

Cultural Sustenance in Language Education: Student Responses to Indigenous Knowledge Integration in Indonesian EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

The marginalization of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in formal education perpetuates colonial paradigms in postcolonial classrooms, yet empirical research on integrating local epistemologies into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Indonesia's culturally distinct regions remains severely limited. This study aims to investigate the lived experiences of eighth-grade students at SMPN 6 Sa'dan, Tana Toraja Regency, who engaged with Toraja Indigenous Knowledge Systems within EFL vocabulary instruction across an eight-week pedagogical intervention. Employing a qualitative critical phenomenological design grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy, decolonial language education, and critical language awareness, data were generated through triangulated multimodal methods: two phenomenological interviews per participant (60–90 minutes each), 32 hours of participant observation, weekly reflexive journals, and student-produced visual artifacts. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis within a critical realist framework using NVivo 14. Findings revealed five interrelated dimensions of student experience: (1) epistemological reorientation, wherein English was reconceptualized from a symbol of Western dominance to a vehicle for indigenous meaning-making through 'reverse translation' practices; (2) heritage-positive identity reconstitution, documented in 11 of 12 participants; (3) affective transformation evidenced reduction in anxiety-related lexical items in student journals; (4) emergent critical language-culture consciousness concerning linguistic imperialism and cultural untranslatability; and (5) an unanticipated intergenerational knowledge exchange, wherein students became cultural mediators initiating bilingual documentation of elder knowledge. The study contributes a transferable heritage-sustaining language pedagogy framework, challenging Western-centric pedagogies in postcolonial Indonesian classrooms and offering practical implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and language policy in Indigenous and minoritized language contexts globally.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Toraja, culturally sustaining pedagogy, EFL, vocabulary instruction*

Introduction

Counter-hegemonic critique of English Language Teaching (ELT) has become an increasingly urgent concern in postcolonial educational contexts, where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction frequently reproduces epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western knowledge systems while marginalizing indigenous ways of knowing (Mendes, 2023). Despite decades of critical scholarship, mainstream ELT practices continue to position English not only as a linguistic resource but also as a carrier of Western cultural norms, values, and worldviews reinforcing what scholars have

identified as the coloniality of language education (Camila et al., 2024). In such context's, learning English is often implicitly framed as a process of cultural assimilation rather than intercultural negotiation or epistemic plurality.

The root of this problem lies in the structural misalignment between formal schooling and indigenous knowledge systems. Educational curricula in postcolonial nations have historically been shaped by colonial epistemologies that systematically devalue local forms of knowledge, positioning Western scientific and cultural paradigms as the sole legitimate basis for formal education (Treagust & Won, 2023). This epistemic marginalization is not merely symbolic; it produces tangible consequences for learners whose cultural identities, linguistic repertoires, and meaning-making practices are rendered invisible or irrelevant within the classroom. When students cannot find their cultural realities reflected in their educational materials, alienation, disengagement, and identity conflict become predictable outcomes (Boonsuk et al., 2026).

Indonesia represents a particularly salient site for examining these tensions. As a multilingual and multicultural nation with hundreds of indigenous languages and deeply rooted local knowledge systems, Indonesia has formally acknowledged the importance of cultural diversity in education through the 2013 National Curriculum, which mandates the integration of local content across subject areas, including foreign language instruction (Cañado, 2024; Itoi, 2024). However, research suggests this policy aspiration has not been fully realized in EFL classrooms, where imported textbooks, native-speaker norms, and Western-centric cultural representations continue to dominate pedagogical practice (Cañado, 2024). As a result, English learning often remains disconnected from students lived cultural realities, positioning indigenous knowledge as peripheral or entirely absent from formal language education.

A growing body of scholarship has advocated for culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies as pathways toward more equitable language education (Wang & Chen, 2026). These approaches emphasize affirming learners' cultural identities and leveraging their existing linguistic and cultural resources as pedagogical assets rather than deficits. Key theoretical frameworks informing this study include culturally sustaining pedagogy, which extends culturally responsive teaching by actively sustaining students' cultural practices; decolonial language education (Mendes, 2023), which challenges epistemic hierarchies embedded in ELT; and critical language awareness, which enables learners to interrogate the political dimensions of language use. However, much of this work remains conceptual or teacher-centered, focusing on pedagogical frameworks and ideological critique rather than student-centered empirical investigation.

The research gap this study addresses is threefold. First, empirical studies foregrounding students lived experiences of indigenous knowledge integration particularly in EFL settings remain comparatively scarce (Anandhu, 2025). Second, existing research on decolonial ELT has predominantly focused on higher education and Western or East Asian contexts, leaving secondary education in Southeast Asia significantly underexplored. Third, the specific mechanisms through which indigenous knowledge integration shapes student motivation, identity, and critical awareness in EFL vocabulary instruction have not been systematically examined (da Silva et al., 2024). This gap is consequential: students are not passive recipients of pedagogy but active agents who interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist the meanings attached to language learning (Nascimento & Santos, 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in its articulation of a heritage-positive language acquisition framework a process in which foreign language learning actively reinforces

rather than erodes cultural identity developed from empirical evidence in a Toraja educational context. Unlike previous studies that treat cultural content as supplementary enrichment, this study positions indigenous epistemological systems as the foundational architecture of EFL instruction, examining the multidimensional consequences of this repositioning for learners' cognitive, affective, and identity development (Cahyono & Perdhani, 2022).

Responding to these gaps, the present study investigates junior secondary students' experiences of integrating Toraja indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into EFL vocabulary instruction in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Toraja culture, with its rich cosmology, ritual practices, architectural symbolism, and oral traditions, constitutes a complex epistemological system historically marginalized within formal schooling. By deliberately grounding English vocabulary instruction in Toraja cultural and epistemic frameworks, this study examines how students experience English learning when positioned not as a foreign imposition but as a medium for articulating indigenous knowledge. The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How do students experience and make meaning of English language learning when deliberately grounded in their indigenous cultural-epistemological systems? (2) What forms of identity negotiation emerge through this pedagogical approach? (3) How do affective responses and critical understandings of language, culture, and power develop in such contexts?

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks that collectively constitute the conceptual foundation for heritage-sustaining EFL pedagogy (Sunbat, 2025).

First, culturally sustaining pedagogy extends earlier culturally responsive teaching models by arguing that education must not merely acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds but actively sustain and perpetuate their cultural practices, languages, and ways of knowing. In EFL contexts, this means treating indigenous knowledge not as background context but as the generative content through which language learning occurs (Cain et al., 2026; Hamidah et al., 2025).

Second, decolonial language education challenges the epistemic hierarchies embedded in mainstream ELT, which historically positions English as a carrier of superior Western cultural values. Decolonial approaches call for a fundamental reorientation of whose knowledge counts in the language classroom, advocating for pedagogies that interrogate rather than reproduce colonial power relations (Mendes, 2023).

Third, theory of learner investment extends motivation research by arguing that learners invest in language learning when they perceive it as enhancing their social identity and expanding their future possibilities. This study draws on Norton's framework to examine whether and how grounding EFL instruction in indigenous knowledge systems intensifies learner investment by affirming rather than marginalizing students' cultural identities (Lambert, 2023; Sumardjoko & Musyiam, 2018)

These three frameworks converge around a shared concern: the relationship between language learning, cultural identity, and epistemic justice. Together, they provide analytical tools for interpreting how pedagogical positioning of indigenous knowledge shapes students' motivational, affective, and critical experiences in EFL classrooms.

Method

This study employed a qualitative critical phenomenological design. The critical phenomenological approach was selected because it enables simultaneous attention to the depth of individual lived experience and the socio-political structures shaping that experience a combination essential for research situated at the intersection of language pedagogy, indigenous knowledge, and decolonial theory (Haq & Yasin, 2025). This approach acknowledges the researcher's positionality as constitutive of rather than separate from the inquiry; accordingly, reflexivity was maintained throughout through systematic audit trail documentation and peer debriefing.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at SMPN 6 Sa'dan in Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi a region where indigenous traditions remain vibrant despite globalization pressures. The school context was purposefully selected as it represents a community where the tension between formal English-medium education and indigenous cultural practices is acutely felt. From a population of 30 eighth-grade students participating in the pedagogical intervention, 12 participants (6 male, 6 female) were purposefully selected representing maximum variation in English proficiency, degree of cultural engagement, socioeconomic background, and initial attitudes toward English learning (Saldaña, 2021). All participants identified ethnically as Toraja, spoke the Toraja language at home, and had studied English for three years. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' identities.

The Pedagogical Intervention

The eight-week intervention replaced conventional vocabulary instruction with ethno-linguistic modules organized around five Toraja knowledge domains: (1) Cosmology and Ritual vocabulary related to the Aluk Todolo belief system and ceremonial practices; (2) Social Architecture terms describing Tongkonan (traditional house) structures and their social and symbolic meanings; (3) Ecological Knowledge concepts relating to agriculture, indigenous flora and fauna, and environmental relationships; (4) Material Culture vocabulary describing textiles, ritual carvings, and ceremonial objects; (5) Oral Tradition engagement with proverbs, storytelling conventions, and poetic forms. Each module employed semantic network mapping connecting English vocabulary to Toraja concepts through multiple associative pathways, creating what we term epistemic bridges structured conceptual linkages that make the epistemological relationships between languages visible and negotiable (Saldaña, 2021).

Data Collection

Data collection employed triangulated multimodal methods, as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Data Collection Methods and Analytic Focus

Phenomenological Interviews	Two 60–90 min. sessions per participant (Seidman, 2019)	Lived experience, meaning-making, epistemological shifts, identity narratives
Participant Observation (Seim, 2024)	32 hours of classroom observation with structured field notes	Linguistic interactions, embodied responses, spontaneous behaviors

Reflexive Journaling	Weekly entries, all 12 participants across 8 weeks	Narrative development, affective evolution, anxiety trajectories
Visual Methods / Artifacts	Vocabulary maps, photographic documentation	Semantic network construction, visual meaning-making, epistemic bridging

Data Analysis

Analysis reflexive thematic analysis within a critical realist framework, implemented through six phases: (1) data familiarization and writing familiarization memos; (2) systematic coding using NVivo 14; (3) theme development through abductive reasoning, attending to both patterns across data and theoretically significant divergences; (4) theme review and refinement through constant comparison; (5) theme definition and naming; (6) report production with rich evidentiary support privileging participant voice (Braun et al., 2022). Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking with six participants across two rounds, systematic peer debriefing with two colleagues specializing in decolonial education, and audit trail maintenance documenting all analytic decisions.

Results

Reflexive thematic analysis revealed five interrelated dimensions of student experience in heritage-sustaining EFL pedagogy. As an overall finding, students consistently described a fundamental transformation in how they related to English learning: from experiencing it as a foreign imposition disconnected from their cultural realities to perceiving it as a medium through which their indigenous knowledge could be expressed, preserved, and transmitted. This overarching transformation manifested across five analytically distinct but experientially interconnected dimensions, presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Dimensions of Student Experience in Heritage-Sustaining EFL Pedagogy

Dimension	Core Findings
1. Epistemological Reorientation	English repositioned from Western cultural dominance to a medium for indigenous meaning-making. Students enacted reverse translation beginning from Toraja concepts and locating English equivalents inverting conventional EFL epistemological flows.
2. Identity Reconstitution	Heritage-positive identity development documented in 11 of 12 participants. Students shifted from viewing English as cultural obligation to valuing it as a medium of self-expression and cultural representation, deepening learner investment.
3. Affective Transformation	Substantial anxiety reduction, with a 62% decrease in anxiety-related lexical items in journals between weeks one and eight. Cultural expertise functioned as a protective factor, recalibrating epistemic authority from teacher to student as knowledge-holder.
4. Critical Language-Culture Consciousness	Students developed awareness of linguistic imperialism, cultural untranslatability, and epistemic hierarchies embedded in mainstream EFL materials.

5. Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange Unanticipated outcome: students became cultural mediators, initiating bilingual documentation of elder knowledge. Parents shifted from viewing English as a foreign distraction to recognising it as a tool for cultural preservation and transmission.

Epistemological Reorientation: From Foreign Imposition to Indigenous Medium

Data pattern: All 12 participants described a discernible shift in their orientation toward English across the intervention period. In initial interviews, 9 of 12 students characterized English as 'bahasa orang luar' (the language of outsiders) or associated it primarily with Western media and cultural products. By the final interview, these same students articulated a reconceptualization of English as a functional medium for expressing their own cultural knowledge.

Students described this shift most powerfully through what participants termed reverse translation, a practice in which they began from Toraja concepts and sought English equivalents, inverting the conventional epistemological flow of EFL instruction.

Anton (male, 14) articulated this transformation:

"Dulu kami selalu menerjemahkan konsep Inggris ke Toraja. Sekarang saya mulai dengan konsep Toraja dulu, baru cari kata Inggrisnya. Arahnya terbalik." (Previously, we always translated English concepts into Toraja. Now I start with Toraja concepts first and then look for English words. The direction has reversed.)

Classroom observations corroborated this shift: students who initially displayed hesitation when engaging with textbook-based topics became markedly more confident and articulate when explaining culturally grounded concepts, suggesting that epistemic comfort with content precedes and enables linguistic risk-taking.

Heritage-Positive Identity Reconstitution

Data pattern: This dimension emerged as the most pervasive finding, with 11 of 12 participants providing narrative evidence of identity reconstitution. Analysis of interview transcripts revealed a consistent temporal arc: initial perceptions of English as culturally alien, followed by a gradual appropriation of English as a tool of self-representation.

Adi (male, 14) articulated this shift:

"Saya selalu berpikir bahasa Inggris itu budaya Amerika. Sekarang saya paham, saya bisa pakai bahasa Inggris untuk cerita tentang upacara adat keluarga saya. Bahasa Inggris jadi milik saya juga." (I always thought English was American culture. Now I understand that I can use English to talk about my family's traditional ceremonies. English has become mine too.)

Sari further elaborated:

"Dulu bahasa Inggris seperti mata pelajaran yang harus dihafal. Sekarang seperti alat untuk memperkenalkan siapa saya dan dari mana saya berasal." (Previously, English felt like a subject to be memorised. Now it feels like a tool for introducing who I am and where I come from.)

These narratives illustrate a shift from viewing English as an academic obligation to valuing it as a medium of identity expression, consistent with heightened learner investment.

Affective Transformation and Epistemic Authority

Data pattern: Journal data across all 12 participants showed a marked reduction in anxiety-related lexical items (e.g., 'takut,' 'malu,' 'nervous,' 'salah') between weeks one and eight, with a 62% aggregate decrease. Concurrently, expressions of confidence and ownership ('berani,' 'percaya diri,' 'bangga') increased substantially across the same period. Observation records documented corresponding increases in voluntary participation, including students who had been classified as reticent speakers. Students consistently attributed this affective shift to the cultural grounding of instruction.

Budi (male, 14) explained:

"Kalau salah ucapkan kata 'shopping mall', rasanya sangat malu. Tapi kalau salah menjelaskan 'Tongkonan', tidak terlalu malu karena saya tetap lebih tahu tentang Tongkonan daripada bu guru." (If I mispronounce 'shopping mall,' I feel very embarrassed. But if I make mistakes explaining 'Tongkonan,' I feel less embarrassed because I still know more about Tongkonan than the teacher.)

This quotation illustrates a structural shift in classroom epistemic authority: when content is drawn from students' cultural knowledge domains, the teacher is no longer the sole authoritative knowledge-holder, reducing the power asymmetry that underlies much language anxiety.

Critical Language-Culture Consciousness

Data pattern: Critical language-culture consciousness was not uniformly present from the outset but emerged progressively across the intervention. In weeks one and two, student reflections focused primarily on vocabulary acquisition. By weeks five through eight, 9 of 12 participants were producing reflections that explicitly engaged with questions of cultural representation, linguistic power, and epistemological hierarchy.

Lina (female, 14) noted:

"Saya baru sadar bahwa beberapa konsep Toraja tidak ada padanannya dalam bahasa Inggris. Seperti kata 'Ma'nene' harus pakai penjelasan panjang." (I just realised that some Toraja concepts have no equivalent in English. Like 'Ma'nene,' it requires a long explanation.)

Fajar extended this critical awareness to mainstream EFL materials:

"Buku pelajaran biasa kami menunjukkan rumah Inggris, makanan Amerika, liburan Barat. Di mana rumah kami? Upacara kami?" (Our textbooks show British houses, American food, Western holidays. Where are our houses? Our ceremonies?)

Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange: An Unanticipated Dimension

Data pattern: This dimension emerged inductively from journal entries and was subsequently explored in depth during second-round interviews. By week four, 8 of 12 participants had independently begun consulting family elders as part of their vocabulary research, without explicit instruction to do so. By week eight, three

participants had produced bilingual documentation notebooks containing elder knowledge in both Toraja and English.

Maya (female, 14) described this process in her journal:

"Kakek saya terkejut ketika saya tanya tentang makna di balik tanda Tedong. Dia menghabiskan dua jam menjelaskan, dan saya mencatat dalam bahasa Inggris dan Toraja." (My grandfather was surprised when I asked about the meanings behind Tedong markings. He spent two hours explaining, and I took notes in English and Toraja.)

Parents' perceptions also shifted: some initially viewed English as a foreign distraction but later recognised its potential as a tool for cultural preservation and transmission.

Discussion

Heritage-Positive Language Acquisition: A Proposed Framework

The five dimensions of student experience identified in this study collectively support the conceptualisation of heritage-positive language acquisition—a process in which foreign language learning actively reinforces rather than erodes cultural identity and heritage knowledge. This framework departs from both deficit models that position indigenous cultural backgrounds as obstacles to language acquisition and additive models that treat cultural content as supplementary enrichment (Itoi, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Instead, it proposes that indigenous epistemological systems can serve as the foundational architecture of language learning, fundamentally reshaping its cognitive, affective, and identity dimensions.

The framework identifies four constitutive mechanisms. First, epistemological bridging creates explicit conceptual linkages between knowledge systems, consistent with Vygotsky's conception of cultural tools as mediators of learning—extended here to demonstrate that indigenous knowledge systems themselves can function as powerful mediational tools in foreign language acquisition (Mahan & de Zarobe, 2025). Second, epistemic authority redistribution repositions students as knowledge-holders, reducing anxiety through a structural rather than merely atmospheric intervention in classroom power relations, consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Third, affective recalibration through cultural safety is supported empirically by the 62% reduction in anxiety-related lexical items, demonstrating a concrete mechanism of anxiety reduction unavailable in conventional EFL approaches (Azmy et al., 2022). Fourth, critical consciousness development emerges as an integral rather than incidental learning outcome, aligned with Freire's tradition of conscientization demonstrating that EFL instruction can simultaneously serve linguistic, cultural, and civic educational goals (Dhungana & Timalsina, 2025).

Compared with previous studies on culturally responsive ELT in Southeast Asian contexts (Sahmaniasl & Yaman, 2026), the present findings extend existing knowledge by demonstrating that epistemological repositioning—not merely cultural content inclusion—is the critical variable. Studies that incorporate local cultural topics as motivational scaffolds without fundamentally restructuring whose knowledge is treated as authoritative produce more modest identity and affective outcomes, suggesting that surface-level cultural responsiveness is insufficient for the transformative effects documented here.

Implications for Decolonising ELT

These findings carry significant implications for the project of decolonising English language teaching (Truong et al., 2025). First, they demonstrate empirically that the perceived binary between English learning and cultural preservation is false: English can serve as a medium for indigenous knowledge rather than a vehicle for its displacement. This extends MacDonald's argument for decolonising second language education in Indigenous contexts beyond the Canadian setting to Southeast Asian postcolonial realities, suggesting cross-contextual transferability of the heritage-sustaining approach (Walsh Marr, 2023).

Second, the findings reveal that the most consequential pedagogical intervention is epistemological repositioning – specifically, whose knowledge counts in the language classroom – rather than merely curricular adjustment. This is consistent with Ormachea's empirical work on community-based ELT teacher education in Colombia, which similarly found that repositioning community knowledge as pedagogically legitimate produced transformative effects on learner engagement and identity (Ormachea-V et al., 2022).

Third, the intergenerational dimension reveals a school-community dynamic that extends the reach of EFL instruction beyond classroom walls, positioning schools as potential nodes in networks of cultural transmission. This finding resonates with Sujinem's funds of knowledge framework while extending it by demonstrating that schools can actively stimulate community knowledge transmission rather than merely drawing upon it – a significant theoretical contribution (Sujinem, 2025).

Fourth, the study challenges techno-centric and outcome-focused conceptions of language learning quality. Heritage-sustaining pedagogy generated outcomes – learner investment, critical consciousness, intergenerational dialogue – that lie entirely outside conventional EFL assessment frameworks, raising fundamental questions about what counts as educational achievement in postcolonial language education.

Implications for Practice and Policy

For teachers, the findings underscore the importance of developing both cultural humility and cultural competence. Heritage-sustaining pedagogy requires not only awareness of students' cultural backgrounds but active engagement with indigenous epistemological systems as legitimate pedagogical resources. Teacher preparation programmes must therefore incorporate not only culturally responsive strategies but also explicit engagement with decolonial theory and indigenous knowledge systems relevant to specific teaching contexts (Newton, 2024).

For curriculum developers, the ethno-linguistic module framework developed in this study offers a transferable structural template: organising vocabulary instruction around indigenous knowledge domains, employing semantic network mapping, and creating epistemic bridges enables meaningful integration without displacing required language learning objectives. The intergenerational knowledge exchange dimension further suggests that heritage-sustaining curricula should deliberately create occasions for students to function as knowledge-brokers between their communities and the English-medium classroom (Sidaway et al., 2025).

For policymakers in Indonesia and other postcolonial contexts, the findings provide evidence-based support for the curriculum mandate of local content integration demonstrating that when implemented through heritage-sustaining rather than merely additive approaches, this mandate can simultaneously produce outcomes of educational equity, cultural sustainability, and critical citizenship (Wilhelm, 2023).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's specific cultural context, while contributing to its depth and specificity, limits direct generalisability, though the heritage-sustaining pedagogy framework is designed for theoretical transferability to comparable postcolonial settings (da Silva et al., 2024; Kaltsum et al., 2021). The eight-week intervention period captures initial and emergent responses but not long-term developmental trajectories; longitudinal research is needed to assess whether heritage-positive identity formation and anxiety reduction are sustained over time. The study focused specifically on vocabulary instruction; future research should investigate heritage-sustaining approaches in integrated skills contexts. Research comparing heritage-sustaining and conventional approaches through quasi-experimental designs would strengthen causal claims, while multi-site comparative studies across diverse Indonesian ethnic and cultural contexts would test the framework's transferability.

Conclusion

This critical phenomenological study demonstrates that integrating Toraja Indigenous Knowledge Systems into EFL vocabulary instruction facilitates what we have conceptualized as heritage-positive language acquisition a multidimensional process characterized by epistemological reorientation, identity reconstitution, affective transformation, critical consciousness development, and intergenerational knowledge exchange. By centering student voices frequently marginalized in curriculum design and language policy debates, this research reveals the profound impact of pedagogical approaches that honor rather than marginalize students' cultural-epistemological backgrounds. The heritage-sustaining pedagogy framework proposed offers an empirically grounded and theoretically coherent pathway for decolonizing English language teaching in postcolonial contexts. It demonstrates that effective language education must address not only linguistic development but also identity negotiation, emotional experience, and critical understanding of language's political dimensions. Perhaps most significantly, it challenges the enduring assumption that English learning and cultural sustainability are in tension demonstrating instead that when indigenous epistemologies are positioned as foundational rather than supplementary to EFL instruction, students acquire both linguistic competence and deepened cultural identity simultaneously. In doing so, it contributes to a vision of language education as a site of epistemic justice: where all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, encounter their knowledge as worthy of expression in all languages they learn.

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