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ORIGINAL

The Legend of La Llorona as a teaching resource for critical thinking and meaningful cultural learning among university students

Leyenda "La Llorona", como recurso didáctico para el pensamiento crítico y aprendizaje cultural significativo de universitarios

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ABSTRACT

The dynamism of the digital society increasingly requires university teachers to manage, apply, or adapt teaching resources for the comprehensive academic training of future professionals, without discarding traditional pedagogical tools that prove useful. Legends, as a form of oral literature, can be used to explain certain doubts or social behaviors within the community. As a teaching resource, university professors can develop critical thinking skills that enable students to analyze, evaluate, and compare aspects that affect their personal, academic, and professional lives. In this way, meaningful cultural learning is achieved that describes the behavior, values, traditions, or cultural beliefs of society. "La Llorona," a legend that has survived since 1521, has spread remarkably; it is best known in Mexico and the towns of Los Altos, Jalisco. The characteristics of this literary genre, as a teaching resource, promote enjoyable interaction in the classroom. It motivates students to develop oral and written expression skills while encouraging their creativity. It enriches their cultural heritage because they can identify and value their own roots. The versatility and richness of this resource lies in the plurality of stories derived from its oral transmission, which enhances the educational experience. This work proposes the use of "La Llorona" as a teaching tool for training university students to be analytical, critical, and empathetic to their cultural environment, thus contributing to the comprehensive academic training of competent, responsible, and empathetic professionals in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Teaching Resources; Meaningful Learning; Critical Thinking; Cultural Context.

RESUMEN

El dinamismo de la sociedad digital, cada vez más exige a los docentes universitarios gestionar, aplicar o adaptar recursos didácticos para una formación académica integral de los futuros profesionistas, sin descartar herramientas pedagógicas tradicionales que resultan ser útiles. La leyenda, como transmisión de literatura oral, permite explicar algunas dudas o conductas sociales del entorno comunitario. Como recurso didáctico los dicentes universitarios pueden desarrollar el pensamiento crítico que facilite al alumno analizar, evaluar y comparar aspectos que inciden en su vida personal, académica y profesional. De esta forma se logra un aprendizaje cultural significativo que describe el comportamiento, los valores, tradiciones o creencias culturales de la sociedad. "La Llorona", leyenda que sobrevive desde 1521 se ha extendido notablemente; es la más conocida en México y poblaciones de Los Altos, Jalisco. Las características de este género literario, como recurso didáctico, promueve una amena interacción en el aula; motiva a los educandos a experimentar un proceso que desarrolla su capacidad de expresión oral y escrita, al tiempo que incentiva su creatividad; enriquece su acervo cultural, porque pueden identificar y valorar sus propias raíces. La versatilidad o riqueza de este recurso radica en la pluralidad de relatos que derivan de su transmisión oral, lo cual favorece la experiencia educativa. Este trabajo propone la leyenda "La Llorona" como herramienta didáctica para una formación de universitarios analíticos, críticos y empáticos con su entorno cultural; así, se contribuye a la formación académica integral de profesionistas competentes, responsables y empáticos en un mundo cada vez más globalizado.

Palabras clave: Recurso Didáctico; Aprendizaje Significativo; Pensamiento Crítico; Contexto Cultural.

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INTRODUCTION

The new ways of learning that are currently being proposed pose a significant challenge for those who make universities teach their "modus vivendi" or way of life. Today's students are immersed in the use of technology and require constant changes in the process, approach, and pedagogical mediation that will lead them to participate in meaningful, lasting, and enjoyable learning.

It is difficult to conceptualize theoretically how legends arise, are collected, and disseminated. In the case of Latin America, it can be observed that since the Spanish Conquest, the syncretism resulting from the mixing of expressions, cultural rituals, and manifestations of the popular religiosity of different peoples has led to a rich accumulation of oral versions of legends, stories, myths, and tales. Legends reveal certain ways of life in communities and how they affect the traditions or behavioral habits of many members of society.

In accordance with the programs of some competency units (subjects), such as "Oral and Written Expression," which for the past five years has been taught as a workshop course on specific topics, in accordance with the specific objectives to be achieved and in line with the respective teaching plan, legends have been used as a resource to help students put into practice their skills in gathering, analyzing, and evaluating information, developing the knowledge and data they acquire, and then exercising their oral and written expression skills, resulting in a variety of products, as well as enabling them to achieve meaningful learning.

Some agree that legends cannot be easily defined because, as a literary resource, both oral and written structures involve considering certain characteristics of narrative, description, storytelling, sometimes fables, and even historical and geographical elements. There are legends that may be intended or attempt to recount events that cannot be verified; others even refer to certain fantastical situations; in other words, there is no shortage of legends that recount real or supernatural events.

Figure 1. La Llorona

For example, "La Llorona" is a legend that has had an enormous impact throughout the American continent, and although there may be more than a thousand versions scattered around, everything indicates that it was in Mexico where the main historical antecedent was recorded. This is confirmed by Pablo Alatriste Galván in his report: "con los hijos regados" (with scattered children). "It refers to an Aztec goddess named Cihuacóatl who embodied a woman dressed in white to announce the fall of the Mexica empire".[1]

In fact, today it seems that every town has its own Llorona, even with a first and last name, adds Alatriste, who adds that 20 million Americans claim that the spirit of La Llorona travels from the Mexican border to New York and from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic. Furthermore, in his report, he states that Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, in his book "General History of the Things of New Spain," includes testimonies of this female figure and quotes verbatim: "She often appeared as a lady dressed in the finery worn in the Palace; they also said that at night she would cry out and bellow into the air" .

The report specifies that the night-time lamentations of La Llorona were related to the omens of the fall of the Aztec people to Spanish. At that time, it was also related to La Malinche back in 1521 when, after becoming pregnant by the Spanish conquistador, the kings of Spain sent a lady to seduce Cortés and forced him to appear before the crown. However, before doing so, La Malinche fled with her babies and, in Lake Texcoco, finding herself cornered by the guards, she stabbed the children and threw them into the water. Since then, her wails and inconsolable crying have been heard.

In his book, Las calles de México. Leyendas y sucedidos (The Streets of Mexico: Legends and Events), González Obregón recounts that in the mid-16th century, those who lived in and around the area were terrified by the moans of a figure covered in white sheets who appeared at midnight.

Apart from many other versions about the apparitions of La Llorona, there are testimonies in Guayuriba, Antioquia, Casanare, and other regions of Colombia, where residents, hikers, and researchers report hearing the chilling cries of a soul wandering through the jungle. In the Philippines, stories allude to La Llorona. In Ireland, under the name "Banshee," a woman appears crying in the hills, and each time she does so, she predicts the death of a person near where her cries are heard. This legend is also hundreds of years old.

In the magazine as part of the aforementioned report, there is a map of America showing the places where La Llorona appears most frequently, such as Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. In Mexico, she has

been heard and seen practically throughout the entire country. The same is true in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. There are reports of moderate appearances in northern Florida, Toronto, South and North Carolina, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay. Appearances are less frequent in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay.

La Llorona has become an icon of Mexican culture and of many other places where she is deeply rooted in beliefs and traditions. There are compositions based on this legend with hints of melancholy, sadness, loneliness, and death. Painters have created many versions of this legend, demonstrating its palpable relevance. It has been adapted for Hollywood films and has even been broadcast on television.

In Mexico, in 1974, the film "El Santo y Mantequilla (boxer of Cuban origin) en la venganza de la llorona" (El Santo and Mantequilla in the Revenge of La Llorona) became very popular. and in 1994, Time magazine described Susan Smith as the modern Llorona because she captivated television audiences with her sobs as she asked for help in finding her two missing children, who had allegedly been kidnapped. However, her guilt betrayed her, and she confessed that she had killed them. Their bodies were found at the bottom of Lake John D. Long, locked in the family car.

Parts of legendary tales may also contain moral lessons that aid in the educational process, whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, as they open up the possibility of analyzing, learning about, and, of course, better understanding the popular thinking of other eras.[2] Legends also address various aspects of human life in their narratives; they even provide explanations and facilitate understanding of things that are sometimes difficult to believe. Legends often speak of specters, figures, or silhouettes of real and unreal beings as a result of imagination, fantasy, and spirituality because they are often, if not always, associated with religion.

Legends are based on reality, especially when they refer to people who sometimes leave their mark through their actions, but the story sometimes leads the reader or listener to extraordinary situations or paranormal phenomena. They are part of the collective imagination, tradition, and, in some cases, modernity, as when we discuss "urban legends".

Legends are considered to be the result of certain realities to which valid interpretations of teachings can be added, even making the story entertaining and more interesting. There may be many slightly different versions of the same legend because it was initially transmitted orally. The study of legends can be considered quite limited because academic works tend to focus on the narrative itself and not necessarily on the context in which it arises or why these events or phenomena occur.

The complexity that, in a way, characterizes the world we live in means that, owing to rapid scientific and technological advances, it is often more difficult for a large part of society to be aware (fully knowledgeable) of things to make appropriate, viable, and effective decisions to achieve harmonious development in all aspects. In view of this, education takes on greater relevance in the training of professionals who are effective and efficient both in their work performance and in their personal fulfillment.

In this globalized world, Latin America in general, Mexico, Jalisco, and, in particular, the Los Altos region are not left behind. For this reason, educational processes are increasingly changing their teaching methods, and teachers are modifying their pedagogical methods, techniques, and strategies through the appropriate application of teaching tools, as exemplified in this article, by using the legend of "La Llorona" in the classroom, with the aim of helping students achieve meaningful learning and, consequently, develop their skills. In addition to the above, ICT is needed because, like it or not, it is present in education systems at all levels.

With respect to these challenges a study mention that it is necessary to propose new learning assessment models to evaluate student performance. For this reason, assessment instruments and tools can consider and include a set of elements that allow students to assess their academic performance. Therefore, each of them collects as much qualitative and quantitative information as possible during the specific learning process.

Cultural Theoretical Framework

A dimension for collective identity

Figure 2. La Llorona

Human beings need culture to develop socially with others. Cultural identity is a concept that includes all the experiences and recognitions that social actors have in different spaces of interaction and that become part of their identity. For this reason, the cultural dimension within a society cannot be reduced to a set of isolated phenomena with an existence independent of the fundamental processes of social reproduction.

Culture is closely linked to everyday practice, even in contexts where its exclusion might seem necessary for the efficient functioning of modern systems of production and consumption.[3] Culture is therefore a space of productivity and rationality, and it contributes to the full development of a society in different areas.

On the basis of this premise, we can see that there are collective identities that are also organized forms of social action and mobilization. These collective identities are indicators that the actors that comprise them are social actors.[4] This means that they are active people who mobilize and have influence within society.

It is important to note that while individual identity is endowed with psychological attributes and consciousness, collective identities emerge from processes of social construction and lack their own consciousness in the strict sense. In this context, individual identity is shaped by the subject's identification with various social categories while maintaining particular attributes that distinguish them as unique individuals within a system of social relations.[4]

Cultural identity recovers traditional aspects specific to community history or even to a nation state. Thus, emerging from history and nourished by collective knowledge, it also projects itself into the future, transforming itself with the times, contexts, and spaces of its own. We can find evidence of this in culture and its manifestations.

These factors allow for the integration of characteristics that identify a people, a region, or a community while giving them their own characteristics that make them recognizable and distinguish them from others. Social belonging implies the adoption and sharing of cultural models. This also occurs on a smaller scale, within social structures such as social class, ethnic group, territory, age group, and gender, as groups to which the individual belongs.[5]

Mexico is a country with a cultural identity that is deeply rooted in its traditions, its pre-Hispanic history, and its mestizaje with European influence. This has been manifested in art, gastronomy, music, festivities, and oral tradition.

All of this has a strong connection between the ancestral and the contemporary. In this way, a certain degree of cultural continuity is maintained among Mexicans who learn, share, and are also expected to contribute to the development of society. Legends, as part of oral tradition, play an extremely important role in preserving knowledge while building a collective identity.

Thus, there are different versions of legends such as "La Llorona," for example, which changes form in different countries, regions, or cities but maintains its most relevant essence. Legends play an important role in the transmission of culture across hundreds of generations. They not only carry with them the mystical aspect but are also part of attempts to explain the world and what surrounds man.

Since ancient times, oral tradition has been the main vehicle for transmitting knowledge in Mexico. Before the development of writing, Mesoamerican people depended on oral storytelling to preserve their myths, stories, and values. These stories served both as entertainment and as a pedagogical strategy for sharing values, norms, and teachings and transmitting knowledge and explanations of the world and natural phenomena.[5]

Mexican legends, like other types of stories or oral tradition practices, have contributed to the continuation of traditions over the centuries, ensuring that generations maintain these practices and teach them as a legacy to the next. The transmission of stories is not static, nor are all the characteristics of the story strictly maintained. Each one can change depending on the context and on who it is aimed at. Owing to this, legends are preserved through oral tradition, which fortunately continues to be a form of traditional Mexican communication.

Objectives of the experience

The preparation of university students as future professionals, in this case through the "Oral and Written Expression" learning unit, requires them to demonstrate their competence through their skills and mastery of specific areas, enabling them to acquire the diverse knowledge they need academically to face the challenges of the professional world.

In other words, it is about thinking about the importance of promoting holistic, comprehensive education, as responsible citizens of their community and future professionals with ethical principles and values.

According to the experience described in this paper, students gain knowledge of stories or legends; obtain information and details that are part of the story from their particular family environment or from the contexts of the neighborhood, district, town, or community to which they belong; and then share them first with their classmates in the classroom and then (as far as possible) with society as a whole.

Using legends as a resource or teaching tool means that students develop oral and written expression skills while adhering to grammatical rules and using language correctly.

Figure 3. La Llorona

METHOD

Legends in education

Using legends as a resource or teaching tool means that students develop skills in gathering information, analyzing and evaluating, as well as their dialogical skills, communication skills, and eloquence.

In this work, the legend of "La Llorona" is applied as a strategy, tool, or teaching resource so that students majoring in administration, public accounting, and international business can turn to their respective family groups or people they know from the same place where they live to orally remember, rescue and tell them the legends that form part of the vast cultural heritage of their community's oral history.

On the other hand, teachers and those who attempt to put the activities involved in this process into practice face a wide range of problems, such as the difficulties students often encounter in understanding some of the ideas, word order, phrases, or statements in accordance with the structure of a good oral presentation.

It is necessary to understand the use and function of words and the types of paragraphs; adhere to methods of reasoning; develop ways of thinking; understand semantics; and adhere to morphosyntax, which requires strict adherence to the grammatical rules of punctuation, accentuation, and spelling, to achieve proper writing of the story, depending on the relevance of the protagonists, the characters involved, and the events or situations in the story to be shared. Another problem that is often detected is the lack of clarity or confusion caused by some terms or concepts that involve different areas of public knowledge. It is therefore necessary to be familiar with the methods, technical terms, and specific words, the meanings of which often require consulting specialized glossaries or lexicons, because they are sometimes not sufficiently understandable in the academic sphere and, above all, by a large part of society. In many cases, there are similarities between the events recounted in their locality and those known and recounted at other latitudes. This is specifically the case with the different versions of "La Llorona," a legendary tale that has been seen, heard, and described in various places in the regions of Jalisco throughout the country and in almost all Latin American countries. Thus, on the basis of the stories written by students of the Bachelor's Degree in Administration and International Business at CUAltos-UdeG, as learning products during the 2024-A and 2024-B school cycles, they provide an account of testimonies of some appearances of this nocturnal specter in Mexico, in the canals of Xochimilco, as well as in Tepatitlán de Morelos, Arandas, San Andrés, and San Miguel el Alto, places that are part of the Los Altos region of Jalisco, which are summarized in the following comparative table. Here are different versions of the legend of La Llorona in various regions of Mexico.

Table 1. Key elements of each story are highlighted to facilitate comparison and analysis

Author	Location	Protagonist	Motivation	Outcome	Supernatural Elements
Diana Laura Gómez Martín	Mexico	María, a beautiful and gentle woman	Infidelity of her beloved	Mary kills her children and her spirit cries in the water	Heart-wrenching cry on nights of the full moon
Ana Pamela Guerrero del Toro	Mountain village	María hides a deep pain	Jealousy and despair	Maria throws her children into the river, her soul wanders	Ghostly figure in a white dress
Gerardo Alexander Plascencia Gutiérrez	Xochimilco	María, an indigenous woman in a relationship with a Spanish man	Social rejection and abandonment	La Llorona wanders around Xochimilco because of her tragedy	Lament in the canals of Xochimilco
Fabiola Fernández Delgadillo	Los Altos de Jalisco	María, in love with a peasant	Family rejection and abandonment	Her tormented spirit continues to search for her children	Nighttime apparitions near the river
Isabella González Torres	Arandas, Jalisco	María, a young woman in love	Imposed obligation to marry	The story gives rise to local legend	Wandering spirit on the riverbank
José Íñiguez	Tepatitlán de Morelos, Jalisco	María, daughter of a landowner	Heartbreak and madness	María eternally searches for her children with her lament	Heart-wrenching cries in valleys and mountains
Tania Hernández Gutiérrez	Tepatitlán de Morelos, Jalisco	María, witness to apparitions	Testimony of apparitions	Masses are held to ward off the presence	Masses and holy water calm the presence
Kelly Lira	San Andrés, Jalisco	María, abandoned by her husband	Depression and madness	María searches for her lost children at night	Pitiful voice in the streets of the town
Jovana Nájar	San Miguel el Alto, Jalisco	Testimonies about apparitions	Stories from the community	Apparitions seen by residents during the Cristero War	Floating figure dressed in white

Image created independently with the support of AI (ChapGpt)

Some doubt the veracity of the story, but it remains part of Mexican folklore, passed down as a reminder of humanity's darkest passions and the importance of compassion and forgiveness. The elders remember it with solemnity, sharing their stories with younger generations to keep alive the memory of those distant times and the lessons they left behind.

Figure 4. La llorona

Contribution to knowledge

A recurring example of a legend passed down from one generation to the next is "La Llorona". It is known not only in Mexico but also throughout Latin America and other parts of the world. Although the versions of the story have changed over time and cultural and geographical contexts have also influenced the tales, many of the essential elements of the story remain: it is about a woman who lost her children or even killed them and walks in sorrow while seeking forgiveness. This legend conveys messages about motherhood, guilt, and the consequences of human actions.[6]

In addition to transmitting knowledge, legs reinforce cultural identity because they connect people with their history, traditions, customs, and roots. In Mexico, legends are present in all areas of daily life: they are told in the family environment; in neighborhoods, communities, and different communities; and even in schools and are often part of popular festivities. Some have transcended oral tradition to become fundamental elements of art, such as cinema and literature.

In addition, legends fulfill a social function by strengthening a sense of community and cultural identity. When these stories are shared, people reinforce collective ties and build a common historical memory. This is especially relevant in a country as diverse, vast, and multicultural as Mexico, where each region maintains its own versions of traditional stories. Thus, while La Llorona is known throughout the country, other legends, such as "Callejón del Beso" in Guanajuato or "los Aluxes" in the Yucatan Peninsula, reflect specific cultural characteristics of their respective localities.[7]

The impact of legends also extends to the educational sphere, as seen or deduced from the specific case addressed in this paper. In addition, there are several examples, such as in indigenous communities, where oral tradition remains the primary means of teaching, and legends play a crucial role in the education of children.

Through these stories, students learn about respect for nature, the importance of family, the history of their ancestors, and their place of origin. This type of knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, contributes to the preservation of the country's cultural and linguistic diversity.[8]

Legends also play an important role in artistic expression. They are not limited to the literature and appear only in novels, short stories, tales, or essays. Adaptations can also be found in film, theater, and other mass media. One example is the film Macario, which revisits the theme of death and includes elements from legends about it.

Currently, globalization poses a challenge to the preservation of legends, as well as other expressions of intangible heritage. This is because access to information and the arrival of global and foreign narratives are increasingly imposing themselves on local narratives, which can make it difficult to maintain stories that have been important even within the history of a country such as Mexico.[5]

However, there are efforts, such as the one presented in this article, to rescue, disseminate, and revitalize the role of legends with the intention of keeping them alive. There are countless works by researchers who seek to compile traditional stories and disseminate them through the publication of anthologies or audiovisual projects.[9]

All this is to encourage communities to maintain their traditions and to bring us closer to our Mexico of the past. New digital platforms influence the transmission of legends, stories, and other oral traditions (such as tales, jokes, proverbs, and fables) to new generations. The aim is to ensure that they are not lost in a new global world.

Legends are taught in schools, and their dissemination can be promoted in cultural spaces. This also encourages the practice of storytelling, both orally and in writing.

Legends are a form of cultural expression that involves transmitting history, knowledge, and values; reinforcing a sense of community; and preserving traditions. Preserving them is a great challenge, but it is also an opportunity to reaffirm Mexican identity and everything that shapes us as a society. Education plays an important role by providing space, under the guise of pedagogical practice, for legends to be transmitted, learned, and used in teaching so that new generations can learn about them, repeat them, transmit them, and make them their own.

Mexican culture cannot be separated from its traditions because there are legends, such as "La Llorona," that are characteristic of Mexican society and promote nationality at a level that becomes intrinsic to identify and individuality.

CONCLUSIONS

"La Llorona" is used as an example of a legend and a strategic resource for students in various educational programs at the Centro Universitario de Los Altos (CUAltos) of the University of Guadalajara to share, recount, rescue, or remember and write as a tool for narrating part of the oral history of their community.

In many cases, similarities can be observed between the events recounted in their locality and those known and recounted in other parts of the world. This is the case, for example, with the different versions of "La Llorona," a legendary tale in which, according to testimonies, her silhouette has been seen and her terrible cries or lamentations heard and which has been recounted in various parts of Mexico and Latin America.

Legends, as a form of cultural transmission through oral tradition or even oral literature, help to explain the doubts and contradictions that some inhabitants have about their environment.

It requires an oral structure that makes explicit various forms of thought in which the story becomes something alive; it is not only the recounting of situations but also the style of each narrator that will include their gestures and peculiarities of oral expression that during the story add to the characters, places, or events they recount. Therefore, as it is transmitted, the narrative acquires new characteristics.

The different versions of La Llorona share common elements, such as the heart-wrenching lament and the ghostly presence. They also reflect cultural nuances and local contexts that enrich the narrative. Each story offers a unique perspective on the pain, betrayal, and regret that characterize this legend. Oral literature differs from written literature in that it is transmitted between generations through speech, with different versions of myths, legends, proverbs, songs, and so forth being told.

It is the sum of knowledge and values that are passed down from one generation to the next as part of a group's cultural tradition. They do not have a single author, because at the same time they are all authors; it is part of the oral heritage or tradition of the people. As part of the heritage of people's traditions and customs, it is important to note that it is different from other types of oral transmission or communication of this kind. According to several authors, La Llorona originated during the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521. Legends express the ways of life of communities, where events have an impact on behavior; therefore, the customs that are generated have an explanation based on them. Legends do not fulfill religious functions, nor are they part of ceremonies, although some of them refer to paranormal or extraordinary events, both real and fictional. The study of legends is quite limited, but one of their functions is to guide and maintain the morality or behavioral guidelines of the group. Legends often provide answers to the existential questions that the community has about its own environment. Technologies can be used to recover texts and disseminate narratives that could be lost because of the social context to which they belong. They are integrated into the classroom orally and in writing because, as part of the communities of the region, they help to understand the environments from which they arise. In some cases, more modern legends are also tools because, like "smoke screens," they recount events that even sound supernatural, but sometimes they try to cover up acts of corruption through fake news. Some consider it a psychosocial phenomenon insofar as it seeks to generate fear or mistrust among the population, in addition to achieving the distraction that authorities or powerful groups seek to achieve. Although some authors explain that legends must invariably have a place, characters, and time, it is important not to rule out details that include playing with the natural and that which seems not to belong to the earthly realm. Often, reality is called into question by the manipulation of certain historical truths, and objectivity is not necessarily part of legends.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

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