

Bridging Traditional and Modern Healthcare: Ethnomedicine in the Chakpa Community of Andro, Manipur

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Abstract

Ethnomedicine is the study of traditional medical knowledge, practices, and beliefs of various cultural and ethnic communities. It is an interdisciplinary field encompassing anthropology, medicine, botany, and pharmacology, aiming to understand and integrate indigenous healing systems into modern healthcare. Traditional medicine has played a crucial role in human societies for centuries, with the World Health Organization (WHO) estimating that nearly 80% of the global population relies on it for primary healthcare. The recognition of ethnomedicine as a distinct discipline in the 1960s highlighted its significance in addressing healthcare needs and preserving indigenous knowledge. A notable example of ethnomedicine can be found in Andro, a village in Manipur inhabited by the *Chakpa* community. The community has a rich tradition of using medicinal plants, many of which serve dual purposes as food items, spices, or snacks. Approximately 56% of these medicinal plants are collected from the wild, while 24% are cultivated, ensuring their sustainable use. This deep-rooted knowledge system plays a vital role in community health, reinforcing the importance of preserving traditional healing practices. The study of ethnomedicine is essential for bridging the gap between traditional and modern healthcare systems. By documenting and analysing traditional healing methods, researchers can identify bioactive compounds that may contribute to the development of new pharmaceutical drugs. Moreover, integrating ethnomedical knowledge into modern healthcare can enhance culturally sensitive medical practices and improve healthcare accessibility in indigenous and rural communities. Understanding and preserving ethnomedicine is crucial for global health and sustainable healthcare development. As modern medicine advances, recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge systems can foster a more holistic approach to healthcare. Future research should focus on validating traditional remedies through scientific studies while ensuring the ethical protection of indigenous knowledge and resources.

Keywords: Ethnomedicine, Traditional Medicine, *Chakpa* Community, Medicinal Plants, Healthcare Integration

Introduction

Traditional medical knowledge of medicinal plants and their application by indigenous healers play a vital role in preserving cultural traditions, biodiversity conservation, and fostering advancements in healthcare and drug development. The reliance on ethnomedicine is particularly significant in developing nations, where approximately 80% of the population depends on traditional medicines due to their affordability compared to expensive pharmaceutical drugs. Furthermore, traditional medicines are deeply ingrained in cultural and spiritual practices, making them widely accepted within these communities. Ethnobotanical studies have revealed that around 2000 plant species have been newly identified as potential sources for drug development, contributing to approximately 4000 drug industries within the Indian medicinal system. Scientific validation of indigenous therapies and ethnopharmacological practices has led to the introduction of numerous herbal-based drugs in global markets.

Manipur, a North Eastern State of India, is rich in ethnomedicinal resources, particularly within its diverse ethnic communities, which include 33 recognized tribal communities, the Meitei Pangal (Manipuri Muslims), seven scheduled caste communities, and the majority Meitei population. These communities possess a wealth of traditional knowledge and accessible remedies for common ailments. Over the years, a substantial number of studies have been conducted on the ethnobotany of Manipur, particularly focusing on its medicinal plants. The study of ethnomedicine in Andro Village, a historically significant settlement in Manipur, is essential for preserving traditional knowledge, discovering novel medicinal plants and compounds, and understanding the cultural perspectives on health and healing. The integration of traditional medicine into modern healthcare frameworks is becoming increasingly crucial, emphasizing the need for community-based healthcare models.

Literature Review

Ethnomedicine refers to the traditional healthcare practices employed by indigenous communities to treat various ailments. A substantial body of research underscores the importance of recognizing and preserving indigenous knowledge for its medicinal value. According to Chakrabarty and Hossain (2021), traditional medicine should be integrated into primary healthcare systems, particularly in rural and underserved regions of developing nations. Their research highlights the necessity of a legal framework to protect indigenous knowledge and ensure equitable access to

traditional healing methods. Rawat (2020) provided a detailed analysis of the ethnomedicinal properties of plants such as *Mimosa pudica*, emphasizing the need for phytochemical and pharmacological validation of traditional claims. Similarly, Benamar and Koraichi (2021) explored the ethnobotanical usage and biological properties of medicinal plants from the Mediterranean region, demonstrating their potential health benefits and significance in modern pharmacology. India's ethnomedicinal practices have evolved alongside major traditional healing systems such as Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani. Bhairam (2019) investigated the role of indigenous healers in tribal regions such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, highlighting the reliance on local herbs and spiritual healing rituals. His findings reveal that tribal communities perceive illnesses not merely as physical ailments but as imbalances requiring holistic interventions.

The ethnobotanical diversity of India is immense, with many regions exhibiting unique medicinal plant applications. Sindhav (2021) examined the use of *Phyllanthus reticulatus* in the Barda Hills of Gujarat for treating various ailments. His research underscores the importance of documenting such traditional practices for future scientific validation. Manipur's rich cultural and biological diversity is reflected in its extensive use of ethnomedicine. Traditional healers, known as *Maibas* and *Maibis*, play a crucial role in indigenous healthcare, addressing both physical and spiritual ailments. Lokendrajit (2012) documented the use of indigenous medicinal plants for treating blood pressure in Manipur, highlighting their significance in communities with limited access to modern healthcare. Yuhlung and Bhattacharyya (2016) investigated the indigenous medicinal practices of the Maring tribe, demonstrating how cultural beliefs are closely intertwined with healing methods. Their study revealed that various plant-based treatments are employed for conditions such as fever, dysentery, and skin diseases.

Despite its significance, the preservation of ethnomedicinal knowledge in Manipur faces multiple challenges, including biodiversity loss, modernization, and inadequate documentation. Ningthoujam (2013) emphasized the urgent need for community-based initiatives to document and safeguard traditional medicinal knowledge, warning that urbanization and migration are causing its rapid decline. Mao and Roy (2016) suggested the development of ethnobotanical databases and the promotion of conservation efforts through community participation as potential solutions to this issue. Their findings highlight the necessity of government policies that recognize traditional medicine as a valuable resource for improving rural healthcare. Several studies have explored the pharmacological potential of Manipur's ethnomedicinal plants. Thokchom (2018) investigated the efficacy of traditional herbal vapor therapy for liver disorders, finding that many plants used in the treatment contain bioactive compounds with hepatoprotective properties. Similarly, Bhardwaj and Talukdar (2013) emphasized the potential for drug discovery through ethnomedicinal research in Manipur, advocating for sustainable bioprospecting and the rational use of medicinal resources.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore and document the ethnomedicinal practices of Andro Village, Manipur, with a specific focus on how traditional knowledge and practices are integrated into the daily lives and healthcare systems of the *Chakpa* community. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify and document the medicinal plants traditionally used by the *Chakpa* community for treating various ailments.
2. Understand the role of traditional healers in the preservation and transmission of indigenous medical knowledge.
3. Assess the cultural significance of traditional medicine within the *Chakpa* community.
4. Investigate the potential for integrating ethnomedicinal practices into modern healthcare frameworks.
5. Evaluate the pharmacological properties of selected medicinal plants used in Andro Village through phytochemical and biological analyses.

By achieving these objectives, this study aims to contribute to the preservation of traditional medical knowledge, promote sustainable utilization of medicinal plants, and enhance the understanding of community-based healthcare practices in Manipur.

Materials and Methods

This study employed standard ethnographic research techniques, including observation, case studies, and interviews, to collect primary data. Fieldwork was conducted in the village of Andro, which was selected due to its indigenous population of the Lois of Manipur, a *Chakpa* Scheduled Caste community known for its traditional and conservative practices, including the continued use of traditional healing methods. Primary data were gathered through direct engagement with traditional health practitioners, including *maibas* (traditional healers), to understand their healing practices, treatment methods, and perceptions of common ailments. In addition to field observations and interviews, case studies were conducted to document specific instances of traditional healing practices and their outcomes. Secondary data sources were utilized to supplement primary findings and provide contextual background. These included national and international journals, magazines, newspapers, and the Census of India 2011. Archival materials, records, and relevant literature available in libraries further enriched the study. Additionally, online resources were consulted to access contemporary discussions and documentation related to traditional healing practices. The combination of these

primary and secondary sources ensured a comprehensive understanding of the subject, facilitating a thorough analysis of traditional healing methods among the Lois of Manipur.

Findings

The village of Andro in Manipur is widely recognized for its rich cultural heritage, not only for its distinctive pottery tradition but also for its well-preserved traditional healing practices. At the heart of these healing traditions are the *Maibas*, esteemed traditional healers who embody a holistic approach to healthcare by integrating medicinal plant knowledge, spiritual rituals, and social well-being into their healing methods.

Holistic Approach to Ethnomedicine - Ethnomedicine in Andro is deeply rooted in local knowledge systems, emphasizing an interconnected approach to health that considers physical, spiritual, and social dimensions. The *Maibas*, as the principal healers, employ:

- Medicinal plants to treat various ailments and diseases.
- Spiritual healing through prayers, invocations, and protective rituals.
- Ceremonial practices that maintain community health and well-being.

These elements collectively form a comprehensive indigenous healthcare system that continues to thrive in Andro.

Role of *Maibas* in Traditional Healing - The *Maibas* play a vital role in sustaining Andro's medicinal traditions. Their responsibilities extend beyond physical healing, encompassing spiritual guidance and community well-being.

1. Healing Practices - *Maibas* primarily rely on the region's biodiversity to treat various ailments using plant-based remedies. These treatments range from addressing minor injuries to managing chronic conditions such as diabetes and kidney disorders. Knowledge of medicinal plants, their preparation, and safe application is meticulously preserved and transmitted across generations, ensuring its refinement over time.

2. Spiritual Guidance - In addition to their medical expertise, *Maibas* serve as spiritual guides, conducting rituals that are believed to restore harmony and protect individuals from negative energies. These ceremonies often invoke ancestral blessings, reinforcing the community's cultural and spiritual fabric.

3. Community Healthcare Providers - As the first point of contact for many health concerns, *Maibas* play an essential role in community healthcare. Their accessibility and deep-rooted trust within the community allow them to offer preventive care, diagnosis, and treatment, particularly in areas where modern healthcare facilities are limited.

4. Bridging Traditional and Modern Medicine - In contemporary times, the role of the *Maibas* is increasingly significant as they act as intermediaries between indigenous knowledge and modern healthcare practices. By incorporating traditional remedies alongside contemporary medical advice, they contribute to a more integrated and holistic approach to health.

Transmission of Knowledge and Training - Becoming a *Maiba* is a lifelong commitment that requires rigorous training under an experienced healer. This apprenticeship-based learning process ensures that both medicinal and spiritual knowledge is accurately preserved and passed down through generations. For instance, Chinakham Bheigachandra, a 54-year-old *Maiba* from Andro, began his training under his grandfather at a young age. Over the decades, he has acquired a deep understanding of local medicinal plants, their safe usage, and complex treatment formulations tailored to specific ailments. His expertise extends beyond physical healing, as he is also entrusted with conducting essential cultural and spiritual ceremonies within the community.

Ethnobotanical Knowledge of the Chakpa Community - The *Chakpa* community, an indigenous group in Andro, possesses extensive ethnobotanical knowledge, utilizing a diverse range of medicinal plant species belonging to different genera and families. These plants, which include herbs, shrubs, trees, and climbers, form the basis of their traditional healthcare system. A comprehensive list of these medicinal plants, along with their therapeutic uses, is presented in the following table.

Table -1: Important medicinal plant species used by local people of Andro, Imphal-East District, Manipur

Sl. no.	Scientific Name	Family	Local Name / Common name	Parts use	Medicinal values/Treatment
1.	Adhatoda vasica Linn.	Acanthaceae	Nongmangkha angouba/ Malabar nut	Leaves & flower	Cough, fever, Dysentery, Tonsillitis
2.	Alocasia cucullata (Lour.) Schott	Araceae	Palukabi/Singju-pan /Chinese taro	Rhizome	Purify blood

3.	Andrographis paniculata (Burm.f.) Wall.	Acanthaceae	Bhubati King of bitters/ Andrographio	Leaves	Chronic fever
4.	Artemisia nilagirica	Asteraceae	Laibakngou/ Indian Wormwood	Root, leaf, and flower	dysentery (Eton Phaiba)
5.	Asparagus filicinus Buch. Ham.	Liliaceae	Nungarei/ Fern Asparagus	Root	Dysentery & epilepsy
6.	Cardamine hirsute (Linn.)	Brassicaceae	Chantruk-maan/ Hairy bittercress	Whole plant except root	Diuretic, better urination
7.	Calotropis gigantea (Linn.)	Asclepiadaceae	Ang-got Crown flower	Shoot	Ring worm & leprosy
8.	Cedrela toona (Roxb.)	Meliaceae	Tairen /Red – cedar	Leaves	Skin diseases & poxes
9.	Centella asiatica	Apiaceae	Peruk/ Gotu Kola	Leaves and stems	Fever, wound healing
10	Cinnamomum tamala (Buch. Ham.)	Lauraceae	Tejpata/ Indian bay leaf	Leaves	Dizziness, headache
11	Clerodendrum serratum (Linn.)	Moon Verbenaceae	MoirangKhanambi /Bayflower/bleeding heart	Leaves, stem	Fever, dysentery, asthma, bronchitis
12	Eclipta prostrata	Asteraceae	Uchi Sumbal/ False Daisy	Leaves,stem, roots	Treats liver disorders, hair growth/loos
13	Eryngium foetidum		Awa-phadigom/ Coriander	Whole plant	Arthritis
14	Gynura nepalensis DC.	Asteraceae	Terapaibi/ Ashitaba	Young stem & flower	Against stomach ulcer
15	Hedychium coronarium (J. Koenig)	Zingiberaceae	Takhellei-angouba/ White ginger lily	Rhizome	Cough,vomiting
16	Hedychium marginatum (C. B. Clarke)	Zingiberaceae	Takhellei-angangba/ Red ginger lily	Rhizome	Bronchitis & stomach ulcer
17	Iris bakeri (Chapin.)	Iridaceae	Kombirei/ Fire-bowerbird	Rhizome	Brain coolant & hysteria
18	Melothria perpusilla (Blume.)	Cucurbitaceae	Lamthabi/Creeping cucumber	Leaves & Fruit	Jaundice & kidney affection
19	Meriandra benghalensis (Roxb.) Benth.	Lamiaceae	Kanghuman/ Salvia abyssinica	Leaves	Cough, dizziness
20	Mimosa pudica (Linn.)	Mimosa pudica	Kangphal-ikaithabi /Sleepy plant	Young shoot	Piles & jaundice

21	<i>Oxalis corniculata</i> L.	Oxalidaceae	Yensil Mana/ Sorrel	Leaves	dysentery (Eton Phaiba)
22	<i>Phlogacanthus thyrsoformis</i> (Roxb.) Nees.	Acanthaceae	Nongmangkha/ Poison Berry	Leaves & flower	Fever, cough
23	<i>Plantago asiatica</i> subsp. <i>Erosa</i>	Plantaginaceae	Yempat / Asian Plantain	Leaves	Wound/boils (yairong)
24	<i>Pogostemon parviflorus</i> (Benth.)	Lamiaceae	Sangbrei/ Phangla	Leaves & root	Bleeding piles
25	<i>Polygonum posumbu</i>	Polygonaceae	Phak-pai/ Smartweed Tender	shoots & leaves	Heart beat increases
26	<i>Psophocarpus tetragonolobus</i> (Linn.) D.c	Papilionaceae	Tengnou-manbi/ Four-angled bean/ Winged bean	Young fruit	Cough
27	<i>Rhussemi alata</i> (Murr.)	Anacardiaceae	Heimang /Chinese Sumac	Fruit, leaves	Intestinal worms, hair care
28	<i>Sesbania grandiflora</i>	Papiplionaceae	Chuchu-rangmei /Agati	Young fruit	Diabetes
29	<i>Sida rhombifolia</i>	Malvaceae	U-han/ Indian hemp.	Leaves	Urinary disorder, rheumatism
30	<i>Smilax</i> (Roxb.) <i>ovalifolia</i>	Liliaceae	Kwa-mana-manbi/ Kumarika	Aerial part	Skin diseases
31	<i>Tinospora cordifolia</i>	Menispermaceae	Ninthou-khong-lee /Guduchi	Leaves	Diarrhoea& muscular sprain
32	<i>Zanthoxylum acanthopodium</i> (D.C.)	Rutaceae	Mukthruhi/ Toothache Tree	Young leaf & fruit	Fever bronchitis, cough,

Traditional Healing Practices in Andro - The village of Andro in Manipur is home to a profound and well-preserved system of traditional healing, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the community. Rooted in generational knowledge, these practices utilize locally available medicinal plants, herbs, and natural ingredients to address a wide range of ailments. The preparation of remedies often involves simple yet effective methods such as boiling, cooking, or crushing plant-based ingredients, with honey frequently incorporated for its therapeutic properties.

Common Ailments and Indigenous Treatments - The people of Andro rely on traditional medicine to treat both common and specific ailments, demonstrating an intrinsic connection between nature and healing. Some of the frequently treated conditions include:

- Respiratory ailments: Coughs, colds, and throat infections are often managed using herbal infusions and decoctions.
- Digestive disorders: Remedies for stomach aches, indigestion, and bloating include plant-based concoctions with soothing properties.
- Menstrual and reproductive health: Herbal preparations are used to alleviate menstrual discomfort and regulate cycles.
- Chronic conditions: Indigenous treatments for kidney problems, joint pain, and other long-term ailments highlight the community's expertise in herbal medicine.

These remedies not only reflect the villagers' reliance on natural resources but also underscore the effectiveness of their holistic healthcare system.

Healing Beyond the Physical: The Case of Black Magic - Beyond physical ailments, traditional healing in Andro extends to treating conditions attributed to supernatural influences, such as black magic. The case of Tennyson, a patient from Ukhrul, illustrates the deep-seated belief in spiritual afflictions and the role of Maibas in diagnosing and treating such conditions. After exhausting conventional medical treatments without success, Tennyson turned to Bheigachandra, a respected Maiba in Andro. Upon evaluation, Bheigachandra identified the illness as being caused by black magic but refrained from revealing the source. He prescribed two remedies:

1. **The Seed Treatment:** He performed rituals and provided 21 seeds of *Nung Hawai* (soybean), instructing the patient to consume one seed per day for three weeks.

2. **Herbal Infused Yu Therapy:** A traditional drink made from yu (local rice wine), infused with medicinal spices and left to soak for a week, was prescribed. The patient was advised to consume a measured amount every night before bed.

Over two weeks, the patient showed significant improvement, progressing from immobility to walking with a stick, and eventually regaining full mobility. This case underscores the therapeutic and spiritual dimensions of traditional healing, reinforcing the trust placed in Maibas for both physical and metaphysical well-being.

Cultural Significance of Rituals: The *Yelhing Thaba* Ceremony

Traditional healing in Andro is not solely limited to treating illnesses; it also encompasses ritualistic practices designed to maintain spiritual harmony within the community. One such ritual is *Yelhing Thaba*, a ceremony performed by a *Maiba* to ward off negative energies and invoke blessings.

- The ritual involves the symbolic release of a cock, signifying the removal of misfortune and the ushering in of good health and prosperity.
- Accompanied by prayers and specific ceremonial rites, this practice highlights the role of traditional healers not only as medical practitioners but also as custodians of cultural and spiritual well-being.



Picture 1: A Maiba performing *Yelhing thaba*

Sacred Rituals for Spiritual Harmony and Protection - In the village of Andro, traditional healing extends beyond herbal medicine to include ritualistic practices aimed at restoring spiritual balance and ensuring communal well-being. One such significant ritual is performed when villagers believe they are experiencing disturbances caused by malevolent spirits or divine forces. These ceremonies are deeply rooted in the Meitei belief system and are conducted to appease deities, protect households, and restore harmony within the community.

Reasons for Performing the Ritual – The ritual is primarily performed for the following reasons:

- **Lai Oknaba:** This refers to making contact with spirits or divinities believed to be responsible for causing harm or misfortune. The ceremony seeks to communicate with these entities and pacify them.
- **Yum da Lai Fattaba Chingba:** This belief suggests that evil spirits or negative energies may have entered a household, leading to illness, misfortune, or familial discord. The ritual is performed to expel these forces and cleanse the home.
- **Seeking Divine Blessings:** The ceremony is also conducted as a proactive measure to invite prosperity, protection, and the overall well-being of the village. By offering prayers and sacred items, the community believes that divine forces can be appeased, ensuring continued peace and harmony.

Ritual Components and Offerings - The ceremony requires the preparation and arrangement of sacred offerings each carrying symbolic significance. The essential items include:

- Local Yen (Cock): The central element of the ritual, believed to serve as a medium between the human and spiritual realms.
- Hei Ram Taret (Seven Types of Fruits): Representing abundance and nourishment.
- Lei Ram Taret (Seven Types of Flowers): Symbolizing purity and divine acceptance.
- Yai Yu (Locally Brewed Rice Wine): Offered as a sacred drink to appease the spirits.
- Kabok (Puffed Rice) and Cheng (Rice): Signifying sustenance and well-being.
- Thoiding (Sesame Seeds): Associated with longevity and protection from malevolent forces.

These items are meticulously arranged on a Yangkok – a flat, circular bamboo basket lined with banana leaves and is then taken to the Panam Ningthou gi Khubam, the sacred site dedicated to the village deity, Panam Ningthou, where the ritual is performed.

Interpreting the Cock's Behaviour: A Divine Message

A unique aspect of the ritual is the villagers' belief that the behaviour of the cock during the ceremony serves as a divine message. The interpretation is as follows:

- If the cock eats the offered items and then runs away – It is considered a good omen, signifying that the deities have accepted the offerings and that the village will experience peace, prosperity, and protection.
- If the cock runs away without eating the offerings – It is seen as a bad omen, indicating possible misfortune or unresolved disturbances within the community.

Discussion

The study of ethnomedicinal practices in Andro Village, Manipur, highlights the integral role of traditional healing systems within indigenous communities (Chakrabarty and Hossain, 2021). Ethnomedicine offers a holistic approach that blends medicinal, spiritual, and cultural practices, with Maibas serving as custodians of ancestral knowledge, addressing both physical and metaphysical health concerns (Yuhlung and Bhattacharyya, 2016). Unlike conventional medicine, Andro's ethnomedicine encompasses herbal remedies, cultural rituals, and spiritual healing, reflecting an indigenous perspective of health as balance rather than the absence of disease (Sindhav, 2021).

The community's extensive use of medicinal plants demonstrates their deep understanding of natural pharmacology (Rawat, 2020), though these practices are not yet scientifically validated (Thokchom, 2018). Rituals like Yelhing Thaba promote community well-being by fostering psychological resilience and social cohesion (Mishra and Singh, 2021). However, ethnomedicinal knowledge faces significant challenges due to urbanization, modern healthcare systems, and biodiversity loss (Kumar, 2019; Singh, 2020). The decline in transmission of traditional practices to younger generations threatens the continuity of this valuable knowledge (Gupta and Joshi, 2018). The commercial exploitation of indigenous knowledge without proper recognition also raises ethical concerns (Bose, 2020). To ensure the preservation of these practices, community-led conservation efforts, legal protections for indigenous knowledge, and integration with modern healthcare systems are essential (Chakrabarty and Hossain, 2021; Sharma and Bose, 2017). Ethnomedicinal knowledge is crucial for advancing holistic healthcare and safeguarding cultural sustainability (Singh and Gupta, 2019).

Conclusion

The ethnomedicinal practices of Andro Village highlight the essential role that traditional healing systems play in indigenous communities, integrating medicinal, spiritual, and cultural elements to foster holistic health. The *Maibas*, as custodians of this knowledge, provide accessible healthcare services that address both physical and metaphysical ailments, ensuring the continuity of these traditions. This study underscores the importance of documenting, scientifically validating, and conserving ethnomedicinal knowledge to bridge the gap between traditional and modern healthcare. The loss of biodiversity and the erosion of cultural practices due to urbanization pose significant threats to the sustainability of these practices, necessitating community-driven conservation efforts and policy interventions to protect indigenous flora and intellectual property.

Efforts should focus on integrating traditional healing methods into mainstream healthcare systems, offering a more inclusive, culturally sensitive approach to medical care. The establishment of ethnobotanical databases and support for ethical research are crucial for preserving this knowledge for future generations. By recognizing and safeguarding the value of ethnomedicine, both in Andro and beyond, we ensure that these healing practices remain an enduring part of

global healthcare, offering complementary solutions to contemporary medical challenges. Through collaboration between indigenous practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, we can foster a sustainable and respectful integration of traditional and modern healing systems for the benefit of all communities.

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