## THE CULTURAL IDENTITY ISSUES OF THE 19TH CENTURY ABKHAZIA

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**Abstract:** The cultural values of the nation, traditions, symbols, folklore, myths and legends, constitute the collective memory of this society. These values, created by educational and cultural centers, express the leading aspirations of the nation that created them and play a special role in shaping the identity of nations.

The cultural identity of the population of Abkhazia rested on centuries-old traditions of Georgian-Abkhaz historical coexistence. This determined the fact that Abkhazia had remained a part of the all-Georgian cultural and historical universe. Since the end of the 17th century, when local Christian cultural and educational centers were liquidated in Abkhazia, cultural life in Abkhazia was supported only by the church centers of the Principality of Samegrelo (Odishi). Throughout the 19th century, the House of the Abkhaz principals was the center of the cultural life of Abkhazia. Even after the abolition of the Abkhaz principality (1864), representatives of the former ruling dynasty and people close to them determined the main aspects of social and cultural life. Above this, the history of the cultural life of Abkhazia of the 19th and early 20th centuries knows many prominent Georgians and Abkhazians, who great contributed to the creation of the cultural identity.

The history of the cultural life of Abkhazia in the 19th and early 20th centuries reflects the main aspirations and characteristics of the cultural identity of the Abkhazian population: the establishment of new educational and cultural centers, close ties and cooperation with the progressive society of Tbilisi.

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Abkhazia, Georgians, Abkhazians, Abkhazian Script, Georgian Theological Schools of Abkhazia.

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The famous identity theorist Anthony David Smith considers ethnic and national identities as models of cultural identity. In turn, cultural identity is the basis of ethnic and national identity. [Smith, Anthony D. (2010): 85-93] Cultural values of this or that nation are traditions, symbols, folklore, myths and legends, in which the collective memory of this society is reflected. The values created by the educational and cultural centers, which express the leading aspirations of the nation that created it, play a special role in the formation of the identity of nations.

From the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the local Christian cultural and educational centers were dismantled in Abkhazia and the area was emptied of clergymen, there was virtually no cultural and educational activity here. From that time on, only the ecclesiastical centers of Samegrelo (Odishi) Princedom were maintaining the cultural life

in Abkhazia. They were teaching the residents from Abkhazia (Abkhazs and Georgians) literacy, scripture, geography, astronomy, arithmetic, hagiography, hymnography, etc. It was based on centuries-old traditions of Georgian-Abkhaz historical coexistence, which, despite the pressure from the highlanders and the strengthening of Ottoman influence, was not completely eradicated. This determined the fact that Abkhazia had remained a part of the all-Georgian cultural and historical universe. This is evidenced by the written sources left by the Principals of Abkhazia, Abkhaz and Georgian nobility, and the representatives of the lower social circles: The official documents, letters, donations, complaints and rulings, tombstone epitaphs, etc. All of them are written in Georgian. There were also some family schools and also an ecclesiastical school near the Ilori Church, where Georgian literacy and other fields of literature were taught. [Lia Akhaladze (2021): 202-210]

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the house of Abkhazia's principals was the center of the cultural life in Abkhazia. Even after the abolition of the Abkhazian Princedom (1864). the representatives of the former ruling house and persons closely related to them were determining the main aspects of social and cultural life. The activities of Giorgi (Safar-Sharvashidze. Mikheil Sharvashidze, Constantine Sharvashidze, Sharvashidze, Solomon Zvamba, Dimitri Machavariani, and clergymen such as Ioané Ioseliani, Alexandre Okropiridze, Gabriel Kikodze, Ambrosi Khelaia, Kyrion Sadzaglishvili, Ivané Gegia, and others should be especially mentioned. It is known that in 1810 the archpriest of the Zugdidi temple and the court priest of the Abkhaz principality Ioané Ioseliani officially tried to open a religious school in the village of Likhni, the center of the Abkhaz principality, with the support of Giorgi (Safar Bey) Sharvashidze, a representative of the House of Abkhaz princes. [ACAC (1875): 850-851] This was the first attempt to establish an ecclesiastical school in Abkhazia.

The transformation of Sokhumi into the cultural and educational center of Abkhazia began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, after the foundation of the first Ecclesiastical and secular schools. Giorgi (Safar-bey) Sharvashidze's children, Mikheil, Constantine and Alexander, had a good Georgian education which was ensured by their mother *Tamar Dadiani* (sister *Grigol Dadiani*, the Samegrelo Principal). This tradition was carried on by the family of Mikheil, whose spouse was Alexandra (Tsutsa) Dadiani, a representative of the side branch of the Samegrelo Princely House and the granddaughter of Niko Dadiani, known as the Great Niko.

Georgian was the main language of culture and education in 19th century Abkhazia. This is validated by the Russian scholars and travellers of the first half of the 19th century. [Seleznyov (1847): 206] Their works contain a lot of information about artifacts decorated with Georgian *Asomtavruli inscriptions* in the 19th century Abkhazia. As an illustration, Georgian inscriptions are on the icons commissioned by Mikheil Sharvashidze in 1829 and 1848, and donated to the Lukhuni (Likhni) Temple. It should be noted that the correspondence of Mikheil Sharvashidze with the Russian authorities and family members was conducted in Georgian. Letters of the Principal's family members were also written in an exemplary Georgian. Simon Janashia, observing the form and style of Mikheil Sharvashidze's correspondence, concludes that "such function of the Georgian language was the result of the centuries-old cultural and historical development of the country of Abkhazia". [Janashia (1988): 35] Besides the official

documents and epistolary legacy of Giorgi (Safar Bey) Sharvashidze and Mikheil Sharvashidze, the Russian General Kotzebue confirms the widespread use of the Georgian language at Mikheil Sharvashidze's court: "Georgian was the written language used by the family of the Princes Sharvashidze'. [Papaskiri (2010); Papaskiri (2016): 412] On top, it should be also mentioned that Mikheil Sharvashidze, the last prince of Abkhazia, and his wife Alexandra Dadiani's the tombstone epitaphs in the Mokvi Cathedral are crafted in Georgian Asomtavruli script. [Bgazhba Kh. (1967): 32-33; Silogava (2004): 298-301] Also in Georgian are the tombstone epitaphs of nobleman Mikheil Marshania in the same temple [Bgazhba Kh. (1967): 31; Silogava (2004): 302-303] and diverse tombstone epitaphs of Gali Municipality. Among the latter, the tomb epitaphs of the noblewoman Salome Anchabadze and her husband Kiazo Emkhvari deserve special attention. [Akhaladze (2006): 208-212]

Also noteworthy is Constantine Sharvashidze, the younger brother of Mikheil Sharvashidze. Although Constantine Sharvashidze was educated in the Corps of Pages in St. Petersburg, he was close to the Georgian aristocratic circles and shared their views. This is evidenced by his participation in the conspiracy of 1832 with the aim of restoring the state independence of Georgia. [Potto (1894): 25-26] As it is seen from the testimony of one of the conspirators, Constantine Sharvashidze enjoyed great authority among them. He was talking ecstatically about freedom and claimed that he "could mount an uprising in Abkhazia, and clear Abkhazia from the Russians with two thousand Abkhazs." In addition, it is believed that he planned to send to Tbilisi in the first days of the uprising, according to some sources, 300 armed Abkhazians, and according to other sources. [Gozalishvili (1970): 363-364] Because of his participation in the 1832 conspiracy, Constantine Sharvashidze was banished from Georgia [ACAC (1847): 410] and was allowed to return only from 1858 (he lived mainly in Kutaisi and Tbilisi). This period is associated with his active involvement in the process of creating the first Abkhazian alphabet.

It is known that Abkhazian was a spoken language. The Russian government decided to create an Abkhazian script in the 1860s. The creation of the Abkhazian script is connected with the name of General Peter von Uslar, who composed the Abkhazian alphabet on the basis of Cyrillic script in 1862. [Gvantseladze T. (2009): 11] The same year, the Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus set up in Tbilisi a special commission headed by General Ivan Bartolomeito compile the first textbook of the Abkhazian alphabet for Abkhazian parish schools. The members of the commission were the well-known Georgian historian Dimitri Purtseladze, who at that time was in charge of the affairs of the Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity, and *Vladimir Trirogov*, the Special Representative of the Caucasus Viceroy, graduate of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at St. Petersburg University and an expert in Oriental languages. Moreover, residents of Abkhazia, such as Priest Ioané Gegia, officer Georgy Kurtsikidze and Simeon Eshba took an active part in the creation of the alphabet. Beside this, the Abkhaz text was first reviewed and corrected by Constantine Sharvashidze in 1863, and then by Grigol Sharvashidze in 1864. Thus, this text was twice revised and corrected. According to their suggestion, the Bzipi pronunciation of the Abkhazian language, which was used in the book at first, was changed to the common Abkhazian pronunciation. [Gyantseladze T. (2012)]

The creation of the Cyrillic-based Abkhazian alphabet by P. von Uslar was highly criticized. It was believed that Georgian graphics better reflected the phonemes of Abkhazian sounds. [Charaia, Petre (1907)] This fact was acknowledged by Peter von Uslar himself [Gamakharia and Gogia (1997): 353]. Uslar stated: "The Georgian alphabet system can be taken as the basis of a common alphabet for all Caucasian languages that are not written languages yet; But if we borrow from Georgians not only the alphabet system, but also the outline of the letters, we will unintentionally create difficulties, which will be even more noticeable as the Russian literacy spreads more in the Caucasus" [Uslar (1887): 48-49].

Even the Abkhaz nationalists believed that the Russian Empire was trying to separate the Abkhazs from the kindred peoples. [Ashkhatsava (1925): 37-38] The Abkhazian script was created solely for political reasons and aimed both the isolation of the Abkhazs from the Georgian cultural universe and the preparation of their Russification through the use of Russian graphics and the Russian language. [Gvantseladze (2009): 212] Although at that time this alphabet could not be used properly, and neither the Abkhazian primary school nor the Abkhazian literature could be established on its basis, this fact gave some expectations to the Abkhaz community that they would have their own script and via this, opportunity to develop new spheres of culture.

Georgian missionaries of the Georgian Exarchate played a special role in the cultural life of Abkhazia and in the survival of the Abkhaz ethnos in general. Their activities contributed to the institutional development of education and culture in Abkhazia. The establishment of the first educational and cultural institutions is connected with their names. The first was the Okumi Parish School, which was opened for the children of nobles by *David Machavariani*, a graduate of the Tbilisi Theological Seminary, in 1851. Soon the gifted children of peasants also were able to join the school. There was a library near Okumi school, which was opened by Ivané Gegia with his own funds. [Sakhokia (1985): 333-335]

It is alleged that the Okumi School for a long time was the only one among the schools and parochial schools of the Orthodox Christian Restoration Society in the Caucasus. [Dudko (1956): 3] However, there is evidence that other unofficial schools were already operated in Abkhazia, namely, in Likhni and Ilori, before 1851-1852. [Gamakharia (2006): 67; Dudko (1956): 20] In accordance to the archival sources, the Georgian Exarch awarded Bishop Alexandre Okropiridze on May 8, 1852 for establishing a school for the children in Ilori. The documents show that the pupils were ready to enter the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in 1852 and their achievements had been already substantial. Based on the documents, we can presume that the Ilori school started its functioning no earlier than 1850 and no later than May 1851 [CHAG: 18] As for the Likhni ecclesiastical school, it was officially established on September 25, 1852 and subordinated to Alexandre Okropiridze, the supervisor of the Abkhazian Theological School. The Russian scholar A. Dudko also mentions the establishment of schools at churches and monasteries in Abkhazia, namely in Bedia, Saberio, Dikhazurga, and Gudava. [Dudko (1956): 20]

In a short time new schools started to operate in Samurzakano and Abkhazia. For example, there were 11 schools in Samurzakano (Okumi, Dikhazurga, Bedia, Gudava, Tagiloni, I and II Saberio, Barghebi, Nabakevi, Chuburkhindji, Pakhulani) by 1868.

Bishop Alexandre Okropiridze donated 200 rubles from his own salary to the Ilori school, which as well continued its functioning [Gamakharia (2005): 457]

In 1863, a school for highlanders was opened in Sokhumi, calculated for 20 boys, consisted of 15 places for the children of the Abkhaz nobles and 5 places for the children of Russian officials. The education would last four years. [Gulia (1962): 140] For years, the school superintendent was *Constantine Machavariani* (son of *David Machavariani*, the founder of the Okumi School). The Sokhumi Highlanders' School was the largest educational institution in Abkhazia [Tarba (1964): 10]

According to the material published in the newspaper "Kavkaz" on 1 June 1866, the local Russian administration established the women's school in Sokhumi on 3 March 1866. There, among others, were enrolled five Abkhazs.. [Papaskiri (2004): 216-217] In 1870, the second women's school for the Abkhaz girls – a Progymnasium – had been opened in Sokhumi. [Dudko (1956): 40] The establishment of the Highlanders' School and the women's Progymnasium only for the children of the Abkhaz and Russian civil servants, unequivocally indicates the imperial goal to divide the local community and gradually establish its own foothold for the full domination in the region.

By 1917, there were about 79 schools in Abkhazia with 3,407 students. [Dudko (1956): 309-328]. The foundation of the Sokhumi branch of the Society for the Propagation of Literacy among Georgians considerably contributed to the institutional development of education in Abkhazia. The idea of creating a Sokhumi branch arose during the stay of Ilya Chavchavadze in Abkhazia. Ilia Chavchavadze was invited to Gagra by Duke Alexander von Oldenburg and he arrived there in May of 1903. From there Ilia Chavchavadze went to Sokhumi. On May 24 he was warmly welcomed by the Georgian society of Sokhumi (by the initiative of Tedo Sakhokia) in Alexander Sharvashidze's house. [Gelenava (2011): 370] Interestingly, it was after Ilia Chavchavadze's toast at the official dinner that one of the young guests asked him, as chairman of the Society for the Propagation of Literacy Among Georgians, to petition for the opening of a branch of this society in Sokhumi. Nonetheless, the Branch establishment, as well as opening the school took couple years. This idea was brought to life in 1909 when Niko Tavdgiridze, one of the well-known public figures, wrote the petition on behalf of the Sokhumi Georgians. Ultimately, in 1910, the Sokhumi branch of the Society for the Propagation of Literacy among Georgians was established. Among its functioning members were such public figures as Antimoz Jugheli, Niko Tavdgiridze, Sachino Ioseliani, Niko Janashia, and remarkably, Mariam Dadiani-Anchabadze, a female activist, was Chairman of the Board. [Kvaratskhelia (2009): 41] The number of members grew to 355 in 1913. Soon the branch had its own schools in Sokhumi, Gudauta, and Gali. There were also small schools in the villages. Of particular note is the founding of the People's University in 1911 on the initiative of the population of Sokhumi, which in the first instance had about 40 students. At this university, classes lasted 5 days a week, and it is noteworthy that Georgian literacy is taught here. [Newspaper Sakhalkho Gazeti (1911)]

One of the prominent figures in the cultural and educational life of Abkhazia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Niko Janashia. Succeeding establishment of the society's Sokhumi branch, at the request of the board, Niko Janashia was invited as a teacher of the Georgian school and he started working there from 1910 until his death. Along with other

public figures, such as Antimoz Jugheli, Alexandre Sharvashidze, and Andria Chochua, he made a great contribution to the creation of a seminary in Abkhazia. The four-year seminary was open on 1 July 1915 and from 1917 it was supervised by *Alexandre Giorgobiani*, a graduate of Moscow University. [Gelenava (2000): 38-40]

Studying the history of the culture of Abkhazia of this period, it is necessary to mention prominent Georgian and Abkhaz public figures. Among them who greatly influenced the cultural life of the region we should single out *Giorgi Sharvashidze*, the son of the last Principal of Abkhazia *Mikhail Sharvashidze* and the heir to the throne. Giorgi Sharvashidze, with his works and activities as a poet, playwright, novelist, essayist, and theatre critic, was an integral part of the all-Georgian culture. He referred to Georgia as "our homeland Iveria" and considered Abkhazia as an organic part of this Iveria (Georgia). Shalva Inal-ipa, the well-known Abkhaz scholar, correctly stated that he "was striving to restore the historical unity of two kindred peoples — Georgians and Abkhazs." [Inal-ipa (1973): 8]

Giorgi Sharvashidze had a special relationship with the newly formed community of theatre-lovers in Abkhazia, which later became the basis for the establishment of a drama theatre. Theatrical performances began in Sokhumi in the 1880s and the Sokhumi theatrical circle started managing the first performances. Thus, Sokhumi drew attention of not only the Abkhaz, but also of the Georgian theatrical community in general. Soon the drama group was formed in Sokhumi. Its inspirers were ladies from the Sharvashidze and the Anchabadze families: *Mariam, Aghati,* and *Terezia Sharvashidze,* and *Mariam (Masho) Dadiani-Anchabadze.* At first, the income from the theatrical performances was used for charity. The money was spent on schools and hospitals, or given to the poor and students. In 1885, the Sokhumi theatre-lovers society performed the first play in Georgian before the audience. From 1886, *Lado Meskhishvili* began his collaboration with the Sokhumi theatre-lovers society. He had special relations with the Sokhumi Theatre. [Paghava (1941)]

In 1894, "The Georgian Koro" ("The Georgian Choir"), the first professional ensemble of the Georgian song (founded on November 15, 1886), successfully conducted its performances in Sokhumi. It was led by Czech singer Ioseb Ratil (Navratil), the lead singer of Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Theatre, who was immensely in love with Georgian folk song. In 1897, Alexandre Kavsadze, the famous choirmaster, visited Sokhumi and performed with great success on the stage of the Sokhumi Theatre. [Newspape Iveria (1897)]

Sokhumi and Sokhumi Drama Theatre are closely connected with the name of *Shalva Dadiani*, the famous Georgian writer, playwright, and a theatrical figure. His active theatrical activities and acting career began in Sokhumi. Since 1912, Shalva Dadiani managed to establish a semi-professional theater in Sokhumi. There were several professional actors including *Elo Andronikashvili, Vaso Agulishvili, later Evelina Tsutsunava* and *David Kobakhidze* in the Georgian troupe. The troupe diligently colluded with *Dzuku Lolua's* choir.

Accompanying with the Georgian theatre, the Abkhazian theatre was also created in the 1910s. On the initiative of Dimitri Gulia, in 1918, an Abkhazian literary-dramatic circle was established in Sokhumi, headed by Anton Shakaia. The first Abkhazian-language performance under the direction of local theatre-lover Platon Shakril was held

in Ochamchire in 1918. [Georgian Soviet Encyclopaedia (1985)] When talking about the formation and development of theatrical art in Abkhazia, it is impossible not to recall the first Abkhazian professional artist *Alexandre Sharvashidze*. He was educated at the Moscow Higher School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. He was a graphic artist, painter, scenographer, and art critic and theorist. He worked in St. Petersburg and Paris Theatres. In 1918 he returned to Sokhumi and as a theatre artist he also contributed to the development of theatrical art in Abkhazia. In 1918, at the initiative of A. Sharvashidze, a children's art studio was opened in the building of the Sokhumi Women's Gymnasium, where he gave drawing lessons. [Shervashidze (1961)] He was invited to Europe in 1920 and has lived in Europe since 1921, but he donated about 500 works to the museums of Tbilisi and Sokhumi in 1958. [Shervashidze-Chachba, 2011]

It noteworthy to mention that *Solomon Zvanba*, an Abkhaz military man, scientist and ethnographer, had a great influence on the formation and development of modern Abkhaz culture. He was educated in St. Petersburg and served in the Honorable Regiment. He spent seven years in Russia and then enlisted in the Black Sea Coast Guard Battalion. Solomon Zvanba knew well the life and traditions of the Abkhazs. It is confirmed by his ethnographic works. [Zvanba (1982); Dzidzaria (1979): 45-47] It should be also noted that Solomon Zvanba was the first scholar who considered the Abkhazs to be culturally and historically separate from the rest of Georgia. He was the first Abkhaz scholar whose scientific work and cultural identity were entirely associated with the Russian cultural universe.

Dimitri Gulia, who started his public activities at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has a special contribution to the formation of Abkhaz culture and Abkhaz national values. He was educated at the Highlanders' school in Sokhumi and the Teaching Seminary in Gori. Dimitri Gulia as a scholar, poet, writer, and public figure was greatly influenced by Georgian public opinion. He collaborated with Tbilisi State University, where he was invited to teach Abkhazian language. In 1892, Dimitri Gulia, together with Constantine Machavariani, adapted the alphabet created by P. von Uslar to match the sounds of the Abkhazian language and published the new Cyrillic-based Abkhazian alphabet. In 1909 Andria Chochua compiled and published the textbook based on the revised Abkhazian alphabet in Tbilisi. In 1912, two important collections of Dimitri Gulia's poems, based on the Abkhaz folklore, were published in this script in Tbilisi. Moreover, in Tbilisi, his ballad "The Love Letter" was printed in 1913. Therefore, the foundations of Abkhazian culture, literature and poetry, closely related to Georgian literature and culture, were gradually laid. [Akhaladze (2021): 208-209]

Dimitri Gulia is also associated with "Apsni," the first newspaper in Abkhazian language, which was published on 27 February 1919. With the support of Georgian friends, the Abkhazian type was formed in Tbilisi and brought to Sokhumi by *Andria Chochua*. The newspaper's editorial office was in the building of the Sokhumi Teaching Seminary. In total, until February 12, 1921, when the publication of "*Apsni*" was discontinued, 35 issues were published. As Dimitri Gulia wrote, the newspaper was closed temporarily. [Gulia D. (1925): 22] although, in fact, this was the first repressive step of the Soviet government against the Abkhaz national culture.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, musical institutions were also established in Abkhazia. In 1904, following the initiative of *Mariam Dadiani-Anchabadze* and the board of the

Sokhumi branch of the Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians, Georgian musician, singer, and choirmaster *Dzuku Lolua* moved to Sokhumi. Upon arrival, he immediately established a reading room "Dioscuria", gathered up to eighty singers and formed a choir. In the repertoire of the choir, special attention was paid to Abkhaz songs, along with Georgian ones, which were collected during Dz. Lolua's village-by-village walk. He recorded them on a phonograph, performed them on stage, and preserved them for eternity, therefore becoming the first collector and recorder of Abkhazian folk songs. [Lolua (2015)]

A new stage in the development of musical art in Abkhazia started during the Democratic Republic of Georgia. Zakaria Chkhikvadze, the famous Georgian choirmaster and teacher, by the instructions of the Georgian Music Society established a branch of the Music Society in Sokhumi, namely the Abkhazo-Georgian Music Society of Sokhumi, on 23 April 1919. [Akhaladze (2021): 210] In fact, it was the first philharmonic society in Sokhumi whose chairman became *Astamur Inalipa*.

David Chkotua, a representative of aristocratic circles, is another prominent Abkhaz whose work developed in the natural cultural and historical way of the Abkhaz people. Being a member of the younger generation of Georgian 1860s movement, he participated in the Georgian National Liberation movement. David Chkotua was also a columnist, talented journalist, tireless propagandist of education, and great scholar. In his scientific and journalistic letters, various topical issues of Georgian linguistics, literature, education, ethnography and geology are considered. He was one of the first to start a discussion about the national and global significance of Rustaveli's immortal poem. Despite the tragic and unfair fate, David Chkotua, through his journalistic and scientific activities, had a profound influence on Rustvelology and the history of Georgian national culture as a whole.

The history of the cultural life of Abkhazia in the 19th and early 20th centuries reflects the main aspirations and characteristics of the cultural identity population of the Abkhazia: the establishment of new educational and cultural centers, close ties and cooperation with the advanced society of Tbilisi, The appearance of new professional staff in the official arena.

The history of the cultural life of Abkhazia in the 19th and early 20th centuries knows many outstanding people whose work and social activities deserve special study. There are people whose contributions to various spheres of public life are invaluable. It should be noted that not only men, but also women played an important role in shaping the cultural identity of Abkhazia during the period under study. Among them such outstanding women as *Mariam Sharvashidze*, *Aghati Sharvashidze*, *Tereza Sharvashidze*, *Mariam (Masho) Dadiani-Anchabadze*, and others were the people who created the cultural image of Abkhazia of that period.

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