



Traditional Food and Agricultural Heritage in Butig, Lanao del Sur: Preserving Mëranaos Identity Through Community-Based Promotion

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the traditional food and agricultural practices of the Municipality of Butig, Lanao del Sur, emphasizing their cultural significance and potential for community development. Known as one of the oldest Mëranaos settlements, Butig boasts a rich heritage of halal food, native pastries, and sustainable farming. Through ethnographic methods, including observation and interviews, the research documents indigenous delicacies such as tiyatag, tamokonsi, browa, and community-farmed staples like rice, corn, and coconut. Findings highlighted the role of food in Mëranaos identity formation, religious observance, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. The paper argued that the revitalization and promotion of traditional food and agriculture serve as tools for cultural preservation, economic sustainability, and community empowerment. Recommendations include policy support, culinary tourism initiatives, and community education programs to enhance local pride and market reach. This approach aligns with the broader goals of food sovereignty, heritage conservation, and rural development in Muslim Mindanao.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional food is not merely about sustenance; it is a vital expression of culture, history, spirituality, and identity (Rana *et al.*, 2022). Food relates to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Nurramadhani *et al.*, 2024).

Across the Philippines, particularly among Indigenous communities, food preparation and agricultural practices are deeply rooted in heritage and social values. Among the Mëranaos in Butig, Lanao del Sur, traditional food is intricately tied to religious observance, family life, and community celebrations. It encompasses not only the ingredients and methods of preparation but also the symbolic meanings that accompany each dish or delicacy.

The Mëranaos, one of the thirteen Islamized ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao, have preserved a rich culinary tradition passed down through generations. Pastries like tiyatag, tamokonsi, and browa, as well as dishes such as nitib-a-manok and inaloban-a-tilapia, represent more than gastronomic pleasure—they mark rites of passage, honor religious customs, and symbolize social relationships. These foods often appear in significant life events, including childbirth, weddings, funerals, and religious feasts like Eid al-Fitr and Maulid (Jemal, 2020).

Halal food, as part of the broader halal lifestyle, adheres to Islamic dietary laws and practices, emphasizing cleanliness, ethical preparation, and respect for religious boundaries. Butig, with its predominantly Muslim population and deep Islamic history, naturally aligns with the principles of halal food production and consumption. Halal extends beyond food to include the ethical values embedded in Islamic life, thus reinforcing the importance of preserving local halal food traditions as a form of faith-based cultural expression (Hadji Abdul Rahman, 2020).

Furthermore, Butig is known for its abundant natural resources, fertile lands, and long-standing agricultural heritage. The municipality is home to rice paddies, cornfields, coconut plantations, and fishponds that sustain local food production. Agriculture remains a primary source of livelihood for many families, often practiced through traditional means. These agricultural practices not only support food security but also strengthen community bonds and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Despite these cultural and ecological riches, traditional food systems in Butig face challenges due to modernization, migration, and declining interest among younger generations. As processed food becomes more accessible, traditional recipes and farming methods are increasingly at risk of disappearing. Additionally, the lack of proper documentation, market access, and government support further hinder the promotion of traditional food as a sustainable community resource.

In this context, the promotion of traditional food in Butig becomes a matter of community service. Preserving culinary and agricultural heritage not only safeguards cultural identity but also opens opportunities for economic development, tourism, and social cohesion. By emphasizing the local food system through research and advocacy, this study contributes to broader efforts to empower rural communities, reinforce food sovereignty, and revitalize Indigenous practices. It aligns with the goals of community-based development by supporting local skills, encouraging entrepreneurship, and inspiring pride in cultural knowledge.

Thus, this paper aims to assess and promote the traditional food and agriculture of Butig, Lanao del Sur, with a particular focus on its potential for heritage conservation and community development. By documenting local pastries, delicacies, and farming practices and analyzing their socio-cultural meanings, this study contributes to the preservation and revitalization of a vibrant culinary tradition that remains central to Mëranaos' identity. This

study adds new information regarding traditional food, as reported elsewhere (Ashari *et al.*, 2021; Apriyanti, 2023; Qotrunnada & Nurani, 2022).

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore and document the traditional food practices and agricultural livelihoods in Butig, Lanao del Sur, Philippines. The ethnographic method was chosen for its strength in capturing the cultural, religious, and social dimensions of food heritage and farming activities through immersive fieldwork. The study aligns with a community service framework by emphasizing community engagement, preservation of indigenous knowledge, and sustainable development.

2.1. Data Collection

Primary data were gathered through participant observation, informal interviews, and documentation of traditional food preparation, local market activities, and agricultural practices. The researchers engaged directly with bakers, cooks, farmers, vendors, madrasah teachers, women's groups, and elders to gather firsthand information about the production, meaning, and cultural significance of local foods and farming systems. Visits were conducted to kitchens, family farms, madrasah canteens, public markets, and community-based processing areas.

Photographic documentation was also used to visually capture traditional pastries and food items, as well as the landscapes where farming occurs. This visual ethnography helped to illustrate the richness of Butig's food culture better.

2.2. Sampling and Community Involvement

A purposive sampling approach was used to select key informants who possessed deep knowledge of Mëranaos cuisine and traditional farming. These included local elders, women known for their culinary skills, young farmers, halal food sellers, and local government representatives involved in agriculture and tourism.

The research was conducted in partnership with the local community, following principles of participatory research and community service. Informants were treated as co-creators of knowledge, and their insights were used to shape the documentation and recommendations of the study.

2.3. Data Analysis

Narrative data from interviews and field observations were coded thematically. The researchers identified recurring patterns in how food is linked to culture, community development, religious practice, and local identity. Themes such as "food and spirituality," "women's role in food preparation," "food as economic resource," and "agriculture and food security" were drawn from the field data and used to construct the Results and Discussion section.

Visual data (photographs) were categorized and included in the findings to support descriptive analysis. These images helped contextualize the textual data and highlight the authenticity of traditional food practices.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical standards of respect, consent, and cultural sensitivity. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, and verbal consent was obtained before

interviews or photographs. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time, and their identities were protected unless they explicitly approved being named in the study.

By embedding itself within the community, this research aims to serve not only as documentation but also as a contribution to local empowerment. The findings are intended to support the community's efforts in preserving their food heritage, promoting sustainable agriculture, and expanding opportunities for economic development through halal food tourism.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Location of the Study

The Municipality of Butig is located in the province of Lanao del Sur, part of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). As a 6th class municipality, Butig has a total population of 22,768, based on the 2020 census. It is widely regarded as one of the cradles of Mëranaos civilization, with deep historical, cultural, and agricultural significance.

Geographically, Butig is landlocked, yet it is bordered by fertile land that supports various forms of agriculture, including rice paddies, cornfields, banana plantations, and coconut groves. Its terrain is enriched by natural water springs and mountain ranges, including Mount Makaturing, a dormant stratovolcano that adds to the municipality's rich biodiversity. The land's irrigation network also makes it ideal for sustainable farming practices, which are central to the local economy and culinary traditions.

Figures 1 and 2 provide maps highlighting the regional and municipal locations of Butig. These maps illustrate Butig's strategic position in Mindanao and its proximity to urban centers like Marawi City and Iligan City, which makes it a valuable contributor to regional food distribution and traditional culinary exchange.

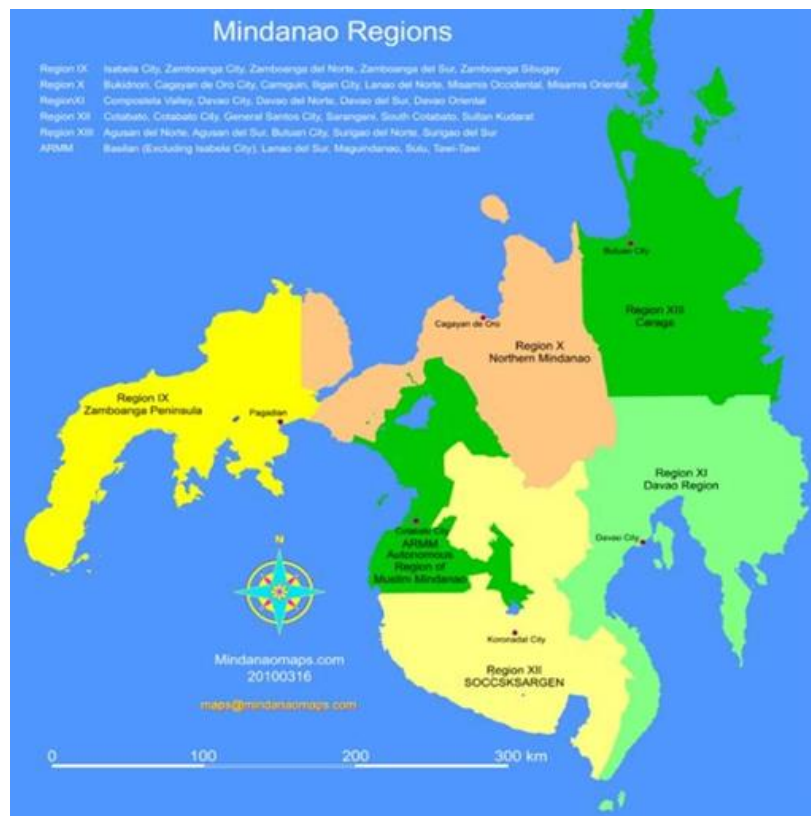


Figure 1. Map of Mindanao with Lanao del Sur highlighted.



Figure 2. Map of Lanao del Sur with the Butig Municipality highlighted.

3.2. Agricultural Resources and Local Produce

Agriculture is the lifeblood of Butig's local economy, playing a central role in sustaining livelihoods and supporting the development of halal-based food traditions. The municipality's fertile lands are utilized for cultivating rice, corn, bananas, coconuts, and bamboo, which are vital not only for daily subsistence but also for traditional Mëranaos cuisine.

- (i) Rice farming is one of the dominant agricultural practices. Farmers typically work on lands owned by local businesspeople under profit-sharing agreements, ensuring a fair distribution of income. This model supports the local economy while fostering community cooperation (see **Figure 3**).



Figure 3. Rice farming in Butig, typically managed through landowner-farmer profit-sharing systems.

- (ii) Corn is another major crop, some of which is exported to snack manufacturing companies in Cagayan de Oro, highlighting Butig's participation in regional commerce. Fields of corn are common across barangays and serve both as food and a cash crop (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4. Corn crops are cultivated for local consumption and regional export.

- (iii) Bamboo grows abundantly in Butig's upland areas. Locals use it to build furniture, housing materials, and fishing tools. With proper management, bamboo can become an eco-friendly export product for the municipality, contributing to both agriculture and community development initiatives. **Figure 5** shows bamboo trees cultivated in the area.



Figure 5. Dense bamboo groves, commonly used for building and local crafts.

- (iv) Banana plantations are also widespread and contribute to both household nutrition and local markets. Bananas are sold fresh or used as ingredients in traditional snacks and desserts. Alongside them, bamboo groves flourish in Butig and are used for construction, crafts, and kitchen implements (**Figure 6**).



Figure 6. Butig banana plantation, an essential part of household nutrition and local commerce.

- (v) Coconut trees are another key agricultural feature, and their products—especially coconut milk and grated coconut—are foundational in Mëranaos cuisine. They are used in savory dishes like *piyaparan* and sweets like *dodol*, showcasing the integration of agriculture and traditional food practices (**Figure 7**).



Figure 7. Coconut trees are commonly found across Butig, contributing to traditional Mëranaos cuisine.

Through these diverse agricultural assets, Butig not only feeds its community but also preserves the culinary traditions and halal food culture that define its local identity and offer promise for halal-focused tourism and entrepreneurship.

The agricultural practices in Butig align with Islamic principles of cleanliness, ethical treatment of the environment, and community service. Crops are harvested through ethical labor and are often used in community feasts, religious observances, and shared meals—reflecting Islam’s emphasis on charity, unity, and environmental care.

As halal tourism grows in the Philippines, highlighting the agricultural roots of Butig can attract eco-conscious Muslim travelers who seek authenticity in their culinary experiences. Promoting organic rice, native corn, and coconut-based products offers opportunities for local farmers to reach broader markets, supporting food security and income generation.

3.3. Culinary Tourism: Halal Food and Local Delicacies

3.3.1. Traditional pastries

The Mëranaw people of Butig, Lanao del Sur, possess a vibrant culinary heritage, particularly evident in their array of traditional pastries. These delicacies, collectively known as *mamis*, are integral to various social and cultural events, symbolizing hospitality, celebration, and communal identity. Rooted in indigenous ingredients and time-honored techniques, these pastries offer a glimpse into the Mëranaw's rich cultural tapestry.

- (i) *Tiyatag*. *Tiyatag* is a distinctive Mëranaw pastry renowned for its intricate, lace-like appearance. Crafted from a batter of rice flour, eggs, and coconut milk, it is meticulously drizzled into hot oil in a circular motion, forming delicate, crispy webs. Once golden brown, the pastry is rolled and often drizzled with syrup, enhancing its sweetness. As seen in **Figure 8**, the crispy texture and unique design of *tiyatag* make it visually distinctive.



Figure 8. *Tiyatag*, a traditional Mëranaw lace-like pastry.

- (ii) Tamokonsi. Resembling a soft pretzel, *tamokonsi* is a chewy, sweet treat made from flour dough that is twisted into a knot before being fried to a golden hue. Its slightly crisp exterior encases a tender, flavorful interior, making it a beloved snack among the Mëranaw. **Figure 9** shows the signature twisted form of *tamokonsi*.



Figure 9. *Tamokonsi*, sweet knot-shaped Mëranaw pastry.

- (iii) Browa. *Browa* is a sponge-like biscuit that comes in two primary varieties: one akin to ladyfingers with a crunchy texture and another resembling a soft sponge cake. Made from a blend of flour, sugar, eggs, and baking powder, *browa* offers a light yet satisfying sweetness. As presented in **Figure 10**, browa is typically served with tea or coffee.



Figure 10. Sweet *Browa*, a soft and spongy traditional pastry.

- (iv) Dodol. A quintessential Mëranaw delicacy, *dodol* is a sticky, sweet confection made from glutinous rice flour, coconut milk, and brown sugar or jaggery. The mixture is cooked slowly over several hours, requiring constant stirring to achieve its characteristic thick, smooth consistency. An image of a black dodol is shown in **Figure 11**.



Figure 11. Sweet black dodol made with coconut milk and glutinous rice.

- (v) Apang. *Apang*, often referred to as the Mëranaw hotcake, is a simple yet delightful pastry made from a batter of rice flour, coconut milk, and sugar. Cooked on a griddle until golden brown, it boasts a slightly crisp edge with a soft, fluffy center. **Figure 12** captures its golden-brown crust and warm serving style.



Figure 12. Apang, the Mëranaw hotcake made with coconut and rice flour.

- (vi) Balolon. *Balolon* is a rolled pancake filled with sweetened coconut and muscovado sugar, often topped with honey and raisins. The pancake is thin and pliable, encasing the rich, flavorful filling in a delicate embrace. **Figure 13** shows a close-up of this festive and well-loved treat.



Figure 13. *Balolon*, coconut-filled rolled pancake topped with syrup and raisins.

- (vii) *Pabrot*. *Pabrot* consists of small, fried balls made from glutinous rice flour, offering a crunchy exterior with a chewy interior. These bite-sized treats are often glazed with caramelized sugar. The appearance of *pabrot* is depicted in **Figure 14**.



Figure 14. *Pabrot*, glutinous rice balls fried and glazed in sugar.

The traditional pastries of the Mëranaw people are more than mere confections; they are edible embodiments of cultural values, social bonds, and historical narratives. Each delicacy carries its own story, preparation rituals, and symbolic meanings, contributing to a rich culinary heritage that continues to thrive in Butig, Lanao del Sur. Preserving and promoting these traditional pastries not only honors the Mëranaw's ancestral legacy but also offers a delectable avenue for cultural appreciation and understanding.

3.3.2. Traditional Food

Mëranaw cuisine reflects a harmonious blend of indigenous flavors, Islamic dietary laws, and regional ingredients that define the culinary identity of Lanao del Sur. The traditional food of Butig offers a fascinating insight into the community's social customs, religious values, and connection to the land. It features rich, coconut-based dishes often seasoned with native spices and condiments such as palapa (a mixture of sakurab, chili, and ginger). Meals are typically communal, reinforcing hospitality and family unity.

- (i) *Nitib-a-Manok*. *Nitib-a-manok*, or native chicken with grated coconut, is one of the most beloved traditional dishes in Butig. It is made by slow-cooking free-range chicken in freshly grated coconut milk, ginger, onions, turmeric, and palapa. The result is a rich, flavorful stew with a creamy, yellow-hued sauce that pairs well with white rice or sticky

rice. As shown in **Figure 15**, *nitib-a-manok* is often served during community events and special occasions.



Figure 15. *Nitib-a-manok*, traditional Mëranaw chicken cooked in coconut milk.

- (ii) Inaloban-a-Tilapia. Another popular dish is *inaloban-a-tilapia*, which features grilled tilapia simmered in a spicy, aromatic coconut broth. Infused with native ingredients like ginger, chili, and sakurab (native shallots), the broth highlights the fish's natural flavors while offering a comforting, tangy-spicy finish. **Figure 16** illustrates the bright yellow coconut sauce characteristic of *inaloban-a-tilapia*.



Figure 16. *Inaloban-a-tilapia*, grilled fish simmered in spicy coconut gravy.

- (iii) Piyaparan a Bakas. *Piyaparan* is a cooking technique that involves sautéing meat or fish in turmeric, coconut milk, and palapa. One common variant in Butig is *piyaparan a bakas* — smoked tuna prepared with this method. The smoky flavor of the tuna, combined with the creamy texture of the coconut sauce, creates a savory delicacy that is deeply satisfying and highly valued in local gatherings. Although a figure is not provided for this specific dish, it is often served alongside *palapa* and sticky rice.
- (iv) Beef Rendang (Maranao Style). While originally of Indonesian-Malay origin, *rendang* has become a staple in Mëranaw cuisine. The Maranao version features slow-cooked beef simmered in a rich mixture of coconut milk, chili, turmeric, lemongrass, and native aromatics. The dish is labor-intensive but produces intensely flavored, tender meat. Beef rendang is often served during weddings, royal enthronements, and Eid celebrations, highlighting its cultural prestige and culinary richness.
- (v) Palapa. No Mëranaw meal is complete without *palapa*, the iconic condiment of the region. Made of sakurab, ginger, garlic, and chili, finely minced and sautéed in coconut oil, *palapa* is used both as a cooking base and as a table condiment. It adds a burst of

spice and complexity to every dish and represents the quintessential taste of Mëranaw culinary identity.

Many Mëranaws prepare jars of *palapa* at home and consider it a household staple. It is also increasingly being marketed as a halal-certified product that can reach wider food markets.

The traditional food culture of Butig is inherently sustainable. Many ingredients, including coconut, banana, sakurab, native poultry, and freshwater fish, are locally sourced from home gardens, farms, and lakes. This connection to local agriculture reinforces food security and supports the halal lifestyle adhered to by the Mëranaw population.

Additionally, the sharing of food (particularly during religious observances like Ramadan and Eid) reinforces values of charity (*sadaqah*), community service, and togetherness. Meals often serve as an expression of religious devotion, gratitude, and cultural continuity.

Mëranaw food traditions in Butig encapsulate centuries of heritage and faith. From richly flavored stews like *nitib-a-manok* to everyday staples such as *palapa*, these dishes not only nourish the body but also serve as symbols of cultural identity and resilience. By preserving these food traditions and promoting them through halal tourism initiatives, Butig can carve a unique niche in the culinary tourism landscape of the Philippines.

3.4. Implications for Traditional Food Promotion and Community Development

The rich traditional food culture of Butig, particularly its array of native pastries and halal dishes, presents a significant opportunity for community-based development and economic empowerment. In a region known for its historical significance and cultural heritage, the promotion of traditional food is not merely about preserving recipes—it is a means of strengthening identity, supporting livelihoods, and enhancing tourism through food-focused experiences.

Traditional Mëranaos food, including pastries like *browa*, *tamokonsi*, *tiyatag*, and *dodol*, as well as main dishes such as *nitib-a-manok* and *inaloban-a-tilapia*, carries cultural and emotional meaning for locals. These foods are deeply intertwined with celebrations, rites of passage, religious holidays, and expressions of hospitality. As such, their preservation and promotion go beyond culinary appreciation; they contribute to social cohesion and cultural education.

From a development perspective, these culinary traditions can be harnessed to stimulate the local economy through food entrepreneurship, agritourism, and halal food tourism. Women, in particular, play a central role in preparing and selling traditional snacks and meals. Encouraging the formation of cooperatives and small enterprises around food production can provide income opportunities, especially for women and youth. For instance, *balolon*, *apang*, and *pabrot* are already commonly sold in markets and during special events. Branding, packaging, and ensuring food safety standards can allow these products to reach wider markets, including those beyond Lanao del Sur.

Incorporating food-based tourism into the local halal tourism strategy also offers value. Tour packages that include cooking demonstrations, food tastings, and visits to community farms or local kitchens can attract domestic and international Muslim travelers seeking authentic and religiously compliant experiences. Food festivals celebrating Mëranaos cuisine can serve as platforms for cultural exchange and promote local ingredients and agricultural practices.

To support these initiatives, community training on sustainable food production, hygiene practices, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship should be offered through partnerships between the local government, non-profit organizations, and academic institutions.

Educational campaigns that emphasize the nutritional value, cultural symbolism, and economic potential of traditional food can also strengthen community awareness and pride.

Furthermore, integrating Mëranaos food heritage into school curricula and youth activities can ensure intergenerational knowledge transfer. Documenting recipes and oral histories through multimedia or local publications would help preserve this intangible cultural heritage and allow future generations to engage with it meaningfully.

In the broader context of community service, the promotion of traditional food aligns with the goals of inclusive development, cultural preservation, and local empowerment. It leverages what communities already have—their culinary knowledge and agricultural resources—to build sustainable pathways for progress. Through concerted efforts in education, tourism planning, and microenterprise development, Butig can position itself not only as a site of historical importance but also as a vibrant center for traditional halal food in the Bangsamoro region.

This adds new information regarding traditional food, as reported elsewhere ([Ashari et al., 2021](#); [Apriyanti, 2023](#); [Qotrunnada & Nurani, 2022](#)).

4. CONCLUSION

The Municipality of Butig, Lanao del Sur, holds significant potential as a center for traditional food promotion and agricultural development in the Bangsamoro region. Its rich culinary heritage, particularly in the form of halal-certified native pastries and culturally significant dishes, reflects centuries of tradition, local wisdom, and Islamic values. Through ethnographic exploration and cultural documentation, this study highlights how food serves not only as sustenance but also as a symbol of identity, community resilience, and spiritual expression among the Mëranaos people.

The variety of traditional pastries (such as browa, tamokonsi, tiyatag, dodol, apang, balolon, and pabrot) alongside iconic Mëranaos dishes like nitib-a-manok and inaloban-atilapia illustrates the diverse gastronomic landscape of Butig. These foods are deeply embedded in local celebrations, religious observances, and everyday life, offering both cultural meaning and economic opportunity. By preserving and promoting these food practices, the municipality can harness the power of traditional cuisine to foster community pride, create livelihood opportunities, and attract halal-conscious tourists.

The findings emphasize that traditional food promotion, when supported by inclusive policies, infrastructure, and training, can serve as a key driver for rural development. Educational institutions, women-led enterprises, local farmers, and community leaders all have a role to play in ensuring the continuity and innovation of traditional food systems. Moreover, incorporating traditional food heritage into the municipality's halal tourism strategy will enhance its visibility and economic sustainability.

Food is not just a reflection of cultural identity in Butig, it is a tool for community service and empowerment. The preservation, celebration, and strategic promotion of traditional Mëranaos cuisine hold the promise of revitalizing local economies, fostering intercultural dialogue, and enriching the spiritual and material well-being of the people. Butig's journey from tradition to transformation begins at the community table, where every shared dish tells a story of resilience, faith, and unity.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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