Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality

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Abstract
This paper makes a case for conviviality as a currency for frontier Africans. It argues that incompleteness is the normal order of things, and that conviviality invites us to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate the delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of completeness. Conviviality encourages frontier Africans to reach out, encounter and explore ways of enhancing or complementing themselves with the added possibilities of potency brought their way by the incompleteness of others, never as a ploy to becoming complete, but to make them more efficacious in their relationships and sociality. Frontier Africans and conviviality suggest alternative and complementary modes of influence over and above the current predominant mode of coercive violence and control.

Introduction

Africa's unequal encounters with the rest of the world have left the continent with many untapped potentials, i.e. its possibilities, prospects and emergent capacities for being and becoming in tune with its creativity and imagination. The world is the poorer with Africa disengaged. A dominant Eurocentric logic of conquest drives many an interaction with Africa into zero sum games. It privileges conversion over conversation, and prioritises the argument of force over the force of argument. Fuelled by assumptions and preconceptions that Africa has little to offer beyond its status as the cradle of human kind, violence and conquest have been justified with benevolent discourses of the gift of civilisation and enlightenment to the reluctant darkness of a continent trapped in inertia and the emotive logic of ignorance. If anything, Africa is seen to teach the world the dangers of void – of being devoid of progress – that must absolutely be avoided like the plague, AIDS or Ebola, which is currently tormenting the world with its nightmarish variant of globalisation.

Africa is perceived to be stuck in a dark and distant past, unable to extricate itself like someone neck deep in mud following a tsunami. Africa is seen as desperately in need of an infusion of the capacity to aspire, in order, hopefully, to rise and shine and transform its circumstances. Yet, even with the assistance, wisdom and technological wizardry of others, Africa is generally portrayed by such purportedly benevolent others as incapable of moving forward, reduced as it often is, to cycling vigorously on the spot or covering mileage on a

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treadmill in the gym. Once in a while, as if to mitigate the pessimism of those who profess evangelical faith in modernising Africa in tune with exogenously inspired templates, the continent is declared aspiring and emergent, albeit tentatively, from hopelessness to hope, darkness to promise.

Often, the idea of a complex, modern, civilised world of autonomous citizens is contrasted with an unsophisticated, traditional (pre-historic, pre-scientific, pre-logical, irrational), underdeveloped Africa steeped in backward customs, traditions and cultures, and haunted by the untamed caprice of internal natural forces, human and environmental. The world out there – dominated by Europe or the West and its civilisational acolytes – has historically used coercive violence and control over people and resources as its privileged mode of influence, to force into silence, self-repudiation or ridiculous defensiveness African modes of self-reproduction and ideas of the good life. Convergence is championed and mimicry imposed on Africa by the prescriptive gaze of those claiming civilisational superiority. Although a very particular and parochial mode of modernity initially, such violent orgies of coercion and control have often been circulated and imposed as if they were the one best way of being human and being modern.

Violence and coercion are deliberately employed to silence other civilisations, encourage Pavlovian conditioning, unquestionable loyalties and zombielike servitude, and discourage creative imagination and diversity. If and when other modes of being and becoming are acknowledged, they are deliberately represented not as alternatives and complementarities to the imposed dominant Eurocentric order. Instead, they are portrayed as belonging to the past, something only students of deep history or archaeology could excavate to satisfy the curiosities of their discipline. Eurocentric or western modernity – a modernity of here and now, reluctant to go back beyond the Bronze Age, or to credit Africa with influence beyond the Neolithic (Rowlands, forthcoming) – is often choreographed, packaged and marketed as the only modernity worthy of recognition, representation, reproduction and globalisation.

Given its fascinating capacity to dramatise its distinctiveness and to market and impose itself globally (hence its universalist pretensions and propensities), western modernity has insinuated itself into very dominant positions. This is the case even in societies, geographies and cultures where popular modes of representation and practice are inspired by civilisations ordinarily ignored by or dormant in elite western settings or among the westernised elite of non-western societies.

In many cultures, westernised and non-westernised alike, given the centrality of babies for social reproduction, it is customary to resist rejecting a baby, however threatening the baby and/or its circumstance might be. In social terms, every baby is inadequate or incomplete at birth; they are understood to undertake the journey of self-activation in a process of cultivation or domestication through relationships and interactions with social others. Babies acquire potency through social action and interaction. A baby that imbibes and embodies the ways of seeing, doing and being of the social contexts in which they are born and grow up, makes a strong case for inclusion and legitimisation through the relationships forged with others. Western modernity or civilisation (and by extension any other modernity or civilisation) can be compared to a baby in these terms.

If all babies are inadequate, the western(ised) baby is particularly incomplete, especially in its streamlined, standardised export version. The situation is worsened by its insistence on passing for a complete baby, aggressively marketing and imposing itself as such globally. As tempting as rejecting western modernity might be, I cannot afford such an extreme degree of insensitivity to the reality of many an African elite – academics like you and me included – and by extension (even if to a lesser degree) the reality of the vast majority of ordinary Africans, which is

inextricably entangled (mangled even) with western ways of seeing, doing, being and becoming (in varying degrees and gradations, of course, but nonetheless). The potency of Africans is, to varying degrees, simultaneously depleted and enhanced by their adoption of the western baby. Indeed, to simply resort to an unqualified rejection of western civilisation would be tantamount to throwing the baby (however incomplete) out with the bathwater of western excesses and inadequacies.

I shall resist the temptation to throw the baby of western civilisation out with the bathwater, given my love of babies, even as I hate the bathwater of coercive violence and impulsive control of others and their resources in particular. To save the baby of western civilisation and modernity, I suggest we disabuse it of obvious inadequacies. These include its tendency to claim completeness and superiority often with little evidence to substantiate such extravagant claims. We should also disabuse it of the reluctance to see the realities of others in historical perspective, or to selectively employ history when it suits its purposes. The western(ised) baby needs to be disabused of epistemologies that tend to privilege neat dichotomies and dualisms, and to caricature, dismember or confine reality to sensory perceptions or to essences. The baby must be invited to pay greater attention to the interconnections, hierarchies and gradations that spring from and are consolidated by the ever-evolving messiness of lived experiences that continually reconfigure human reality.

Once disabused and saved along the lines suggested, the baby of western civilisation and modernity would flourish by opening up and enriching its reality with African potentials derailed or caricatured by the orgy of coercive violence and impulse to monopolise humanity and the world's resources. In light of this necessary gesture of compassion to the disabused and saved western baby, let us explore three African potentialities that could enrich our understanding of African perspectives on conflict resolution and conviviality, and point the wider world in the direction of alternative and complementary modes of influence over and above the current predominant mode of coercive violence and control. These potentialities are encompassed in: (i) popular ideas of what constitutes reality; (ii) Africans as frontier beings; (iii) mediating frontier modes of existence; (iv) conviviality as a currency; and (v) conclusion: towards a future of convivial scholarship.

Popular ideas of what constitutes reality

Endogenous epistemologies in Africa, despite their popularity with ordinary Africans and with elite Africans especially in settings away from the scrutinising prescriptive gaze of their western and westernised counterparts, are mainly dormant or invisible in scholarly circles because they are often ignored, caricatured or misrepresented in the western categories of 'magic', 'witchcraft', 'sorcery', 'superstition', 'primitivism', 'savagery' and 'animism'. These problematic categories are actively and uncritically internalised and reproduced by a Eurocentric modern intellectual elite in Africa. Educated and steeped in the dualisms of colonial ways of knowing and producing knowledge, this elite tends to despise endogenous African ways of knowing and knowledge production. Ordinary Africans immersed in popular traditions of meaning making are denied the right to think and represent their realities in accordance with the civilisations and universes they know best. African elites schooled in western modernity are all too eager to label and dismiss (however hypocritically) as *traditional knowledge* the creative imagination of what their western counterparts love to term 'the African mind' – instead of creating space for the fruit of that mind as a *tradition of knowledge*. The western baby and its African mimics stand to gain by (re)familiarising themselves with and encouraging these popular

modes of knowing and knowledge making in the production of relevant, inclusive, negotiated and nuanced social knowledge. The western baby and its African babysitters need to (re)immerse themselves and be grounded in endogenous African universes and the interconnecting global and local hierarchies that shape and are shaped by these universes.

Comprehensive depictions of African endogenous universes exist in popular narratives and accounts, and can be drawn upon by the western baby and its African disciples. Examples include the novels and short stories of the late Nigerian writer, Amos Tutuola. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (Tutuola, 1952), for example, reality is more than meets the eye and the world an experience of life beyond sensory perceptions. In Tutuola's universe, being and becoming materialise through the consciousness that gives it meaning. Consciousness matters more than the containers that house it. Consciousness can inhabit any container – human and non-human, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible – regardless of the state of completeness or incompleteness of the container in question. Both reality and the universe are imbued with endless possibilities of being and becoming, thanks to the multiplicity of consciousness available to inhabit them. Things, words, deeds and beings are always incomplete, not because of absences but because of their possibilities. Faced with inadequacies, we, every now and then, invest hope, interpretation and mediation in those claiming the status of seers and frontier beings, in those imbued with larger than life clairvoyance and capacity to straddle worlds, navigate, negotiate and reconcile chasms. With the potency they avail us, we are able to activate ourselves to mitigate the inadequacies of the five senses, so that we too might perceive what is ordinarily lost to us in terms of the fullness and complexity of reality. Mediators or interpreters are multidimensional in their perception, because of their capacity to see, feel, hear, smell and taste things that are ordinarily beyond sight, feeling, hearing, smelling and tasting.

Tutuola's is a universe where life is larger than logic, and where the logic and reality of sensory perception are constantly challenged. He invites us to perceive things as interlinked and to factor interconnections into how we relate to the world and the hierarchies we would like to claim or contest therein. No condition is permanent in this universe, not even the unity of being. Only the permanence of change is unconditional. Structures are just as subject to the whims and caprices of changing times and the shifting forms of the beings, things, words and deeds they seek to tame. Everyone and everything is malleable and flexible, from humans and their anatomies, to animals and plants, gods, ghosts and spirits. Anything can be anything. People and things adopt different forms and manifest themselves differently according to context and necessity. Something transformed can regain the state that preceded its transformation. A thing can double itself, and the double becomes the thing and the thing the double. Gods are humans and humans are gods. Spirits assume human forms, and humans can transform themselves into spirits, animals and plants. Sometimes a creature combines multiple forms of being – half-human and half-animal or half-plant, half-god, half-ghost, half-spirit, half-male or half-female, etc. – and assumes the consciousness akin to each form. It is a universe of agency ad infinitum, one in which structures exist only to the extent they can be humbled by the agency of those who make structures possible. Agency is not a birthmark or permanence, but something to be discovered, cultivated, nurtured, activated and reactivated to different degrees of potency through relationships with others, things and humans alike. Context matters and even nature and the supernatural are sensitive to context, and, like chameleons, are expected to collaborate with the consciousness that possesses it. Power is fluid, and so is weakness. Both change hands without warning. Woe betide those who invest too heavily on appearances in a nimble-footed world where signs are permanently scrambled and logic forever wrong-footed. Tutuola's universe of tales defies the currency of Cartesian rationalism and its dualistic ambitions of dominance.

In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (Tutuola, 1952) the supernatural is quite simply natural. Gods, death, spirits and the curious and terrible creatures of the bushes and forests take on human nature, just as humans develop the supernatural attributes of these ordinarily invisible forces in their lives. The palm-wine drinkard himself is quite ordinarily extraordinary in his capacity to collapse the boundaries between nature and culture, village and town, home and bushes, human and supernatural, plausible and implausible, rational and superstitious, primitive and civilised, Africa and the West, etc. Not only is he a composite of the natural and supernatural, he and the world he inhabits provide for infinite shifts between categories through flexibility and fluidity in bodies and a capacity to be anything and to take any form, even the form of air.

Just as there is more and less to bodies than meets the eye, and more and less to the eye than meets bodies, there is much more and much less to what strikes us in things or facets of things. When doubles mimic or parody in convincing ways, what reason is there to argue against a thing and its double being two sides of the same coin or cowry? While surfaces are obviously important and often suffice for many ends and purposes, delving beneath appearances and digging deep into the roots of things is critical for understanding eternally nuanced and ever-shifting complexities of being and becoming. Digging deep makes impossibilities possible, just as it makes the possible impossible. Being and becoming as works in progress require borrowings and enhancements to render them beautiful and acceptable. It is this capacity to enable and disable simultaneously that makes absence present and presence absent in certain places and spaces, private and public alike. Particular contexts challenge us in particular ways to heighten or lower the bar and threshold of acceptability and tolerability. This capacity, Mbembe (2003) argues, is most unsettling to a fundamentally dualistic assumption in western thought that 'every life is singular'; hence: 'the impossibility for a single and same thing, or a single and same being, to have several different origins or to exist simultaneously in different places and under different signs' (Mbembe, 2003: 3).

The West may think what it likes, but Tutuola's bodies have meaning only to the extent that and in the manner in which they are harnessed, in full or as organs (Mbembe, 2003: 17). As vehicles, containers or envelopes (Salpeteur and Warnier, 2013; Warnier, 2006, 2007, 2009), bodies are malleable, amenable to being compressed, contorted and extended, dissected, dismembered and remembered, and branded. Auras and essences are as much attributes of the parts as they are of the whole, just as the part is in the whole and the whole in the part. What seems more important than the forms bodies take is the consciousness which inhabits bodies and body parts. Even when a body is seemingly palpably the same and contiguous, the consciousness that inhabits it may be fluid and flexible, pointing to a reality that impoverishes fixations with permanence and stability. The human body can assume the consciousness of an ordinary human just as it can that of a god, a spirit, death, a curious creature from the wild bushes or the endless forests, as well as it can project its own consciousness onto a plant, an animal, air or whatever other element of nature is available and handy.

Tutuola's is a world in which being a hero requires being a composite – amenable to shifting bodily shapes and with the capacity for presence in simultaneous multiplicities, in familiar and unfamiliar ways. Bodies and forms are never complete; they are open-ended malleable vessels to be appropriated by consciousness in its multiplicity. Bodies provide for hearts and minds to intermingle, accommodating the dreams and hopes of both, and mitigating the propensity of the one to outrace the other. Bodies are melting pots of possibilities and amenable to being melted by possibilities. Similarly, sameness is emphasised through border crossing and unbounding and fusing identities.

To die in life and live in death is part of the flexibility characteristic of Tutuola's universe. Death is a form of circulation and not a matter of permanent severance of links with life and the living. One is dead to a particular context, as a way of becoming alive to prospective new contexts. Death is a form of adventure and exploration of the infinitudes of life. Death and dying are processes in gradations and by degree. There seems to be no end to dying, just as there is no end to living. People who die reappear elsewhere and are again available for death. There is no such thing as an ordinary mortal, just as there is no such thing as the fully dead. Death and dying are as much a reality for gods, spirits, ghosts and death itself, as they are for humans.

Tutuola's stories constitute an epistemological order where the sense of sight and physical evidence has not assumed the same centrality, dominance and dictatorship evident in the colonial epistemology and its hierarchies of perceptual faculties (Van Dijk and Pels, 1996). In this epistemological order, one can be blinded by sight and sighted by blindness. Just as body organs can outsource their responsibilities to others, in the manner of the womb of the palm-wine drinkard's wife outsourcing a pregnancy to her thumb. The stories invite us to question dualistic assumptions about reality and scholarship, inspired by: 'the opposition between the affective and the cognitive, the subject and the object, appearance and essence, reason and passion, the corporeal and the ideal, the human and the animal, reality and representation, the one and the multiple', that tend to favour thinking which: 'privileges above all the ability to reason (*argumentation* and *deliberation*) and the will to power, giving short shrift to the ability to feel, to remember, and to imagine' (Mbembe, 2003: 2, emphasis in original; see also Mbembe, 1997: 152).

The real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; it is also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive and the inexplicable (Nyamnjoh, 2001). These popular ideas of knowing and knowledge challenge dualistic approaches to reality. They question the centrality accorded the mind and reason to the detriment of other modes of knowing. They suggest a world larger than its material realities, where matter is not as fixed as assumed in dualistic rationality. Instead, they focus on what is possible and not just on what exists made apparent by human sensory perception. Furthermore, they embrace the supernatural, and emphasise the interconnection of everyone and everything. We are introduced to a world of flux, where structure is a temporary manifestation of what is otherwise a flow of constant change. It is a universe of self-consciously incomplete beings, constantly in need of activation, potency and enhancement through relationships with incomplete others.

Africans as frontier beings

If the western(ised) baby is convinced by the possibilities evident in Tutuola's universe, it would see the limitations or futility of continued insistence on defining and confining Africa and Africans through its illusions of completeness. If African realities are not steeped in dualisms, binaries, dichotomies and essences as Tutuola's stories of a universe of incompleteness and infinite possibilities suggests, then Africans – when not pretending, claiming identities in abstraction or being defined and confined by others – are frontier beings. Frontier Africans are those who contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces. They are interested in conversations not conversions. They find abstract distinctions between nature and culture sterile, and seek to understand what cities have in common with towns and villages and bushes and forests or what interconnections hide underneath labels such as the civilised and the primitive, Europe and Africa, the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. With frontier Africans everyone and everything is

malleable, flexible and blendable, from humans and their anatomies, to animals and plants, gods, ghosts and spirits. No boundary, wall or chasm is challenging enough to defy frontier Africans seeking conversations with and between divides. At the frontiers, anything can be anything.

As frontier beings, Africans and the fruit of their creative imagination adopt different forms and manifest themselves differently according to context and necessity. And because frontier Africans do not insist on permanencies, any person or anything that transforms (or is activated and projected into something else) can regain the state that preceded the transformation. Frontier Africans thus straddle myriad identity margins and constantly seek to bridge various divides in the interest of the imperatives of living interconnections, nuances and complexities made possible or exacerbated by the evidence of mobilities and encounters. Through accelerated physical and social mobility afforded Africans and others by their creativity and technological innovations, such frontier Africans are able to navigate and negotiate myriad margins of identity and belonging. Their capacity to straddle physical and cultural geographies enables them to point attention to the possibility and reality of a world beyond neat dichotomies. Their world is characterised by flexibility in mobility, identity, citizenship and belonging. Myriad interconnections, inextricable entanglements and creative interdependencies, despite persistent hierarchies at global and local levels, afford Africans the opportunities to explore the fullness of their potentialities without unduly confining themselves with exclusionary identities. If civilisation means confinement to a narrow idea of reality characterised by dualisms and the primacy of the mind, the purportedly autonomous individuals and a world of sensory perceptions, then Africans (or any other race, class, gender, generation or social category) who feel unduly severed, dismembered, scarred, caricatured or savaged by such limited and limiting indicators, have every reason to disabuse themselves of civilisation and modernity. One is healthier and feels more wholesome saying farewell to such a baby – such a bare, skeletal or streamlined notion of being human, civilised and modern. It is one's interest and the interest of others to acknowledge that being and becoming is an eternal process of incompleteness.

Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1987) recognises this frontier nature of Africans in their social formations. He argues that the largely frontier character of African societies has been ignored in the anthropological fixation on the elusive authentic insider firmly located in 'the unambiguous heartland', to the detriment of the 'uncertain peripheries' that represent histories of mobility, cultural encounters, negotiation and flux (Kopytoff, 1987: 3–17). Such a 'hierarchy of purity', informed by an uncritical mapping of 'difference', remains embedded in the professional practices of anthropologists (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 11–18). Straddling worlds the way nimble-footed and flexibly mobile Africans do in the capacity as 'frontier persons' (Kopytoff, 1987: 17–23; Nyamnjoh, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) is not always positively perceived by those who (like our western(ised) baby) feel more embedded in either world, especially when mobile Africans behave in ways that translate into opportunism, dishonesty, lack of loyalty or impermanence in relationships with others (Alhaji, 2014).

Fundamentalist and exclusionary claims and articulation of belonging are profoundly at odds with the frontier character of Africans and their societies. Such fundamentalism pays scant regard to the reality of those who inhabit borderlands, circulate and operate across borders or who seek to collapse the binaries, dualisms and teleologies as evidenced by both Tutuola (1952) and Kopytoff (1987). Being neither an insider nor an outsider in categorical terms might have its blessings, but it does not inspire confidence or trust among those who see the world and configurations of belonging purely in black and white and in very rigid and frozen ahistorical terms (Nyamnjoh, 2006, 2010; Alhaji 2014). Many anthropologists have been just as rigid and categorical in distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, through a tendency to define and

confine and to ignore the history of flexible mobility, encounters and fluidity of identities that make 'frontier' communities of African societies (Kopytoff, 1987; MacGaffey, 1995). The western baby and its African acolytes must disabuse themselves of the policing of borders to realise and harness the full potentials of Africans as frontier beings and of Africa as frontier geography.

It is important for the western baby and its African fan base to see and relate to frontier Africa and frontier Africans, not as cheating or being unfaithful to their prescribed cultures and various other administered identities, but rather as people and places subverting the boundaries within which they are confined in the zero sum game of completeness. If the western baby and its African disciples appreciate the flexibility with which frontier Africans and frontier Africa are ready to claim and contest rigid modes of being and becoming, then the universe depicted by Tutuola (1952) is likely to make more sense than simply as a primitive world of magic, superstition, witchcraft and fantasies gone wild. They would appreciate the principle and value of a world where one can simultaneously belong and not belong, be a present absence and an absent presence, without the compulsion of the zero sum games of a regressive and stunted rationalism. If being and becoming are an eternal work-in-progress, it follows that identities and identifications are open to renegotiation in part by mobility and frontier encounters that enable purported outsiders to nibble away at the peripheries of host communities, even as they know and are constantly reminded of the prescribed aspiration to commit loyalties to cultures and communities to which they are purportedly wedded by birth and place. Such negotiation and renegotiation is only possible beyond the tokenism of tolerance, if, as Fardon (2014: 2) argues, identification is about 'finding substantive sameness' rather than questing for 'similarity' in the worlds we encounter.

Naturally, such encounters and nibbling shape and are shaped by public opinion, and attitudes to frontier beings are varied and divided. It is not enough for frontier Africans to define themselves. They are often defined and confined by others who feel more embedded and entitled, hence the tensions and expectations of them to make a compelling case for inclusion on terms dictated by host communities. As with Tutuola's palm-wine drinkard (1952), the belonging and commitment of frontier Africans to their communities of origins may not be in doubt, but circumstances can bring them to explore other climes and chimes, notwithstanding the mountains and hurdles facing them in the process (Nyamnjoh, 2010; Alhaji, 2014). Frontier Africans make boundaries real by crossing and interlinking them, and are better able to contest these very same boundaries when activated to challenge their mobility as frontier beings. Operating at the margins, in conversation with those in their various homes, they challenge essentialisms, play with limits and expand possibilities for flexibility and inclusiveness. Their world is far from one of simple choices, even when they internalise and reproduce the rhetoric of flexible belonging in the ever-elusive quest for social visibility. Their determination to cross and subvert heavily policed borders is indicative of their discomfort with essentialisms and illusions of completeness (Nyamnjoh, 2011: 707–711).

Mediating frontier modes of existence

Popular ideas of reality and the reality of frontier Africans, suggest an approach to social action in which interconnections, interrelationships, interdependence, collaboration, coproduction and compassion are emphasised. Sameness, commonalities and possibilities ad infinitum, mean that everyone can act and be acted upon, just as anything can be subject and object of action, making power and weakness nimble-footed, fluid and situational, and giving life more a character of flux

and interdependence than permanence. If hierarchies of social actors and actions exist, it is reassuring to know that nothing is permanent or singular about the nature, order and form of such hierarchies. Humans and non-humans, animate and inanimate, visible and invisible, are active agents in the manner depicted by Tutuola (1952) in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Agency is available and affordable to humans as singular, plural and composite beings – whole or dis(re)membered – and in human or non-human forms, apparent or virtual.

Commitment to conversations across divides make Africans steeped in similar Tutuola-like universes express discomfort with the suggestion of autonomous action, that humans are the only actors or that the individual is the only unit of analysis for human action. In these universes where to be incomplete is normal and where dualisms are de-emphasised and frontier thinking, representation and practice recognised and championed, domesticated agency and subjectivity are prioritised and celebrated as the modus vivendi. In the absence of permanence, the freedom to pursue individual or group goals exists within a socially predetermined frame that emphasises collective interests at the same time that it allows for individual creativity and self-activation. Social visibility derives from (or is facilitated by) being interconnected with other humans and the wider world of nature, the supernatural and the imaginary in a communion of interests. Being social is not limited to familiar circles or to fellow humans, as it is expected that even the passing stranger (human or otherwise, natural or supernatural) from a distant land or from out of this world should benefit from the sociality that one has cultivated in familiar shores. In other words, domesticating the salvaged western(ised) baby to assume the fullness of its relevance and responsibilities beyond the narrow confines of the cultural and physical geographies of the West, entails endowing the baby with the necessary community spirit to permit the rest of society to share in the baby's successes and good fortune, while relieving its immediate western(ised) family of the burden of dealing singlehandedly with the baby's failures and misfortunes. The logic of collective action that underpins the privileging of interconnections and frontier beings is instructive in a situation where nothing but change is permanent. The tendency towards temporality, transience or impermanence calls for individuals to de-emphasise or domesticate personal success and maximise collective endeavours. As I have argued before:

> Through domesticated agency and subjectivity, the collectivity shares the responsibility of success and the consequences of failure with the active and creative individual, thereby easing the pressure on individuals to prove themselves in a world of ever diminishing opportunities, even for the most talented. Domesticated agency or subjectivity does not deny individuals the freedom to associate or to be self-reliant, initiative and independent, but simply places a premium on interdependence as insurance against the risk of dependence, where people face the impermanence of independent success. Achievement is devoid of meaning if not pursued within, as part of, and on behalf of a group of people who recognise and endorse that achievement. For only by making their successes collective can individuals make their failures a collective concern as well. Such collectivisation or domestication emphasises negotiation, concession and conviviality over maximisation of pursuits by individuals or by particular groups in contexts of plurality and diversity. Acknowledgement and appreciation should be reserved and room created for excellence, especially for individuals who demonstrate how well they are ready to engage with collective interests. Individuals who refuse to use their endowments towards enhancing their community, are most likely to be denied the public space to articulate their personal desires, and like Cinderella, find themselves dependent on external agents and muses, or confined to singing their little songs in their little corners: "In my own little corner in my own little chair I can be whatever I want to be" (Nyamnjoh, 2002: 115–116).

Individual actors need society as a moral regulator for competing agencies, granted that corporate or communal interests are not simply the aggregation of individual aspirations. This does not

necessarily imply arguing along with Durkheim (Frisby and Sayer, 1986; and in Lukes, 1982) that society has a life of its own or that it is external to us in the same way as the physical world is. For: 'While society is external to each individual taken singly, by definition it cannot be external to *all* individuals taken together' (Giddens, 1993: 720). In other words, paradoxical as it may seem, individuals maximise their interests best when these are pursued in recognition and respect for the incompleteness of being and being interconnected with incomplete others and in communion with collective interests. This is something that does not depend simply on the goodwill of fellow social actors, but on a community or society providing an ordered environment in which all actors, in their incompleteness, can foster various ends, personal and/or otherwise.

Anthropological accounts on agency and subjectivity in Africa point to this quest for accommodation and conviviality between the community and the individual as social agents. While cultural meanings of agency and subjectivity have been transformed remarkably by new political and economic developments on the continent, these meanings have themselves continued to influence such developments. Instead of ideas of domesticated agency and intersubjectivity informed by universes such as Tutuola's (1952) being pushed aside by western-inspired modernity, as was widely predicted both by modernisation theorists and their critics, the social structures and institutions of African communities have displayed remarkable dynamism, versatility and adaptability to new socio-economic and political developments, without becoming erased in the process. Adaptability and dynamism are displayed both in macro-level changes and in developments within the family among children. Continuity and change are similarly determined by concessional mutuality. The choice has been for the middle ground of conviviality between modernities and traditions of various origins, to promote interdependence and interconnectedness among competing worldviews.

Conviviality as a currency

I have mentioned conviviality several times. What exactly do I mean by conviviality? Conviviality is recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete. If incompleteness is the normal order of things, natural or otherwise, conviviality invites us to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate the delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of completeness. Not only does conviviality encourage us to recognise our own incompleteness, it challenges us to be open-minded and open-ended in our claims and articulations of identities, being and belonging. Conviviality encourages us to reach out, encounter and explore ways of enhancing or complementing ourselves with the added possibilities of potency brought our way by the incompleteness of others (human, natural, superhuman and supernatural alike), never as a ploy to becoming complete (an extravagant illusion ultimately), but to make us more efficacious in our relationships and sociality. Drawing on Warnier (2009) who argues that: 'a subject is always a subject-with-its-embodied objects' and that: 'identifying with a subject entails identifying with its bodily *cum*-material culture', conviviality could be compared to 'techniques', defined as 'traditions *and* efficacious action' available to 'intimately interwoven' objects and subjects to draw on in the process of identification through mutual production, shaping and transformation (Warnier, 2009: 422–423). With conviviality, accommodation is the order of the day. Far from being a threat, other beings and ways of being are always a fascination to be embraced with open arms. Conversation is privileged over conversion, and ritual influences are more amenable to the logic of conviviality

than is coercive violence to control others – mind, body and soul – and resources with reckless abandon in a delusory quest for completeness.

Let us be generous to all those who claim that humans are, without exception, self-interested, calculating, manipulative creatures who toil selfishly and self-centredly night and day to maximise their interests – pursue, achieve and maintain completeness, so to speak – through making rational choices. What form does this take in a context of competing interests and unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities? How do individuals maximise opportunities and minimise opportunisms in their interactions with one another? I suggest that conviviality as the recognition and celebration of incompleteness is needed to temper the quest for and opportunism in individual fulfilment. This is achievable with carefully negotiated collective interests through provision for the incompleteness of others, not as something negative but as a source of potency.

In rational choice circles, agency is often emphasised as being an individual navigation of social structures through the singular drive and confidence to act in self-fulfilment and unmitigated freedom. A less dualistic framework that recognises the sociality of being human through the normalcy of incompleteness calls for a consideration of intersubjective agency: 'how are individuals able to be who they are through relationships with others?' (Nyamnjoh, 2002: 111). The group is more than just a composite of individual interests, selfishly pursued. Both group and individual are incomplete, as are individuals and groups. Conviviality allows for the empowerment of the individual and group alike, not the marginalisation of one by or for the other. It implies a sense of accommodating togetherness beyond mere *tolerance*[1], where the individual can express themselves in a hospitable space but may also have to exercise restraint to maintain the comforts of being part of the full.

Callahan (2012) argues that conviviality is fundamental to being human – biologically and socially – and necessary for processes of social renewal and regeneration or, in particular contexts, reconstruction. To make his case for 'collective subjectivity', Callahan reiterates the importance of conviviality as a tool for activating human capacity to manage social transformation, drawing inspiration from anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-state struggles inspired and facilitated by conviviality in the Americas. His case for conviviality as a tool for strategic mobilisation in the service of collective subjectivity draws on and enriches Illich's (1973) 'tools of conviviality' that afford individuals who employ them the fullest opportunities to enrich their environment with their vision and self-realisation. Conviviality is a popular concept across and even beyond the social sciences, with authors employing it to depict diversity, tolerance, trust, equality, inclusiveness, cohabitation, coexistence, mutual accommodation, interaction, interdependence, getting along, generosity, hospitality, congeniality, festivity, civility and privileging peace over conflict, among other forms of sociality (Caire and Van Der Torre, 2010; Gilroy, 2004; Karner and Parker, 2011; Maitland, 2008; Noble, 2013; Vigneswaran, 2014; Wessendorf, 2014; Williams and Stroud, 2013; Wise and Velayutham, 2014).

Conviviality emphasises unrestrained sociality beyond its most familiar sense of festivity and hilarity. It involves more than the suggestion of good company where enmity and gloom have no place, and where an individual or group can legitimately afford to be merry, jolly, cheerful, hearty, genial, friendly and jovial. Conviviality tasks us to go beyond simply providing for a setting where one can risk a glass too many and be hilarious in the extreme, without fear of being taken advantage of. It works on the tacit or overt understanding that no one has the monopoly of incompleteness. Conviviality is a disposition that constantly challenges us to go beyond tolerance with accommodating processes, institutions and practices that enshrine and emphasise good-fellowship and feelings of security that one – in one's incompleteness – is part of a whole,

imbued with the spirit of togetherness, interpenetration, interdependence and intersubjectivity. Conviviality stresses the pursuit of sameness and commonalities by bridging divides and facilitating interconnections. It encourages the cultivation of frontier realities and frontier beings, and an attitude towards identities and identification as open-ended pursuits. For the purposes of empowerment, conviviality is available for individual and group empowerment, without marginalising the individual or the group by or for the other. Encouraging conviviality in society and a convivial society may involve negotiating between different or competing agentive forces (Nyamnjoh, 2002). In a context of recognised and well-represented incompleteness, there is a shared imperative for harmony and collective success, as everyone intuitively recognises the relevance and importance of interdependence. Maintained by and actively cultivating mechanisms for dealing with animosity, a convivial society prioritises: 'amiable, intimate sets of relationships which carry, as well, a notion of peace and equality' (Overing and Passes, 2000: 14).

In a context where reality is more than meets the eye and matters are far from fixed, life becomes a process of negotiating and navigating possibilities of being and becoming. Being a constant work-in-progress, conviviality involves competing agentive forces which need a negotiated understanding of social reproduction and contestation. If the agents are states, interest blocs or universes, conviviality is about privileging dialogue and consensus over zero sum games through coercive violence. In cosmopolitan contexts (both urban and rural, given the frontier nature of African societies) and between communities (local, national, regional and global) tactical alliances informed by mutual needs and aspirations are the building blocks of conviviality. Frontier Africans are able to mediate with the truth of their circumstances and negotiate the limits of their conviviality with the state and, in turn, create new channels that contribute to their social networks of encounters and cooperation despite grand narratives of exclusion. Conviviality is maintained by a sense of community affirmation through network-based relationships. The strategic cultivation and maintenance of networks enhances conviviality in significant ways, especially in cosmopolitan settings where migrants from different backgrounds and origins are compelled to adapt to fit in, flourish or survive in their incompleteness. Conviviality is experienced in the very cramped nature of inner cities, emerging in the precariousness of living together under tense circumstances. Population density and diversity reflect the reality of cities as places and spaces of incompleteness, requiring trust, interdependence, solidarity and mutual support to get by (Brudvig, 2014: 38–72; Nyamnjoh and Brudvig, 2014a, 2014b). In their call for a 'politics of conviviality', Hinchliffe and Whatmore (2006) see no reason why such negotiation and accommodation in the messy business of living together should be confined to humans, when urban spaces are home to all manner of inhabitants, human and non-human, natural and non-natural, visible and invisible. Caire and Van Der Torre (2010) make a similar argument for computer science and the development of ambient technologies.

Conviviality often emerges from the delusory and elusive search for autonomy and in contexts of dreams of completeness through violence, hostility and conflict, as we will see in a moment. Far from denying or downplaying the existence of animosity, hostility, aversion and conflict, conviviality recognises that social life is a contested terrain of tensions and conflicts needing a careful balance of intimacy and distance in relationships between social categories and interests generated or informed by them (Karner and Parker, 2011; Noble, 2013; Vigneswaran, 2013; Wessendorf, 2013; Williams and Stroud, 2013; Wise and Velayutham, 2014). Conviviality as a negotiation of tensions between intimacy and distance, Luepnitz (2002) argues, entails a daily struggle by individuals and communities to: 'balance privacy and community, concern for self

and others' (Luepnitz, 2002: 53). In this regard, Schopenhauer's (see Farmer 1998; Luepnitz 2002) conviviality of the porcupines is instructive. Determined to keep from freezing by huddling together in winter, Schopenhauer (Farmer 1998; Luepnitz 2002) recounts the fable of porcupines compelled to negotiate just the right distance from one another, challenged to avoid poking one another with their quills. They had to be close enough to keep warm, but distant enough to avoid the pain of the quills (Farmer, 1998: 422; Luepnitz, 2002: 53). In such contexts of manifest incompleteness, meaning and belonging or conviviality are negotiated on the basis of a fine line of tolerance and respect, catalysed or imposed by necessity (Brudvig, 2014: 74). Hay (2014) suggests we look for conviviality 'at the edge of conflict', where people avoid going over the precipice by: 'working out tensions positively' (Hay, 2014: 4). In the case of the Bay Community Church in Cape Town, a church that brings together South African nationals and immigrants from various African countries, conviviality is an ongoing process that: 'depends both on the agency and aspirations of the individuals involved and on ways in which their subjectivity is governed, such as through religious rituals' (Hay, 2014: 4). Where completeness is stubbornly pursued without sensitivity to the reality of full autonomy as an ultimate illusion: 'conviviality is not a constant state of relations but a process of building and remaking relationships in order to achieve a balance between intimacy and distance' (Hay, 2014: 31) or: 'between getting close but not too close' (Hay, 2014: 60).

Mobile encounters by and with incompleteness involve experiments with multiple, layered and shifting identities, which are tried and tested through convivial interactions. Urbanites desperately seeking (however misguided) completeness are like porcupines, their quills spanning out to protect against even the most warm-hearted neighbours. With defensive quills they aspire to create 'protective' barriers, reasserting notions of 'self' and distancing from the 'other'. Yet, every daily experience of the tensions and dangers of quills are subtle calls to recognise the normalcy of incompleteness, and detect and institutionalise ongoing strategies towards conviviality for all porcupines involved. Once the illusion of completeness is mitigated, the need to create space for one another to get by begins to be considered seriously by urban Africans. Their relationships as 'intimate strangers' in their incompleteness demonstrate the thorny paradoxes of intimacy and mutuality and are representative of contestations of regressive forms of belonging. Conviviality rests on the nuances inscribed and imbibed in everyday relations by individuals and communities at micro and macro levels, within and between societies. It involves cultivating and sustaining accommodating and interdependent styles of relating, of sociability and communality through careful and innovative negotiation of the constructive and destructive dimensions of being human. Providing for the reality of incompleteness as the norm, urban conviviality has little room for neat dichotomies emphasising distinct places and spaces for different social categories and hierarchies, as urbanites, like porcupines compelled to huddle together to keep warm in winter, can ill-afford to insist on rising above the messiness of everyday realities. Individuals learn to meander through the spatial and conceptual intricacies of everyday life in the city, accommodating one another socially, economically and otherwise, as the surest way of survival, getting by and aspiring for the good life. It is in this sense that conviviality is a frontier disposition par excellence, enabling social actors to delicately negotiate, navigate and balance the real or potential tensions, eruptions, outrage and violence of the various identity margins their straddle with conversations of unity in diversity (Brudvig, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2002; Nyamnjoh and Brudvig, 2014a, 2014b).

The entangled, interconnected or even mangled lives of urbanites suggest an approach at understanding conviviality as emerging from trends towards accommodation and hospitality for fluid identities learned in the face of uprootedness. Conviviality emerges out of the necessity to

surmount tensions and divisions with attempts at flexibility propelled by the need to get by. Conviviality is fostered by the dynamics of mutual need and the prospects of mutual gain. In urban buses and other forms of public transportation, for example, conviviality is dependent upon a web of social and economic relations between drivers and passengers, whose differences (which are often confronted in public spaces of mobilities) must be put aside, if only momentarily, in order for individuals to continue to reap mutual benefit. For many trapped in crammed ghettos, conviviality provides rare occasions to fulfil their expectations of citizenship, which is otherwise confined to abstract statements in constitutions and public pronouncements by politicians. Conviviality may be a difficult force to cultivate and maintain, requiring vigilance and even suffering in order to collectively deter negativity and maintain accessibility of a service as critical as daily transportation. Conviviality may emerge from a resolution of frictions which, when turned into meaningful relationships, may actually facilitate mutual interests and mutual trust. The dynamics of social capital and forms of local governance that encourage notions of inclusion and belonging for people whose affiliations to a given country, city or town represent a spectrum of citizenship possibilities, facilitate conviviality in public places of transit such as bus and railway stations and in other public spaces such as markets and churches. Conviviality makes possible interdependence among humans whose tendency is to seek autonomy even at the risk of dependencies (Brudvig, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2002; Nyamnjoh and Brudvig, 2014a, 2014b).

Some spaces, dispositions and possibilities militate in favour of the emergence of conviviality more than others. Organised religion (churches, mosques, pilgrimages, rallies, etc.), public transportation (*kombis*, *matatus*, *car rapid*, *gbakas*, etc.), sports (football, rugby and wrestling competitions, etc.), public manifestations and festivities such as musical concerts, schools, communal water taps and marketplaces are among spaces likely to foster the emergence of conviviality. Not only do such spaces facilitate mingling and comingling among ethnic or national 'citizens', they are likely to welcome and accommodate ethnic and national 'strangers' beyond mere tolerance. The fact of incompleteness militates in favour of being open to other beings, other ways and other worlds not as questing for completeness but as seeking enhancement through the richness of encounters with incomplete others.

In her study of the Bay Community Church in Cape Town, where local South Africans and African immigrants co-worship, Hay (2014) argues that the church makes migrants feel at home away from home, and presents itself, to locals and migrants alike, as: 'a space in which it is possible to safely negotiate fears or misconceptions about the "other"' (Hay, 2014: 60–61). To Hay (2014): 'Conviviality at the Bay is facilitated by the spontaneous and expressive style of charismatic worship, which produces a sense of openness and intimacy'(Hay, 2014: 5–7). It is: 'expressed in physical interactions and bodily practises' (Hay, 2014: 35), and: 'encourages free movement, spontaneity and intimate physical interaction such as hugging' (Hay, 2014: 60). As: 'vessels for God's love and grace' (Hay, 2014: 60), worshippers do not need to know each other outside of services, to express physical intimacy during worship, especially through rituals and church activities that encourage indiscriminate: 'bridging and bonding' (Hay, 2014: 60). 'The emphasis on being one Kingdom encourages a reconciliation of tensions towards convivial relations and religion ultimately becomes a greater criterion for inclusion than other differences' (Hay, 2014: 60). The church is not simply a place of worship. It is also: 'the site of transnational and local networks which migrants draw on for social and spiritual capital, emphasizing a shared Christian identity and habitus' (Hay, 2014: 61). Such flexibility beyond mere tolerance makes it possible for migrants not only 'to find belonging at the church' (Hay, 2014: 63), but also: 'to forge relationships that allow them to belong in many places at once' (Hay, 2014: 63). Migrants

are also able to negotiate the obligations and reconcile conflicting expectations that belonging to many networks may imply (Hay, 2014: 63).

In terms of change and continuity, conviviality is about negotiation between the incompleteness of the past and the present in the interest of a non-linear future. It is often about negotiating between and within animosity and friendship, being an insider and an outsider, desires and obligations at individual, family and societal levels, here and there, culture and nature, Africa and the rest. If all life and reality are ultimately socially shaped, then dichotomies that fail to recognise or deliberately downplay the power of the social in determining reality do conviviality a disservice with the tensions, conflicts and contradictions engendered by such exclusivity and exclusionary perspectives and practices. Conviviality offers spaces and opportunities for mutually edifying conversations across various divides, hierarchies and inequalities. It challenges us to desist from rigidities about what constitutes reality and identities, pointing us towards fertile fantasy spaces for social reinvention. It is in this sense that one can imagine and promote an infinite number of conviviality spaces – political, cultural, religious, economic, gender, class, generational, geographical, etc. – all stressing interconnections, dialogue, collaboration, interdependence and compassion. It is about building bridges and linking people, spaces and places, cross-fertilising ideas, and inspiring imagination and innovative ways of seeking and consolidating the good life for all and sundry. The trends towards increasingly global, flexible and mobile citizens advise the need for a new framework of citizenship that is flexible, informed by histories of relationships, interconnectedness, networks and conviviality rather than by rigid geographies and hierarchies (Isin, 2012; Isin et al., 2008; McKinley, 2009). Identities informed by the messy reality of entanglements occasioned by accelerated mobility, for long an inconvenience, may well be the indicators for the future direction of citizenship and what it means to belong in Africa and the world.

Conclusion: towards a future of convivial scholarship

Although intended as convivial spaces per excellence, universities are not as convivial in practice as one would expect. Disciplines tend to encourage introversion and emphasise the exclusionary fundamentalism of the heartland rather than the inclusionary overtures of the borderland. Inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary dispositions are more claimed than practised, as scholars stick to their spots like leopards and quills like porcupines. Despite their quest for distinction through science and reason, the *homo academicus* are as much creatures of habit as the *homo ignoramus*. The scarcity of conviviality in universities and among the disciplines and scholars suggests, and rightly so, that the production, positioning and consumption of knowledge are far from a neutral, objective and disinterested process. It is socially and politically mediated by hierarchies of humanity and human agency imposed by particular relations of power (Bourdieu, 2004: 18–21). Far from being a 'liberating force' that celebrates 'achievement' over 'ascription', education, and thus universities, play: 'a critical role in the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and thus in the reproduction of the structure of social space' (Bourdieu 1996:5). They are drawn upon by the elite to stake claims: 'in the struggle for the monopoly on dominant positions' (Bourdieu 1996:5) and serve as a 'legitimating illusion' (Bourdieu 1996:5). The elite are its primary victims and beneficiaries (Bourdieu, 1996: 5). Given the resilience of colonial education in Africa, ordinary men and women and the endogenous alternatives on which they draw, do not receive the recognition and representation they deserve (Nyamnjoh, 2012). Conviviality in knowledge production would entail not just seeking conversations and collaboration across disciplines in the conventional sense but also, and even more importantly, the integration of

sidestepped popular epistemologies informed by popular universes and ideas of reality such as depicted in Tutuola's (1952) *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Granted the intricacies of popular conceptions of reality, and in view of the frontier reality of many an ordinary African, nothing short of convivial scholarship would do justice to the legitimate quest for activation of African potentialities. A truly convivial scholarship is one which does not seek a priori to define and confine Africans into particular territories or geographies, particular racial and ethnic categories, particular classes, genders, religions or whatever other identity marker. Convivial scholarship confronts and humbles the challenge of over prescription and over standardisation. It is critical and evidence based; it challenges problematic labels, especially those that seek to unduly oversimplify the social realities of the people and places it seeks to understand and explain. Convivial scholarship recognises the deep power of collective imagination and the importance of interconnections and nuanced complexities. It is a scholarship that sees the local in the global and the global in the local by bringing them into informed conversations, conscious of the hierarchies and power relations at play at both the micro and macro levels of being and becoming. Convivial scholarship is scholarship that neither dismisses a priori nor throws the baby out with the bathwater. It is a critical scholarship of recognition and reconciliation, one that has no permanent friends, enemies or alliances beyond the rigorous and committed quest for knowledge in its complexity and nuance, and using the results of systematic enquiry to challenge inequalities, foster justice and inspire popular visions, versions and aspirations for the good life. Convivial scholarship does not impose what it means to be human, just as it should not prescribe a single version of the good life in a world peopled by infinite possibilities. Rather, it encourages localised conversations of a truly global nature on competing and complementary processes of social cultivation through practice, performance and experience, without pre-empting or foreclosing particular units of analysis in a world in which the messiness of encounters and relationships frowns on binaries, dichotomies and dualisms. Callahan's (2012) call for conviviality as a research methodology or a tool of analysis, and Hinchliffe and Whatmore's (2006) argument that confining conviviality to humans is conceptually and empirically impoverishing given the infinite heterogeneity of inhabitants of the universes we share, would find comfort in the popular modes of knowing among frontier Africans discussed in this paper. With convivial scholarship, there are no final answers, only permanent questions and questioning.

If we have not exhausted the nuanced complexities and fullness of being human, how can we be prescriptive and categorical about human agency? If being human is permanent work-in-progress (in the manner of Tutuola's (1952) universe of infinities and possibilities), where existence and consciousness matter more than essence, it is only scholarly to consider human agency as permanent work-in-progress. In a world where reality is more than meets the eye and existence defies containment, what scientific justification do we have for crowning an abstract, singular and individualised idea as the one best way of being human? Convivial scholarship provides instead for domesticated agency as interdependence between individuals and groups as autonomous (intersubjective) agents sharing common, consensual moral and ethical codes of conduct on what it means to be, become and sustain being human in multiple ways.

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Note

1. For a critical discussion of tolerance, its possibilities and limitations as a discourse of depoliticisation and power, and as a form of governmentality, see Brown (2006).

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