

new orleans voodoo history

New Orleans Voodoo History: A Deep Dive into the Mystical Roots of the Crescent City

new orleans voodoo history is a fascinating tale that weaves together culture, spirituality, and folklore. This unique tradition, often misunderstood and shrouded in mystery, has played a significant role in shaping the identity of New Orleans. From its African origins to its evolution amid the city's vibrant cultural landscape, the story of voodoo in New Orleans is as rich and layered as the city itself.

The Origins of Voodoo: From West Africa to the Americas

To truly appreciate the history of New Orleans voodoo, it's essential to understand its roots in West African spirituality. Voodoo, or Vodou, originated among the Fon and Ewe peoples of what is now Benin and Togo. It was brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans who carried with them their religious beliefs and practices despite the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade.

Once in the Caribbean and the southern United States, these spiritual traditions blended with Catholicism and indigenous beliefs, resulting in a syncretic religion. In places like Haiti, this fusion became Haitian Vodou, while in Louisiana, it evolved into what we now recognize as Louisiana Voodoo, or New Orleans voodoo.

The Influence of Haitian Immigrants in New Orleans

One key chapter in New Orleans voodoo history involves the influx of Haitian refugees during the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the 19th century. Many free people of color and enslaved individuals fled to New Orleans, bringing their religious customs with them. This migration helped solidify voodoo's presence in the city and introduced new elements to its practice.

The Haitian influence is evident in many aspects of New Orleans voodoo rituals, including the veneration of specific spirits or "loa," ceremonial drumming, and dance. This cultural exchange laid the groundwork for the voodoo traditions that would become integral to New Orleans culture.

New Orleans Voodoo: A Blend of Spirituality and Culture

New Orleans voodoo is not just a religion but a cultural phenomenon deeply embedded in the city's social fabric. Its practices often intertwine with other local traditions, creating a unique spiritual tapestry that continues to captivate residents and visitors alike.

Key Figures in New Orleans Voodoo History

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, several prominent voodoo practitioners helped shape the perception and practice of voodoo in New Orleans. One of the most famous was Marie Laveau, often called the "Voodoo Queen." She was a healer, spiritual leader, and community figure whose influence extended beyond religious circles.

Marie Laveau's legacy lives on through stories, rituals, and annual celebrations in her honor. Her ability to blend Catholic iconography with African spiritual practices exemplifies the syncretic nature of New Orleans voodoo history. Other notable figures include Doctor John and other practitioners who maintained voodoo as a living tradition amid social and cultural changes.

Rituals, Symbols, and Practices

New Orleans voodoo rituals are rich with symbolism and often involve music, dance, and the use of sacred objects. Voodoo practitioners may create intricate veves – symbolic drawings representing various loa – on the ground using materials like cornmeal or flour.

Altars play a crucial role in ceremonies, adorned with candles, offerings, and images of saints or spirits. These rituals serve multiple purposes, such as healing, protection, and guidance from the spiritual world.

Additionally, the use of gris-gris bags – small pouches containing herbs, stones, and other magical items – is a well-known aspect of New Orleans voodoo. These talismans are believed to bring luck, ward off evil, or provide other specific benefits depending on their contents.

Misconceptions and Modern Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo

Voodoo has often been sensationalized in popular culture, leading to many

myths and misunderstandings. Horror movies, literature, and tourist attractions sometimes portray voodoo as dark magic or witchcraft, which oversimplifies and distorts its true nature.

Separating Fact from Fiction

In reality, New Orleans voodoo is a complex spiritual system focused on community, healing, and connection with ancestors and nature. While it does involve rituals that might seem unusual to outsiders, these practices are deeply meaningful to practitioners.

Understanding the cultural and historical context helps demystify voodoo and dispel harmful stereotypes. Many contemporary voodoo practitioners emphasize respect, ethics, and the importance of preserving their heritage.

Voodoo's Role in Contemporary New Orleans

Today, voodoo remains a living tradition in New Orleans, attracting both locals and tourists interested in exploring its mysteries. Voodoo shops, museums, and guided tours offer insights into its history and practices, though true practitioners often encourage a respectful and informed approach.

In addition to spiritual functions, voodoo influences New Orleans' art, music, and festivals. Events like the annual Voodoo Music + Art Experience celebrate the city's cultural diversity and its mystical past.

Exploring Voodoo Sites and Experiences in New Orleans

For those fascinated by New Orleans voodoo history, visiting key locations can provide a tangible connection to this rich tradition.

- **St. Louis Cemetery No. 1:** The resting place of Marie Laveau, this historic cemetery is a focal point for voodoo pilgrims and history enthusiasts alike.
- **Voodoo Museum:** A small but informative museum that showcases artifacts and stories related to voodoo's influence in New Orleans.
- **Voodoo Spiritual Practices:** Some practitioners offer private ceremonies or readings for those seeking a deeper understanding of voodoo rituals.
- **Annual Festivals:** Participating in or attending festivals that highlight

voodoo culture provides a lively and educational experience.

When exploring these experiences, it's important to approach with respect and sensitivity toward the beliefs and traditions of voodoo practitioners.

The Enduring Legacy of New Orleans Voodoo

The history of New Orleans voodoo is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of African spiritual traditions in the face of adversity. It has survived centuries of suppression, cultural shifts, and misconceptions, continuing to thrive as a vibrant part of New Orleans' identity.

Whether encountered through folklore, art, or spiritual practice, voodoo in New Orleans offers a unique lens through which to understand the city's complex history and diverse cultural heritage. It reminds us of the power of tradition, community, and the unseen forces that shape our lives.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the origin of New Orleans Voodoo?

New Orleans Voodoo originated from the African spiritual traditions brought by enslaved West Africans, particularly from the Fon and Ewe peoples, and merged with Catholicism and Native American beliefs in the Louisiana region.

How does New Orleans Voodoo differ from Haitian Vodou?

While both share African roots, New Orleans Voodoo integrates more Catholic elements and has unique practices influenced by French and Creole cultures, making it distinct in rituals, spirits worshipped, and community roles compared to Haitian Vodou.

Who was Marie Laveau and why is she significant in New Orleans Voodoo history?

Marie Laveau was a renowned 19th-century Voodoo priestess in New Orleans, often called the 'Voodoo Queen.' She played a crucial role in popularizing Voodoo practices, blending Catholicism with African traditions, and is a legendary figure in the city's spiritual history.

What role did New Orleans Voodoo play in the city's culture and society?

New Orleans Voodoo influenced the city's culture by blending spirituality with music, dance, healing, and community gatherings. It served as a form of resistance and cultural preservation for African Americans during slavery and segregation.

What are some common rituals or practices in New Orleans Voodoo?

Common practices include spirit possession, drumming, singing, the use of gris-gris (amulets), offerings to spirits (loa), candle magic, and healing ceremonies. Altars and sacred spaces are also central to the rituals.

How has New Orleans Voodoo been portrayed in popular media and tourism?

New Orleans Voodoo has often been sensationalized in movies, books, and tours, sometimes emphasizing superstition and dark magic. However, many local practitioners and historians work to present an accurate and respectful portrayal of its spiritual significance.

Are there any historical sites in New Orleans associated with Voodoo?

Yes, sites like St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, where Marie Laveau is said to be buried, and various Voodoo shops and museums in the French Quarter are historically and culturally linked to New Orleans Voodoo.

What is the significance of the Loa in New Orleans Voodoo?

The Loa are spirits or intermediaries between the human world and the divine in New Orleans Voodoo. Each Loa has distinct personalities and domains, and practitioners honor them through rituals to seek guidance, protection, and blessings.

How did New Orleans Voodoo survive despite historical oppression?

New Orleans Voodoo survived through oral traditions, secrecy, adaptation, and syncretism with Catholicism, allowing practitioners to preserve their beliefs and rituals despite slavery, racism, and legal restrictions.

Can anyone practice New Orleans Voodoo today, and how is it practiced in modern times?

Yes, New Orleans Voodoo is practiced today by diverse individuals. Modern practice often includes traditional rituals, healing, spiritual counseling, and cultural education, while emphasizing respect for its historical roots and community values.

Additional Resources

New Orleans Voodoo History: Unearthing the Roots and Realities

new orleans voodoo history is a complex tapestry woven from African spiritual traditions, Catholic influences, and the unique cultural milieu of the Crescent City. Rooted deeply in the transatlantic slave trade and evolving through centuries, New Orleans Voodoo stands apart from other forms of Vodou practiced elsewhere, such as Haitian Vodou or Louisiana Voodoo, while sharing essential spiritual and ritualistic elements. This article investigates the origins, evolution, and cultural significance of New Orleans Voodoo, exploring its misunderstood facets and enduring legacy.

The Origins of New Orleans Voodoo

To understand New Orleans Voodoo history, one must begin with its African roots. The religion traces back to the West African Vodun traditions, primarily from the Fon and Ewe peoples of present-day Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Enslaved Africans brought these beliefs to the Americas during the 18th and 19th centuries. In New Orleans, a city marked by French, Spanish, and African influences, these spiritual practices intermingled with Catholicism, resulting in a syncretic religion.

Unlike Haitian Vodou, which developed in the context of a slave revolt and established a prominent national religion, New Orleans Voodoo remained more clandestine. This was partly due to social pressures and legal restrictions imposed by colonial and American authorities who viewed African spiritual practices with suspicion, often branding them as witchcraft or superstition.

Syncretism and the Role of Catholicism

An essential feature of New Orleans Voodoo history is its integration with Catholic symbolism. Enslaved Africans and free people of color in New Orleans adapted their religious practices to align with dominant Christian imagery to avoid persecution. Saints were equated with African spirits or “Loa” – for example, Saint Peter might be associated with Papa Legba, the gatekeeper between the spiritual and earthly worlds.

This syncretism allowed practitioners to maintain their beliefs covertly while outwardly conforming to the dominant religion. It also contributed to the distinctive iconography and rituals observed in New Orleans Voodoo today, such as the use of candles, altars, and prayer beads reminiscent of Catholic worship.

Key Figures in New Orleans Voodoo History

The history of New Orleans Voodoo cannot be told without mentioning some of its most influential practitioners, who helped shape and preserve the tradition amid societal challenges.

Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen

Perhaps the most famous figure in New Orleans Voodoo history is Marie Laveau (circa 1801–1881), often referred to as the “Voodoo Queen of New Orleans.” A free woman of color, Laveau was a healer, spiritual leader, and community figure whose influence extended beyond religious circles into civic life.

Her reputation as a powerful practitioner of magic and Voodoo rituals attracted followers from all walks of life. Laveau’s legacy remains an integral part of New Orleans’ cultural identity, with her gravesite in the Saint Louis Cemetery attracting thousands of visitors annually. Her life exemplifies how Voodoo was not only a spiritual practice but also a form of resistance and empowerment for marginalized communities.

Other Notable Practitioners

In addition to Marie Laveau, other practitioners such as her daughter, Marie Laveau II, and Doctor John Montanee contributed to the perpetuation of Voodoo traditions. In modern times, figures like Priestess Miriam Chamani have worked to revitalize and demystify New Orleans Voodoo, emphasizing its spiritual and healing aspects rather than the sensationalized portrayals common in popular media.

Practices and Beliefs of New Orleans Voodoo

New Orleans Voodoo encompasses a broad range of rituals, spiritual beliefs, and healing practices. While much of what is popularly known has been distorted, the core of Voodoo revolves around a connection with the divine, respect for ancestors, and harmony between the spiritual and physical worlds.

Rituals and Ceremonies

Ceremonies often involve drumming, chanting, dancing, and the invocation of spirits or Loa. Altars with offerings such as food, candles, and personal items are common. The use of gris-gris bags—small charm bags believed to bring protection or luck—is a notable feature distinguishing New Orleans Voodoo from other traditions.

Healing and Herbal Medicine

Historically, Voodoo practitioners served as herbalists and healers within their communities. Utilizing knowledge of local plants and traditional African remedies, they provided medical care in an era when access to formal healthcare was limited for African Americans and Creoles in New Orleans.

This healing dimension remains a vital aspect of contemporary Voodoo practice, blending spiritual and physical wellness.

New Orleans Voodoo in Popular Culture and Misconceptions

The portrayal of New Orleans Voodoo in literature, film, and tourism has often veered towards sensationalism. Hollywood movies and tourist attractions frequently emphasize spells, curses, and zombie myths, which can obscure the religion's true nature and cultural importance.

The Impact of Stereotypes

These stereotypes have sometimes led to misunderstandings and stigmatization of practitioners. The association of Voodoo with black magic or malevolent forces is largely a product of racial prejudice and exoticism rather than accurate representation.

On the other hand, the fascination with Voodoo has also contributed to a unique cultural tourism industry in New Orleans, with Voodoo shops, museums, and guided tours offering visitors a glimpse into the city's mystical heritage.

Preservation and Revitalization Efforts

In recent decades, there has been a concerted effort by scholars, practitioners, and cultural organizations to document and preserve authentic

New Orleans Voodoo traditions. Education initiatives aim to dismantle myths and highlight the religion's role in community cohesion and cultural identity.

Comparisons with Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo

While New Orleans Voodoo shares roots with Haitian Vodou, distinctions are clear.

- **Haitian Vodou** is a national religion in Haiti, with a structured pantheon of Loa, established temples, and formalized rituals tied closely to Haitian history and politics.
- **New Orleans Voodoo** tends to be more individualistic and less centralized, blending African traditions with French and Spanish Catholic elements and Creole culture.
- **Louisiana Voodoo** sometimes overlaps with New Orleans Voodoo but can also refer to broader folk practices in the state, including Hoodoo, which focuses more on magic and folk healing than religious worship.

These nuances illustrate the rich diversity within African diasporic spiritual systems and the localized adaptations that arise from different historical and social contexts.

New Orleans Voodoo Today

Today, New Orleans Voodoo remains a living tradition, practiced by a diverse community that includes African Americans, Creoles, and spiritual seekers worldwide. The religion continues to evolve, incorporating contemporary spiritual movements and responding to modern urban realities.

Institutions such as the New Orleans Voodoo Spiritual Temple and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple of Priestess Miriam Chamani provide spaces for worship, education, and cultural preservation. Community events like Voodoo Spiritual Gatherings and public rituals during Mardi Gras and All Saints' Day further demonstrate the religion's ongoing vitality.

Through these practices, New Orleans Voodoo history is not only remembered but actively lived, reflecting the resilience and creativity of those who embrace this spiritual heritage.

The exploration of New Orleans Voodoo history reveals a faith deeply intertwined with the city's social fabric and cultural identity. Far from the sensational myths, it embodies a rich tradition of spirituality, healing, and resistance that has shaped and continues to influence New Orleans and its people.

[New Orleans Voodoo History](#)

new orleans voodoo history: [New Orleans Voodoo: A Cultural History](#) Rory O'Neill Schmitt, PhD, and Rosary Hartel O'Neill, PhD , 2019 There is no more compelling nor more spiritual city than New Orleans. The city's Roman Catholic roots and its blended French, Spanish, Creole and American Indian populations heavily influenced the rites and rituals that West Africans brought to Louisiana as enslaved laborers. The resulting unique Voodoo tradition is now deeply rooted in the area. Enslaved practitioners in the nineteenth century held Voodoo dances in designated public areas like Congo Square but conducted their secret rituals away from the prying eyes of the city. By 1874, some twelve thousand New Orleanians attended Voodoo queen Marie Laveau's St. John's Eve rites on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. The Voodoo tradition continues in the Crescent City even today. Rory Schmitt and Rosary O'Neill study the altars, art, history and ceremonies that anchor Voodoo in New Orleans culture.

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new orleans voodoo history: [The New Orleans Voodoo Handbook](#) Kenaz Filan, 2011-08-16 A guide to the practices, tools, and rituals of New Orleans Voodoo as well as the many cultural influences at its origins • Includes recipes for magical oils, instructions for candle workings, and directions to create gris-gris bags and Voodoo dolls to attract love, money, justice, and healing and for retribution • Explores the major figures of New Orleans Voodoo, including Marie Laveau and Dr. John • Exposes the diverse ethnic influences at the core of Voodoo, from the African Congo to Catholic immigrants from Italy, France, and Ireland One of America's great native-born spiritual traditions, New Orleans Voodoo is a religion as complex, free-form, and beautiful as the jazz that permeates this steamy city of sin and salvation. From the French Quarter to the Algiers neighborhood, its famed vaulted cemeteries to its infamous Mardi Gras celebrations, New Orleans cannot escape its rich Voodoo tradition, which draws from a multitude of ethnic sources, including Africa, Latin America, Sicily, Ireland, France, and Native America. In [The New Orleans Voodoo Handbook](#), initiated Vodou priest Kenaz Filan covers the practices, tools, and rituals of this system of worship as well as the many facets of its origins. Exploring the major figures of New Orleans Voodoo, such as Marie Laveau and Dr. John, as well as Creole cuisine and the wealth of musical inspiration surrounding the Mississippi Delta, Filan examines firsthand documents and historical records to uncover the truth behind many of the city's legends and to explore the oft-discussed but little-understood practices of the root doctors, Voodoo queens, and spiritual figures of the Crescent City. Including recipes for magical oils, instructions for candle workings, methods of divination, and even directions to create gris-gris bags, mojo hands, and Voodoo dolls, Filan reveals how to call on the saints and spirits of Voodoo for love, money, retribution, justice, and healing.

new orleans voodoo history: [The Magic of Marie Laveau](#) Denise Alvarado, 2020-02-01 The life and work of the legendary "Pope of Voodoo," Marie Laveau—a free woman of color who practically ruled New Orleans in the mid-1800s Marie Laveau may be the most influential American

practitioner of the magical arts; certainly, she is among the most famous. She is the subject of songs, films, and legends and the star of New Orleans ghost tours. Her grave in New Orleans ranks among the most popular spiritual pilgrimages in the US. Devotees venerate votive images of Laveau, who proclaimed herself the "Pope of Voodoo." She is the subject of respected historical biographies and the inspiration for novels by Francine Prose and Jewell Parker Rhodes. She even appears in Marvel Comics and on the television show *American Horror Story: Coven*, where she was portrayed by Angela Bassett. Author Denise Alvarado explores Marie Laveau's life and work—the fascinating history and mystery. This book gives an overview of New Orleans Voodoo, its origins, history, and practices. It contains spells, prayers, rituals, recipes, and instructions for constructing New Orleans voodoo-style altars and crafting a voodoo amulet known as a gris-gris.

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new orleans voodoo history: Creole New Orleans in the Revolutionary Atlantic, 1775-1877 Caryn Cossé Bell, 2023-10-04 Nowhere in the United States did the Age of Democratic Revolution exert as profound an influence as in New Orleans. In 1809-10, refugees of the Haitian Revolution doubled the size of the city. In 1811, hundreds of Saint-Dominguan, African, and Louisianan plantation workers marched downriver toward the city in the nation's largest-ever slave revolt. Itinerant revolutionaries from throughout the Atlantic congregated in New Orleans in the cause of Latin American independence. Together with the refugee soldiers of the Haitian Revolution (both Black and white), their presence proved decisive in the Battle of New Orleans. After defeating the British, the soldiers rejoined the struggle against Spanish imperialism. In *Creole New Orleans in the Revolutionary Atlantic, 1775-1877*, Caryn Cossé Bell sets forth these momentous events and much more to document the revolutionary era's impact on the city. Bell's study begins with the 1883 memoir of Hélène d'Aquin Allain, a French Creole and descendant of the refugee community, who grew up in antebellum New Orleans. Allain's d'Aquin forebears fought alongside the Savarys, a politically influential free family of color, in the Haitian Revolution. Forced from Saint-Domingue/Haiti, the allied families retreated to New Orleans. Bell's reconstruction of the

d'Aquin family network, interracial alliances, and business partnerships provides a productive framework for exploring the city's presence at the crossroads of the revolutionary Atlantic. Residing in New Orleans in the heyday of French Romanticism, Allain experienced a cultural revolution that exerted an enormous influence on religious beliefs, literature, politics, and even, as Bell documents, the practice of medicine in the city. In France, the highly politicized nature of the movement culminated in the 1848 French Revolution with its abolition of slavery and enfranchisement of freed men and women. During the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Afro-Creole leaders of the diasporic community pointed to events in France and stood in the forefront of the struggle to revolutionize race relations in their own nation. As Bell demonstrates, their cultural and political legacy remains a formidable presence in twenty-first-century New Orleans.

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new orleans voodoo history: Hauntingly Good Spirits Sharon Keating, Christi Keating Sumich, 2024-08-13 Plunge into New Orleans' culture of death and mystery through the 40 scintillating

cocktails in Hauntingly Good Spirits.

new orleans voodoo history: A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess Carolyn Morrow Long, 2007-10-07 Against the backdrop of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans, *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* disentangles the complex threads of the legend surrounding the famous Voodoo priestess. According to mysterious, oft-told tales, Laveau was an extraordinary celebrity whose sorcery-fueled influence extended widely from slaves to upper-class whites. Some accounts claim that she led the orgiastic Voodoo dances in Congo Square and on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, kept a gigantic snake named Zombi, and was the proprietress of an infamous house of assignation. Though legendary for an unusual combination of spiritual power, beauty, charisma, showmanship, intimidation, and shrewd business sense, she also was known for her kindness and charity, nursing yellow fever victims and ministering to condemned prisoners, and her devotion to the Roman Catholic Church. The true story of Marie Laveau, though considerably less flamboyant than the legend, is equally compelling. In separating verifiable fact from semi-truths and complete fabrication, Long explores the unique social, political, and legal setting in which the lives of Marie Laveau's African and European ancestors became intertwined. Changes in New Orleans engendered by French and Spanish rule, the Louisiana Purchase, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation affected seven generations of Laveau's family, from enslaved great-grandparents of pure African blood to great-grandchildren who were legally classified as white. Simultaneously, Long examines the evolution of New Orleans Voodoo, which until recently has been ignored by scholars.

new orleans voodoo history: Popular New Orleans Florian Freitag, 2020-10-01 New Orleans is unique – which is precisely why there are many Crescent Cities all over the world: for almost 150 years, writers, artists, cultural brokers, and entrepreneurs have drawn on and simultaneously contributed to New Orleans's fame and popularity by recreating the city in popular media from literature, photographs, and plays to movies, television shows, and theme parks. Addressing students and fans of the city and of popular culture, *Popular New Orleans* examines three pivotal moments in the history of New Orleans in popular media: the creation of the popular image of the Crescent City during the late nineteenth century in the local-color writings published in Scribner's *Monthly/Century Magazine*; the translation of this image into three-dimensional immersive spaces during the twentieth century in Disney's theme parks and resorts in California, Florida, and Japan; and the radical transformation of this image following Hurricane Katrina in public performances such as Mardi Gras parades and operas. Covering visions of the Crescent City from George W. Cable's *Old Creole Days* stories (1873-1876) to Disneyland's New Orleans Square (1966) to Rosalyn Story's opera *Wading Home* (2015), *Popular New Orleans* traces how popular images of New Orleans have changed from exceptional to exemplary.

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psychology to ease mental ailments, fear to bring about the death of enemies and acquittals at trials, and advice to encourage clients to succeed on their own. By critically examining the many influences that have shaped conjure over time, Anderson effectively redefines magic as a cultural power, one that has profoundly touched the arts, black Christianity, and American society overall.

new orleans voodoo history: Moon New Orleans Laura Martone, 2016-01-26 This full-color handbook includes vibrant photos and easy-to-use maps to help with trip planning. New Orleans native Laura Martone offers an insider's take on the Big Easy, from shopping on Magazine Street to listening to old-time jazz in Faubourg Marigny. Martone also includes a handful of fun trip itinerary ideas, including A Romantic Weekend, Mardi Gras, and Haunted New Orleans. With tips on taking carriage rides through the French Quarter, visiting the Art District's museums, and bicycling in City Park, Moon New Orleans gives travelers the tools they need to create a more personal and memorable experience.

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