

# Exploring the Indigenous Healing Ritual for *Barkes*: A Phenomenological Study

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Asia Pacific Journal of  
Multidisciplinary Research  
Vol. 5 No.1, 49-56  
February 2017  
P-ISSN 2350-7756  
E-ISSN 2350-8442  
www.apjmr.com

Date Received: September 30, 2016; Date Revised: December 4, 2016

**Abstract** - *The migrant settlers of Casigayan, Tabuk, Kalinga have upheld the healing ritual for barkes (a skin disease). It is a simple ritual performed by the mangngagas (folk healer) who uses only pan-aw (cogon) leaf and dalikan (clay stove) as instruments of healing. The procedure basically starts from the diagnosis of the affected body area followed by the preparation of the materials, measuring the barkes, prayer and sharing of post-ritual advice. This phenomenological study reveals that barkes underpins a collective experience among those who consider it as existent phenomenon. The healing ritual is viewed not only as an alternative remedy but also as a show window of intergroup interaction and solidarity. It brings about from the ritual actors a state of mutual focus of attention and shared reality, which creates frontiers of interaction as the participants of the ritual construct meaning to what they are doing. The study also presents that even in this age of modernity and scientific hegemony, folk rituals persist primarily to address the need for healing of those who believe in them and to generate vibrant channels of cultural confluences and intergroup camaraderie.*

**Keywords:** *phenomenology, indigenous healing ritual, barkes, mangngagas, nabarkes,*

## INTRODUCTION

Philippines is composed of several ethnolinguistic groupings and according to Philippine Institute of Traditional and Alternative Health Care [1], "each group has a rich tradition including those that refer to healing". Evidently, several folk healing rituals are performed despite the flourishing of modern medicine and the provision of advanced health services by the government since, according to some people, there are illnesses that cannot be treated using scientific means. In the past, when there were few hospitals and the healing power of modern medicine was not yet felt, people resorted to herbs, insects, ashes, incense, fire, water and other materials believed to be therapeutic. These were used in rituals of healing that would try to eliminate bad omen or evil spirits recognized as inexplicable causes of illnesses. Fiar-od [2] claims "many of the traditional practices of non-western communities cannot be explained by conventional concepts. Generally the understanding and appreciation of spiritual practices is lacking and there is little theory related to spiritual phenomenon".

According to Struthers, Eschiti and Patchell [3], traditional indigenous healing is still widely used

today, as it has been since time immemorial. Several healing rituals are still observed in the peripheries and among indigenous communities where people depend much on the power of the ritual and the miraculous care of the esteemed folk healer who serves as forefront in analyzing complicated symptoms of a disease. The folk healer is regarded as the chosen individual who is capable of diagnosing sickness and prescribing its probable cure. To bolster healing, participants revere the ritual elements and adhere to the advice of the medicine man.

In the neo-durkheimian framework, rituals become authoritative because they bring about social interaction based on physical co-presence and shared emotional attunement. The people involved in the ritual experience the essence of solidarity with one another as they actively take part in a common undertaking. Collins [4] theorizes that participants of the rituals become infused to emotional energy and exhilaration as they establish and strengthen collective symbols and moral representations of the group that ought to be defended and reinforced. Accordingly, rituals establish, maintain, and regulate interpersonal relationships.

In this study, the indigenous healing ritual of *barkes* in Casigayan, Tabuk, Kalinga, Philippines is explored. Kalinga is a province in the Cordillera Administrative Region with perceptibly productive topographical features that attracted the coming of migrant settlers from different regions of Northern Luzon such as the Bagos, Ibalois, Ilokanos, Ifugaos and Kankana-eyes. The migrant settlers brought with them the rich cultural heritage that helped them cope with the challenges of the new social landscape. They have carried with them their material culture, indigenous know-how, beliefs, traditions, and other aspects of their cultural life that they uphold and perform up to the present. Apparently, one of these traditions is the healing ritual for *barkes*. In the Cordilleras, there are a lot of traditional practices that are being utilized in order to alleviate physical discomfort and suffering [5]. Rituals are performed as an antidote to the evil intentions and cure to natural afflictions and to diseases that might have been induced by sorcery, magic, or witchcraft. Regrettably, there was no study conducted as regards the healing ritual for *barkes*. This pushed the researchers to explore and to document the said indigenous healing ritual hoping to develop a clear understanding as regards its dynamics as well as its essence in the community life.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper delves into how *barkes* is viewed in the context of the *mangngagas* (folk healer) and the *nabarkes* (person who suffered from *barkes*). It describes the materials used and processes involved in performance of the ritual. It also discusses how the healing ritual promotes intergroup interaction and solidarity, and finally, it identifies the pressing threats to the aforementioned folk healing ritual.

### METHOD

The researchers employed phenomenology to describe the dynamics of the healing ritual for *barkes* from the points of view of the *mangngagas* and the *nabarkes*. According to Welman and Kruger [6], phenomenology emphasizes on comprehending psycho-social phenomena from the perspectives of people involved. It is basically concerned with the “lived experiences” of the individuals [7]. In phenomenology, the primary objective is to describe precisely the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts

wherein both researcher and participant are engaged in a dialogue [8].

Data were obtained through in-depth phenomenological interviews that were backed up by observations. Prior and informed consent were accomplished by the respondents to ensure compliance to ethical standards. There were 11 key informants in the interview, one (1) *mangngagas* (folk healer) and ten (10) *nabarkes* (persons who suffered from *barkes*). They were appropriately chosen because these are the individuals who have the “lived experiences” and personal knowledge on the *barkes* phenomenon. Open-ended questions were asked to the participants. The questions were framed in Iloko, which is the lingua franca of the place. Moreover, the researchers ensured that the interview setting was free as possible from background noise and interruptions. Responses were recorded through a tape recorder and these were transcribed carefully.

The interpretation of the data was done using the procedure of Hycner [9] as follows: 1) Bracketing and phenomenological reduction. 2) Delineating units of meaning. 3) Clustering of units of meaning to form themes. 4) Summarizing each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it. 5) Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.

The study setting is in Casigayan, Tabuk, Kalinga where the incidence of indigenous healing ritual for *barkes* is observed. This is the barangay which is thickly occupied by migrant settlers especially the Bagos. Historically, Casigayan was duly acknowledged as an independent barangay unit on July 10, 1985 by virtue of Provincial Ordinance No. 85-05. The local government officials coined the term “Casigayan” in order to give due recognition to the first settlers of the place who were known to be migrants from Sigay, Ilocos Sur [9] [10].

### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### The Meaning of *Barkes* in the Context of *Mangngagas* and *Nabarkes*

*Barkes* refers to an unusual disease on the skin that begins from a plain prickly heat with reddish appearance on its base. It is quite itchy and painful especially when the patient perspires. It affects any part of the body. It may be found at the neck, torso, hand, foot and even in sensitive body parts. As narrated by the informants, the *barkes* becomes bigger in size and wider portion of the skin is affected as

days go by. Pus cells also appear. For those who experienced *barkes*, the itchiness is incomparable. It could not be remedied by any ointment. It was observed for several times that the more a patient applies skin medication, the worse it becomes. The swelling and pain strongly persist. In most instances, it spreads rapidly if left untreated by the *mangngagas*. Anyone can be a victim of *barkes*. The frequent sufferers are children though adults are not spared.

There is ambiguity in the origin of the term *barkes*. Based on experiences and accounts, the informants already heard *barkes* when they were still young. Apong Tanong, the recognized *mangngagas*, recalled that the elder members of the community in Ilocos Sur where he came from named the said skin disease as *barkes*. Subsequently, he used *barkes* as a fitting term when he began treading his course as *mangngagas* in Casigayan, the place where he migrated to. That eventually made the term be known and carried in the community up to this time.

According to the some *nabarkes*, the cause of the skin disease is inexplicable. An informant said, “*Uray to pay ti maysa a doctor, Dios ti alwad na, ket madi na maawatan daytoy a sakit. Nagited met ti agas ngem madi latta naagasan*” (Even a doctor, may he rest in peace, could not understand this disease. He once gave medicine but the disease could not be cured). This pertains to a particular case when a medical doctor once recommended a nurse who was then employed in his clinic to see Apong Tanong. The said health staff suffered from an uncommon skin disease in a sensitive part of her body. The doctor opined that bacteria caused the irritation, which led to infection and so he prescribed antibiotics for the nurse to take religiously for a week. Haplessly, the medication did not respond effectively as expected. In fact, the condition became worse. Pus cells dominated the infected skin and the patient could hardly walk. Surprisingly, the doctor suggested that alternative curative practices be employed. He was then open to unconventional means of dealing with diseases. Accordingly, the nurse approached Apong Tanong. Although skeptical at first, the patient eventually allowed the *mangngagas* to take lead in the healing ritual. After three days, the *barkes* was already gone.

For several decades serving as *mangngagas*, Apong Tanong is not utterly convinced that *barkes* is a work of bad spirit or an upshot of witchcraft. He simply discounts the idea that *barkes* has demonic root. In fact, he offers two practical reasons for its existence. First, it might be attributed to certain

pollens mixing with the air during harvest season. The pollens from the rice fields probably irritate susceptible skin. The scratching of surface of the affected area results to the breaking of skin and the appearance of prickly-heat-like forms, which increase in size and spread progressively. Second, it might be that the transition from cold to hot weather triggers the occurrence of *barkes*. The *mangngagas* reckoned that many patients come to him to be cured during summer when temperature is quite high. He seldom encountered *nabarkes* during rainy and cold seasons (approximately from months of August to February).



Photo 1. This is a picture of a presumed *barkes* that is located on a foot.

### The Dynamics in the Performance of the Healing Ritual of *Barkes*

The *mangngagas* utilizes two simple instruments of healing. These are the *pan-aw* (cogon) leaf and *dalikan* (clay stove). Apong Tanong remarked, “*Awan ti ado nga us-usarek nga agagas. Pan-aw laeng ken dalikan*” (I don’t use many materials in healing, only the cogon leaf and clay stove). In most cases, many *nabarkes* would anticipate for more than a few items to be present as a normal scene in folk rituals. Nevertheless, they would just be overwhelmed with the plainness of the materials. They would find out that *pan-aw* leaf and *dalikan* are already sufficient in the healing ritual.

The *pan-aw* is abundant in Casigayan. It is commonly found on stream banks or near the rice paddies. In the eyes of the *mangngagas*, it is an ideal object for healing. The *mangngagas* neither pounds the leaf to get its extract nor puts anything on it. In other words, there is no complicated procedure done to the leaf. The striking attribute of the *pan-aw* leaf that makes it significant in the healing ritual is its

length used merely to measure the dimension of *barkes* on the skin. The greater is the extent of *barkes*, the longer leaf is needed.



Photo 2. The *pan-aw* (cogon leaves) normally abounds near the streams.

Another indispensable material is the *dalikan*. For the *mangngagas*, this is where the ritual of healing culminates. It functions as a contrivance of both cooking and curing. The heat from the *dalikan* steadily dries the *pan-aw*. This is the vital episode since healing of the *barkes* is expected when the *pan-aw* leaf already dried out and turned into black.



Photo 3. This is the *dalikan* used by the *mangngagas*.

The healing ritual for the *barkes* starts from a diagnosis that is not actually intricate and may just last for few minutes. It is similar to what a medical doctor does during the consultation. It is noted that not all who seek for the help of *mangngagas* are *nabarkes*. Hence, in this part, the *mangngagas* deliberately examines the infected part of the skin. He then asks questions, which he knows would lead to proper

understanding of the patient's condition. As revealed by the *mangngagas*, he can easily determine if the person is *nabarkes* or may just be suffering from other skin illness. With this, it is believed that only the *mangngagas* can identify a *barkes* that apparently marks his authority to heal, believed to be at its peak from eight o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon.

If in the diagnosis, the person is confirmed to be *nabarkes*, then the *mangngagas* proceeds to the preparation of the materials. He goes to the place where *pan-aw* abounds. He searches for the young *pan-aw* leaf believing that the freshness of the leaf makes it to be more effective. He carefully cuts the leaf and the length depends on the extent of *barkes*. After which, he readies the *dalikan*. There is no more painstaking cleaning done to its exterior. The important thing is for the *mangngagas* to position properly the *dalikan* in a place, somewhat high in elevation, where it cannot be touched by children. Usually, it is found in the extension area of the house.

Next step is the core of the healing ritual, which refers to the process of measuring the *barkes*. This is undertaken usually in the receiving room or in an open area. It depends on the case of the patient. If the *barkes* is located on a sensitive part of the body, then basically, it is done inside the house. The procedure is done as quickly as possible. There are no incantation, singing, dancing and the like. The patient is quiet while he or she watches how the *mangngagas* does his job. In here, the *mangngagas* gauges first the length of the infected area using the *pan-aw* leaf, after which, the width is measured. The *mangngagas* marks the endpoint of the length of *barkes* in the leaf. This is where the measurement of the width begins. The *mangngagas* merely folds and ties the *pan-aw* leaf then hangs it about two or three feet high over the *dalikan*. It is expected that after two or three days, the leaf would dry out and would turn into black. This is an indication that the *barkes* is drying; thus, it is assumed that healing is effectively taking place.

As a segment of the ritual, the *mangngagas* gives few pieces of advice to the *nabarkes* in order to be successfully healed. He emphasizes that everything is permissible for the *nabarkes* to eat and to perform except to let the *barkes* be wet for two to three days. Taking a bath is not prohibited but it is very important for the *nabarkes* to protect well the affected part of his body so that water cannot sip in to the *barkes*. The *mangngagas* presumes that if the *barkes* that underwent a ritual gets wet, the healing power



weakens and gradually disappears. He insists that if *nabarkes* really desires to be cured, then following the simple instruction should not be compromised. The healing ritual for *barkes* culminates with the silent prayer that is only known by the *mangngagas*.



Photo 4. The *mangngagas* measures the dimensions of the *barkes*.

According to Apostol [11], “rituals and ceremonies are incomplete without prayers; hence, many traditional healers consider prayer as spiritual connections to effective healing”.

After the healing ritual has been completed, the *nabarkes* leaves the house of the *mangngagas* with the hope that his well-being will be restored in due time. Kirmayer [12] posits that “at the heart of any healing practice are metaphorical transformations of the quality of experience (from feeling ill to wellness) and the identity of the person (from afflicted to healed)”. The *mangngagas*, on the other hand, anticipates for the immediate outcome of the healing ritual and nonchalantly resumes his unfinished tasks for the day.

Customarily, the *mangngagas* does not accept any payment but there are patients who offer donations as a gesture of gratitude. For the *mangngagas*, this is acceptable as long as volunteerism and sincerity become the reasons of giving. Apong Tanong stressed, *Saan nak nga agpabayad ta awan met ti ginastos ko nga nagagas. Umanayen kanyakon ti panagyamanda. Ni laengen Apo Dios ti makaammo ti naaramidak* (I don't accept payment because I did not spend anything in healing. Words of thanks are enough. It is God who knows the merit of what I did).

The processes of healing the *barkes* were never invented by the *mangngagas*. For him, the ritual he performs is a product of both his personal experience when he was healed from *barkes* and the gift of

healing he might have received from the Divine. As narrated, Apong Tanong suffered from *barkes* when he was still young.



Photo 5. The *mangngagas* hangs the *pan-aw* above the *dalikan*. This signals that the ritual has been completed.

He went to see a doctor for treatment but the condition did not improve. One time, a protestant minister known as Ptr. Delmindo (deceased) was visiting members of his congregation in the community. It was then when the good pastor saw the terrible health condition of Tanong. The pastor identified the illness as *barkes* and he performed the corresponding healing ritual. Apong Tanong meticulously observed every detail of the ritual and after which, unexpectedly, the pastor blessed him with the parting words: *Agagas kanton ta inted ko met kenkan ti bendisyon. Daytoy ti inted ti Dios a parabor tapno makatulong ken uray pay dagiti saan a nagadal ti pagkadoktor* (You will become a healer because I have given you already the blessings. This is a gift from God so that even those who are not medical doctors can help others through healing). Three days after, his skin disease vanished. From then on, Tanong took the challenge of being a *mangngagas* and ascertained his authority in the healing ritual for *barkes*.

According to Collins [4] a ritual involves a group of at least two individuals who are physically assembled, who focus attention on the same object or action, who are somewhat separated from non-participants or outsiders and who share a common

mood or emotion. The healing ritual for *barkes* obviously meets the four ingredients of the ritual existence. The meeting of the *nabarkes* and *mangngagas* is a manifestation that the healing ritual is not just a product of an individual's act. Rather, it is collective experience among those who consider it as existent phenomenon. The house of the *mangngagas* where the ritual is usually held serves as the stricture for the ritual that distinguishes the participants from non-participants. Also, the situation brings about from the ritual actors a state of mutual focus of attention on the need for healing, the authority to heal and the realization for the success of the ritual.

Furthermore, it is not surprising that the healing ritual of *barkes* may be partly analogous to some rituals of certain cultural communities such as the *suring* of the Ilocanos and *sibisib* of the Ibalays. According to Peralta [13], "some patterning of culture may be seen in certain regions of the country because of the generally homogenous forms of ecosystems prevalent in some broad areas". This geographical reason is complemented by the relatively more increased interaction among cultural groups that inhabit adjacent areas. *Suring*, in the study of Ramos [14], is performed among Ilocanos in order to remedy the frequent occurrence and recurrence of child's illness. This starts from a diagnosis of the *mannuring* (medicine man), followed by invocation, anointing of the herbs, bleeding of the chicken, dancing and chanting, renaming of the child and a post-ritual prayer. On the other hand, *sibisib* is an Ibaloi tribal healing for wounds. The medicine man summons the spirits while placing the instrument over the wounded skin as core of the healing process [15].

### **Healing Ritual of *Barkes* in Relation to Intergroup Interaction and Solidarity**

The healing ritual of *barkes* serves as an indispensable fabric of group survival in a new social and physical landscape as it became a shared reality among those who believe in it. Basically, it is something that migrant settlers had used as an enabling complementary mechanism to address their specific health concerns especially that in the past, there were few hospitals and health professionals in the area. In time, the healing ritual spread in the community that even other groups resorted to it.

Clearly, the healing ritual is not an exclusive feature of any particular indigenous community in Tabuk given that its distinctive attachment to a certain cultural group is not evident. The prominent

*mangngagas* belongs to the Bago tribe whereas the *nabarkes* come from various cultural orientations. In other words, the belief in *barkes* and the confidence in the healing ritual transcend ethnic boundaries and it somehow facilitates the formation of intercultural relationship and the strengthening of social bond, which leads to a healthy and binding community spirit. Taray [16] cites that sense of solidarity and mutuality in the community is enhanced and affirmed through ritual.

The informants emphasized that the healing ritual gives opportunity for them to intermingle despite the fact that they come from different walks of life. They have diverse socio-economic and religious background. Nonetheless, the incidence of *barkes* usually leads them to the well-known *mangngagas* in the community. As an informant articulated "*Saan laeng a panakaagas iti napadasan mi ngem ketdi narikna mi pay ti makunkuna nga pannakikaddua*" (We did not only experience healing in the ritual, we also felt the essence of companionship.) Some *nabarkes* believe that they did not only receive hope for the restoration of their health as they deliberately participated in the ritual, but they also considered the alliance that was established with their encounter with the *mangngagas*, who is also a notable elder of a the Bago cultural community.

On the other hand the *mangngagas* regards the healing ritual as a mechanism in establishing social relations and friendship with other people. He views the ritual as an effective channel of communication with the individuals who come to him for healing as the ritual facilitates the exchange of thoughts and cultural orientations. He admits that he certainly learns a lot of things because of a quality contact with other groups of people. He further claims that the healing ritual paves way for promoting his identity as a trustworthy, accommodating and caring person. Consequently, the presence of social interaction between the *mangngagas* and *nabarkes* fosters camaraderie among the individuals involved in the ritual. The idea supports the assertion of Barbalet [17] that a ritual generates "the feeling of common membership and therefore group solidarity, self-enhancing and group dependent feelings described as emotional energy". The emotional energy becomes significant because it "holds a society together and provides the energy through which groups are mobilized" [4]. Kirmayer [12] substantiates this idea claiming that participation in specific healing

traditions may also contribute to individual and collective identity.

### Threats to the Healing Ritual of *Barkes*

One considered threat to the healing ritual of *barkes* is cynicism. This is an immediate reaction of some young professionals who discard practices outside the realm of scientific studies and methodologies. They doubt the reality of *barkes* and the effectiveness of the healing ritual due to high-level medical advancement in this modern time. Evidently, they pin their trust to the health experts. For Apong Tanong, he sees this as a minor challenge to his healing. He expects doubt to prevail among people who lack understanding as regards the phenomenon. He does not force anybody to believe it. In fact, there were instances when he even referred a number of *nabarkes* to physicians, mainly dermatologists, for consultation. The important thing is that he gives his best in healing, which demonstrates how he cares those who willingly come up to him for help.

Finally, the tough issue that confronts the ritual is its tendency for disappearance. To date, only Apong Tanong serves as the *mangngagas* of *barkes* in Casigayan. He is already 84 years old and he feels his power to heal is dwindling as days go by. He fears that when he dies, he will also bring to the grave the dynamics of the healing ritual. This is the reason why he longs for somebody, determined and patient enough, to replace him as the *mangngagas*.



Photo 6. He is Apong Tanong, the only *mangngagas* for *barkes* sa Casigayan, Tabuk, Kalinga.

He presumes that the power to heal is not merely passed on to anyone. If that should have been the case, he could have transferred easily his gift of healing to any of his children. Nevertheless, he asserts that only

those whom he had cured from *barkes* and had personally witnessed the healing process have the chance to be blessed with the healing power. Ultimately, he believes that somebody elsewhere in the community is already on the course of exploring his or her potential to become *mangngagas*. Subsequently, this idea gives hope to Apong Tanong and to the future of the ritual itself.

### CONCLUSION

The healing ritual of *barkes* is an alternative therapeutic intervention for a skin disease (*barkes*) believed to be irresponsive to scientifically recognized medical treatment. It is a simple ritual performed by the *mangngagas* who uses only *pan-aw* leaf and *dalikan* as instruments of healing and the procedure basically starts from the diagnosis of the affected area followed by the preparation of the materials, measurement of the *barkes* and sharing of post-ritual advice.

By and large, the said ritual reveals a deep form of intergroup interaction and solidarity. The ritual does not only satisfy the need of a *nabarkes* for healing per se. It becomes a means to promote and reinforce social relations especially in the community where various groups of migrants abound. It becomes a way for the community members to adjust to internal interactions and maintain its state of harmony. In here, the ritual operates as a social mechanism with a pivotal role in sustaining vibrant community interrelationship.

The steadfast hope of the *nabarkes* for healing and the valued authority of the *mangngagas* in the ritual form the fabric of a unified and shared reality, which makes participants of the ritual think that they are members of a cohesive group. The emotion created by the ritual emanates from the unswerving hope of the *nabarkes* to be cured completely and from the intense desire of the *mangngagas* to help. This eventually leads to an atmosphere that reflects the harmony of a gradually emerging interaction as the participants of the ritual construct meaning to what they are doing.

Moreover, the healing ritual for *barkes* showcases simplicity. It does not involve lavish celebration and rigorous processes that are common to many rituals in the Cordillera Region. No animal is butchered nor sacrificed. Basically, only the *mangngagas* and the *nabarkes* join the ritual. Also, the ritual materials depict the desire of the *mangngagas* to simplify the process and at the same time, to spare the *nabarkes* from spending anything since the healing materials

and procedure are just viewed as mere symbolic forms of the real healing power. With this, the plainness of the ritual favors the *nabarkes* who is no longer bothered to think about expenditure and it promotes the credibility of the *mangngagas* who is not profit-oriented. This mood of the ritual becomes its strength because it advances the idea of practical approach to life in the midst of somewhat disfavored socio-economic condition of some people in the area.

Nowadays, the healing ritual of *barkes* faces apparent threats. Some people, especially young professionals, do not see empirical evidences as regards its authentic healing power because of the presence of medical specialists (e.g. dermatologists) and the advancement in medicine. Besides, there is only one identified *mangngagas* of *barkes* in Casigayan and it might be that in the future, if nobody emerges as replacement, the healing ritual will eventually fade away. Nevertheless, a few individuals who personally experienced the ritual could attest to its healing efficacy. For them, *barkes* is real and there is nothing to lose if they believe in the curative potential of the ritual. It is just a matter of decisively harmonizing folk healing ritual and modern science in dealing with ailments and in restoring well-being. In the end, everything lies on one's conviction and perspective.

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