Schelean formation and Eliade's theories may yet yield interesting results. To some extent, Eliade's phenomenology (after some revision) remains a useful tool – but it must be recognized for what it is: a Western *etic* approach. First and foremost, its inductive nature must be

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recognized and the material must be consciously and diligently reviewed to see where the scholars made well-funded conclusions based on the primary material and where Eliade's theories themselves (or impressions created by their unreflected use) were the chief instigators of some types of interpretations applied in a deductive manner (as opposed to the essentially inductive nature of Eliade's approach). Let us illustrate the point on the case of *axis mundi*: we need to decide where the tool helps us to understand a specific dimension of a phenomenon – and where it rather obscures the phenomenon, misleading us or impeding us from seeing its other dimensions. For example, the practical questions may be the following: is the post-classic Chumayel myth relevant for analysing late classic iconography? Are the "world trees" of Palenque indeed fully symbolic in nature or were they real and tangible cultic objects that physically existed in the Maya cities? And if so, what was their *raison d'etre*, apart from possibly symbolizing some kind of *axis mundi*? And what about the visual quotes of some iconographical traits of these trees that can be found in some depictions of a Maya king? Do they simply mean the king was understood as an *axis mundi* – or do they have other functions as well? Without recognizing the term *axis mundi* for its *etic* nature we won't get far. On the other hand, acknowledging the theoretical concept for what it is allows us to apply it in a more creative and methodologically rigorous way. We don't have to throw Eliade out with the bathwater – as long as we are fully conscious of the theoretical framework we use. And the same applies to *Maya Cosmos*, which, regardless of its more problematic aspects, rightfully deserves an important place in the history of Maya studies.

All in all, wider theoretical and methodological reflection would benefit Maya studies in many other ways. As the discipline has been stuck in the realm of phenomenology of religion for too long, it has made little or no use of other exciting and possibly fruitful methodologies such as structuralism, from which the neighboring discipline of Aztec studies has greatly benefited.[4] There are many exciting methodologies out there and many inspiring theoretical approaches that, when combined, may help to create a more complex and multilayered understanding of the ancient Maya culture. To paraphrase the old Czech proverb once again, every theory is a good servant, but an evil master. We should carefully examine the masters we have allowed to rule us, transform their dominance into cooperation and, instead of expulsing them, we should invite as many of them in as we can. I firmly believe that instead of looking for the one "true" theory and demonizing the "wrong" one, we should strive for a greater theoretical and methodological plurality. Every theory has its possibilities and limits;

[4] See e.g. the studies made by Susan Gillespie, specifically Susan Gillespie, *Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press 1989, p. 272.

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there is no single ideal approach. And the truth, as Urs von Balthasar has poetically written, is symphonic anyway.

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Zuzana M. Kostićová (1980) is a Religious Studies scholar specialized both in the Pre-Columbian religions of Mesoamerica and the contemporary alternative spiritualities. She mainly moves on the intersection of these two themes, analyzing both the reflection of the Pre-Columbian worldviews on alternative spiritualities and the impact of alternative spiritualities on the scholarly interpretations of Maya Religion.



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