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The Potentiality of Contemporary *Ie* through Potential Affinity: Rice, Natural Cheese and the State

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“Alliance” is a good and a bad word. Every word is good if it can be used to cross the boundary between people and things. So alliance is a good word if you use it for a microbe.

Bruno Latour

Introduction: *Ie* and Potential Affinity

In the Tokachi region of Hokkaido, Japan, there exists a community known as the House of Working Together (tentative, though the actual name also includes the Japanese word for house), where approximately 70 individuals, including children, reside and sustain themselves primarily through the production of natural cheese and the practice of biodynamic farming of various vegetables. This community accommodates individuals facing diverse challenges in integrating into Japanese society, such as those with physical or mental disabilities, orphans, and others.

In Japan, such communities are typically operated as non-profit social welfare service corporations, which cater to specific categories of individuals with disabilities. Larger groups often exhibit characteristics of institutionalization, whereas smaller groups tend to resemble family-like communities, despite the absence of blood relations among members. In the case of the House of Working Together (HWT), it is not a social welfare service corporation but rather an agricultural producers' cooperative corporation, and it is a relatively large community to be considered family-like.

In this paper, I will employ the traditional concept of “*ie*” (literally meaning “house” in English) to interpret HWT as a contemporary manifestation of “*ie*” and illuminate their interconnectedness, including relationships with both humans and non-humans. To achieve this, I will also reference the concept of “potential affinity” proposed by Viveiros de Castro, as the common theme of our joint research group centers on “family potential.” Viveiros de Castro introduced the notion of “potential affinity” in the context of the Amazonian relational world, where affinity is perceived to extend beyond human beings to include non-human entities such as animals and spirits.

Regarding the concept of “*ie*,” this paper adheres to the interpretation proposed by Kunio Yanagita, the founder of Japanese ethnology. Yanagita regarded “*ie*” as a work

organization, wherein blood relations were of secondary importance (Yanagita 1998). Yanagita focused particularly on rice cultivation in the Japanese archipelago and identified the inseparable and fundamental relationship between rice cultivation as a livelihood and popular religious beliefs, ancestor worship, and how it has shaped *ie*.

Yanagita's idea of *ie* as a work organization was embraced by some sociologists and folklorists, leading to further research, although it is being overshadowed by the prevailing trend that considers blood relations as the natural and given foundation of family. In this paper, I intend to refer to "the alimentary form of the religious life" (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 137) associated with rice cultivation in the Japanese archipelago and compare it with another form of work and livelihood, namely natural cheese making. Through these reconsiderations of contemporary *ie*, I aim to demonstrate the potentiality of modern *ie*.

1. From Relatedness to Relational Ontology

In his insightful essay "The Gift and the Given," Viveiros de Castro delineates four potential models of kinship theory, grounded in two dichotomies (Viveiros de Castro 2012). The first dichotomy, consanguinity/affinity, is a major conceptual framework in Western kinship practice and anthropological theory, while the second, innate/the constructed, is articulated by Roy Wagner (Wagner 2016).

The first model, termed the standard model, posits consanguinity as given and innate, whereas affinity is actively constructed. This model reflects the Western cosmology of nature and law, status (substance), and contract (code), which many have theoretically universalized as "human kinship" (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 254). In this framework, affinity is established through marriage, and it is precisely through conjugality that affinity is considered constructed (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 255). Consequently, there is a contemporary trend to view conjugality as a free choice, distinct from affinity. The standard model thus comprises these two dimensions: given substance and constructed choice.

The second model, known as the constitutive model, perceives both consanguinity and affinity as given. Although both dimensions are given in this structuralist model, they are given in distinct manners: the former naturally, the latter socially. The Lévi-Straussian concept of incest prohibition signifies that affinity precedes consanguinity, serving as its formal cause. There are no consanguines prior to the inception of the idea of exchange; a sister only becomes a "sister" when perceived (or anticipated) as a "wife" for another. Men do not "exchange women," and women are not there *for* exchange; they are created *by* exchanges, as are men (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 256; original italics).

The third model, the constructive model, views both consanguinity and affinity as constructed by human agency. They are "created" or "produced" through purposeful acts of feeding, caring, sharing, loving, and remembering. The theoretical emphasis is predominantly on the socially constructed nature of consanguineal relations, particularly parent-child ties (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 257). In this model, since affinity is assumed to be constructed, the focus is primarily on consanguinity. With Janet Carsten's

“relatedness approach” in mind, Viveiros de Castro situates this model within a broader social context: “the constructive model represents the final hegemony of consumptive individualism, which has taken possession of the intrinsically anti-individualist (because relational) field of kinship. This expansion of the sphere of constructiveness of human kinship has, to my mind, an essential connection to our ‘own particular brand of magic’—technology, the wellspring of the ideologically central character of cultural enterprises like the new reproductive technologies or the Human Genome Project in our present civilization” (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 256).

Viveiros de Castro identifies an obsession with expanding the domain of choice underlying the desire for technology, highlighting the limitations of the constructionist model. He argues that the primary objective of this model is to challenge the notion of biologically determined relatedness, suggesting that in terms of kinship, the “world of made” is often as valid as, if not superior to, the “world of born.” However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the foundational equation of the Western standard model persists—equating “biological,” “given,” and “non-negotiable” with “social,” “constructed,” and “optative.” Biology, encompassing elements such as “sex” and “birth,” remains the given in the constructionist model, albeit with diminished significance compared to the constructed dimensions of kinship, such as “gender” and “feeding.” “Some people may even entirely ignore the given, entertaining a ‘nothing is given, all is made’ type of ontology—but no people would have something other than biologically grounded consanguinity as the given” (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 258).

In the introduction to *Cultures of Relatedness*, Janet Carsten asserts that the term “relatedness” is employed in contrast to “kinship” to challenge specific assumptions about the social and biological implications of these terms (Carsten 2000: 4). Nevertheless, the endeavor to supplant the given structure of “kinship” with the process of “relatedness” merely extends the domain of choice and social construction, while the dichotomous framework of the given and the constructed remains fundamentally unaltered. Sandra Bamford’s words, cited by Viveiros de Castro in a footnote, aptly illustrate this point: “Despite the novelty of these newer formulations... they continue to rest upon two underlying ideas: first, that kinship is a bond of substance; and second, that it unites two or more people in a ‘physical’ relationship” (Bamford 2007: 58–59).

The issue arises when the given structure is replaced by a process of practice, which still relies on a model of exchange—whether of food or care—between two terms or agents. The very notion of “substance,” theoretically shifted from the domain of the given to the constructed, is conceived as existing independently outside these terms or agents, highlighting this problem. In essence, relatedness remains insufficiently relational as long as it presupposes the separate existence of terms and substance.

The fourth model proposed by Viveiros de Castro, known as the Amazonian model, presents a conceptual inversion of the standard model. In this framework, affinity is perceived as inherent and natural, whereas consanguinity is regarded as a cultural construct. However, it is important to note that “Amazonian affinity” cannot be considered “natural” in the same manner as our understanding of consanguinity, which is perceived as an intrinsic, organismic condition. Instead, affinity is considered a

fundamental ontological condition that underlies *all* “social” relations. In other words, affinity is not a subsequent development following pre-existing natural relatedness; rather, it is one of the primordial elements from which the relational matrix emerges, integral to the fabric of the universe (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 259; original italics).

Viveiros de Castro further elaborates on this concept by referring to it as “potential affinity.” In this context, a diverse array of Others, both human and non-human, are personalized and related to as affines. “Guests and friends as much as foreigners and enemies; political allies and clients as much as trade partners or ritual companions; game animals as much as predatory spirits—all these kinds of people are awash in affinity, conceived either as generic affines or as marked versions (or sometimes inversions) of this omnipresent position. The Other, in sum, is first and foremost an Affine” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 107).

It is crucial to recognize that “potential affinity” pertains to the fundamental dimension of cosmological relations, as opposed to the more limited sense of affinity established through marriage. Viveiros de Castro states, “I opted to call this principle (*relational* principle; quoter’s note) ‘potential affinity’, thereby distinguishing affinity as a *generic value* from affinity as a *particular manifestation* of the kinship nexus. The distinction implies that potential affinity as a generic value is not a component of kinship (unlike matrimonial, actual affinity) but its exterior condition. It comprises the dimension of virtuality of which kinship is the process of actualization” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 104; original italics).

Therefore, relatedness is not created by pre-existing agents or terms through exchange or the sharing of substance. Instead, in a world where all beings are potentially affines, certain actions (such as rituals, feeding, caring, marriage) or the absence of certain actions (such as incest, monetary transactions) actualize a specific series of relations. Consequently, it can be asserted that affinity as a particular relation is virtually eclipsed by consanguinity as part of the process of forming kinship (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 108).

Only upon acquiring this perspective can the significance of incest, which extends beyond human kinship, be comprehended. Viveiros de Castro emphasizes this notion through the expression “primal analogic flow of soul-matter” or “precosmological chaos.” He posits that “we can start to understand why incest is often associated, in Amazonian languages and cosmologies, with processes of metamorphosis—that is, the transformation of the human body into the body of an animal. Kinship, in Amazonia, is a process of constructing a proper human body out of the primal analogic flow of soul-matter in which humans and animals interchange their bodily forms unceasingly. Incest inverts this process (...), ‘unrelating’ us to other humans and taking us back to where we came from—the precosmological chaos described by myth” (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 262).

At this juncture, we may consider acts of caring, feeding, or cultivating from a perspective that scrutinizes the type of relatedness or affinity actualized through these actions. In the Japanese archipelago, such affinity has been cultivated between humans and the rice plant throughout the extensive history of rice cultivation. The concept of “*ie*” is also pertinent in this context.

2. The Birth of the State and *Ie* in Japan

The term “*kazoku*” is currently prevalent in Japan to denote individuals related by blood, particularly the father, mother, and children. However, it is a relatively recent term, having been adopted as a translation of “family” during the Meiji period, subsequently becoming entrenched in Japanese society. Historically, the indigenous term “*ie*” has been predominantly used in the Japanese archipelago and continues to be employed due to its distinct connotation from *kazoku*.

Ie literally translates to “house,” but it encompasses not only a physical structure and estate but also a group of individuals who reside or have resided in the same dwelling. Anthropologist Chie Nakane posits that *kazoku* is primarily defined by kinship and affinity, whereas *ie* is a unit characterized mainly by the criterion of local residence (Nakane 1967: 2). A defining feature of *ie* is its spatiality and locality, as well as the communal living of its members, both in the present and the past. Consequently, recent anthropological studies of *ie* have proposed a perspective that regards “*ie* as place” (Koike and Nobuta 2013: 5). It is not merely a matter of cohabitation but also a locus where specific types of physical interactions, typically excluded from public spaces—such as cooking, caring for the elderly or children, and engaging in sexual activities—occur.

However, the contemporary perception of *ie* often evokes notions of various family rules that are patriarchal, morally stringent, and imagined to have been transmitted across generations. This premodern image of *ie* precisely embodies filiation, particularly patrilineal filiation and consanguinity, which is why *ie* is currently perceived negatively as anachronistic and suppressive of individual freedom. This perception is, however, a consequence of the Meiji government’s reform of family-related laws. In 1872, the new Meiji government enacted the *Kosekihō* (Law of *ie* register) to incorporate those who had fallen outside the Edo Shogunate’s jurisdiction through the *koseki* (*ie* register) system.

By implementing *koseki* and *kachō* (head of *ie*), the government delineated the scope of *ie* and established the relationship between *kachō* and the other members of *ie* (Hikakukazokushigakkai ed. 1996: 16). In this manner, the Meiji government endeavored to construct a new *ie* system and govern the populace with *ie* as a fundamental unit of governance. In this modern *ie* system, *ie* is not only conceptualized as consanguineal filiation but also as linked to the Nation-State as a more comprehensive *ie* (Ito 1982).

The contemporary reestablishment of the *ie* system can be interpreted as a revival of its original conception in ancient times as a fundamental unit of state governance. Historian Takashi Yoshida posits that the *ie* system emerged in the Japanese archipelago during the late 7th century, coinciding with the formation of the first *Ritsuryō* state, a centralized governance structure based on laws and codes modeled after China. This development is attributed to the inadequacy of the clan system as a stable foundation for state governance, given the fluidity of clan leadership, which often shifted among collateral relatives, and the constant change in clan membership. Consequently, the state deliberately established the *ie* as a basic unit within the ruling class of the *Ritsuryō* state, ensuring the succession of the patriarch exclusively from father to son (Yoshida 1983: 167–182).

The *koseki* system was implemented not only for ruling class clans but also for common people, serving as a mechanism for the nascent *Ritsuryō* state to levy taxes. The first centralized state in the Japanese archipelago nationalized all land, legally owned by the emperor, and rented it to all individuals over the age of six as *handen* (state rice fields) every six years, collecting a portion of the harvest as tax annually. The administrative unit for *handen* and tax collection was *ko*, which in ancient times was believed to comprise multiple *ie*. From the state's perspective, *ko* functioned as a unit for *handen* and tax collection; however, from the people's perspective, it evolved into a self-defense group against state expropriation. Thus, although *ko* or *ie* was initially established by the state for governance and taxation purposes, it eventually transformed from a vertical relationship into a foundation for the people's lives as well (Aruga 1971: 185–189).

3. Rice, State and *Ie*

In the *Ritsuryō* state, taxation extended beyond rice to encompass other foodstuffs such as salt, fish, and kelp; handicrafts including silk, thread, cloth, ironware, and woodwork; as well as services and levies. Nevertheless, the nascent centralized state prioritized rice cultivation as the cornerstone of its national agenda.

Paddy rice cultivation was introduced to Japan circa 950 B.C., initially spreading to the western regions before permeating the entire Japanese archipelago. Among the varieties of rice plants, the Japonica-type wild rice was originally perennial, from which self-pollinating annuals evolved. However, several conditions were requisite for its domestication as a cultivated crop. These included the ability to thrive in disturbed soils and dense environments, possessing a thin seed coat for rapid germination, having a fixed growth and maturity period, ripening simultaneously, producing numerous large seeds, and being easy to thresh and store. These traits were selectively preserved over time through cultivator selection. The Japanese archipelago represented the northernmost boundary of rice cultivation (Sato 2020).

As James Scott observed, only grains that could be visually assessed, divided, stored, transported, and distributed became viable for taxation. Among various grains, irrigated wet rice, which could be easily controlled through water management and dictated planting schedules, was the most desirable for tax purposes (Scott 2017). In this context, the first centralized state in the Japanese archipelago emerged as a prototypical grain state, or rice state.

Following the nationalization of all land in the early 8th century, laws mandated that people settle near paddy fields and pay taxes in rice. However, despite the state's strong intentions, there was a significant shortage of rice paddies (Amino 2008: 118–119). Consequently, a series of laws were enacted allowing newly cultivated rice fields to become private property. In the ensuing centuries, aristocratic landowners became primarily concerned with bequeathing these lands to their descendants. From the late 11th to early 12th century, the succession of government positions by certain clans was institutionalized as a business of *ie*, and the transmission of positions and property,

including lands, to lineal heirs became paramount, solidifying the concept of “inheriting the *ie*” or “passing on the *ie*” (Yoshida 1983: 180–181). During the same period, the emperor’s *ie* established a system whereby the heir to the throne was determined by the emperor’s will from his direct descendants, a system that persisted until the end of the Edo period (Hikakukazokushigakkai ed. 1996: 13).

In this manner, the hereditary succession of governmental roles from father to son gradually established a lineage extending to grandsons, thereby institutionalizing the *ie* system across various societal strata during the first half of the 12th century. Within the aristocracy, a legitimate son would assume a designated governmental position within the *ie*, thereby inheriting his father’s political status. Similarly, among local lords, a legitimate son would inherit his father’s responsibilities and territories (Kuriyama 2011: 76–78).

However, within the peasant class, there was initially less recognition of *ie* succession, as the *ie* primarily functioned as a unit for tax collection and levy. This perception evolved from the 14th century onward, with the first-born son inheriting all aspects of the *ie*, including the name, assets, business, and the duty and right to conduct ancestral rituals. Consequently, by the late medieval period, the *ie* system was firmly established among the aristocracy, samurai class, and upper peasant class, with inheritance confined to the legitimate son (Kuriyama 2011: 78–79).

Among the peasantry, the *ie* expanded and contracted in response to changes in agricultural production. For instance, during the 15th and 16th centuries, upper-class peasant *ie* primarily engaged in extensive farming, utilizing work cattle and horses to cultivate large tracts of land. The paterfamilias managed the operations, with assistance from siblings and their families, as well as lower-class peasants without their own lands and servants, all of whom lived and worked together. Thus, the *ie* comprised ten or more individuals, both related and unrelated by blood (Nagashima 2011: 130–131).

As productivity, particularly in rice cultivation, increased from the 17th to 18th centuries, more lower-class peasants without land began to establish small farms and achieve independence. Consequently, the size of the *ie* decreased, from 6 to 7 individuals in the 17th century to 4 to 5 individuals in the 18th and 19th centuries. Management was sustained by the labor of the nuclear family, including the husband and wife, their children, and the husband’s parents. Given the small and often irregularly shaped farmland, intensive farming methods, which were labor-intensive and involved significant fertilizer investment, were adopted (Nagashima 2011: 136–137).

Thus, due to increased productivity, the *ie* system became established across all classes in the early modern period. The *ie* emerged as a social unit wherein the occupation, name, and property of the *ie* were transmitted across generations based on the principle of patrilineal male inheritance. The consciousness and lifestyle associated with the *ie*, involving the construction of a house on ancestral land, its protection, and its transmission to descendants, were increasingly solidified (Nagashima 2011: 135).

The concept of “*ie*” encompasses spatial entities that individuals associate with as intermediaries between family and residence, such as the physical configuration and arrangement of houses, residences, rice fields, farms, tombs, temples, and shrines (Shimizu 1987: 150). Consequently, “*ie*” became perceived as intrinsically linked to the

land where the house was located.

Although patrilineal male inheritance was the prevailing principle, the perpetuation of the “*ie*” was prioritized, prompting individuals to make significant efforts to sustain their “*ie*” by adopting children from relatives or other “*ie*,” marrying off a daughter with an adopted son-in-law, or even adopting a married couple to ensure the continuation of the “*ie*” (Nagashima 2011: 135).

The primary concern was the perpetuation of the “*ie*,” as it served as a foundation for individuals’ lives, providing relative autonomy from the State or feudal lords. This notion of perpetuation, or even a sense of permanence, was distinct from the continuity of blood relations from its origin. Instead, it signified the inheritance and transmission of names, titles, property, lands, occupations, tools, and skills deemed essential to the continuity of the “*ie*,” rather than consanguinity.

4. *Ie* as a Work Organization and Corporate Body

Japanese scholars, including Kunio Yanagita and Kizaemon Aruga, have emphasized the conceptualization of *ie* primarily as a work organization, rather than prioritizing consanguinity.

Yanagita, for example, elucidates that the term *oyako*, which currently denotes parents (*oya*) and children (*ko*), originally signified the responsible individual (*oya*) and workers (*ko*) within a work organization. This usage persists today, particularly in artisan work organizations, where *oyako* refers to the boss (*oyakata*) and the workers (*kokata*). Yanagita’s analysis, grounded in a survey of dialects across Japan, suggests that the expression *oyako* is not an extension of the parent-child blood relationship to a work context. Instead, the *oya-ko* relationship in work organizations has been adapted in various contexts to denote family relationships, such as “*umi no oya* (birth parent)” or “*sodate no oya* (foster parent)” (Yanagita 1998: 288–291; 1963a: 370–390; 1963b: 240–248).

Viewing *ie* as a work organization challenges the traditional kinship perspective that prioritizes consanguinity and filiation. Although blood relations were central to *ie*, the emphasis on blood ties and the size of *ie* varied according to the occupation type or the inheritance priorities. For instance, peasants prioritized farmland, craftsmen valued tools and skills, merchants emphasized trust from clients and peers, and aristocrats focused on special professions or titles. As previously discussed, even within paddy rice cultivation, *ie* as a work organization evolved in response to the productivity and technology of the era.¹⁾

When examining the concept of “*ie*” as a form of organizational structure and its enduring nature, it is possible to conceptualize “*ie*” as a corporate entity. This perspective was initially articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the mid-1970s. In his work, *The Way of the Masks*, Lévi-Strauss introduced the notion of the “house” or “*maison*” to comprehend certain societies where understanding solely through kinship and lineage proves inadequate or overly complex. He references the research of Franz Boas on Kwakiutl society and Alfred Kroeber on Yurok society, stating that to recognize the house, ethnologists would need to consider historical contexts, including medieval Europe, Japan

during the Heian period and subsequent eras, ancient Greece, and others. He observes a notable similarity between Boas' definition of the Kwakiutl *numayma* and a European medievalist's description of a house. Lévi-Strauss asserts, "As can be seen, the language of the anthropologist and that of the historian are practically identical. We are, therefore, in the presence of one and the same institution: a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both" (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 174).

If "*ie*" is akin to a corporate entity, management considerations become essential. For instance, determining the most suitable successor for the future of the "*ie*," addressing situations where all members cannot be sustained, deciding whether to send members to work for other "*ie*," or having younger brothers undergo *syukke* (joining a Buddhist temple and becoming a monk, with *syukke* literally meaning "to leave the *ie*"). The patriarch was responsible for these considerations to effectively manage the "*ie*." Rather than being a place of relationships bound by affection, "*ie*" necessitated a more serious approach to management.

By conceptualizing *ie* as a corporate entity, even the contemporary nuclear family can be perceived as a form of "small *ie*." Although the majority of individuals now engage in wage labor, often in professions distinct from those of their parents, parents continue to nurture and educate their children with the aspiration that something will persist beyond their own lifetimes. While parents may not bequeath farmland, titles, occupations, or skills to their offspring, they still desire to leave a legacy. This legacy may be abstract, such as knowledge or academic proficiency, which can serve as a means of livelihood for their children in the future. In this context, one might discern remnants of the historical *ie* as a corporate entity. However, the modern nuclear family frequently adheres to a limited notion of perpetuation, grounded in the concept of blood relations or genetic continuity.

Makoto Tsugami, through his examination of the Kayan society, the swidden rice cultivators of Borneo, posited the minimal elements of *ie*, which he terms "small *ie*." He identifies two fundamental components of *ie*: the embodied relationship between individuals and objects, and the extended relationship between individuals (Tsugami 2013: 296–301). The former pertains to the relationship wherein objects, cherished and utilized over time, acquire the owner's personality, while the latter refers to the relationship typically found in "generous giving," which fosters a "relatives" situation. "Expressing gratitude to the mother for 'generously' providing the meal or requesting and compensating for labor constitutes an act of choosing between gift exchange or market exchange, which is inappropriate for the maternal relationship ('we are not strangers to each other'). By silently accepting the offer of food as a matter of course, I allow the mother to exist as a relative, just as she has done for me" (Tsugami 2013: 301).

Tsugami further elucidates the typical suffering experienced in modern Japanese society, citing a Japanese woman who was informed of her infertility and her despair at the prospect of having no related individuals after her demise. Her suffering arises because, firstly, the sense of relief that childless individuals could have experienced in the

past, as long as the *ie* to which they belonged persisted, is no longer feasible in the modern family. Secondly, “my child” must originate from her own egg and, if possible, should be her own biological offspring. In contemporary Japanese society, the notion of corporeal continuity based on the egg has been naturalized as the foundation for distinguishing between relatives and non-relatives, thereby excluding the possibility of creating an extension of oneself through mutual generosity, originating from a shared place, as was the case in the historical *ie* (Tsugami 2013: 308).

5. Circulation of the Spirit of Rice

When considering “*ie*” as both a work organization and a perpetual corporate entity, its characteristics vary according to its occupation or means of livelihood. Notably, a comparison between the peasant class and the samurai class reveals that the further an occupation is removed from the natural environment, the more abstract and ideological the rules and morals of “*ie*” become. It is well-documented that the ideology of “*ie*” among the samurai class during the Tokugawa period was grounded in Confucianism.

Conversely, for the peasantry, the perpetuation of “*ie*” necessitated not only the care of its human members but also the stewardship of farmland, soil, water, forests, and other natural resources. Although “*ie*” was initially established from above for tax collection purposes, individuals developed their “*ie*” autonomously, with care and reverence for both their “*ie*” and its environment, ensuring their sustenance and relative autonomy.

Kunio Yanagita (1875–1962) illuminated the cosmology of the common people, which was not documented and existed only in fragmented forms. Yanagita observed that seasonal events in the Japanese archipelago aligned with the work calendar of rice cultivation, revealing that work, rituals, and events of “*ie*,” such as ancestral rites, evolved as an inseparable whole. Together with ethnologist-folklorist Sinobu Orikuchi (1887–1953), they identified a cosmology indicating the circulation of *tama*, the soul-spirit of rice, rice fields, water, forests, mountains, and the sun.

At the end of winter, the *kami*, or divine spirit of the mountain—who is also considered the *kami* of the sun and water—descends from the mountains to the village, taking residence in the rice fields and transforming into the *kami* of the paddy field. The spirit, known as *tama*, is infused into the rice field, facilitating the growth of the rice plants. *Tama* develops within each rice seed and is ultimately harvested as rice. During the harvest festival in autumn, the community, alongside the *kami* of the rice field, partakes in the first rice of the year and drinks *sake* fermented from the newly harvested rice. Consequently, the *tama* of the rice is ingested and shared among the members of the *ie*. Following the festival, the *kami* of the paddy field returns to the mountain, with the expectation of returning the following year. Upon the death of an *ie* member, after the funeral, the individual is believed to ascend to the mountains to watch over their descendants. Over time, they gradually integrate into the collective ancestral spirit, which is often perceived as synonymous with the divine spirit of the mountain, and by extension, the spirit of rice. It is precisely because the divine spirit of the rice paddy is also the spirit of the mountain and their deceased ancestors that there emerges a belief in

its role in ensuring the subsequent year's harvest for the living members of the *ie*, as well as overseeing their sustenance and prosperity in the future. This can be interpreted as a form of potential affinity, as the life force within the rice is identified with their ancestors. The paterfamilias bears the responsibility of conducting these festivals and rituals to ensure the proper return of the *kami* each year.

Such a cosmology, briefly outlined here, has evolved over the extensive history of the relationship between rice cultivation and the *ie* in the Japanese archipelago. However, when conceptualized in this manner, it may appear that *tama*, as a substance, circulates independently of each agent. This is not the case, as the circulation of *tama* itself engenders living entities, making it impossible to dissociate the substance from the agent. This may explain why Yanagita, unlike Orikuchi, refrained from generalizing and theoretically modeling the circulation of *tama*.

What is important is that the practice of rice cultivation, along with the associated rituals, festivals, and ancestral rites, constituted a unified whole. This unity was established and maintained through a series of care practices: care for rice, soil, water, mountains, and the deceased, among others. In this context, the distinction between human and non-human entities was not clearly delineated, and through this series of care, a certain potential affinity is actualized, thereby sustaining the circulation of *tama* and, consequently, the *ie*.

Interestingly, in such a cosmology of *tama*, the two minimal elements that constitute *ie*—namely, the embodied relationship between humans and objects, and the extended relationship between humans—are further extended to encompass the relationship between humans and non-human entities. Moreover, communal eating not only fosters relationships among individuals but also suggests a form of metaphysical cannibalism, as the rice consumed is believed to contain the *tama* of ancestors.

Annemarie Mol offers an insightful perspective in her work on the theoretical transition from kinship to relationship through the act of eating. She posits, “If we let go of the family tree and instead model relating on eating, being generative is not about having offspring, but about cultivating crops. If we do not focus on the companions with whom we sit around the table, but on the foods that are on the table, we find that our love for them harbors violence, while our devouring may go together with gratitude” (Mol 2021: 125). Mol further questions, “But here is a question: Is *kin* still the most suitable term for the togetherness implied? For as I eat, I do not continue to coexist with those of whom I eat; I incorporate them. Or, on an agricultural, collective level, my eating may make me coexist with the *species* from whose bodies I eat, but even so, the *specimen* being eaten disappears from the scene. Beyond *kin*, then, we may want other words for the relations with those of whom we eat. They are, after all, not our companions, but the *panis* itself. The act of eating turns them into *food*” (Mol 2021: 122).

When rice is consumed, it becomes part of us, and each grain vanishes, yet the species of rice persists and thrives through consumption. Similarly, an individual, such as a grandparent, may pass away, but the ancestral spirits collectively endure and flourish as they are incorporated into us. This ongoing cycle is perceived as the perpetuation of *ie*. Consequently, it appears more appropriate to refer to these relationships as potential

affinity rather than *kin*.

Over an extended period, humans have transformed rice through cultivation and consumption, while rice, in turn, has influenced human development. This process can be described as a mutual evolution into rice-human entities. In such a plant-human society, the concept of “*ie*” functioned not only as a corporate entity in a narrow economic sense but also held inseparable moral and religious roles. This phenomenon may be referred to as “the alimentary form of the religious life” (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 137) in Japan.

However, this sense and ethics diminished as individuals transitioned from rice cultivation to wage labor in urban areas. The Meiji government legally institutionalized “*ie*” as a foundation of governance, yet this also provided an opportunity for “*ie*” to evolve into an ideology of blood, distinct from land, territory, occupation, and spiritual circulation. Concurrently, individualism, which dismisses “*ie*” as an antiquated concept, offers little more than the biological myth of genetic continuity concerning what persists beyond one’s death. This context provides a framework for considering the House of Working Together in Tokachi as a contemporary manifestation of “*ie*.”

6. Dairy Farming in Hokkaido

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese government designated the land of Ezo as a “frontier” and a national resource base, initiating the colonization and development of this northern island, subsequently renamed Hokkaido. The Kaitakushi (Development Commission) was established in 1869. In 1871, merely three years post-restoration, the Japanese government enlisted Horace Capron, who had resigned as the commissioner of the US Department of Agriculture, to travel to Hokkaido with his colleagues. Capron’s team introduced American-style agricultural practices, later termed “plow farming,” utilizing mechanized farming tools, and introduced new seeds for Western fruits, vegetables, and other crops, as well as livestock for ranching. This large-scale agricultural model integrated Japanese perceptions of US frontier development with modern scientific and technological concepts. Subsequently, tens of thousands of unemployed ex-samurai and other Japanese migrated to Japan’s first settler colony, constructed under American guidance, as armed farm settlers, striving to establish a modern civilization while countering the threat of Russian invasion (Azuma 2019: 15).

In 1876, the Sapporo Agricultural College was inaugurated, inviting experts from America and Europe who introduced techniques for raising and milking cows and processing dairy products. William Clark from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst established an animal husbandry program. American and European expatriates, under the direction of the Kaitakushi, were instrumental in developing Hokkaido’s initial cattle, sheep, and dairy farms. Japan enthusiastically adopted beef consumption and later dairy, creating foods such as *sukiyaki* (broiled beef) and emulating American-style cattle ranches and European-style dairies, with Hokkaido serving as an ideal site for such innovative experimentation (Hansen 2024: 64–65).

Initially, settler colonialism in Hokkaido comprised agriculture and stockbreeding, with agriculture primarily involving farming rather than rice paddy cultivation due to the

cold climate. However, as suitable areas for rice cultivation were identified and more immigrants from mainland Japan with rice farming expertise arrived, farmlands were increasingly converted to rice paddies. Through significant labor and dedicated efforts to enhance rice varieties, by the end of the Taisho period in 1926, paddy fields had proliferated throughout Hokkaido, which had previously been the northern limit of rice farming.

Nevertheless, rice cultivation was unfeasible in regions with dark volcanic soil and cold temperatures, such as Tokachi and neighboring Kushiro. As only grass could thrive, these areas became dedicated to dairy farming. It was posited that to match Western countries, the Japanese needed to fortify their bodies, and thus, the consumption of beef and milk was advocated. Emperor Meiji himself initiated this practice, leading to an increase in beef and dairy consumption among the general Japanese populace (Hansen 2024: 64).

Following World War II, during the predominantly American-led Occupation from 1945 to 1952, primary education was mandated, alongside the implementation of school meal programs that provided *healthy* food. According to Hansen (2024: 65–66), “healthy” by American standards, akin to the earlier decree by the Meiji emperor, entailed rich foods modeled after a prosperous nation. For Japanese children, this translated into the consistent provision of milk at lunchtime and occasional servings of beef, a practice that persists for most today. Notably, rice and milk are the only staple food commodities in Japan that maintain self-sufficiency, despite the country’s generally low food self-sufficiency rate (Hansen 2024: 75). This indicates that the Japanese government prioritizes rice and milk as critical to national food security, prompting governmental intervention in their production and pricing.

Under these political and economic conditions, Hokkaido emerged as the so-called “Milkland,” now accounting for more than half of the domestic milk supply. This development was underpinned by the specialization and industrialization of dairy and livestock farming, as well as large-scale production. However, as Hansen (2024: 75) notes, due to the relative isolation of central and eastern Hokkaido from major population centers, which results in high transport costs and threatens the profit margins of smaller southern farmers, only approximately 15 percent of the prefecture’s milk is utilized as “drinking” milk, with 85 percent allocated for product manufacturing. This is directly related to the pricing structure, where the price for drinking milk is set up to 33 percent higher than that for product milk. Importantly, Hokkaido producers, operating under stringent regulations and regional cooperative quotas, receive significantly lower compensation for the same milk output compared to other regions in Japan.

It is noteworthy that dairy farming in Hokkaido was initially focused on producing drinking milk. Although some processed cheese was manufactured, the primary production was milk, which was distributed to public schools nationwide for lunch. The government regulated the annual milk production volume, and any surplus from production adjustments was processed into cheese. However, the culture and practice of producing natural cheese did not emerge until the 1980s.

7. Making Natural Cheese

The HWT was established in 1978 at the base of a mountain approximately 400 meters above sea level in northern Tokachi. Initially, six individuals, some of whom had mental or physical disabilities, relocated from outside Hokkaido and settled on town-owned land. Due to the steepness of the terrain, which rendered it unsuitable for agriculture as it was a town-operated ski area, they acquired six Holstein Friesian cows to initiate a dairy farming operation. Initially, local residents maintained a distance; however, when HWT transitioned into an agricultural producers' cooperative corporation, despite lacking farmland, and became a member of Nōkyō (Agricultural Cooperative), they secured a 14-ton milk shipping quota. At that time, milk production was experiencing a surplus, and the quota proved insufficient to sustain the community. Consequently, HWT members deliberated on alternative means of livelihood.

Rather than discarding excess milk due to governmental production adjustments, they experimented with cheese production. Upon discovering that natural cheese commanded high market prices, they resolved to produce natural cheese from unpasteurized milk. Given that HWT accepted various individuals with disabilities and juvenile delinquents who were marginalized by welfare institutions or schools, the organization had grown to over 20 members. From a management perspective, pursuing a lucrative venture was prudent. They calculated that converting milk into high-quality natural cheese, rather than selling it as raw milk, could yield nearly tenfold the revenue from the same milk volume. This initiative occurred in the early 1980s, a period when only one or two producers had commenced natural cheese production in Hokkaido.

Furthermore, the environmental context was significant. The terrain of HWT was not flat agricultural land but designated wilderness with a 20-degree slope, previously utilized as a ski area. Such topography precluded the adoption of large-scale American dairy farming, which relies on extensive farmland. In the American model, milk production is contingent upon the quantity of grain fed to cows. American dairy farmers cultivate soybeans, oats, corn, and other grains on their expansive farmland to feed their cattle, with minimal reliance on grass. This approach is optimal from a management perspective when maximizing milk output is the primary objective.

In contrast, in Japan, characterized by limited plains and numerous mountains, albeit not exceeding 3,000 meters in height, grass naturally grows on mountain slopes. Utilizing these slopes for cattle grazing is logical, as the grass is inedible for human consumption but can be converted into milk by cows, providing human nourishment. From a broader perspective of material circulation and metabolism, it is prudent to minimize grain feeding and maximize grazing. Additionally, given that nearly all cattle feed grain is imported, a depreciation of the yen leads to prohibitive feed costs, rendering dairy farming unsustainable. Observing the precarious state of Japanese dairy farming in 2024, it appears judicious from a long-term management standpoint to minimize grain feeding.

Consequently, HWT opted to introduce the Brown Swiss breed, native to the Alpine mountains, rather than the Holstein Friesian, a breed developed for dairy production in the lowlands of the Netherlands. Brown Swiss cattle, with their short legs, are well-suited to



Photo 1 Grazing Brown Swiss cattle on a mountain slope (Photo by the author, September 2019, Hokkaido)

sloped terrain and are viable for both beef and dairy production. Although they yield less milk than Holsteins, they produce a higher percentage of cheese from milk compared to the Holstein Friesian (Photo 1).

In contemporary cheese production, the creation of natural cheese involves the fermentation of raw milk without the application of heat treatment. This process ensures the safety of cheese through fermentation and ripening rather than thermal processing. Notably, a significant proportion of traditional ripened cheeses in Europe are classified as natural cheeses. According to Grappin and Beuvier (1997: 751), “with a production of 700,000 tonnes per year, raw milk cheeses represent a significant proportion of ripened cheeses produced in Europe, particularly in Italy, France, and Switzerland.”

Interestingly, the Japan Dairy Council, an organization comprising dairy producers across Japan that provides guidance on dairy farming, stipulates in its manual that to produce natural cheese, “raw milk must be pasteurized” (Chūōrakunōkaigi 2015: 38). This requirement is influenced by both international and domestic considerations. Specifically, pasteurization is crucial for larger producers who source milk from various dairies, whereas smaller producers, who manage their own cattle and feed, may opt to produce cheese without pasteurization, as it preserves the environmental microbes essential for developing unique regional flavors (Grappin and Beuvier 1997).

Generally, most bacteria responsible for foodborne illnesses thrive at moderate temperatures ranging from 25°C to 37°C. Their growth is inhibited at temperatures near

0°C, and they are effectively eliminated by heating to 65°C or higher. Pasteurization typically involves either the low-temperature long-time (LTLT) method, which entails heating at 63 to 65°C Celsius for 30 minutes, or the high-temperature short-time (HTST) method, which involves heating at 72 to 78°C Celsius for 15 seconds. It is important to note that pasteurization does not eradicate all microorganisms but reduces their numbers to a safe level. Some thermophilic bacteria may survive pasteurization.

HWT opted to manufacture natural cheese from raw milk and enlisted the expertise of a French cheese-making specialist. The expert advised against transporting milk, leading to the construction of a cattle barn, milking parlor, and cheese factory in close proximity to each other. This arrangement allowed for the transfer of milk to the cheese factory without pumps, utilizing the elevation difference between the milking parlor and the factory.

Additionally, HWT obtained HACCP certification, which was not yet widespread at the time. HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) was initially developed for the United States manned space program to ensure pathogen-free food and is now a widely used management tool in the food industry to guarantee food safety. The implementation of the Japanese GI (Geographical Indication) protection system in 2015 has clarified provisions for natural cheese made from raw milk under the Food Sanitation Law, provided the product meets HACCP standards. In light of these developments, HWT's acquisition of HACCP certification appears to have been a foresighted decision.

8. Becoming Microbe

The central concept underlying the project of producing natural cheese from raw milk is not rooted in an ideology that nature inherently optimizes processes. Rather, it is based on a comprehensive understanding of the microbial ecosystem. While putrefactive bacteria are present among the indigenous microbes in the environment, they are typically not abundant and only produce toxins when they reach a certain population threshold. Consequently, instead of employing heat sterilization to eliminate these generally harmless bacteria, it is more effective to cultivate an environment where these bacteria do not exert negative effects.

A representative from HWT articulated this perspective: “If we can envision the microbial world, it is safer to incorporate environmental microbes in their natural state, as we coexist within such an environment. Therefore, we should avoid creating conditions that facilitate the proliferation of pathogenic bacteria.”

To ensure the effective functioning of all environmental microbes present in raw milk, it is essential to understand these microorganisms and create conditions conducive to their optimal activity, rather than resorting to heat sterilization. In cheese production, this is primarily achieved through the regulation of temperature, acidity, and time. At the HWT cheese factory, operations commence concurrently with milking, which begins around 5 a.m. The use of thermometers, pH meters, and precise timing devices is standard practice. However, the phrase “*Kin no mi ni naru*,” meaning “I put myself in the shoes of the microbe,” or which can be better translated as, “I become microbe,” is frequently heard.

Although a temperature variation of 0.5°C may seem negligible to humans, it represents a significant change in the microbial environment. Therefore, while HWT personnel monitor numerical data, it is crucial to physically engage with the milk and intuitively assess the microbial conditions. Decisions regarding the addition of rennet, a coagulant enzyme, are made through this empathetic approach to microbial life by putting bare hands in the milk in order to feel the ‘mood’ of the microbes. This method exemplifies a deep, sensory understanding of microbial dynamics. Nonetheless, the question remains: what does “I become microbe” truly signify?

Viveiros de Castro elucidates the concept of becoming as follows: “If serial resemblances are imaginary and structural correlations symbolic, becomings are real. Neither metaphor nor metamorphosis, a becoming is a movement that deterritorializes the two terms of the relation it creates, by extracting them from the relations defining them in order to link them via a new ‘partial connection’. In this sense, the verb to become designates neither a predicative operation nor a transitive action: being implicated in a becoming-jaguar is not the same thing as becoming a jaguar. The ‘totemic’ jaguar, whereby a man is ‘sacrificially’ transformed, is imaginary, but the transformation itself is real. It is the becoming itself that is feline; in a becoming-jaguar, the ‘jaguar’ is an immanent aspect of the action and not its transcendent object, for becoming is an intransitive verb” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 160).

The phrase “*Kin no mi ni naru*” does not signify becoming a microbe, but rather becoming-microbe. The term S does not transform into the term O, as expressed in the sentence ‘A human becomes a microbe’. The verb “become” is intransitive, or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as the middle voice. Through the action of “*Kin no mi ni naru*,” individuals comprehend the disposition of microbes, care for microbes, and become microbes. This is a partial and immanent transformation; thus, humans remain human, microbes remain microbes, yet simultaneously, a new connection and relatedness emerge.

“Every becoming is an alliance. Which does not mean, once again, that every alliance is a becoming. There is extensive, cultural, and sociopolitical alliance, and intensive, counter-natural, and cosmopolitical alliance. If the first distinguishes filiations, the second confuses species or, better yet, counter-effectuates by implicative synthesis the continuous differences that are actualized in the other direction (the way is not the same ...) through the limiting synthesis of discontinuous speciation. When a shaman activates a becoming-jaguar, he neither ‘produces’ a jaguar nor ‘affiliates’ with a reproductive line of jaguars: he *adopts* and *coopts* a jaguar—establishes a feline alliance” (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 164; original italics).

We do not become *kin* or companions with microbes, but we establish an alliance through becoming. “*Kin no mi ni naru*” indicates that humans cannot exert total control over microbes. At that juncture, we recognize microbes as persons. This is by no means traditional animism. Here at HWT, to be a person signifies being the unassimilable Other. In this manner, through becoming, caring, and recognizing, a series of potential affinities activate as an alliance that traverses the boundary between human and microbe (Photo 2).



Photo 2 Feeling the progress of milk coagulation with a finger (Photo by the author, September 2022, Hokkaido)

Conclusion: Diversity, Complementarity and New Alliance

In a manner akin to their care for the cows, attention is also devoted to the pasture consumed by the cows and the soil within the pasture. The progression from fertile soil to quality cheese represents a continuum of care and transformation. The production of natural cheese necessitates the preservation of this cycle of care, reminiscent of the historical circulation of *tama* of rice. To sustain this chain of care, a multitude of tasks must be undertaken. Furthermore, HWT now manages pigs, goats, horses, and chickens, cultivates vegetables and rice, and engages in various crafts. This underscores the importance of HWT's status as an agricultural producers' cooperative corporation rather than a social welfare service corporation.

To qualify as a social welfare service corporation, it is required to assemble individuals with the same category of disabilities and provide welfare services to them, clearly distinguishing between the provider and recipient of care. This relationship is characterized by a subject-verb-object (SVO) structure, indicating a transitive verb, and cannot be considered an alliance. In the case of HWT, there are 15–16 members who possess disability certificates, yet they rarely belong to the same disability category. Consequently, each member can perform various tasks. Not all members are involved in cheese production at the cheese factory. Different individuals undertake different responsibilities: some feed the cows, others allow them to graze, some cut the grass,

others feed the pigs, some collect eggs from the chickens, others cultivate vegetables, some weave textiles, others package cheese, some prepare meals, others clean the dining area, some manage accounting, among other tasks. It is indeed a contemporary *ie*, functioning as a work organization where members coexist. The emphasis lies on diversity and complementarity among members.

My previous observations at a farm in Italy, where a psychiatric hospital had been dismantled, revealed a similar ecosystem where diversity and complementarity were crucial due to the presence of humans and animals with varied attributes, rather than an “institution” where individuals of the same category were congregated (Matsushima 2014: 260–262).

In the HWT framework, roles and tasks are not explicitly delineated. Each morning, during the breakfast meeting, members discuss their intended activities for the day. Participation is voluntary, as no individual is compelled by others to undertake specific tasks. However, it is insufficient to merely pursue personal preferences. The needs of other entities, such as livestock, crops, and microorganisms, necessitate human intervention on a daily basis. Furthermore, residing within HWT allows individuals to comprehend the broader dynamics, enabling them to recognize when there is a shortage of labor for a particular task or when a member is unwell, necessitating additional effort to allocate more personnel to that task. Consequently, it becomes challenging to simply avoid tasks one is disinclined to perform. Additionally, during the evening meeting, each member reports their daily activities, further discouraging inactivity. The central question is whether tasks can be undertaken voluntarily and with a positive attitude, rather than reluctantly or under implicit coercion.

While productivity is not the primary expectation, members are still anticipated to contribute to the best of their abilities. In this context, HWT can be perceived as a modern iteration of a traditional *ie*, functioning as both a work organization and a corporate entity where individuals, regardless of familial ties, coexist and collaborate. However, notable differences exist. Primarily, the organization is no longer patriarchal, as it once was, and the autonomy of each individual is fully respected.

A striking feature is the egalitarian nature of relationships, irrespective of age, ability, or disability, which is frequently highlighted in members’ narratives. Although some members may express frustration towards those who do not engage in tasks, they seldom attempt to alter such individuals. Within HWT, fostering an environment where each member can work actively and with a positive disposition is prioritized over reprimanding or attempting to change individual members.

The way each member relates to each other is fundamentally the same as with various microbes in the production of natural cheese. Just as they attune themselves to the microbes, discerning their moods and conditions on any given day, they similarly engage with human members during breakfast meetings, perceiving their moods and conditions. Each day, they partially integrate with others, both human and non-human, forming alliances: “becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming produces nothing by filiation; all filiation is imaginary. Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable

becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 263; original italics).

Contemporary *ie* can also be regarded as a block of symbioses of diverse beings, rather than a filiation of blood. Through acts of caring, working, and eating, its alliance is sustained.

However, is there anything perpetual or permanent in their imagination akin to *ie* in the past?

I would assert that there is. Perpetuity or permanence should not be equated with temporality. It is not an extended duration in time, but rather a sense of being connected in the present moment. In other words, the ideal concept of perpetuity or permanence is an imaginative projection of this sense of connection across time. If this is the case, then the sense of perpetuity, in HWT, can be found in the very fact that one perceives oneself to be within and a part of this connection or alliance. Here, we can identify a contemporary form of relational ontology that does not negate individuality. This represents the potentiality of potential affinity today.

Note

- 1) Peter Worsley conceptualized kinship in relation to work organization in a manner akin to others. He critiqued Meyer Fortes’ examination of kinship among the Talensi, particularly Fortes’ segregation of three systems—kinship, ritual, and economic—and his emphasis on kinship as fundamental. Worsley argued, “As we have seen, kinship is the form which the essential relations arising from the needs of agriculture, the inheritance of property, etc., take, and as these latter relations change, so kinship changes. Far from being basic, it is secondary. The particular forms which kinship relations will take—corporate unilineal descent-groups, cognatic systems without lineages, double unilineal systems, etc.—are largely determined by economic and historical forces. What is particularly interesting about the Tale kinship system is its close adaptation (in size of compound, joint family, etc.) to the particular type of agricultural organization” (Worsley 1956: 62–63).

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