

A LOOK AT THE ENIGMATIC "GI TITLE" ASSOCIATED WITH THE MAYA WOMEN

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Many different titles used by the ancient Maya kings and nobles still remain poorly understood. Even if epigraphers are able to transliterate and transcribe some of them, their exact meaning and significance is not clear to us. It seems still more complicated in the case of titles that have not been fully deciphered, though at times it is possible to establish for what reason a specific title was held by a specific person. Such is the case with the so-called "vase title" (Proskouriakoff 1961). Even without an exact reading we know that this title was associated with Goddess O and was used by the Maya to designate married women, able to give birth (Colas 2004: xxiii). In the case of Maya women we have another enigmatic "godly title" found only in a few Classic period texts, known as the "GI title". The title consists of three signs: 1) the undeciphered sign T217d, 2) the logogram T4 **NAH** and 3) the glyph representing the head of GI. The title is found in a few Early Classic texts (Boot 2001, Stuart 2005: 121) and Linda Schele considered it one of the name phrases of GI (Schele 1994). There are some glyphic variations of the title (Figure 1). The "hand" sign and the glyph **NAH** are sometimes accompanied only by the so-called "dotted" *ajaw*. In another example the "hand" sign and the logogram **NAH** are accompanied by the *ajaw* sign and the head of GI, and finally we have the "hand" sign attached to the logogram **NAH** and the head of GI. Based on this substitution pattern, it seems obvious that the sign representing the "dotted" *ajaw* could be replaced by the head of GI. This is not surprising because, as David Stuart states (2005: 121), in numerous portrayals of GI from Early Classic, the "*ajaw* medallion" with its border of dots is clearly associated with this deity. It is interesting that on an Early Classic cache vessel (current location unknown) the *ajaw* sign and the "hand" are also visible in the headdress of GI (Figure 2a). Another cache vessel from Guatemala (Figure 2b) represents GI with the *ajaw* sign replacing a shark tooth.

This very special aspect of GI also appears on the "Vase of Nine Gods", which represents Underworld Gods (Wagner 2000) (Figure 3a). A similar name for GI is also found on Stela I (Figure 3b) and Stela J (Figure 3c) at Copan (Schele & Grube 1990), though this time the sign *mih* is present in the lower part. On Stela I, the ruler is represented as an impersonation of GI and as the owner of the stela. In the inscription on Stela J, GI seems to be a protagonist of some event that is difficult to identify.

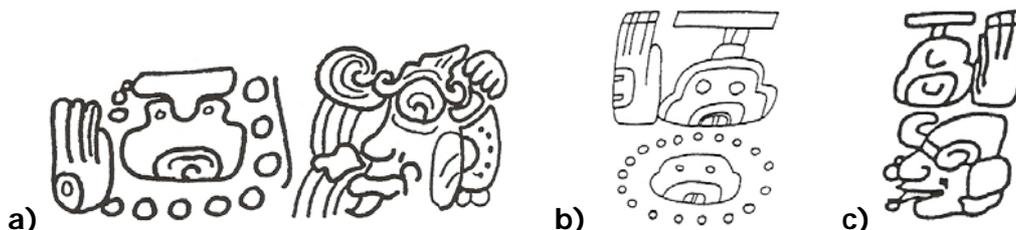


Figure 1: Different Early Classic variants of the "GI title": a) cache vessel from Peten (drawing by S. Reisinger in: Hellmuth 1988: 159); b) cache vessel from Uaxactun (drawing by D. Stuart in: Stuart 2005: 122); c) incised celt (drawing by D. Reents-Budet in: Stuart 2005: 122).



Figure 2: Images of GI on Early Classic cache vessels: a) in: Hellmuth 1987: 101; b) photo by Michel Zabé (in: Fields & Reents-Budet 2005: 132).

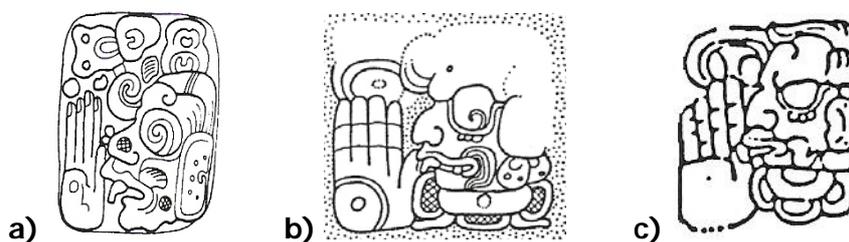


Figure 3: Aspects of the GI deity on: a) the "Vase of Nine Gods" (in: Hellmuth 1987: 284); b) Stela J, Copan (drawing by L. Schele in: Schele & Grube 1990); c) Stela I, Copan (drawing by L. Schele in: Schele & Grube 1990).

GI is one of the most mysterious Maya deities. He can be recognized by a shark tooth, a fish fin or barbel on the cheek, an eye with a scrolled pupil, and a spondylus shell earflare (Schele 1976). The most characteristic feature of this deity is the "Quadripartite Badge" headdress (Robertson 1974). It represents the so-called *k'in*

bowl with a stingray spine, cloth knot and shell earflare (Figure 4). David Stuart (2005: 168) emphasizes GI's cosmological importance, and both his aquatic and solar associations. According to Caitlin Walker (2010: 269) stingray spines, fish fins and shells are marine motifs, and a bowl adorned with the *k'in* sign is, not surprisingly, related to the sun.

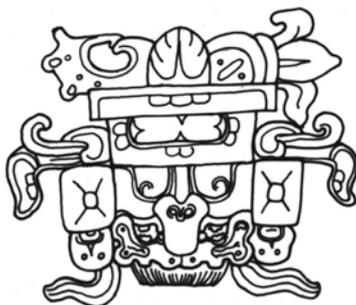


Figure 4: "Quadripartite Badge" from Sarcophagus Lid, Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque (drawing by L. Schele, © Schele Drawings Collection/FAMSI).

I find it intriguing that GI's title is attached to the names of women. As in the well-known "vase title", the "GI title" is always placed in front of the nominal phrase and this special placement is due to the divine reference it is implying. It was Linda Schele (1994) who first drew attention to this glyph block, which precedes the name of Lady *Sak K'uk'* on the Oval Palace Tablet at Palenque. Later, Simon Martin (2001:41) wrote that the same title is also attached to the names of some Tikal women. I have decided to take a closer look at these women, because after all there are only few women in the Maya history bearing this title. I assume they may have a social role in common. It is easy to notice that the women under consideration appeared in very difficult, troubled times in their kingdoms' history, exactly when the patrilineal inheritance of rulership had been broken. Even if the exact translation of the GI's title is not as yet possible, I would like to shed some light on the role it could have played for the ancient Maya.

Lady *K'inich* appeared in Tikal's history after the famous "entrada" by *Sihyaj K'ahk'* and the installation of a new ruler, *Yax Nuun Ahiin I*, the son of "Spearthrower Owl". She married to *Yax Nuun Ahiin I* and became the mother of their son, *Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II*. Martin and Grube (2008: 32) write that she was a local woman. *Yax Nuun Ahiin I* became the ruler of Tikal in A.D. 379, one year after the "entrada", when he was very young, but not an infant. If his mother was really a woman from Tikal, she must have married "Spearthrower Owl"¹ some years earlier, during the life of *Chak Tok Ich'aak I*. Lack of information makes it impossible to establish what was the relationship maintained between the families of Lady *K'inich* and *Chak Tok Ich'aak I*.

A most intriguing fact is she is mentioned in the parentage statement on Stela 31 (Figure 5) erected by her son, the next Tikal ruler. Here, after the relationship expression **ya-AL-la**, *yal* (the child of woman) we do not find the typical glyph *ix* for a woman. Instead, *yal* is followed directly by the "GI title" and the glyph representing

¹ The inscription on the back of Stela 1, Tikal mentions the "Baby Jaguar" as bearing the title *Unahbnal K'inich*, used by the Tikal nobility. The text is followed with the probable expression *yatan* (the spouse of) and the name of "Spearthrower Owl" (Martin 2002).

the head of the deity known as Jaguar God of Underworld, an aspect of the Sun God *K'inich Ajaw*, and it is the reason why the word *K'inich* is used as the lady's nickname.



Figure 5 : Detail of the text (glyph blocks B23-A25) from Stela 31, Tikal (drawing by W. R. Coe in: Jones & Satterthwaite 1982, Fig. 52)

Sihyaj Chan K'awiil II, proclaiming the rebirth of Tikal's dynasty, emphasized his matrilineal descent, not only in the inscription on Stela 31 but also in the iconography as a costume element with a spelling of his mother's name (Grube & Martin 2000). On Stela 1 the king is represented with the regalia indicating the importance of the matriline, as well. In this situation the dynasty of Tikal had not been entirely broken because *Sihyaj Chan K'awiil* II is mentioned as the 16th ruler in the line of the dynastic founder, *Yax Ehb Xook* (Martin & Grube 2008: 34). Had this been considered the foundation of a new dynasty, one is left to assume that the count should be different. The subsequent rulers also added the dynastic count in reference to *Yax Ehb Xook* to their nominal phrases, e.g. "Animal Skull"² is mentioned as the 22nd ruler and *Yik'in Chan K'awiil* as the 27th ruler in the sequence. In my opinion, we can speak about temporary disturbances rather than the establishment of a new dynasty.

At Tikal, during Early Classic period, the importance of matrilineal roots was strongly emphasized. It can be noticed that other kings also made use of the "GI" title. Stela 40 (A.D. 468), erected by *K'an Chitam*, depicts his parents (*Sihyaj Chan K'awiil* II and Lady *Ahiin*) on the lateral sides of the monument. In the parentage statement of the next ruler, *Chak Tok Ich'aak* II, we also find it in the nominal phrase of his mother, **Lady *Tzutz Nik?*** on Stela 3 (A.D. 488) (Figure 6).

² Stanley Guenter (2002: 303-310) has suggested reading his name as *K'inich Waaw*.

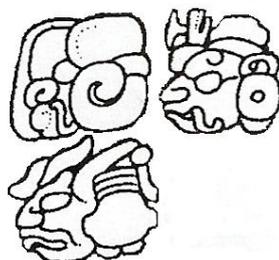


Figure 6: Detail of the inscription (glyph blocks C5-C6) from Stela 3, Tikal (in: Jones & Satterthwaite 1982, Fig.4).

The Lady of Tikal³ appeared in another difficult and troubled time in Tikal's history. *Chak Tok Ich'aak* II had died in July A.D. 508, and his son *Wak Chan K'awiil* was born only a few months earlier. Of course in this situation, it was impossible for such a baby to be ruler though he could have been designated as the future king. The Lady of Tikal – probably his sister – was born in A.D. 504, and was six years old when her father died. To maintain the dynasty, she seems to have given some kind of governance and although she was designated as *ajaw* (Stela 23) in A.D. 511, she never became a true ruler, counted from the dynastic founder, but it is significant that Stela 6 (A.D. 514) and Stela 12 (A.D. 527) were dedicated by her (Martin & Grube 2008: 37), since that was one of the prerogatives of monarchs. The Lady of Tikal shared her regency with the still mysterious *Kaloomte' Bahlam*, possibly a local war chief and the guardian to the young lady. It was *Kaloomte' Bahlam* that is mentioned as the 19th in the sequence from the dynastic founder. Thus, it was him, who is said to have ruled in Tikal in those difficult times. Probably he was much older than the Lady of Tikal because as early as A.D. 486 (Martin & Grube 2008: 39) he participated in the war with Masuul. Obviously, an experienced man could have served as a guardian to the very young lady⁴, and guardians like him are known from other Maya kingdoms⁵.

The inscription on Stela 6 mentions the name and titles of the Lady of Tikal in four glyph blocks (Figure 7). The "GI title" is followed by partly eroded glyphs, in which the logogram **IX** ("woman") and *(u)nahbnaal k'inich*⁶ (a title closely associated with Tikal) are still visible. The Lady of Tikal could have played an important role, maintaining the royal dynasty when her brother was too young for that task. The

³ Marc Zender (2004: 335) has suggested reading her name as *Ix Uunk'in*.

⁴ TIK St.12 is their last common monument. By that time she was already 23 years old. There might be indications from TAM St.2 that she was still in (sole?) reign in A.D. 534 (Sven Gronemeyer, personal communication 2011).

⁵ For example Lord *Chak Joloom* was the guardian of young *Chelte' Chan K'inich* at Yaxchilan. We find a very similar, and even better case at Dos Pilas with Ruler 3 as the guardian of *K'awiil Chan K'inich*, who after the death of his father – *Itzamnaaj K'awiil* in A.D.726 – was too young to rule on his own. In this situation it was *Uchan K'in Bahlam*, who probably because of his military office, was deemed sufficiently strong to become ruler.

⁶ David Stuart has recently suggested the reading *nahbal* instead of *nahbnaal*, treating spelling as **NAB-la** (Christophe Helmke, personal communication 2011).

dynasty had not been broken because – as has already been mentioned – the subsequent rulers counted themselves in the line of the dynastic founder.

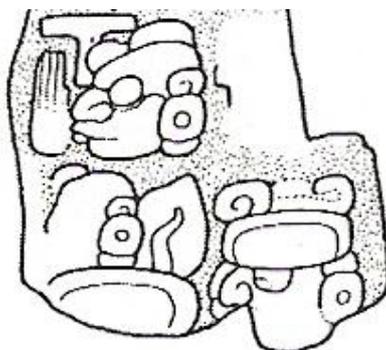


Figure 7: Detail of the inscription (glyph blocks By2-Cy3) from Stela 6, Tikal (drawing by S. Martin in: Martin 2003)

Simon Martin (2001: 41) mentions possibly one more example at Tikal on Stela 17, and it is associated with the mother of *Wak Chan K'awil*. Also in this case we can see that the woman served as an important part of his claim to legitimacy. But in fact the glyph block (G7) is badly eroded. There is a "hand" but the accompanying "head" is difficult to identify. It is also possible that in this case it is used as a part of a personal name rather than a title.

Lady Sak K'uk' lived at the time after the Calakmul war against Palenque in A.D. 611. She appeared in Palenque's history after the enigmatic ruler *Muwaan Mat*, considered by Martin and Grube (2008: 161) a possible mythical king or even a deity. Unfortunately, the parentage statement of Lady *Sak K'uk'* remains unknown and it is difficult to establish her relationship with the previous Palenque rulers, Lady *Yohl Ik'nal* or *Ajen Yohl Mat*. There is still another person whose origin remains mysterious: *Janahb Pakal*. Martin & Grube (2008: 161) write that *Janahb Pakal* could be the son or the husband of Lady *Yohl Ik'nal*. Jossierand (2002: 147) believes that *Janahb Pakal* was the husband of Lady *Yohl Ik'nal* and, according to the Maya tradition, *K'inich Janahb Pakal I* was named after his grandfather. Lady *Yohl Ik'nal* became ruler in A.D. 583 and died in A.D. 604 whereas *Janahb Pakal* died in A.D. 612, eight years after her death, which may support the idea that he was her husband. Lady *Sak K'uk'* died in A.D. 640. She gave birth to his son in A.D. 603, one year before the death of Lady *Yohl Ik'nal*. Could *Sak K'uk'* be the daughter of Lady *Yohl Ik'nal* and *Janahb Pakal*? Even if it remains obscure, this could be why the three most important people for *K'inich Janahb Pakal I* were mentioned twice on the sarcophagus side: Lady *Yohl Ik'nal* (his possible grandmother), Lady *Sak K'uk'* (his mother) and *K'an Mo' Hix* (his father). Schele and Matthews (1998: 120) suggest that in this case a mention made to a lineal descent was more important than a succession and this may be the reason why we do not have portraits of *Ajen Yohl Mat*. Moreover, the death of *Janahb Pakal* is also mentioned in the inscription on the Sarcophagus Lid.

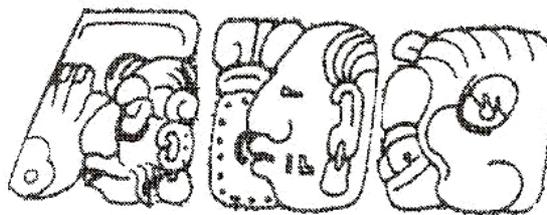


Figure 8: Detail of the inscription (glyph blocks A-C) from the Oval Palace Tablet, Palenque (drawing by M. Greene Robertson in: Greene 1985, Fig.91)

We can only be sure that Lady *Sak K'uk'* was a local woman because she used the Emblem Glyph of Palenque. She played the role of regent to her young son *K'inich Janahb Pakal I*. The Oval Palace Tablet from Palenque depicts Lady *Sak K'uk'* giving him a headdress, a symbol of rulership. The inscription accompanying the scene mentions the name of this Lady preceded by the "GI title" (Figure 8). Here again we can see that it was Lady *Sak K'uk'* who was responsible for continuity of the royal dynasty because her son – the new king – descended through the matrilineage. As in the case of Tikal, thanks to this woman the continuity of the royal dynasty was secured⁷.

Taking into account what has been said above we can see that these prominent women bearing the "GI title" could have, in some way, saved the royal lineages. But how could it be associated with the deity known as GI? At first sight an association of GI with women seems strange. However this deity can, in some way, be related to women. Matthew Loper (2002: 199) states that GI sometimes shares some attributes with the Maize God or the Moon Goddess because men and women depicted on stone monuments in the disguise of the Maize God or the Moon Goddess respectively, always have their costumes adorned with the *xook* head and a spondylus shell, two characteristic iconographic motifs, associated with rebirth and resurrection (Quenon and Le Fort 1977).

Another important feature of GI's portraits is the already mentioned "Quadripartite Badge" which appears as his headdress (Schele and Miller 1986: 48) and represents a bowl with sacrificial implements, emphasizing the role of sacrifice in sustaining the universe's vital forces (Stone & Zender 2011: 155). Merle Greene Robertson (1974) considers the "Quadripartite Badge" a symbol of rulership, proclaiming divine ancestral relationship for its wearer. It is worthy of note that the same headgear is also worn by some women depicted on Classic period stone monuments (Figure 9). Ritual bloodletting and, in consequence, conjuring of gods played the prominent role in the ancient Maya religion, making the gods manifest (Schele & Miller 1986: 182). Women were active participants of bloodletting, as is seen in the scenes of many Classic period monuments depicting women performing this rite (e.g. BMK Structure 1 Murals, Room 3; YAX Lintels 17 and 24) or holding the bloodletting implements (e.g. BMK Stela 2, NAR Stela 24, YAX Stela 35, YAX Lintels 13, 14, 15, 17, 24, 25 and 55). Nourishing gods with their own blood, the ancient Maya, in some way, gave birth to them (Schele & Miller 1986: 184), and giving birth is clearly the domain of

⁷ The depiction of *K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb III* on Temple XIX Platform, west side, where he had the name of the king known as "Casper" attached to his headdress, can serve as a very good example.

women. Moreover, in Maya inscriptions, the same glyph **CH'AB** was used not only for "penance, creation", but also in parentage statements as part of a metaphorical expression "child of parent"⁸. According to Stone & Zender (2011: 75) in this sense bloodletting promoted life itself. Another relationship glyph, *ujuntahn*, for "child of (mother)" in the meaning of "an object of care or devotion" (Stuart 1997) was used for linking the Palenque ruler *K'inich Kan Bahlam* with the Triad Gods (Houston & Stuart 1996). The association between "bloodletting sacrifice" and "giving birth" can be also supported by the inscription on Dos Pilas Stela 14, erected on the Period Ending of A.D. 711 by *Itzamnaaj K'awiil*. The text tells us that "the Paddler gods were born under the auspices of *Itzamnaaj K'awiil*" (Schele & Miller 1986: 183).

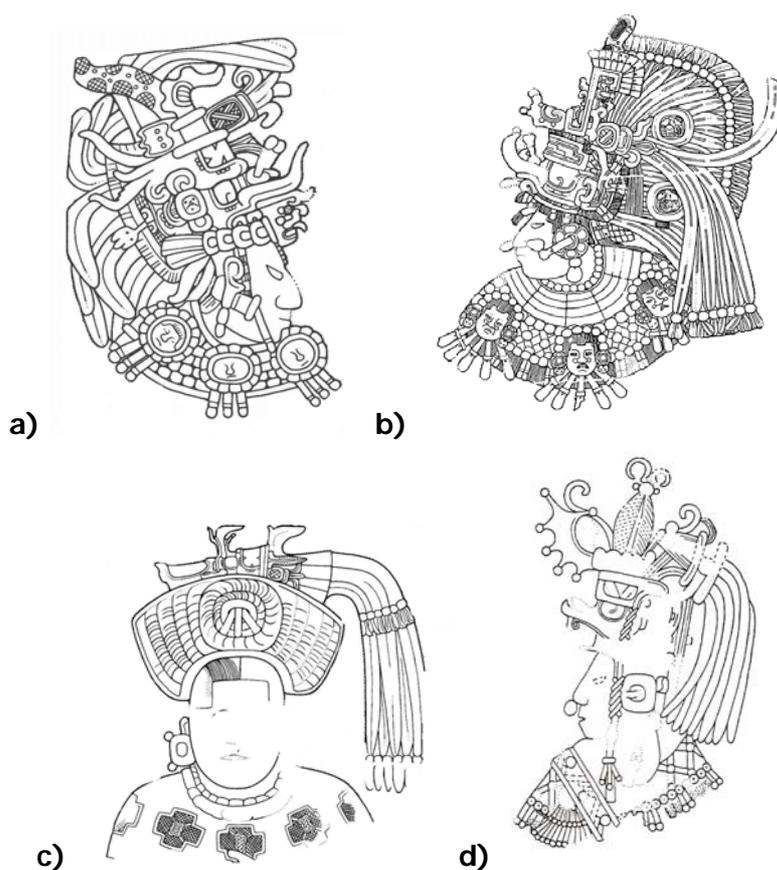


Figure 9: Some depictions of the Maya women with the "Quadripartite Badge" headdress: **a)** YAX Lintel 14 (details from drawing by I. Graham, in: Graham & von Euw 1977); **b)** PRU Stela 34 (details from drawing by J. Montgomery, © Montgomery Drawings Collection/FAMSI); **c)** PNG Stela 3 (details from drawing by J. Montgomery, © Montgomery Drawings Collection/FAMSI); **d)** CRC Stela 1 (details from drawing by Carl Beetz, in: Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981).

⁸ For more detailed discussion on the connection of *ch'ab* with bloodletting see also: Sven Gronemeyer & Barbara MacLeod, *What Could Happen in 2012: A Re-Analysis of the 13-Bak'tun Prophecy on Tortuguero Monument 6*, Wayeb Note 34, 2010, page 26 and footnote 56).

However, in our case the special aspect of GI used as the title, is of greater relevance. As the reading of T217d still remains undeciphered, it is difficult to understand its meaning in the title discussed. But one interesting interpretation of the word *naah* has been recently given by Stephen Houston (Houston & Inomata 2009: 49). In the inscription from Hieroglyphic Stairway 3 at Tamarindito, Houston noticed that the parents of the local ruler were linked to different *naah* (houses). Taking into account that parents came from different sites, Houston suggests that the concept of "house" could be associated not only with structures/buildings but also with social groups in the Lévi-Straussian definition (Lévi-Strauss 1991: 434-36). On the other hand, according to the inscription from Temple XIX Platform, Palenque, GI assumed rulership "in heaven" (Stuart 2005: 172) on 12.10.01.13.02 9 Ik' 5 Mol and his accession is expressed in the inscription as "the first enthronement", making GI a symbol of rulership. In this light the expression "*naah* GI" could tell us that a woman bearing this title tried to emphasize her high position in the Maya society, her origin from the mythological *ajaw*, the ancestor of kings.

An association of GI with rulership seems to be emphasized also on Stela J, Copan, erected by *Waxaklajun Ubaah K'awiil* for the celebration of the Period Ending of A.D. 702. It represents a stone, a thatched house, and "mat" signs to designate the sacred precinct as a place of governance (Schele & Matthews 1998: 136). Another close relation of GI with rulership can be found on the Palace Tablet of Palenque. Here the ruler, *K'an Joy Chitam II*, is seated on the central throne adorned with the characteristic, aquatic features of GI (Looper 2002: 191).

Recalling GI's name in their titles, women wanted to emphasize their significance or even religious legitimization. The importance of this title can be also seen from the fact that it precedes women's names and places of their origin. Each of these women played a key role in times of turmoil, when the dynastic descent had been – or rather could be – broken and when the descent through the maternal blood-line was the only remaining option. We may even say that they upheld dynasties in their kingdoms. After all, the royal houses established by dynastic founders survived. In some cases the enigmatic "GI title" borne by Maya women could have been used to legitimize their sons' claim to kingship.

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