

Traditional Houses of Neelum Valley of Azad Jammu and Kashmir: Architecture and Prospects of Homestay Tourism



Adnan Anwar	Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, Hazara University Mansehra, KP, Pakistan. Email: adnananwar.khan@gmail.com
Anas Mahmud Arif	Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Hazara University Mansehra, KP, Pakistan.
Shahid Mansoor Khan	Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Engineering and Technology, Abbottabad Campus, KP, Pakistan.

Abstract: *Neelum valley is one of the most attractive and beautiful valleys of Pakistan, which is becoming an emerging tourist destination. Being a remote area, tourism resources are well preserved, but under the influence of technology and some other factors, some rapid changes in the natural and cultural resources are occurring. The current study is an attempt to analyze the potential of traditional houses of upper Neelum Valley for their modification into home-based accommodation. Results of the study brought forth the significant potential of sustainable homestay tourism in the region, which may culminate in the preservation of local natural and cultural values for a relatively prolonged period.*

Key Words: Traditional Houses, Neelum Valley, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Architecture, Homestay Tourism

Introduction

The geostrategic location of Kashmir Valley fosters a unique yet rich region-responsive cultural heritage having very deep roots in history. Kashmiris' rich and standing-alone cultural traditions in literature, painting, theatre, dance and architecture find their motivation in the region's natural beauty and moderate environment. The ingenuity of Kashmiri philosophy may be explained by its relative isolation, the protection offered by the band of mountains around it and its separation from the plains of Pakistan and India. The regional environment, which leads to a relatively prolonged winter season in the valley, might be responsible for Kashmiris' obsession with imaginative thought.

Under the influence of globalization and some other factors like the introduction of modern technology, improving the economic condition of the local community and peace at the borders, the Neelum Valley has seen some developments in the past few years (Akhtar 2017). Ceasefire at the borders resulted in safety and security, and thus, tourism has increased in the region.

Neelum Valley is located in the northeast of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). The valley has a total area of 3737 km², making it the biggest district in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The valley has an elevation of 900m to 6325m above sea level (Mahmood et al., 2011). Winters in the valley are very harsh, while summers are pleasant. Wood is mostly used as burning fuel for cooking and heating houses during the cold season. Neelum valley is lush green and blessed with immense water resources. Summer begins at the end of June and lasts until September. August and December are the months with the greatest and the lowest relative humidity, respectively (81.18 per cent and 53.71 per cent). July has the most days of rain than any other month (26.80 days). November has the fewest days of rain in a given month (5.77 days) (Dar 2003).

As per the record of the government of Azad Jammu and Kashmir in its report, *Azad Jammu and Kashmir at a Glance 2017*, the total population of Azad Jammu and Kashmir are 4.045 million, and the Neelum Valley houses 0.191 million people. The majority of the population in district Neelum depends

upon daily wages, livestock, agriculture and tourism. The district also has the lowest literacy rate, and one of the major reasons for it is the safety and security issues along the borders.

Neelum valley of Azad Jammu and Kashmir is one of the emerging destinations for tourists in Pakistan. Every year the number of tourists is increasing gradually and has reached thousands in the upper parts of the valley. Visitors enjoy the nature, culture and wilderness of the region. Being rich in its natural and cultural resources, the increase in unplanned and uncontrolled tourism has also increased potential threats to its beauty. To promote tourism in a sustainable way and make it beneficial for the valley, the introduction of community-based tourism in the area is the need of the day. Homestay tourism is one of the best examples and models to introduce sustainable community-based tourism in the valley. The promotion of homestay tourism may help in reducing threats and hazards to the beautiful landscape of the region by the reduction in the rate of new constructions, and on the other hand, it will also preserve and develop some indigenous economic activities like agriculture, arts and crafts, traditional knowledge and architecture etc. Some significant studies on the subject matter can be found by [Acharya \(2013\)](#), [Gangotia \(2013\)](#), [Lama \(2013\)](#), [Pusiran \(2013\)](#), and [Budhathoki \(2014\)](#), [Kontogeorgopoulos \(2015\)](#) and [Dong \(2020\)](#) etc.

This study is an attempt to analyze the potential of traditional houses for homestay tourism and suggest some measures to take maximum benefits from homestay tourism for the development of the local community by enhancing memorable visitors' experiences. The paper is a result of the authors' surveys in the valley and discussions with the stakeholders.

Architecture in Practice

In the Neelum Valley of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, four different building types may be found, i.e. wood frame construction (Dajji Devari Construction), reinforced concrete, unreinforced stone masonry, and wood log architecture. The earliest discovered architecture is made up of wood logs and features several native architectural features. These wood log structures are completely resistant to earthquakes. Although these structures were earthquake-resistant and operated well throughout history under large snow loads, intense colds, and rains, they also

contributed to huge deforestation and a sudden shift in the region's environment. As a result of the 2003 LOC ceasefire agreement with India, this region became accessible by public transit and was connected to the other regions of the country. The residents of the area learned about new construction methods and materials due to the communication and transportation infrastructure in the area, which also subtly altered the region's whole architectural style. Each year, more than 50 new houses are built in the region, but only 30% of them combine traditional and contemporary building techniques; the other 70% incorporate architectural features and styles that have been influenced by other cultures ([Ahmad et al., 2017](#)).

Although there are numerous traditionally built structures in the centre of each region or village (Kel, Arangkel, Taobutt and Jenwai etc.), many of these wood log structures have survived undamaged, but a few have been damaged and have had their roofs replaced with contemporary SGI sheets. Buildings and walls made of reinforced concrete and concrete masonry, however, sustain significant damage every year (discussion with the community and the researchers' own observations support this). The reinforced concrete structures were discovered to be very different from the old wood log structures, which suffered damage every year from heavy snowfall and rain. Buildings made of wood logs were two to three floors tall, intact and discovered to be resistant to the exterior natural forces that may harm the structures ([Ahmad et al. 2017](#)).

Additionally, these modern structures are less user and environment-friendly, whether they are made of reinforced concrete or brickwork. Since the majority of them employ modern building methods, components and materials, these wooden structures must be documented and conserved as originals for the benefit of future generations, along with their native architectural forms, since it is believed that they will serve as cultural and historical aspects for the next generation.

Description of the Traditional Houses

When comparing the houses of upper Neelum valley in Kel and other areas in the valley, it is often observed that Taobutt houses feature richer traditional characteristics and construction materials than the others. The distance from the settlement or the capital (Muzaffarabad), where all the materials for building

and everyday needs are carried out, is the cause of architectural transformation.



Figure 1: Route Map (Muzaffarabad to Taobutt)

in different neighbourhoods throughout the upper Neelum Valley (Kel and Taobutt) may be divided into two main categories:

- Lower-class family houses
- Middle-class family houses

These buildings come in a variety of sizes, materials, layouts, finishes, and other features. In this study, a case study of two distinct homes—one from lower-class families and the other from the middle-class family house from Kel and Taobutt is presented. The primary building material of both kinds is wood. The form of the roof on these houses also differs noticeably. Though some of the lower-class houses in Kel and Taobutt also have pitched roofs, however, lower-class family houses have flat mud roofs.

Categorization of the Houses

Regarding the family income status, the houses located

Case A – Lower Class Family House in Kel

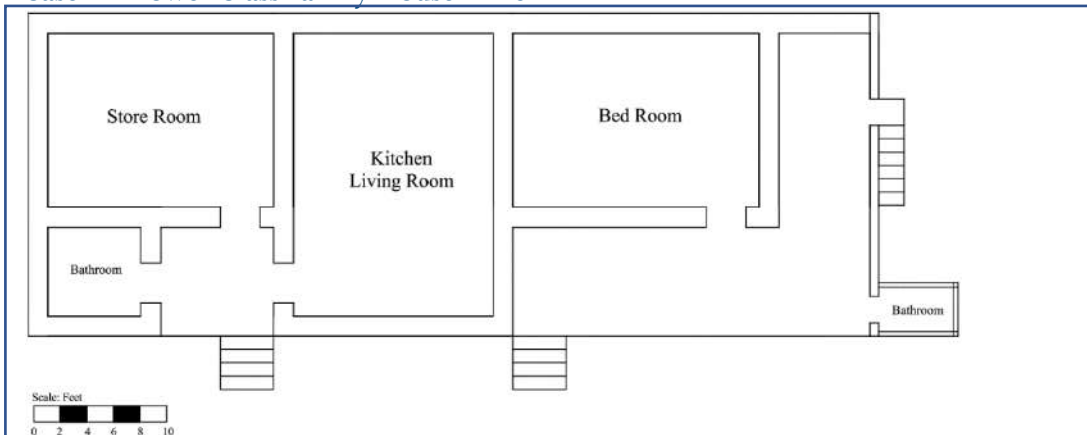


Figure 2: Upper Ground Floor Plan (Family Residence)

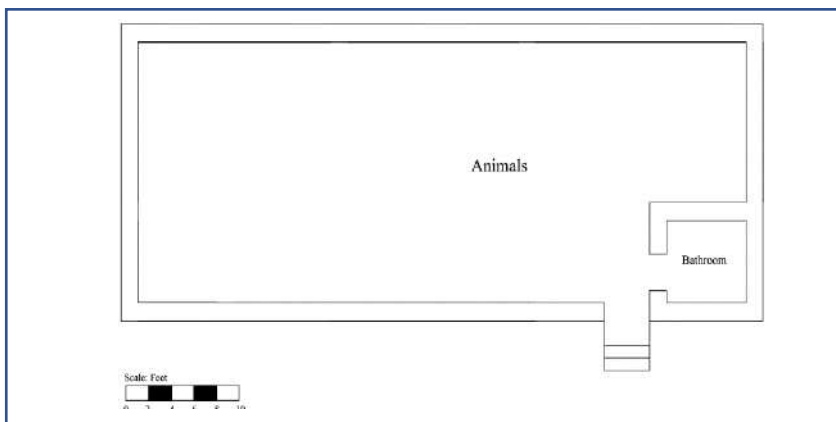


Figure 3: Lower Ground Floor Plan (Animals Space)

Spatial Analysis



Figure 4: Exterior View of the House

The case study house is built on terrain with three distinct levels when seen in its natural setting and surroundings. The house has a courtyard on the lowest level, but it is not well kept because the owner belongs to a lower-class family, and the house is not kept up to their standard of living.

A space for animals that occupies the entire upper floor of the house is located on the middle level. This level uses wood planks and stone masonry as building materials. Wood ledges that traverse the length of the building's roof serve as structural elements.

Figure 02 illustrates how the top floor of the house is separated into two sections. On the left side, there is a storeroom, a kitchen, which serves as a family or living room and a bathroom for the family. The right side of the house has a separate stairway that is visible from the rear and contains a room, a bathroom, as well as a terrace that the family uses primarily for sitting in the winter.



Figure 5: Front view of the House

Major load-bearing walls are built using stone masonry and mud plaster, as was previously indicated. For insulation purposes, mud thatch mortar is applied to

the walls. A little finishing touch can be seen in the patio, where wooden arches give the home a distinctive Kashmiri appearance. An entrance to the animal area is readily apparent on the bottom level. This also serves as a winter wood supply. Traditional features of Kashmiri houses include few windows and a little passageway for access.



Figure 6: Access to the Upper Floor

Figure 06 shows a wooden staircase, and this side also has access to the lower level enabling animals to roam around easily in the winter. The family will utilize the room and patio in the summers through the stairway.



Figure 7: Details of Wooden Roof

The abundantly accessible wood is used as a structural element for both columns and beams. The thickness of these structural components varies depending on the need, but the majority of them have a 10" x 12"

section, which is strong enough for the roof and the framework.



Figure 8: Doorway and Plaster Details

Wooden doors are employed as the rooms' entrances, and thatch mud plaster is used on the walls and floor to serve as insulation. Due to their locality, wood and mud are readily available and inexpensive. As a result, their abundant use can be seen in the structures of the valley.



Figure 9: Granary and Storage

For the dry storage of food products in the winter, granary and storage are also provided in each house. When there is sufficient room, this storage may be

built inside the kitchen. Otherwise, they may be placed in the hallways or in the verandas.



Figure 10: Connection with the Fields

The family who lives in the house also owns the fields aside. Despite a wooden fence separating them, there is still a link so that they may work in the fields and watch over the house simultaneously.



Figure 11: Settlement Pattern in Kel

As a result of the land's topography and access routes, the dwellings in the Kel area are all located in a dispersed settlement layout. The houses are not accessible through wide passageways. The main entryways to the home are small pathways from the fields. Along the routes, there are also several water canals used for irrigation and residential water usage.

The majority of houses have a sloped roof to collect less snow throughout the winter.



Figure 12: Chimney

The Neelum Valley's traditional houses typically include a fireplace because inhabitants burn wood to heat their homes and interior spaces during the bitter winters. In order to eliminate smoke from the rooms, chimneys are a crucial part of the homes/ houses.



Figure 13: Small Windows

For light and ventilation, small windows are carved out of the walls; they are kept small to reduce airflow during the harsh winters.



Figure 14: Flat Roofed House

As the upper parts of the valley receive 5 to 6 feet of snow annually, flat roof buildings are quite uncommon to find there because they are challenging to maintain.

Case B – Middle-Class Family House in Taobutt

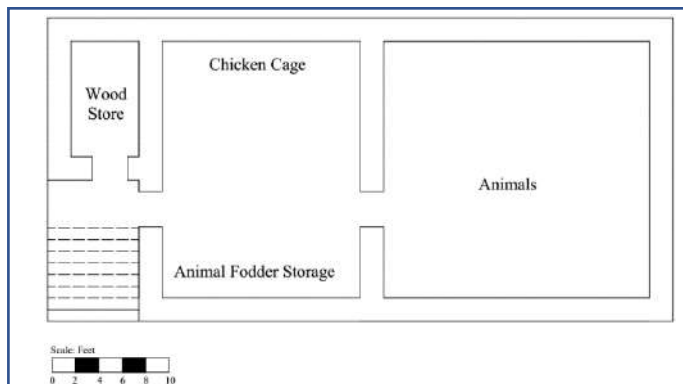


Figure 15: Ground Floor Plan (Animal Space)

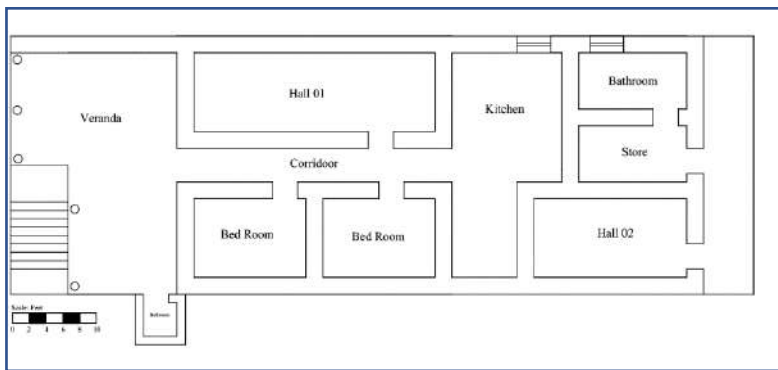


Figure 16: First Floor Plan (Family House in Taobutt)

Spatial Analysis



Figure 17: Exterior View of the House

In Taobutt, most of the houses are situated on flat land with nearby open fields when viewed in their natural surroundings. However, as Taobutt is one of the remote and colder regions of the valley and experiences considerable snowfall every year, all of the living spaces of houses are located on the first floor, which is around 8 to 10 feet above the ground. The ground level is also employed in this case to house the animals on the lower level. In addition to the ground floor, houses with pitched roofs also include attic space, which is used to store wood for the winter and animal feed.



Figure 18: Landscape around the Houses

Despite being in a flat valley, the region around the houses is completely covered by natural scenery and vegetation. The houses are grouped together in their surrounding fields in the same manner, with each person having a field next to his residence. The majority of women are observed working in the fields.



Figure 19: Wood log and Plank Construction

The houses built in the past used wood logs because there were no facilities for making planks out of raw wood to use in construction. However, now with the introduction of sawmills in the area, so to reduce the use of wood for houses, non-structural walls are now replaced with wooden planks rather than wood logs. This is a sustainable approach for reducing the use of wood for construction purposes. Additionally, it is pretty obvious where the wood for burning is kept outside the home.



Figure 20: Ladder to Access the Rear Terrace

The figure shows a wooden ladder made out of a wood log providing access to the balcony or terrace at the back of the house. Wood is in abundance and is used everywhere when needed.



Figure 21: Interlocking Wood logs as Structural Elements

When employed as structural parts, wood logs are joined by the interlocking method, preventing the logs from being moved by earthquake, wind or snow accumulation shear stresses. In locations where log building is practised, a technique that is frequently employed is wood nails and the interlocking method.



Figure 22: Wooden Planks as Roofing Material

Wooden boards (thin sections) are stacked on top of one another on an incline to act as roof coverings, preventing light, rain and snow from entering the chamber below. Although these types of roofs require regular maintenance and repair, they are common in the Taobutt area of the Neelum Valley.



Figure 23: Wood log Walls and Mud Plaster

For insulation, the wood walls are then coated with mud and thatch mortar, which also fills in the spaces left by the logs as they are stacked on top of one another.



Figure 24: Narrow Corridors

Because it is preferable to keep spans short in wooden constructions, corridors are kept narrow. The local architecture takes the stance of keeping circulation space to a minimum while maximizing usage area. In this way, people may use more space in the rooms for daily activities while keeping the corridors narrow and solely used for movement.



Figure 25: Interior of a Room

The figure shows a hanging prayer mat. A wall-mounted rack and small windows. This is a typical design for a room within a rural house. Usable items are stored on a rack to keep them out of the reach of children, and windows are kept modest to meet ventilation needs while reducing heat loss during harsh winters.



Figure 26: A Fire Place

The family room's main feature is the fireplace (Kitchen). Since they use wood for cooking, the same space is expanded to be used as both a kitchen and a family area. The spaces are all organized into eating, kitchen, sitting, pantry and washing areas. The majority of activities are restricted to this space in the winter.



Figure 27: Family Sitting Area

There is a family-only sitting room on the back side of the house. This can be accessed directly from the kitchen or through a separate room for visitors or elderly family members.



Figure 28: Water Proofing in Bathrooms

Since all of the structures are constructed of wood and mud mortar, the bathrooms employ polythene sheets for insulation and waterproofing the walls in order to make them watertight.



Figure 29: Access to the Animal Level from inside the House

An operable shutter is installed on the first floor to provide access to the animal space below, as stepping outdoors to reach it is impractical during the winter. The area is accessible through a wooden log ladder.



Figure 30: Street View

Here in Taobutt, houses are scattered yet lined up along a road for automobile access. The majority of the houses have easy access to the main roadways.

Traditional Houses and Homestay Tourism

Traditional houses of the valley have the great potential to be utilized as home-based accommodations for the tourists, promote sustainable tourism and contribute to the local development. These houses are designed in such a way that they can

be easily modified as home-based accommodations without disturbing the privacy of the tourists and the owners. In some cases, a few separate rooms can also be built along with the houses to cater for the tourists. The local architecture also has the potential to attract visitors. We can find some examples of homestay tourism in the valley, but there are certain issues and challenges which should be addressed immediately to take maximum benefit from the increasing tourism in the valley without disturbing the natural and cultural environment. Some of the issues are discussed in the following lines:

Awareness

The local community of the Upper Neelum Valley is hospitable and friendly but is not so much aware of the tourism and tourism-related businesses. The majority of the local community is unaware of how to start any tourism-related business and make it successful. Similarly, due to less education and exposure, they are shy to interact with the visitors and cannot communicate with them properly. They do not know how to be involved in homestay tourism and, in some cases, hesitate to provide accommodation to the visitors in their houses. They are unaware of how these home-based accommodations can uplift their local economy and preserve some indigenous industries for future generations.

Similarly, the local community should also be trained on how to deal with and interact with tourists. They should be taught basic tourism and hospitality and the use of modern technology for their businesses. Cleanliness is another big issue which is due to unawareness. Cleanliness of the houses, clothes, food and personal hygiene is of great importance for the success of homestay tourism in the valley. For all these, they need proper awareness, guidance and training workshops so that they can initiate homestay tourism.

Financial Constraints

Another big issue for the local community of the upper Neelum valley is the poor economic condition. Mostly the local community is lower middle class and economically deprived. They can not modify their houses or build a few rooms along with their houses as home-based accommodations. Government and private sector can help them in this regard. Loans on easy instalments and interest-free loans should be

provided so that homestay tourism can be initiated in a proper way.

Apart from these major issues, there is a problem with communication. Being remote area, internet and other related facilities are not available. Local travel and tour operators can help to make these accommodations successful by advertising and promoting them.

Homestay Tourism as a Tool for the Revival of Indigenous Industries

Under the influence of certain factors, the indigenous industries and the cultures are disappearing day by day, and the same is the case in Neelum valley. The priceless tourism resources of the valley like traditional arts and crafts, food and beverages, architecture, traditional medical knowledge, agriculture, traditions, rituals and folklores etc., along with the natural resources, are deteriorating and disappearing rapidly. Homestay tourism can be the best tool to preserve, conserve and revive these indigenous industries. Local women can play a vital role in the revival of the indigenous heritage of the valley. Their knowledge and expertise can best be utilized through homestay tourism. Visitors, whenever they visit any remote destination, demand the traditional products of the area, and homestay tourism is a direct interaction with the locals, so these items can best be presented to the visitors. After realizing the importance of traditional industries and heritage, locals will try to preserve and develop these industries, not only for the tourists but also for their future generations.

Traditional arts and crafts may be displayed not only in the houses but also in the community centres for sale as souvenirs and gifts. Similarly, traditional food and beverages would be served to the tourists. Visitors can also participate in traditional agricultural activities as experiential tourists. At night, tourists can sit together with the locals and listen to the legends and folklores of the area along with the history, thus creating sustainable relationships with the local community and having a memorable experience. These satisfied tourists will serve as ambassadors of the valley, encouraging more tourists to visit the area and stay in home-based accommodations. In this way, the local community will realize the importance of their area and culture and will try to preserve them.

Another significant benefit of homestay tourism is the revival of community cooperation with each

other. These home-based accommodations can be run individually, but for the overall success and sustainable development, the community cluster approach would be beneficial. In this way, the community will work for the success of every accommodation, resulting in regional development.

Conclusion

Neelum Valley of Azad Jammu and Kashmir is one of the most beautiful valleys of Pakistan and is an emerging destination. It is almost 150 KM long and is located parallel to Kaghan Valley. The valley is famous for its unique natural and cultural tourism resources. In recent years, thousands of visitors have visited this valley to enjoy the nature, culture and wilderness of the valley. The unique traditional architecture, arts and crafts, food and beverages, folklores, traditions, friendly and hospitable local community, flora and fauna etc., attract the visitors to experience and collect lifelong memories. With the introduction of modern technologies and certain other factors, indigenous heritage is disappearing day by day. If it continues, a lot of tourism resources will vanish very soon. To preserve the natural and cultural resources of the valley and provide the visitors memorable experience, homestay tourism is a tool which will not only preserve nature and culture along with providing a memorable experience to the tourists but also will play a significant role in the uplifting of local economies. The traditional houses of the valley have the potential to be modified as home-based accommodations keeping in view the privacy of the visitors and the owners alike, but for that, some basic challenges like awareness and financial constraints should be considered.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the authors present the following multi-faceted strategy to promote environment-friendly and sustainable homestay tourism in the valley:

1. As an immediate short-term strategy, the community needs to be motivated to adopt the resource-sharing approach in accommodating tourists in the currently available reasonable and presentable houses. When these houses are occupied by the tourists, the residents may share accommodation with the neighbours, ultimately equally dividing the net profit generated through paid hospitality of the tourists.
2. In a medium-term plan, the local authorities should provide loans to repair and upgrade the remaining houses so that those may also be available to house tourists in the near future. These loans, which may range from PKR 50,000 to PKR 300,000, should be returnable within a period of not more than three years.
3. As a third phase of the strategy, the community should develop and manage the open areas between houses and edges of the connecting streets as seating and open-air dining spaces. These open spaces should be robust enough to be utilized as concert areas for folk singers and musicians as well, in addition, to being used as bazaars and display centres for the local products.
4. Last but not least, all the community organizations should manage tourism-related activities formed and constituted under the supervision of local authorities. Authorities may provide their services to these organizations in terms of short-spanned training on management skills, waste management to keep the valley clean and green, hospitality and presentation techniques, and most importantly, resource sharing and saving for future needs. The community should be educated on the importance of a self-sustained tourism-based economy without looking for financial assistance from external sources in terms of aid.

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