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The Conquistadors of the Jungle: Images of the Spanish Soldier in Piaroa Cosmology

Resumen: En la imaginación de los *piaroas*, habitantes selváticos de la región amazónica venezolana, el "blanco" es un gigantesco monstruo-conquistador, su "señor de la selva". Este trabajo presenta a esta figura gigantesca en el contexto del discurso de los *piaroas* sobre el forastero en general y demuestra que el énfasis dado radica antetodo en la fuerza y no en la inferioridad del forastero. La preocupación de los indígenas es por la persona misma, por la absurdidad y peligrosidad del poder humano, así como también por sus fuerzas positivas. Al demostrar que los *piaroas* consideran al "blanco" como un ser exótico, este trabajo opone el etnocentrismo de los nativos americanos con la visión europea sobre el forastero, especialmente en lo que respecta al continente americano, a la forma cómo se ha desarrollado éste en los tiempos de la conquista. Se argumenta que la visión europea sobre el forastero se presenta en relación con la jerarquía política y desigualdad social, mientras que la visión amazónica está vinculada con igualdad política y social. Los *piaroas* no considerarían como inferiores a "los otros", a los que no pertenecen a su sociedad, aunque sean monstruos caníbales, para, por tal razón y con todo derecho, someterlos a su dominio. En la ontología de los *piaroas* — que es de suma igualdad —, los seres rapaces se convierten en la presa de su propia caza. Los límites entre ellos y los otros no están trazados tan nítidamente como en la visión europea, donde los unos excluyen a los otros en alto grado.

Summary: The most powerful image of white people in the imagery of the Piaroa, jungle dwellers of the Venezuelan Amazon Territory, is a giant conquistador ogre who is their Master of the Jungle. The paper places the figure of this monstrous spirit being within the context of the Piaroa discourse upon alterity in general, and notes that the stress is most saliently upon the potency, rather than the inferiority, of the stranger. The indigenous concern is with the human predicament itself, and upon the absurdities and danger as well as the positive strength of human power. Also, in unfolding the Piaroa view of white people as exotic beings, the paper contrasts the Native American



ethnocentrism with that of European discourse upon alterity, especially of the Americas as it developed during the period of the Conquest. The argument is that the European images of otherness must be set within the context of political hierarchy and social asymmetry, while the Amazonian case is one of political egalitarianism and social symmetry. The Piaroa would not judge external others, even if cannibal monsters, as *inferior* beings who were therefore rightfully subject to Piaroa domination. In the Piaroa highly egalitarian ontology of existence, predators are the prey of their own prey, and thus the boundary between self and other is not so clear cut as the Eurocentric discourse which is highly exclusive in its view of humanity.

For the Piaroa, jungle dwellers of the Venezuelan Amazon Territory, their most powerful image of White people is Re'yo, a giant spirit warrior who is Master of the Jungle and Master of all the beings who inhabit it. Re'yo is a monster who is painted with metal and wears an enormous metal hat. He bears Western weaponry — a knife, a rifle, and a sword. Monstrous in both appearance and behaviour, he is for the Piaroa their own Conquistador guardian of the jungle. It is not without irony that, while much of our own imagery of Native America was initially created by Conquistador conquerors, the salient image of white people created by this particular indigenous people is that of the Conquistador ogre. In a conference held in 1992 giving recognition to the Discovery of the New World in 1492, it is a shrewd moment for turning the tables upon Western exoticism by unfolding a Native American view of White People as exotic.¹

Mason in *Deconstructing America* (1990) elegantly compares European and Native American systems of classification of alterity, where he focuses in particular upon the ethnographic literature of the Guianas.² For the conquerors of the New World the peoples of the Americas appeared for the most part as the exotic and pathological antithesis of what the conquistadors believed themselves to be. Images from European popular culture of the brutish giant, the naked and cannibalistic Wild Man, and his partner, the sexually profligate Wild Woman, were freely applied to the inhabitants of the Americas.³ Often, the Native Americans (as with the Piaroa) returned the favour, by viewing the White Person as sexually deviant, morally wicked, and wantonly violent. For the Native American, it was the White Man who was the monstrous cannibal. The European and Native American por-

¹ I am very grateful to both the Economic and Social Science Research Council and the Leverhulme Foundation who each in awarding me a Research Grant in recent years have given me the time to work on many of the issues of this article.

² Mason (1990: chapters 4 - 7).

³ Mason (1990: 43 - 44, 106 - 110).

trayals of each other assumed the exotic other as lacking in reason and most other civilizing modes of behaviour, and thus the imagery of both appear as thorough going exercises in the construction of excessiveness.⁴

Mason argues that despite such obvious similarities in the European and the Native American classifications of the exotic other they are *as systems* fundamentally different, and thus incomparable (1990: 167 - 168). He suggests that the "very attempt to compare such structures is doomed to failure" (*ibid*). I shall support Mason's conclusion of incommensurability, while at the same time adding grist to the mill through the ethnographic data he drew upon by unfolding some of the principles through which the Piaroa construct alterity in myth and in cosmology — and even more importantly by examining the ways in which they put such images to work in daily life.

However I shall emphasise the perspicacity and not the futility of his contrast of the European and Native American ethnocentrism. The discovery itself of such incommensurability carries its own powerful implications which allows us then to examine the question of why such difference, which is a simpler matter perhaps than the similarity.

My own answer to the contrast is a simple one, namely that we are dealing with two very different political strategies and thus two opposing social philosophies. The European discourse upon alterity as it developed during the period of the Conquest and in subsequent centuries must be set within the context of political hierarchy and social asymmetry, while the Amazonian case is one of political egalitarianism and social symmetry. One of the most discerning observations made by Mason (1990: 62) in his analysis of Eurocentrism with respect to the New World was that the Europeans, in conquering the Americas, fixed the status of Native Americans at the level of the lower echelons of European society, placing them alongside the mad, the wild, the child, the lower classes. One salient reason then for the incommensurability that Mason unfolded between European and Native American discourses of alterity can be found in the contrast between hegemonic, totalizing rhetorics of inequality, which are highly exclusive in their views of humanity, and rhetorics of equality, which are much more inclusive in their categorisations of humankind. The cultures of Amazonia have no subaltern classes. For most of its indigenous peoples it would be a misconception to identify specific social divisions as inferior or subordinate to others.

The root metaphor for otherness in Eurocentrism, certainly as it was elaborated as political and colonial discourse, was first and foremost that of inferiority — the gaze was that of the conqueror who took for granted a natural order premised

⁴ On the European images of the New World at the time of the Conquest also see Todorov (1982), Pagden (1982), and Hulme (1986).

upon conquest and the relations of superordination and subordination that might emerge from it. So extreme was the strength of this notion of the inferiority of the other that the divide between self and other easily slipped into the opposition of the human and the nonhuman.⁵ In contrast, the *right* to domination is alien to the Piaroa understanding of proper social and political relations. They would not judge external others, even if monstrous, as *inferior* beings who were therefore rightfully subject to Piaroa domination. It is the potency, and not the inferiority, of the other that is more cogent to Native South American classifications. The idea of inferiority is a much less pervasive element within such systems, which frequently reflect instead a strong tolerance of difference (as well as a fascination and fear of, and a strong desire for it). For instance, in the case of the Piaroa difference does not necessarily carry with it the value judgement of inferiority. On the contrary, often as precious as it might be dangerous, difference is understood to be highly desirable, if not necessary, to their own material existence. The monster may well be a privileged being. Here we are faced with the widespread Amazonian message that alterity is the hallmark of this-worldly social living: the achievement of the social state requires those different from self, for without alterity there can be no fertility and no productive capacity.⁶

The Question of White People: their knives and their perfume

The Piaroa discourse upon White people and their images of them can only be comprehended within the broader framework of their constructions of alterity in general. Thus to interpret adequately their treatment of White people, whether in mythic images and the exegesis of cosmology or in daily talk, it is necessary to know as well their language of alterity in a multiplicity of contexts where self and other are distinguished. For example there is the context of the interior other where affinity,⁷ gender,⁸ shamanism,⁹ leadership and exchange¹⁰ each plays a role. Although it is often difficult to define in any absolute sense the boundary between the internal and exterior other, we can tentatively categorize as the exterior other the Spirit guardians of land and water, the gods of both mythic and present day time, the animals and fish, and peoples who are not Piaroa. There is no room to explicate fully such a complex of alterity, for the obvious reason that agency and

⁵ See both Todorov (1982) and Mason (1990).

⁶ Space forbids an elaboration of this theme, but see, for instance, Overing Kaplan (1981, 1984).

⁷ See Overing Kaplan (1975).

⁸ See Overing (1986a).

⁹ See Overing (1985).

¹⁰ See Overing (1992).

its variation within the Piaroa universe is an immense topic inclusive of all the beings of their universe. Nevertheless certain dominant principles related to the Piaroa classification of agency are important to the interpretation of their discourse on White people.

For instance, when analysing the Piaroa classification of agency in the universe it became clear to me that it was very difficult indeed to delineate the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman in this system. Animals are human when dwelling beneath the earth in the primordial homes of their parents; most animals, plants, fish, and some artifacts and stars are human in the ever-present "before time" of mythic times; their gods, though not ancestors, are said to be human, and they are named as the "The Human (*Tüha*) *Tianawa*", and so on. Thus it is not surprising that, unlike many European representations of Native Americans (at least during the Conquest of the Americas), the Piaroa images of White people are ones that clearly incorporate them within the category of humanity. The Piaroa creator god, Wahari, created White people — as people — in the same manner that he earlier created the Piaroa, from fish of the same lake of origin. Wahari then created in similar manner all the other peoples who neighbour upon the Piaroa. Indeed, my initial response to the Piaroa treatment of White people in both mythology and everyday talk was to note their apparent relative lack of interest in the topic. Mason (1990: 162 - 163) has also noted that ethnographers have remarked on the fact that indigenous peoples "do not seem unduly preoccupied with the Whites". I wondered about their lack of rancour or antagonism, given the violence of the first two centuries of Conquest in the region of the Middle Orinoco. In the Piaroa epics of creation time "the Whites" (*D'ea'tu*) wandered in and out of events seemingly at the whim of the mythteller; almost as a literary flourish they would take their place alongside other people. As a cohesive series, all the peoples would be listed: the Piaroa, the Whites, the Ghahibos, the Waico, the Piapoco, the Yaruro, the Cuiva, the Baniva, the Yabarana, the Waicuri.

Upon closer inspection it became clear that there was a difference, for "Whites" would sometimes enter mythic time alone, rather than as one among many peoples. They sometimes did so when certain themes were being stressed, especially those pertaining to violence, coercion, promiscuity, and cannibalism — all topics particularly relevant to Piaroa constructions of alterity. Other peoples, for example their neighbours, the "Waica", the "Makiratare" and the "Pemon", were not so isolated nor so strikingly "good to think through" in the elaboration of excessive behaviour. The symbols repeatedly used to express the excessiveness of the Whites tended to be gender linked, as mentioned time and again were the weaponry of the Spanish soldier, his sword and his knife, and the perfume of the Spanish woman, the representations respectively of male violence and female promiscuity. The

following episodes about Wahari, the creator god of the Piaroa, and his family include portrayals of White people typical to the mythic cycles:

- 1) Buok'a was jealous of his brother, Wahari, who had just completed his creation of the Piaroa. Thus out of spite Buok'a proclaimed, and therefore created, all the dangers that the Piaroa would thereafter experience which would lead them to early deaths. Buok'a seized all types of Piaroa food — cassava, maize, and pineapple — and ground it up to work magic against them. He announced that these people must not live: they will die from sorcery and jaguar attack, and from the cannibalistic raids of dead souls. It will be dangerous for them to hunt alone, and they will die by falling from trees. Buok'a did these things against the family of his younger brother, Wahari. If he had not made such pronouncements only very old people would die, while children and young adults would not. The Piaroa would have been as plentiful as the Spanish.

In retaliation, Wahari made dangers for the Whites, the family of Buok'a (and Paruna — see below). Wahari created the Whites for his older brother, to mollify him, but then pronounced the future of their deaths. He said that the sword and the knife will be dangerous for the Whites. They will kill their friends and families with these weapons. They will cook their friends and family. They will imprison them, members of their own family. Wahari then said to Buok'a: "Now your family is the same as you made mine!" Buok'a replied: "Yes, many of the Whites will die, but the Spanish will create more people than your people". Buok'a said this.

- 2) After Wahari had created the Piaroa, and they were multiplying as too was their food, he decided to pay his people a visit. To visit them he disguised himself as a Spaniard with black hair, Spanish clothes — trousers, shirt and shoes — and he carried a knife. But the Piaroa were frightened by this disguise, so he decided to disguise himself in Piaroa garb, wearing a loincloth and many splendid ornaments — beads, face paint, leg and arm bands. Then he realised that the Piaroa would be afraid of his ornaments, for ornamentation in Piaroa theory is the outward manifestation of powerful predator forces contained within the body. Wahari understood the symbolic homology of Piaroa ornamentation and the Western knife and sword: in both cases a man in full dress is displaying his capacities as a (cannibal) "warrior". Thus Wahari approached the Piaroa without ornamentation, and they were not afraid.
- 3) Along the rapids of the Orinoco, Wahari came upon his son who he had fathered through an incestuous union with his sister, Cheheru. His son pestered him to claim him as his son and to teach him to hunt. Annoyed, Wahari threatened him with the violence of the Whites. He said, "here comes a boat filled with White men. These men kill us, eat us, and put us in jail. I am going to give you to these people if you do not leave me alone!"

- 4) Cheheru was angry with her brother, Wahari, because he had exchanged her for 6 boxes of Paruna's White people's goods, which included matches, fish-hooks, and machetes. Instead of staying with Paruna as his wife, Cheheru became a promiscuous wanderer. She followed handsome men of every group, creating perfumes as she made love; and when she wandered among the White people she created perfumes in bottle form. The use of these perfumes transform women into crazy wanderers, just like Cheheru. If Cheheru had stayed with Paruna, the owner of "White people's goods", the Piaroa would have been able to marry White people, have many children by them, and thus be as plentiful as the Whites.
- 5) Wahari, poisoned into madness by the forces of his father-in-law (Kuemoi, the mad devourer of jungle beings who was also the creator god of the culinary arts), was arrogant with his sister's sons and accused them of cowardice for desiring water when working in the hot sun. Soon after, poisoned by the forces of the sun from which the powers of Kuemoi were derived, Wahari wanders for years living a violent and promiscuous life among other peoples. Cheheru, his sister, joined him when he lived with White people. With them, Wahari played with White women, and Cheheru with White men. But at each place they visited they soon had to move on because the Whites would become angry with Wahari for his play, and jail him.

Typical of many of the peoples of Amazonia, the Piaroa make a distinction of identity and difference that strongly opposes the inside and the outside, safety and danger, friend and foe.¹¹ It is an image of alterity that always carries with it at the very least the potentiality of "the cannibal other". Thus violence is imminent within all relations of alterity, and the White people who carry knives and swords and who sway so far with their casual physical violence and use of coercive institutions from Piaroa ideas of proper sociality became especially apt symbols for the monstrous in social behaviour. As Mason notes (1990: 160) when he observes that Europeans in turn were the "Other" in the eyes of the Native Americans "it is the excessiveness of the European presence which explains its monstrous forms". It is certainly the Piaroa point of view that Whites treat each other as insiders in ways that only should be possible between strangers. Because they are understood to be people who "cannibalize" themselves, White people are used in Piaroa myth as a highly suitable exemplification of the monster and cannibal other. Such an image is given literal weight, as can be seen by the ways in which past and present events and facts become interpreted and (re)contextualized through mythic discourse (cf.

¹¹ See for instance Rivière (1969) on Trio constructions of the inside and the outside; and Lizot (1985) on the Yanomami images of the cannibal stranger.

Guss 1986: 417 - 418; Mason 1990: 159): the tinned meat in the stores of the towns and in the anthropologist's knapsack were believed to contain the flesh of people; in the Piaroa legends of the "*Kerinya*" raids of the 17th and 18th centuries, the cannibal raiders who stole victims for their anthropophagous rites were said to be White people. Those who cannibalize themselves most certainly cannibalize others.

There is nevertheless another side to the coin in the episodes depicting the violent or promiscuous Whites (Wahari and Cheheru did find White partners in abundance with whom to play) which leads us away from the idea that the Whites as monstrous are but an inverse image of the virtuous Piaroa. In the mythic cycles, Whites who cook and eat people do not appear fortuitously, for it is the domestic argument, the breakdown of internal relations within the families of the Piaroa creator gods, that leads to their introduction. It is with the father's denial of his son and his desire to kill him that the cannibal Whites appear in their boat to be usefully used as a threat. And it is a brother's violent jealousy, along with his sibling's retaliation, that leads to the creation of the violent Whites. Similarly it is the arrogance of a mother's brother towards his sister's sons that leads the former to live a life of wildness among the promiscuous Whites. As Mason has noted (1990, and see Guss 1986: 427, n.9) there is a link in Native American mythology between internal conflict and the arrival of the external stranger. Mason suggests further that the domestic conflict provides the operator for reducing difference between the inside and outside, and with the decrease of distance the stranger becomes not so strange.

Thus it is internal violence that precedes the excessiveness of the external Whites. As Mason so aptly puts it, "the narratives begin, not from a unity which is subjected to violence from outside, but from a totality that is itself already fractured. This fracture is an initial lack which calls for a supplement to supplete it. The supplement, however, *is not of the same order*: it is excessive, it is not commensurable with the rift which it comes to fill" (1990: 159 - 160). Mason then argues that it is the excessiveness of the supplement that prevents a sufficient reduction of difference to allow for symmetrical assimilation and for the relation Native American/European to emerge as a reversible one. His judgement is undoubtedly correct. The violence of the Whites was much more than was bargained for, but it is another train of thought that I wish now to follow. And this is to address the significance of the Piaroa idea that the monster characteristics of the Whites *were created in the first instance* through the *intent* of Piaroa creator gods. In the remainder of the paper it will be my object to unfold the idea that although the Piaroa are obviously concerned about their own asymmetrical relationship with the Whites, their most immediate focus in their constructions of alterity, and of identity and difference, is upon the complexity of the human condition itself, and the explora-

tion of all its possibilities — not only its virtues, but its frailties and monstrosities as well.

Although in the present day world Whites are best construed as exterior to the Piaroa, it is the ethnocentric gaze of the Piaroa to make the history of Spanish origin a solely internal matter. They did not come from outside, but from within, and thus the very location and monstrosity of the Whites as external other is understood to be a Piaroa matter and as such a product of indigenous history. It was the creator god Wahari who initially determined the location of Whites as elsewhere when he placed a barrier in the lake of origin for the Piaroa and the Whites in order to separate the jungle Piaroa from the non-jungle Whites. It was likewise Wahari in the heat of a domestic argument who made violence the mode of life for his brother's people, the Whites. It was the fault of both Wahari and his sister, Cheheru — and not that of the Whites — that the Piaroa today cannot establish reciprocal relations with the Whites: Paruna, who was the original owner of White people's goods, expressed his desire to intermarry with Wahari's family and to establish *social* relations of exchange with its members. It was the profligate acts of Cheheru and Wahari that sabotaged all possibility for Wahari's family to form any sort of unity with Paruna or his family, and according to Piaroa exegesis for the Piaroa themselves later to unite with the Whites: Cheheru refused her marriage with Paruna to become a promiscuous wanderer; Wahari visited Paruna, not with the intention of establishing a friendship bond, but only for the purpose of exchange; he also committed incest with Cheheru, an incident that resulted in the two brothers-in-law, Wahari and Paruna, quarreling together for eternity on the edge of the world; and finally, the only consistent relations that Wahari and Cheheru managed to establish with the Whites were escapades of short-term carnality. In this series of events, while the intentions of Paruna, the Master of the Whites, was to behave in a civilized way, those of the mighty creator gods of the Piaroa were not so honourable.

It was also due to the excessive behaviour of Wahari that at the end of mythic time he lost his guardianship of the jungle to be replaced in this role by Re'yo, the giant Spirit of the jungle who is clothed in Spanish conquistador armour. From the beginning of time on earth Wahari was the Master of the Jungle, and as such his duty was the protection of the people of the jungle. He also acquired for them the gifts of the culinary arts, and taught them how to live in a peaceful and social manner. However, toward the end of mythic time Wahari betrayed his own people by transforming many of them into animals to be hunted and devoured at a great feast that he gave to display his powers to Cheheru, his sister. It was then that all the remaining peoples of the jungle (including the Whites) hunted him to death. Wahari was then replaced as Master of the Jungle by the conquistador spirit, Re'yo.

It should now be clear that there exists an ambiguity in Piaroa portrayals of White people. On the one hand, they are often envisioned as coercive cannibals and sexual miscreants, and the Piaroa, who abhor violence and stress the danger to social life of all excessive action, view much of the behaviour of Whites as monstrous. Yet at the same time, Whites are consistently categorized as people, and thus have an identity with the Piaroa, as beings created in the same lake of origin by the same powerful mythic god. Moreover, it is not just the disaster of the violent Whites with which the Piaroa must contend as a result of the profligate behaviour of their creator gods, for their excessive and immoral behaviour served as an operator throughout the mythic cycles for the creation of all types of dangers particular to Piaroa human existence. The violence of the Whites takes its place alongside other tribulations, such as disease, menstruation, snake bite, work, affines, exchange partners, foreign sorcerers, and vengeful gods of the mythic past.¹² Finally, Whites can also have their honourable side, as the mythic episodes about Paruna indicate.

The qualities of Re'yo, the giant, conquistador Master of the Jungle, introduces more strongly the possibility that Piaroa might positively value, and not just denigrate, the White people's capabilities for violence. In Piaroa imagery the mighty powers of the Whites have become further monsterized in the figure of Re'yo, but it is an exaggeration that has transformed them, not into a more negative force, but into a (more or less) positive one at the service of their own protection. It becomes clear that the Piaroa perspective on the dangerous does not carry with it an absolute either/or valuation, for it is their understanding that power which may be disastrous when acted out within a social setting has positive virtue in the context of the guardian warrior. His service is not without its perils, but that is to be expected with the monstrous.

Re'yo, the Master of the Jungle, and Ahe Itamu, the Master of Water: the puzzle of Western dress

During the time of mythic history, the two creator gods, Wahari and Kuemoi, were the "before time" guardians of the jungle and the rivers, and thus responsible for the well being of the members of their domains, for their health and their fertility. When these two creator gods became transformed toward the end of mythic time respectively into Tapir and Anaconda, they lost their powers for such responsibility and therefore their status as Masters of these domains. For "today time" action, Ahe Itamu replaced Kuemoi as owner of the aquatic domain and

¹² See Overing (1986b).

became the "Master and the Grandfather of all fish", while Re'yo assumed the former role of Wahari as Master of the Jungle. He also became the "Master and Grandfather of all jungle beings (animals)", a category that includes the Piaroa. The Piaroa classify themselves as *Dea Ruwa*, "beings of the jungle", a category inclusive of all jungle dwellers.

Re'yo and Ahe Itamu played only a small role in creation time history. Although I was not told the origins of Ahe Itamu, the mythic cycles do depict Wahari creating and giving form to Re'yo, and it seems that he did so in order for him to perform his future role in "today time" as guardian of jungle beings. Both present day Masters can best be viewed as "of the future" with respect to most action in "before time", although they did occasionally participate in creation time events. Their behaviour, however, was not particularly conducive to the well being of the Piaroa, for both Re'yo and Ahe Itamu were thieves and seducers of people. In present day time they still indulge in such wayward actions, but during creation time this was the only way they related to people.

Their appearance was, and still is, remarkable, if for no other reason than they wore European dress. One *ruwang* (the Piaroa shaman/leader) described the Master of Water as he saw him in trance: Ahe Itamu, he said, was always a handsome man, dressed in blue/green clothing, standing alone upon clouds of patterned and multi-coloured air at a great depth beneath the water. The *ruwang* told me that Ahe Itamu also looked like a Piaroa, except that he wore a sombrero, boots, and trousers. As such a handsome man, he was dangerous to people, whom he seduced into his watery domain. Through his beautiful ritual, he would lure young men and women to come join him in his river home. Once there, they had no desire to leave and return to the forest.

In contrast to the beauty of Ahe Itamu, Re'yo was the ugly ogre of the forest, a roving "orphan" who never lived a social life. He was a peculiar black giant, clothed with conquistador armour to protect himself. The colour of his eyes was "clear", which probably means light blue or grey in the Piaroa classifications of colours, the possible colour of a Spaniard's eyes. Re'yo took his eyes out and placed them on the ground before he ate. He had ticks attached to his oversized penis. He was also a cannibal, a very dangerous seducer, and a kidnapper of women. The following tale from creation time history captures well his monstrosity, as well as the capability of the Piaroa to confront the terrible with play and comedy, and by so doing deflate its danger.¹³ Note that the story also begins with the theme of betrayal and revenge, an operator that should by now be recognised as typical to the structure of Piaroa mythic narrative when violence is being introduced:

¹³ This theme is further developed in Overing (1985).

A "Before Time" Tale of Re'yo and the young girl

A young woman asked a man to marry her, and he agreed. The next day she approached him to say that she had changed her mind: she did not fancy him after all. He then suggests that they go to the mountains to hunt, and she agrees. As he walked through the jungle he thinks: "I am going to make a trap for her. She is going to know who I am!" After they had walked awhile, they came across the hammock of Re'yo, made of a vine that he had stretched between two trees. The young woman stands transfixed by it, and the man suggests that she gets on it to rest. But the hammock of Re'yo is magnetic, and once she was upon it she becomes stuck to it. The man, imperious to her cries for help, left her to return to his house.

In the evening Re'yo returns. "Ah! my hammock is a good fisherman", he exclaims. "It has caught something good, a woman for me!" He took the woman from the hammock to look her over. "What is this?", he asks, looking under her loincloth. "Have you injured yourself?" He looks at her armpits, her breasts, her ears. Soon he had an erection (the penis of Re'yo is very large, and has ticks covering its head). But he does not know what to do with it, and he tries to put it into her eyes, her ears, nose, mouth, throat, armpits, and breasts — before he finally finds her vagina. He then exclaims, "Oh this is it. I like this. This is my life!" "Your cut is very tasty", he tells her. Once a day for 20 days he copulates with her, and finally impregnates her with his large penis. All the while he keeps her imprisoned within his magnetic hammock.

When she was nearly ready to deliver her child, the young woman hears Re'yo talking to himself, and she understands that he is planning to cut her open, remove the baby, and then eat her. The next day, before he leaves for the hunt, she convinces him to let her out of the hammock on the excuse that she is much too large to run away. And as soon as he leaves, she runs away to the house of her relatives. She tells her older brothers what has happened to her, and she asks them to kill Re'yo for her. They agree and they all return to the house of Re'yo in the evening when he is in the process of eating. When Re'yo eats, he removes his eyes from his head and puts them on the ground. The men surround him and begin to shoot darts into him. "Arghh!", he screams. "What is happening, wife?", he asks. "Nothing", she responds. "It is just that there are many stinging insects about." When Re'yo then reaches for his eyes, the young woman scoops them up out of his reach. Screaming, he finally dies, poisoned by the darts.

Re'yo was not totally inhuman, because he could father a child with a woman. Nevertheless his humanity was questionable on a number of grounds, the most obvious being his monstrous appearance and actions. More interesting is his status as an "orphan", as "one who lives alone with no family": his lack of sociality and knowledge of human relations is made clear through his lack of experience with the female anatomy. In the Piaroa view, the conquistadors had also been "orphans", just like Re'yo: neither had families of women and children. They lived alone or marched together as single males, and it is significant that Re'yo existed as both one and a multitude. He often acted alone, but a present day *ruwang* could

also call him out of his jungle home to help him to protect his community as a multitude of armoured giants — a Spanish army — going into battle for him.

In present day time Re'yo would not be portrayed as a hunter, for in "today time" as Guardian of the animals the only animal he hunts is the jaguar, a predator of the animals of the jungle that the Piaroa classify as crossing the zones of mountain and jungle and therefore not belonging to Re'yo's jungle domain. Otherwise the appearance of Re'yo is the same: still a giant, he was said to "paint himself with metal" and to wear an enormous hat of metal. He also sports the arms of the Spanish warrior — he always carries knives, rifles and swords.

Because in "today time" the domains of water and land were controlled and protected by these two powerful spirits, the Piaroa can neither own land nor stretches of river, nor can they appropriate these habitats in a territorial manner. Although the Piaroa have important rights of access to both land and water, they never have exclusive rights, those that would allow them either as an individual or as a group to exchange or sell parts of these domains. They also can not treat land and water as property which can be inherited by generations of descendants. Because of the mastery of Re'yo and Ahe Itamu over the land and the water, such control over these resources is not within the scope of either private or political power among the Piaroa. They receive the capabilities to transform and to use the resources of land and water, but they do not have the power or the authority to own them as private property.¹⁴

In "today time", Re'yo and Ahe Itamu guard their respective habitats, protect them, make fertile their inhabitants, and punish those who endanger their life forms. They also cooperate as guardians of the gardens that are cleared by the Piaroa. While the land belongs to Re'yo, the Master of the Jungle, the plants of the garden, who were the children of Kuemoi in mythic time, and therefore from the domain of water, belong to Ahe Itamu, its Master in "today time". Because of their joint mastery over the gardens, Re'yo and Ahe Itamu work together, bringing sufficient peace between these two antagonistic and competitive elements — the land and the plants growing on it — to allow for the fertility of cultivated plants. They prevent forces of the land from killing the plants of the garden, and in turn the plants from making the land infertile. Re'yo and Ahe Itamu are able to cooperate in a task as the creator gods, Wahari and Kuemoi, had never been able to do.

¹⁴ It is relevant that my own fieldwork with the Piaroa was carried out in 1968 and in 1977. In 1968 the Piaroa with whom I lived had had minimal direct contact with Whites. By 1977 the process of integration of the Piaroa into the wider Venezuelan society was proceeding through deliberate governmental policy, but they were by no means yet active participants in the market economy. A young research student, Paul Oldham, is now with the Piaroa, and he may well discover that former ideas about property, and rights to it, have become more congruent with those of the nation state.

Re'yo and Ahe Itamu hold an ambiguous relation to the Piaroa: both can be highly dangerous for them; yet they also give their protection, especially Re'yo as the guardian of their own domain. Because these two mighty spirits are responsible for the resources of the jungle, the rivers, and the gardens, they must be negotiated with on a daily basis by the Piaroa leader, the *ruwang*. From the point of view of Re'yo and Ahe Itamu, their main duty is to protect their domains and all the inhabitants of them. Re'yo therefore not only has the obligation to protect the Piaroa as beings of his domain, but also all other members of the jungle habitat. Wild Pigs, Armadillos, monkeys, and jungle birds have as much a right to their protection as do Piaroa humans. Thus Re'yo and Ahe Itamu give aid to the Piaroa only when it does not entail harm to the inhabitants of the rivers or other members of the domain of the jungle.

The Piaroa said that Re'yo and Ahe Itamu are also responsible for the fertility of their respective domains. Without them, there would be no abundance of plants, animals, and fish. They are, in a sense, earthly gods of fertility, but it is in their general role as guardians with the duty of protecting the lives and health of the members of their domains that the Masters of the Jungle and Water endow fertility. They do not confer the capability of fertility, for the forces of Piaroa fertility are a gift from the ethereal *Tianawa* gods. Rather, Re'yo and Ahe Itamu maintain fertility through protection. They are the warriors who fight for the safety of the residents of water and jungle. Since Re'yo and Ahe Itamu do not give help to beings of their domains in order for them to make a meal of each other, the Piaroa as hunters of jungle animals and fishermen of the rivers are also ripe for their attack. Nonetheless, insofar as the Piaroa need aid in the protection of their lives which will not entail harm to other members of the jungle, the Master of the Jungle will oblige with the force of his powers.

Some Piaroa split Re'yo into two spirits, or two sets of spirits — one good, one evil — representing the two aspects of Re'yo's relationship with them, as both their protector and the one who punishes them for hurting other jungle beings. A powerful *ruwang* can call upon the more benevolent Re'yo to do battle against the Re'yo intent on harming people. Part of the work of Re'yo is to remind and order the animals to send their diseases to the Piaroa. In their roles as protectors of jungle and aquatic beings, Re'yo and Ahe Itamu are the two most powerful personages guarding the diseases of animals and fish, and in this role are called "the grandfathers of disease". A word of explanation about the origin of disease is in order here: when Wahari, the creation time Master of the Jungle, transformed most humans into their present day form of animal, plant, fish or fowl, he took away their "thoughts", and gave them as replacement a new "life of thoughts", which was disease, the knowledge that would be unique to them in "today time". They themselves do not suffer from this knowledge, but rather pass it on to the Piaroa,

who fall victim to it. When the "thoughts" of the animals and fish were taken away from them by Wahari, so too was their intentionality: they can not on their own volition send the disease they possess. Rather it is Re'yo who orders the diseases of the animals to be sent to the Piaroa, while Ahe Itamu directs fish diseases to them. When the Piaroa kill an animal of the jungle, Re'yo might go further to avenge the death: having sent the animal disease into the body of a Piaroa he can then, as a sensuous force, join it there to eat the victim.

Re'yo and Ahe Itamu also steal children from the Piaroa. They do so intentionally in order to replace beings that the Piaroa have hunted and killed in the domains for which they have responsibility. Re'yo takes them to his jungle home in the mountains, and Ahe Itamu draws them down to his water home in the depths of the rivers. To prevent such thefts, the *ruwang* pays the Masters of the Jungle and Rivers to protect the children, particularly each time he teaches them their first *maripa teau*, lessons that endow them with the capabilities for using the resources of the forest and the rivers. The *ruwatu* gives Re'yo trousers, fish hooks, and other Western implements, which they place in a bundle within the house for him to take. The *ruwatu* also leave similar gifts for Ahe Itamu along the river bank when they teach the children.

Thus the great Spirit Guardians in their line of duty also protect the Piaroa. The role in which both Re'yo and Ahe Itamu most frequently help them is that of guarding their children when they walk and play in the jungle. They guard them when they are solicited to so by the *ruwatu*, who chant daily to the Masters to guard the members of their communities. The Piaroa can wear a black face paint when walking in the jungle, which protects them against attacks by snakes, jaguars, and sorcerers. This paint, when sung over by the *ruwang*, emits the odours and sounds of Re'yo and Ahe Itamu, which frightens these predators and drives them away from their potential victims. The sounds of the children playing become those of Re'yo walking through the jungle and of Ahe Itamu moving through his river domain. To further frighten off the sorcerers, Re'yo clothes the children in his own suit of armour, his sombrero, his boots, and he gives them his form, that of a fat giant. Only powerful *ruwatu* can use the chants for calling upon the Masters of the Jungle and River to help them, for to contact them entails great danger to themselves: these spirits can always be unpredictably dangerous, and they can just as well attack as help a Piaroa who deliberately initiates a conversation with them. For a *ruwang* to negotiate with them safely, he has to have considerable knowledge and power himself.

A strong *ruwang* can also ask for Re'yo's aid to guard his community against the dangers of the night. He can call upon Re'yo as a multitude of giants to chase away a jaguar or sorcerer lurking outside the house. One *ruwang* that I knew had a tiny quartz stone, within which he could see Re'yo when he took the drug,

yopo, at night. This Re'yo dwelt inside the stone, and was given the name, "*Re'yo idoki*" "The Re'yo of the stone". He or she could be called forth each night as both a male and female giant. They would emerge through the smoke of the *ruwang's* cigar to do battle for him. Yet they too could be dangerous for other Piaroa. The *ruwang* would ask them to attack the sorcerers who wished the Piaroa ill, and they would accommodate him, but they sometimes killed a Piaroa relative as well. It is therefore the duty of the *ruwang* to be very careful in his contacts with the Master of the Jungle.

A Dualism: The Power of Might and the Power of Thoughts

The logic for the Western dress of the Spirit Masters and the figure of Re'yo as a Spanish conquistador is best explained in terms of its contrast to the *indigenous* clothing of the powerful *Tüha Tianawa* gods who wear Piaroa loincloths and Piaroa ornamentation — beautiful toucan crowns, necklaces of beads, arm and leg bands. These two sets of images, the Spanish soldier and the ethereal "Piaroa" *Tianawa*, exemplify two aspects of power upon which the Piaroa endlessly play in their discourse on similarity and difference: on the one hand there is power's wild, violent and coercive aspect appropriate to the combative realm of foreign politics where the role of soldier is appropriate, while on the other there is the productive power of a full "life of thoughts" that allows for the creation of interior space. In the creation of productive power, the transformational forces forthcoming from a "life of thoughts" takes precedence over the physical "life of the senses".

The *Tianawa* gods are not warriors, a role that would at any rate be impossible for them since they live a pure life of "thoughts": they have no sensuous capabilities. They are instead the owners of all forces of thought (*ta'kwarü*), a role they received at the close of mythic time. Highly benevolent gods, they continually give aspects of these forces to the Piaroa. It is these "thoughts" that enable the Piaroa to live both socially and materially in a Piaroa way, for their "life of thoughts" endow them with all of their capabilities for hunting, gardening, for ritual, for reproduction, for living a rational social life. In other language it can be said that it is their "life of thoughts", given as a gift to them from the *Tianawa* gods, that gives them the capabilities for transforming the resources of the earth toward the end of living a Piaroa life, one of civilized fecundity. The *Tianawa* gods, without a "life of the senses" of their own, do not themselves *use* any of these capabilities. Nevertheless, as owners of all the forces for life enabling the Piaroa to live as they do, it is highly appropriate that these gods wear Piaroa ornaments, not only in abundance but also in their most beautified form: such ornamentation is expressive of their potency as owners of all the forces of thought that together form the source for power that the Piaroa can but tap.

While the *Tianawa* gods are guardians of *all* the means that the Piaroa use for transforming the resources of the earth, the Spirit guardians of Water and Jungle are in charge of the resources themselves. Both sets of beings, the gods and the Spirit masters, are potently involved in the material well being of the Piaroa, each in their respective — and very extreme — way. It is especially Re'yo, the armoured and armed monstrous Spanish soldier who acts out that reality of power that is on the side of pure might. And just as the gods are incapable of using the forces of thoughts they own, so too it is the case that the Spirit guardians do not *use* the resources of land and water that he guards. It seems unlikely that Re'yo ever owned capabilities for transforming resources for use, and it was clear that as agents in "today time" neither of the Spirit guardians use such forces. Indeed, to do so would work against their role as the mighty protectors of the resources of the jungle and the rivers, the job that the creator god, Wahari, did so poorly when he transformed the flesh of those he was supposed to protect into animal meat to be eaten. There is thus an incongruity to many of the Western items that the Piaroa gave to Re'yo. He can not use fishhooks and matches, for he does not have the transformational capacities (the "life of thoughts") to do so. Such tools as payments can best be viewed as a tribute to the transformational powers of White People — in whose image Re'yo acted — to make their tools and to build their cities.

In his role as guardian, Re'yo is primarily a pure "sensual" force: it is physicality and the power of might that he uses to carry out his duty of protecting the resources of the jungle. Nowhere could we find a greater contrast to his violence and forceful actions than in the ethereal imagery of the *Tianawa* gods. Sitting on their celestial clouds with their crystal boxes of thoughts beside them, they take their hallucinogenic drugs and chant for eternity their songs of productivity. As endowers of fertility through the bestowal of forces of thought, the *Tianawa* gods are more involved in the *protection* of the health of the Piaroa than is Re'yo.

As mentioned above, the *Tianawa* gods are labelled specifically as people ("*Tüha*"), and thus of a class with the Piaroa. It is from them that they receive the gift of their *particular* humanity: the Piaroa are the owners and users of the transformational capabilities given to them by the gods, but not owners of the resources of land and water, which belong — solely — to Re'yo and Ahe Itamu. The dichotomy is that of the inside and the outside: the powers of the forces of thought so carefully guarded over by the *Tianawa* gods pertain most obviously to the internal relations of community life which are built through productive work, cooperation, sharing, and the creation of intimacy and high spirits, while the power of might of the Spirit masters belong to the external relations of foreign politics which involves the competition of individuals (as in the area of exchange) creating a world ever hovering on the edge of violence, coercion, and predation.¹⁵

¹⁵ See Overing (1992) for further explication of exchange in Piaroa social theory.

It is the Piaroa's view of themselves as users of the forces of thought, and not might, that united them with the *Tianawa* gods, and not the Spirit masters. It is a perspective that also carries with it an image of alterity that opposed safety and danger, moderation and excess, being "of a kind" and being different, being friend and foe; it assumes the Other to be "the cannibal other". Nevertheless, as will be discussed below, the Piaroa classification of interiority and exteriority is not without its ambiguity, and the states of being to which they refer are rarely absolute ones.

Life as a predatory process: the *ruwang* as an "interior other"

The imagery for the productive forces of the *Tianawa* gods is that of ethereal beauty, and they are concretized as such: inside the box of curing chants owned by the fertility goddess are the beautiful lights of her songs; there is a long cord of beads that has all the colours of the rainbow; her brilliant crown of toucan feathers lies on a rafter. Within her crystal box of hunting prowess are her beautiful amulets and necklace of medallions, and within all of her boxes of power dwell many beautiful waterfalls. Equally the ornamentation that makes a Piaroa person beautiful tells of his or her capabilities for creative abundance and fertility.¹⁶ The imagery for the productive powers of the *ruwang*, the shaman/leader, is as ethereally beautiful as for those of the gods: the clear yet moderate light of the moon is designated as "the precious light of his wizardry"; the moon-lit water within the crystal boxes of the gods is clean, clear and fresh, and with it the *ruwang* each night cleanses and beautifies the words of his chants.

On the other hand, the Piaroa view themselves as predators and life as a predatory process.¹⁷ The beautiful forces for production, those attributes for life and creation that allow for the human condition of the Piaroa, are as well the weapons and tools for the cannibalistic process. With their gifts of the culinary arts, the *Tianawa* gods give to the Piaroa the powers to prey upon the inhabitants of the rivers and the jungle. It is for instance part of the culinary arts to attack, to kill, and to transform into food and artifacts the animals, fish, and plants — all of whom once also lived a human life on earth. In general the Piaroa understand work, upon which the creation of the "inside" is dependent, to be a violent process, for the powers that make production possible are of creation time wizardry, the original means for predation in the world. In their origin all productive forces were both evil and ugly, and it is only when they are mastered and cleansed that

¹⁶ See Overing (1989).

¹⁷ See Overing (1985, 1986b). Also see Overing (1993).

they can be beautiful — a process that is both personal and social. There is no space to expand upon this point, but the social organization and polity of the Piaroa work toward containing the violence of the predatory process through which humans, of necessity, lived. Tamed in this way, ugly productive powers become transformed through civilized predation into beautiful ones (see Overing 1989).

It is the *ruwang*, as the individual who acquires more predatory forces of thought than others from the *Tianawa* gods, who is the most responsible for the productivity of his community. Because of the powers of his "thoughts" it is he who is also responsible for its protection. As Master and thus protector of his community, and as the one who provides for its fertility, his role is very similar to that of Re'yo, the conquistador Spirit of the jungle. He too is the lone warrior fighting against the dangerous forces that might affect the community's health and security. The relationship that the *ruwang* leader has with most agents of the outside world, whether with exchange partners of trading networks or with vengeful spirits from creation time, is one of competition, and as such it is a mutual relationship of force and coercion having to do with the present day use of the resources on earth (see Overing 1986b).

It is the powerful forces of "thought" that he draws from the crystal boxes of the *Tianawa* gods, and not his physical might, that give the *ruwang* the strength for these martial responsibilities: the "spirit of songs" (*autuisa*) within him is also called the "spirit of hunger" and the "spirit of jaguar's breath"; while the "spirit of the hallucinogen" (*yopo*) that he inhales each night is labelled as well his "spirit of battle" (*tekwae*). The power of breath that he uses to sing his chants is called "*uhuru*", or "jaguar's roar", a tribute to his predatory exploits in other worlds. At his death, the predatory powers specific to his warrior duties leave his body as predator of animal souls: from his breath emerges a jaguar, from his eyes come bees, while ocelots spring from his hands. The once beautiful forces of predation spring that the *ruwang* collected throughout his life, tamed and beautified through his human consciousness, become transformed at his death into pure animal form. Although such service souls might kill and devour they have lost all capacities for the culinary arts.

The power of the *ruwang* clearly has two faces, as indeed in Piaroa theory is true for all power that is human in use: it has its positive productive side, but the very same forces that allow for such productive skill are also rooted in violence, and can therefore take a coercive turn. These are the two faces of shamanism, so often noted in the literature. The human predicament, from the Piaroa point of view, is that each individual, as human and not only as shaman, must constantly cope with these two sides of power in order to live a material life that is at the same time social in construction. On the one hand, there is the construction of the peaceful and productive relations of the inside, while on the other there is the

violence of external politics which entails a relationship of reciprocal cannibalism with many of the asocial agents of the universe. The powers of the *ruwang* (as also those of Re'yo, the Spirit master of the Jungle) that produce health for his own domain are the same as those he uses in his battles of force against outside agency. Productive power in Piaroa theory always has its destructive side.

Conclusion: Alterity and the Human Condition

This paper began with the problem that Mason introduced in *Deconstructing America* of the incommensurability of European and Native American systems of alterity. I suggested that one salient difference between the two is that the Eurocentric discourse, born within a hegemonic and totalizing rhetoric of hierarchy, is highly exclusive in its view of humanity, while the ethnocentrism of the Native Amazonian discourse, can best be understood as being based upon a rhetoric of equality, and thus in its expressions of alterity is much more inclusive in its categorization of humanity. My interest was then to show that in the Piaroa imagery of the Other any absolute boundary between self and Other is difficult to draw, as too is the distinction between the human and the nonhuman. While the root metaphor for alterity in Piaroa discourse is that of "the cannibal other", such an image can hardly preclude in any absolute manner the Piaroa themselves. If Other is a jaguar cannibal, so too are the Piaroa, but jaguar as owner of the culinary arts, as in mythic time. In the Piaroa highly egalitarian ontology of existence, predators are the prey of their own prey. The boundary between self and other is not so clear cut.

The reason for such ambiguity is that the language of alterity for the Piaroa is most saliently a means through which the human condition itself can be understood. It does so by playing upon the complexity of what it means to be human and alive, and thus provides a means for the examination of all aspects of being human, which in the language of alterity tends to treat such aspects — the force of thoughts or of the physical — in their most extreme and exaggerated expression. As with the more Eurocentric vision, the central topic is the nature of human power, but there the commensurability ends. The Piaroa stress is upon the human predicament itself, and thus upon the absurdities and evil as well as the positive strengths of human power; while in the European imagery the emphasis is upon the right of Europeans as superior human beings to subjugate the inferior Other. In the latter vision, evil and danger is assumed to come from without, and never from within.

In Native Amazonian ontology there is no "nature", no inanimate or value free universe over which humans can dominate. The notion of "nature" belongs to the Western paradigm of power, and not to the Amazonian one, where other worlds are always filled with agency with whom it is necessary for humans to deal. In

contrast, there developed in Western understanding the idea that there exists a "natural" order of submission between humans and other beings or elements of the universe. This particular notion about the superiority and the power of humans depends upon the conceptual reduction of the multiple worlds of agents, the foundation of all traditional cosmologies, to the more generalised abstraction of a world of "nature". Instead of many worlds comprised of agents capable of radically different expressions of power in their relations with human beings — and in the Piaroa case, agents as *autonomous* beings who individually own their own forces of will and intentionality, and thought or might — the model that emerged in science was that of one objectified world from which humans could disengage themselves. As disengaged humans, they then had the right to conquer the world of "nature" toward the end of producing wealth for themselves.

In Amazonian theory, it is an ontological fact that human beings cannot have an abundance of wealth. Unlimited accumulation is impossible because they live in an intentional universe filled with non-human beings who do not allow themselves to become objectified and conquered. It is for the same reason that in Piaroa theory humans cannot have proprietorship, in the Western sense, over land and water: human beings must share such resources with other types of agency, and they therefore cannot own resources as property.

The European vision of "right to power" over resources, based upon its own very specific understanding of the relation of humans to nature, has an even more insidious side that effects relations between humans. Seeing the power relationship as a relation between humans and things gives form to the European paradigm of relations of dominance/subordination. The understanding of the rightful power that humans have over the inanimate world of nature becomes the model in general for power, including power in society. This makes the social world a very dangerous place, for all power played out between humans of this living world becomes analogous to what has been decided to be the relation between humans and everything non-human. Thus, to be subordinate means becoming property, becoming objectified and inferior, while to have power means being disengaged.

This is not the Native American understanding of either power or possession: for both, the agency of the other is almost always recognized as a factor with which it is necessary to deal. In Piaroa theory, for instance, there is no "natural" order of subordination between them and other agency in the universe. While they cannot through domination appropriate for themselves the power of others, they also do not see themselves as dominated by any other agency in the universe. Despite the dependency of the Piaroa upon the *Tianawa* gods, these gods in no way rule them through a relationship of command and obedience. They have no "life of the senses" through which to give commands, or to take action upon them if they could do so. From the Piaroa point of view, there can be no stable hier-

archy of power in the universe, for each world is immune to any sort of permanent state of affairs where agents from another world could dominate or govern agency within it. No agent in the universe, or group of agents, including humans, can acquire a sufficient means to violence that would allow for such domination of others. Thus there can be no victors and vanquished in any absolute sense. The best that humans can do is to achieve *equal* relations in their dealings with beings of other spaces and other times.

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