

# Culinary Heritage of Ancient Society: Integrating Indigenous Health-Based Food Traditions into Sustainable Tourism within the Cultural Corridors in North Central Province of Sri Lanka

\*MA Prasad Kumara., MKL Irangani, AMTD Abesinghe., and BMC Madhusankha Bandara

Department of Humanities, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of indigenous health-based culinary traditions in promoting sustainable tourism within the cultural corridors of Sri Lanka's North Central Province, where ancient agrarian systems, *paddy* and *chena* cultivations and rural communities have preserved unique food heritage. The main objective is to identify and document traditional health-based food practices, evaluate their socio-economic and cultural significance, and examine their potential integration into sustainable tourism. The main problem of conducting this research was to discuss how local health-based culinary traditions in the North Central Province can be effectively integrated into sustainable tourism development while preserving cultural heritage and community well-being. Using a qualitative approach, the study collected data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with farmers, women, elders, and community stakeholders in *Medawachchiya* and *Thulawelliya* villages, followed by thematic analysis. The findings reveal that villagers possess extensive culinary literacy, preparing nutritionally rich foods such as *kurakkan* dishes (Eleusine Coracana), *bada iringu* dishes (*Zea mays*), herbal drinks, indigenous rice varieties, and medicinal plant-based recipes, which support health, food security, and rural livelihoods. Traditional food practices also contribute to income generation, women's empowerment, and local economic sustainability. Community members expressed strong interest in integrating these traditions into tourism through village food experiences, homestays, and food festivals. The study concludes that integrating indigenous culinary traditions into tourism can strengthen rural economies, preserve cultural heritage, and enhance sustainable tourism, provided that community participation, proper documentation, and cultural tourism planning is guaranteed. This paper concludes that local culinary traditions can be transformed into a sustainable tourism asset, preserving the living heritage of Sri Lanka's ancient civilization.

**Keywords:** Chena cultivations, Culinary Heritage, Health-Based Food Traditions, North Central Province, Sustainable Tourism.

## INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCH

Culinary heritage is increasingly recognized as an essential dimension of cultural identity, historical continuity, and sustainable development. It can be recognized that the local food culture of Sri Lanka has a long history. From the beginning of man, the methods used by them to obtain their food have been seen throughout history. Information about this can be discovered from the earliest period. Man, who started hunting animals by chasing them, learned to burn fruits and meat with the discovery of fire. Accordingly, with the gradual production of clay items, a very important milestone in cooking was marked. Recently, these facts have been confirmed through research conducted on primitive man by Dr. Shiran Deraniyagala. Accordingly, it has been shown that primitive man killed and burned seashells and wild animals to fulfill his food needs, and may have eaten grains and bones.

Moreover, with the Aryan migration that took place in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, many facts about the food history of this country were revealed, and it is mentioned in the Mahavamsa that when *King Vijaya* and his entourage

landed at *Tammanna*, they were provided with food using *Kuvanna* grains (Mahavamsa, 1996). Thus, it can be cited as a suitable example of the establishment of a prosperous economy in ancient Sri Lanka.

Thus, it can be recognized that the people of this country have had a developed culinary tradition from the beginning. It can be especially recognized how it has been practiced from ancient Sri Lanka to the present society. In this way, as man became civilized, the foods he ate gradually became complex and the methods of preparing them also varied. Accordingly, it developed to the point of being included among the ancient 'Sivata Kala' called culinary art. By studying the written and literary sources that have been documented since the beginning of the Sinhala nation, it can be revealed that the Sri Lankans had an advanced culinary system. Food can also be identified as one of the main factors determining the existence of all living beings in the world, and according to the *Anguttara Nikaya*, "There is nothing but food for the perpetuation of born beings and for the sustenance of born beings" (Anguttara Nikaya, 1960) Although there are no documents belonging to the earliest era, it is possible to uncover these facts through stone and metal documents. Accordingly, among the foods mentioned in the *Saddharmaratnavaliya*, there are potatoes such as *kukulala* (*Cucumis anguria*), *katuala* (*Dioscorea* spp), *gona ala, vel ala*, and in addition, information is given about vegetables such as *puhul* (*Lagenaria siceraria*), *karabatu, kekiri, vetakolu* (*Trichosanthes cucumerina*), etc. The *Mahavamsa* includes information on many ways of cooking rice, such as rice porridge, rice cooked with milk, rice cooked with sugarcane, rice cooked with *hakuru*, rice cooked with honey, rice cooked with *veda* (Mahavamsa, 1996).

Food is not merely a biological necessity. It is a social, cultural, and symbolic system that reflects the values, beliefs, ecological relationships, and knowledge systems of a civilization. In ancient societies, food practices were deeply integrated with agriculture, religion, medicine, and environmental stewardship. In recent years, food has emerged as a powerful medium through which communities' express cultural identity, sustain local economies, and foster tourism development. Across Europe and beyond, rural regions are increasingly recognizing the value of their gastronomic traditions as both tangible and intangible heritage (Demirović Bajrami, D. et al., 2025). The tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors worldwide, contributing significantly to economic development, employment, and cultural exchange (Jones et al., 2016). As a result, sustainability has become a global imperative in hospitality management, with scholars and practitioners emphasizing the need for environmentally friendly operations, economic inclusiveness, and cultural preservation (Okechukwu, O. R. et al., 2025). Culinary practices, often passed down informally through generations, are not only central to daily life but also serve as a living archive of local history, values, and social bonds (Parveen, 2016). Culinary traditions, particularly indigenous ones, encapsulate centuries of accumulated knowledge about agriculture, environment, and culture.

Indigenous health-based food traditions in the North Central Province are rooted in Ayurvedic principles, seasonal agriculture, and community-based knowledge transmission. Traditional diets emphasize medicinal plants, indigenous rice varieties, wild greens, fermented foods, and herbal preparations that promote holistic well-being rather than mere caloric consumption. However, contemporary tourism in Sri Lanka has largely focused on heritage monuments, wildlife safaris and beach tourism, leaving local culinary traditions underrepresented in tourist attractions. Although the Cultural Triangle, which includes Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, is globally valued for its archaeological grandeur, tourists rarely engage with the living food cultures that evolved near these ancient sites. As a result, the critical importance of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage remains invisible to tourists. This gap can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity for sustainable tourism development. Therefore, this study examines how indigenous health-based culinary traditions in the North Central Province can be effectively integrated into sustainable tourism while safeguarding cultural heritage and promoting community well-being. Specifically, the research aims to identify and document traditional health-based food practices and recipes, analyze their socio-economic and cultural value, assess current tourism engagement with local food traditions, and explore community perceptions to promote culturally respectful and community-centered culinary tourism development aligned with heritage safeguarding principles recognized by UNESCO.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted using a qualitative research approach to explore indigenous health-based culinary traditions and their integration into sustainable tourism in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. Data were

collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. In selecting suitable participants for this study, data contributors representing appropriate age groups were selected to achieve the research objectives. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 local farmers and 10 traditional food producers, 10 women engaged in local cooking practices, 10 community leaders and elders, and 04 tourism officials, which generated an in-depth understanding of local knowledge systems, cultural values, and perceptions of tourism integration. Purposive sampling was used for selecting participants for interviews and FGDs to ensure rich and context-specific information, whereas purposive sampling was applied for the interview guide to enhance representativeness across stakeholder groups. The research was conducted in study areas including *Medawachchiya* and *Thulawelliya* in Anuradhapura reflecting the cultural and agrarian significance of the region. In selecting this study area, areas where knowledge related to traditional culinary arts is prevalent, especially in the arid regions, were selected. Therefore, the *Medawachchiya* and *Thulaweliya* areas were selected under purposive sampling. The data analysis followed a thematic approach, to identify patterns linking culinary heritage, community participation, and sustainable tourism development.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Culinary Literacy and Health-Based Indigenous Food Practices in the Study Area

The findings reveal that villagers in the study areas possess a high level of culinary literacy rooted in long-standing agrarian traditions and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Culinary literacy, in this context, extends beyond the ability to prepare food and encompasses a comprehensive understanding of indigenous ingredients, seasonal food cycles, medicinal properties of plants, and culturally appropriate cooking techniques. Interviews with community elders and women responsible for household food preparation indicated that traditional culinary knowledge is primarily transmitted orally and through daily practice rather than written documentation. A group of people who traditionally engage in agricultural activities in the study area were included in the sample of this study and it was confirmed that they live by cultivating *paddy* and *chena*. They have been engaged in agricultural activities for many years and cultivate paddy on a large scale along with mud farming. In addition, they also cultivate upland crops and grow *bada iringu* (*Zea mays*), cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*), *mun* (*Vigna radiata*), *kurakkan* (*Eleusine coracana*), *thala* (*Sesamum indicum*) and various vegetables and fruits. It was revealed during the data collection that the vegetables required for daily use were procured from their own farms. The focus group discussions conducted revealed that the villagers had various recipes that were unique to the study area. Accordingly, the method of preparing those recipes and their quality were also revealed during the group interviews. The elders in the age group of 60-70 years were of the opinion that they had excellent knowledge of ancient food traditions and that the next generation was avoiding to grasp that knowledge. Accordingly, the recipes unique to the area can be shown in the table below.

Table 1: Food Recipes Unique to the Study Area

Food recipes unique to the study area			
Grain-based foods	Leafy-based foods	Potato-based foods	Other unique foods
<i>Bada Iringu Pittu</i> (Maize)	<i>Thampala</i> ( <i>Amaranthus viridis</i> )	<i>Mannokka Ala</i> ( <i>Manihot esculenta</i> )	<i>Undu Hodda</i> ( <i>Vigna mungo</i> )
<i>Bada Iringu Roti</i> (Maize)	<i>Gotukola</i> ( <i>Centella asiatica</i> )	<i>Nelum Ala</i> ( <i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> )	<i>Dunthel Bath</i>
<i>Kurakkan Roti</i> (Finger Millet)	<i>Mukunuwenna</i> ( <i>Alternanthera</i> )	<i>Kiri Ala</i> ( <i>Colocasia esculenta</i> )	<i>Divul Hodda</i> ( <i>Limonia acidissima</i> )
<i>Kurakkan Pittu</i>	<i>Kalawam Pala</i>	<i>Katu Ala</i> ( <i>Dioscorea spp</i> )	<i>Talabasthe</i>
<i>Kurakkan Helapa</i> (Finger Millet)	<i>Cowpea Dalu</i> ( <i>Vigna unguiculata</i> )	<i>Kukulala</i>	<i>Idalolu Hatu</i> ( <i>Termitomyces spp</i> )
<i>Meneri</i> (Foxtail)	<i>Heen sorano</i>	<i>Yam</i> ( <i>Dioscorea aloto</i> )	<i>Dhanya Melluma</i>

(Source: Field Data Collection at Medawachchiya Thulawelliya Village, 2026)

Accordingly, as a finding identified during the data collection conducted in the study area, the villagers paid special attention to the quality and nutritional value of these traditional food recipes when consuming them in their daily lives. Therefore, since this area is an area where agricultural crops and *chena* cultivation are constantly carried out in the dry zone, it was revealed in several focus group discussions that many recipes related to '*Bada Iringu* (*Zea mays*), *Kurakkan* (*Eleusine coracana*), Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*), *Thala and Undu* (*Vigna mungo*)' are provided. Accordingly, it can be said that these villagers had a good view of food literacy. Since paddy cultivation is carried out as a daily livelihood, it seems that they tend to use their food in a quality way as needed to carry out their agricultural activities with good strength. Therefore, it is confirmed that they tend to use those recipes with quality and high nutritional value, just as food is needed as a basic personal need. Accordingly, it appears that rural people frequently consumed nutritious food recipes to improve their strength and nutritional quality through health-based dietary practices.

Moreover, the interviewees demonstrated detailed knowledge of local rice varieties such as *Nadu* (*Oryza sativa*), *Samba* (*Oryza sativa*), *Kalu Heenati* (*Oryza sativa*), *Suwandel* (*Oryza sativa*), *Pachchaperumal* (*Oryza sativa*) and *Rathu Nivudu* (*Oryza sativa*) in their agricultural activities and were aware of their nutritional and medicinal benefits. For example, *Kalu Heenati* (*Oryza sativa*) rice was widely recognized for its ability to enhance immunity and regulate blood sugar levels, while *Suwandel* (*Oryza sativa*) rice was known to improve digestion and overall vitality. Accordingly, in addition to the staple grains, the villagers demonstrated extensive knowledge of wild and cultivated greens including *gotukola* (*Centella asiatica*), *Mukunuvenna* (*Alternanthera sessilis*), *Tampala* (*Amaranthus* species), and *Hathawariya* (*Asparagus racemosus*) that they incorporated into their daily diet and medicinal preparations. Participants also described traditional food preparation techniques such as stone grinding, cooking in clay pots and wood-fired cooking methods, which are believed to preserve nutritional value and enhance flavor. Furthermore, traditional dishes such as *kola kenda*, *kiribath*, *mallum* and local sweets made from rice flour and *hakuru* were identified as culturally significant foods associated with religious rituals, agricultural cycles and social gatherings. However, respondents expressed concern about the gradual decline in culinary literacy among younger generations due to modernization, changing lifestyles and increased consumption of processed foods. This decline highlights the urgent need for systematic documentation and preservation of local culinary knowledge as part of cultural heritage conservation and sustainable tourism development. Accordingly, the residents of this study area were interested in sharing the basic food recipes they consume during their morning/noon/dinner and tea time etc. and eating a quality nutritious meal. According to the interviews conducted in the study area, it was clear that the food patterns they follow during these main meals are similar. Accordingly, the majority of the participants were of the opinion that they include energy-rich foods in their main meals. Overall, the food recipes that the people of the study area consume for their main meals could be identified as follows.

Table 2: The Food Recipes that the People of the Study Area Consume for their Main Meals

The food recipes that the people of the study area consume for their main meals	
Time Category	Special Food Items
Main Breakfast	<i>Diyabath</i> (rice soaked in water)
	<i>Kirihodi</i> with <i>Kurakkan pittu</i> ( <i>Eleusine</i> )
	<i>Kurakkan roti</i> ( <i>Eleusine</i> ) with <i>Tumba karavila malluma</i> ( <i>Momordica dioica</i> )
	Boiled pumpkin with coconut ( <i>Cucurbita</i> )
	Mung beans with milk rice, salt, and chili
10.00 am Tea Time	Boiled cassava with <i>sambol</i>
	Rice flour mixed with <i>aggala</i>
Main Lunch	Corn mixed with <i>aggala</i>
	Rice with meat and fish dishes
	Meat varieties (chicken, pork, etc.)
	Vegetable dishes, <i>Tampala ambula</i> & <i>Undu hodda</i>

3.00 pm Tea Time	<i>Aggala</i> made from dried rice
	<i>Kurakkan halapa</i> (Eleusine coracana) and <i>Ranawara</i> drink (Senna auriculata) with jiggery
	<i>Iramusu Drink</i> (Hemidesmus indicus), <i>Polpala Drink</i> (Aerva lanata)
Main Dinner	Rice as the main dish
	Meat varieties (chicken, eggs, fish)

(Sources: Focus Group Discussion Data, 2026)

Thus, it was confirmed that they are following a regular food recipe for their daily food consumption pattern. When doing farming activities and dedicating themselves to rural economic development, it seems that the household is constantly working to prepare a meal that increases the strength of the farmer. Respondents reported using local spices such as *turmeric* (*Curcuma longa*), *ginger* (*Zingiber officinale*), *koththamalli* (*Coriandrum sativum*), and *garlic* (*Allium sativum*) to flavor meats like pork, beef, venison, and chicken. *Murunga* (*Moringa oleifera*) bark is applied to pork to reduce toxins. Medicinal spices such as uluhal, mustard (*Brassica juncea*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), *lemongrass*, *goraka* (*Garcinia*), and *capsicum* are used for their antimicrobial and digestive properties. Dried mushrooms are also added to some dishes for flavor. This is because the food is a more delicious meaty dish. All these findings indicate that local culinary traditions represent a modern health-oriented food system that closely aligns with the contemporary global interest in health tourism and sustainable food systems.

### Socio-Economic Value of Traditional Food Practices in Rural Community

The findings suggest that traditional food practices play a significant role in supporting rural livelihoods and local economic sustainability. Local food production and processing provide income-generating opportunities for farmers, women, and small-scale entrepreneurs in the study areas. Some household data contributors reported that surplus local rice varieties (*paddy*, *bada iringu* (*Zea mays*), *mun* (*Vigna radiate*), *undu* (*Vigna mungo*) are sold in local markets for traditional sweets, medicinal porridge, and home-grown vegetables, thereby strengthening household income. In particular, older women play a key role in preserving culinary knowledge and producing foods for sale, empowering households and strengthening community roles. Furthermore, 'Wewa' is a major center for strengthening the rural economy. Therefore, evidence can be found from history that farmers used to obtain all the food items such as tubers, leaves and stems from the lake area when carrying out agricultural activities related to paddy fields. Interviews conducted revealed that the people of the study area also believed that the fish species caught in the lake area were of high nutritional value. The interviews confirmed that the following are unique among the foods obtained from the *wewa*.

Table 3: Foods with High Nutritional Value Obtained from the Wewa Area

Foods with high nutritional value obtained from the wewa area	
Type of food Category	Special Food Items
Types of Tubers	<i>Nelum Ala</i> ( <i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> )
	<i>Olu Ala</i> ( <i>Nymphaea nouchali</i> )
	<i>Manel</i> ( <i>Nymphaea nouchali</i> )
	<i>Kekatiya</i> ( <i>Aponogeton crispus</i> )
	<i>Kohila Ala</i> ( <i>Lasia spinose</i> ), <i>Katu Ala</i> (Buck Yam)
Types of Fish Food	<i>Teppili</i> ( <i>Amblypharyngodon melettinus</i> ), <i>Korali</i>
	<i>Lul Malu</i> ( <i>Channa striata</i> ), <i>Angutu Malu</i>
Types Vegetables (Leaves)	<i>Tora Kola/ Keera Pala</i> ( <i>Amaranthus viridis</i> )
	<i>Thitta Pala/ Lunuvila Pala</i> ( <i>Bacopa monnieri</i> )

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*Mukunuwenna (Alternanthera sessilis)/ Kara Kola*

*Bandi Pala, Lee Kola Kankun (Ipomoea aquatic)*

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(Sources: Focus Group Discussion Data, 2026)

They were of the opinion that these foods are of high nutritional value. It was confirmed that some villagers are already harvesting various food items grown around the lake and selling them in the market. This proved that it is a contribution to the development of their rural economy. Respondents noted that rural traditional foods are highly nutritious, and that some villagers already sell locally grown produce in the market, which directly contributes to their rural economy. They highlighted the potential for integrating food practices into tourism by allowing tourists to connect with rural food culture through homes, culinary experiences, and local markets. This could generate additional income, strengthen the economy, and promote sustainable tourism. If market opportunities exist, rural women expressed their willingness to sell nutritious rural food recipes, showing hope for economic development through value-added traditional foods.

### Community Perceptions and Sustainable Culinary Tourism Development

Community perceptions of the integration of local culinary traditions into tourism were generally positive, with many respondents recognizing the potential benefits of promoting traditional food as a cultural tourism asset. Community perceptions of the integration of local culinary traditions into tourism were generally positive, with many respondents recognizing the potential benefits of promoting traditional food as a cultural tourism asset. Respondents recognized the potential of traditional foods as cultural tourism assets and highlighted several indigenous food and beverage items, including medicinal drinks made from *Karapincha* (*Murraya Koenigii*), *Himbutu* (*Psidium Guineense*), *Iramusu* (*Hemidesmus Indicus*), *Pol Pala* (*Aerva Lanata*), *Belimal* (*Aegle Marmelos*), and *Ranawara* (*Senna Auriculata*), a skin-applying powder from *Dahasspethiya* flowers, and incense sticks incorporating flower powders and camphor.

Participants suggested that activities such as traditional cooking demonstrations, farm-to-table experiences, village-based food tours, festivals and workshops could enhance tourism participation while providing economic benefits to local communities. These experiences were seen as an opportunity to bring rural culinary traditions closer to the urban population around Colombo, who rarely have access to locally sourced recipes. Accordingly, it is an appropriate environment to demonstrate the quality of health-based food traditions and the cultural dignity of rural food patterns.

Sri Lanka has historically been a major tourist hub, attracting visitors interested in both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Experiences in rural villages, *paddy*, and *chena* cultivation are particularly valued by tourists, who enjoy observing traditional food preparation and participating in local culinary activities. Respondents emphasized the importance of age-appropriate food experiences, suggesting that different recipes—such as local *potatoes*, *kenda*, *bedum*, and beverages—could be tailored for young and older tourists. Dry foods can be safely packaged and displayed at reasonable prices, allowing tourists to take home traditional items, thereby promoting the rural economy. Several strategies were proposed to integrate rural culinary practices into tourism: using local foods in regional festivals, creating "food villages," establishing street food systems, organizing workshops, promoting agro-foods, applying traditional serving methods, and leveraging social media and digital platforms. Festivals based on village foods, spices, and culinary traditions could feature live cooking shows, food stalls, and traditional music and dance, providing a comprehensive tourism experience. Local farmers and community members can showcase their skills in preparing *Kurakkan Roti* (*Eleusine coracana*), *Bada Iringu Pittu* (*Zea mays*), *Kurakkan Kenda* (*Eleusine coracana*), and *Kiri Kos Curry* (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), reinforcing cultural validity while promoting rural entrepreneurship.

However, an interview with the monk of the village temple revealed that the village has regional base values and that there are several weaknesses in attracting tourists due to the low development opportunities in the area. *Thulaweliya village*, located near the sacred city of Anuradhapura, faces limited development, lack of attention from authorities, and infrastructural constraints, despite hosting two tourist hotels, a rural tank, and extensive agricultural activities. Nonetheless, the village's proximity to Anuradhapura allows for quick access by tourists, making culinary tourism a feasible strategy for strengthening the local economy. By integrating

traditional food experiences into tourism, the village can generate income, preserve intangible cultural heritage, and contribute to sustainable rural development in the region.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights that indigenous health-based culinary traditions in the cultural corridors of North Central Province Sri Lanka's represent a significant dimension of living heritage that reflects the deep interconnection between food, agriculture, health, environment, and cultural identity. Rooted in the ancient Rajarata civilization and sustained through tank-based irrigation systems and rural agricultural lifestyles, these culinary traditions demonstrate a highly sustainable and ecologically balanced food system. It can be said that regionally based food culture emerges and its use in tourism development can highlight cultural dignity. The findings confirmed that the rural communities of *Medawachchiya* and *Thulavelliya* have a broad culinary literacy based on intergenerational transmission of knowledge, close interaction with practical experiences. Traditional foods such as *kurakkan roti* (Eleusine coracana), *pittu*, and *kenda, bada iringu* (*Zea mays*)-based preparations, *thala*-based sweets, herbal beverages such as *ranawara* (*Senna auriculata*), *iramusu* (*Hemidesmus indicus*), and *belimal* (*Aegle marmelos*), as well as indigenous rice varieties like *Kalu Heenati* (*Oryza sativa*), *Suwandel* (*Oryza sativa*), and *Pachchaperumal* (*Oryza sativa*), were identified as nutritionally rich and medicinally valuable. These recipes play a key role not only in nourishing individuals but also in maintaining good health, improving physical strength, leading a disease-free life and supporting longevity. This confirms that local culinary traditions are not just a subsistence practice, but also function as an entire health-based food system. Therefore, all practical implications provided by this research should be structured around tourism policy, community empowerment and heritage conservation. Therefore, local communities, researchers, tourism stakeholders and policy makers should pay special attention to preserving and promoting local culinary heritage as a key component of sustainable cultural tourism and rural regional development in Sri Lanka.

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