'Khor gdong Monastery '*ja'* lus pa Lama sGrib bral (1946-2018)

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The younger brother of sprul sku Tshul lo (1884-c.1957) who resided at Shugs 'byung Monastery, in the rDo yul region of mGo log, which also belongs to the Byang gter tradition (https://www.wandel-verlag.de/en/tulku-tsulo-tsultrimzangpo-1884-c-1957, accessed 30.10.2023). It is worth mentioning here that 'Khor gdong sprul sku 'Gyur med rdo rje was the lama of Chos dbyings khyab brdal (1920- 1997) who is well known for attaining the Rainbow Body with his body shrinking at death to the size of а two-year old child: https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Choying-Khyabdel/9945 (accessed 10.10.2023). For 'Khor gdong sprul sku 'Gyur med rdo rje, see also,

https://fchnt.hypotheses.org/535 (accessed 24.11.2023).

³ See Ritiman Das 2021: 'The Third Khordong Tertrul, Chime Rigdzin,' in *The Treasury of Lives*: <u>https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Third-Khordong-Tertrul-Chime-Rigdzin/13689</u> (accessed 23.10.2023).

present a fuller account of his life and tradition as well as the process of the so-called "rainbow body" (*'ja' lus*).



Figure 1 — Lama sGrib bral (photo Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018).

Lama sGrib bral was born in the Tibetan year of the Fire Dog (1946) in gSer rta,⁴ Khams, in a place called dBu chags near 'Khor gdong dgon,⁵ a rNying ma monastery belonging to the Byang gter tradition located in Tre hor, Khams.⁶ His father was the 'Khor gdong *sprul sku* 'Gyur med rdo rje, with whom he had a father-and-son and master-and-disciple relationship, and his mother was Ha bza' 'dzom lu. He had two brothers, called Kun bzang and gDugs dkar (?), and two sisters, Tsha phrug and Pug skyi — all of them passed away now. There is a photograph of 'Gyur med rdo rje, but none of Lama sGrib bral's mother.

According to his official *rnam thar*,⁷ Lama sGrib bral, as a child, was well-behaved and immediately took up to his studies of reading, making recitation, chanting, sounding the conch, and so on, without much effort. He then perfected his reading and other skills together with his father with the guidance of whom he also completed the

⁴ It has also been said that he was from sKye rgu mdo or Mi nyag or rGyal rong. See Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018 (2, 3).

⁵ Alternative names of this monastery are 'Khor lo gdong, bDe chen gsang sngags, 'Khor lo gdong gi dgon pa.

⁶ The region of Tre hor is now part of the northern Brag 'go county (Ch. Lúhuò Xiàn), under the administration of the Garzê (dKar mdzes) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the Chinese Sichuan province. It belongs to the traditional region of Khams.

⁷ 'Chi med nor bu, 2023.

preliminaries practices (sngon 'gro).

During the unrest and religious persecution at the time of the Cultural Revolution, he was imprisoned for three years in Brag 'go and one year in gSer rta, and spent 15 years in a labour camp in mDa' mdos in Hor khog. While in prison, he completed the 'Jam dpal bla sgrub – a 'Khor gdong bla sgrub – as well as Vajrakīlaya and Yamāntaka (gshin phur) and so on. He was then transferred to a prison in gSer rta, where he stayed for one year. During that time, according to some monks from 'Khor gdong, he recited the Mañjuśrī-Nāma-Samgīti ('Jam dpal mtshan brjod) ten thousand times. It is said that despite all the hardships and beatings he suffered, Lama sGrib bral always insisted on wearing his monk robes.⁸

After the Cultural Revolution was over, he went into a 15-year solitary retreat at the meditation cave called A tsa ri sgrub phug, near lHa khang dkar po, in mDa' mdo, Hor khog, not far from Brag 'go. It is said that once, when he arrived in Hor khog during the "barley begging" (*nas bsod*),⁹ a family in gNas nang¹⁰ had lost a sheep. He then did a *mo* divination saying that the sheep was together with another sheep, and afterwards the sheep was found in Brag 'go.

In the year of the Wood Ox (1984–1985), he received from 'Chi med rig 'dzin (1922–2002), the *gter ston* from 'Khor gdong and *sprul sku* of the 'Khor dong *gTer chen* Nus Idan 'gro phan gling pa (1802–1864),¹¹ the empowerments for the *gter gsar*, that is to say, the treasures revealed by 'Khor dong *gTer chen* Nus Idan 'gro phan gling pa and his successor *gSang 'dzin* mGon po dbang rgyal, as well as 'Khor gdong 'Gyur med rdo rje rje, and g.Yu *sprul* sKal Idan gling pa (1868–1914), etc. 'Chi med rig 'dzin advised him to recite the prayer of Yamāntaka using a big prayer wheel. He went on to practice in rNga ba, in gNam mtsho and other places, and for several years kept on travelling and practicing.

Later on, he went to rMa stod, where, at the invitation of Lama Thub bstan tshe ring (20th c.), he entered into a one-year solitary retreat in A mye ltsags¹² where he found a treasure casket with *sgrom bu* (relics) that can still be seen today. After that, he returned to 'Khor gdong and stayed in solitary retreat for several years. In a prophecy of brDa tshang *gter ston* bSam rgyas (20th c.), he remembered the birth of the

⁸ Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018 (3).

⁹ When monks go begging for barley from the laymen in autumn.

¹⁰ gNas nang is a village about an hour away from Brag 'go. This is referring to a rNying ma monastery that is not to be confused with the Kar ma bKa 'brgyud gNas nang monastery near lHa sa that is the seat of dPa' bo Rin po che.

¹¹ <u>https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Khordong-Terchen-Nuden-Dorje/13617</u> (accessed 21.10.2023).

¹² A small mountain in Golog.

elder monk Bakula during the time of the Buddha, and that of 'Brog mi dPal gyi ye shes (8th c.), one of the nine spiritual heart-sons of Guru Padmasambhava.¹³ With the advice of the 'Khor gdong *dbon po* bSod nams 'od gsal (1928–2001),¹⁴ and according to the Lama 'Chi med tshe ring (b.1974), after Lama sGrib bral became a monk, he acquired and brought to 'Khor gdong a big Yamāntaka prayer wheel, the bKa' 'gyur and bsTan 'gyur, masks, brocade for the thrones, and plenty other precious things.

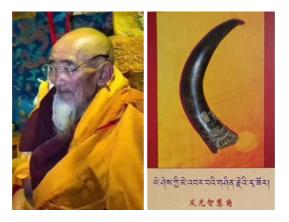


Figure 2 — Yamāntaka Drupchen in 'Khor gdong (photo Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018). Figure 3 — The rwa zor (photo sNga 'gyur Byang gter 'Khor gdong dgon gyi lo rgyus rgyas par bkod pa bzhugs so, 2023).

After he was appointed Vajra Master of the Yamāntaka *sgrub chen*, he stayed at 'Khor gdong for several years (*fig.* 2). Once, while performing the Yamāntaka prayers, the *razor* (rwa zor¹⁵—fig.3) started bleeding – this is just one of the many miraculous deeds symbolic of his accomplishment (*grub pa*), according to many monks who witnessed them at 'Khor gdong. Furthermore, after brDa tshang *gter ston* bSam rgyas became a Dharma Master, Lama sGrib bral wrote down many of the dharma teachings the *gter ston* transmitted orally. Lama sGrib bral stayed in brDa tshang¹⁶ for 3 years.

¹³ <u>https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Drokmi-Pelgyi-Yeshe/11117</u> (accessed 15.10.2023).

¹⁴ His full name is *mKhas btsun Grub pa'i dbang phyug* dBon tsen Dam pa bsod nams 'od gsal.

¹⁵ According to rNying ma lamas, it is a horn used in the Yamāntaka sgrub pa as a samaya offering. The performance of the Yamāntaka *rwa zor* puja requires a powerful lama that has done at least 1 or 2 years of retreat (Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018, 3).

¹⁶ brDa tshang is in gSer rta.



Figure 4 — The house at 'Khor gdong where lama sGrib bral used to live (photo Varvara Chatzisavva, 2023)

After arriving in lHa sa, he stayed several years in retreat in bSam yas mchims pu, in Yar klung shel brag in lHo kha, in lHo brag mkhar chu, and other places.¹⁷

He then returned to 'Khor gdong. Following the advice of the gNas nang *sprul sku* Chos kyi nyi ma (b.1954) he stayed in retreat at the meditation cave O rgyan for several years. Then he went to Li mdo chos sgar¹⁸ where he was fully ordained by Hor shul *mkhan po* She rab (1920–1997). ¹⁹ Arriving at Khrom thar ²⁰ (around the year 2000 according to some unverified sources), he received instructions on the *Klong chen snying thig* of 'Jigs med gling pa by the Second A 'dzom 'brug pa Thub bstan padma 'phrin las (1926–2001). Henceforth he completely abandoned the eight worldly concerns and took up asceticism.²¹

¹⁷ mChims pu is one of the five sacred places blessed by Padmasambhava related to his speech, Yar klung shel brag is related to the aspect of qualities, and mKhar chu to the mind. The latter is situated one day's walk from Mar pa's house in IHo brag.

¹⁸ The monastery and residence of *mKhan chen* Chos dbyings khyab brdal (1920-1997) in gSer rta county, a little further north from what is called today Huoxi township (Chinese: Huoxixiang).

¹⁹ Hor shul *mkhan po* She rab was the then regent of Bya bral *bla ma* Padma chos dbyings khyab brdal. His current regent is *mKhan chen* Zla dbang, <u>https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Choying-Khyabdel/9945</u> (accessed 20.10.2023).

²⁰ The area in Khams where A 'dzom sgar is located, near Ya chen sgar, not far from Nyag rong.

²¹ Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018 (1, 3).

Lama sGrib bral then stayed in A 'dzom sgar for three years. He was a religious friend of Mi nyag *bla ma* Blo gros rab gsal (1970-2020) from the monastery rGyal 'phags, who was the regent of A 'dzom 'brug pa.²² He received an empowerment from *mKhan po* 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933–2004) at a public teaching but did not study with him. He received transmissions and instructions for the *lCe btsun snying thig* of 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820–1892), the revelations of the First A 'dzom 'brug pa, 'Gro 'dul dpa' bo rdo rje (1842–1924)²³ and is said to have relied upon many other teachers too.

Finally, he went to the valley of g.Yu khog,²⁴ Khams, where he stayed in retreat for five years in Chu dbar tā re (*fig.5-6*), the birthplace of g.Yu khog Bya bral Chos dbyings rang grol (1872–1952).²⁵ It is said²⁶ that during the many years he resided at 'Khor gdong, he was in charge of the Yamāntaka (*gshin rje*) *rwa zor* and *bgegs gtor* (torma offered to avert dangers caused by evil and negative forces) protector practices of averting negativities related to death. He is said to have used the donations received for such practices to restore the houses and statues at the monastery and also to contribute for the dharma activities of g.Yu khog Bya bral Chos dbyings rang grol who established Yag ye sgar in Lower gSer rta and who was a direct disciple of the First A 'dzom 'brug pa. It is commonly said that he finally managed to meet g.Yu khog Bya bral Chos dbyings rang grol and received Dzogchen teachings from him but the currently accepted dates make this implausible.



Figure 5 — The hamlet of Chu dbar tā re (photo Varvara Chatzisavva, 2019)

²² Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018 (3).

²³ Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018 (3); Naldjor, 2020.

²⁴ Chinese: Yuke Grassland.

²⁵ Nyoshul, 2005, p. 316-318.

²⁶ See Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018 (1); Naldjor, 2020.



Figure 6 — Lama sGrib bral's hermitage in Chu dbar tā re (photo Varvara Chatzisavva, 2019)

In Chu dmar 'ug chang sde ba²⁷ and at the hermitage of rDo lho dung dkar ri khrod²⁸ in rGyal mo dmu rdo,²⁹ both located in the sacred pilgrimage route in the blessed land Bee ro³⁰—also known as rGyal rong³¹—he stayed in retreat for 14 years (*fig. 7-9*).

²⁷ The area surrounding the hermitage rDo lho dung dkar is called Chu dmar 'ug tshang sde ba and is located in a large remote expanse called Dem kog within rGyal mo tsha ba rong. Under Chinese administration, Dem kog is part of Chu dmar yul shog in rTa'u county (Ch. Dawu).

²⁸ Not to be confused with the other famous mountain called Shar dung ri ("Eastern Conch Mountain") in the Shar kong region of southern A mdo. I was told that there used to be a rNying ma monastery in rDo lho dung dkar but the lama who told me that did not provide further details. Another lama said there never was a monastery over there.

²⁹ Also called Shar rGyal mo dmu rdo (Eastern Mount Murdo). Under Chinese administration, the mountain is located near the town of Danba, known as Rong brag county in Tibetan, under the jurisdiction of Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Danba borders Xiaojin to the east, Kangding (Tib. Dar rtse mdo) to the south and southeast, Dawu County to west, and Jinchuan County (Tib. Tsu tsen) to the north and northeast.

³⁰ Owing to the fact that the great *lo tsā ba* Vairocana lived there, thus blessing the land as a holy place with his presence. See Yudra Nyingpo, 2004, pp.179-192.

Or rGyal mo rong, or Tsha ba rong or rGyal mo tshza ba rong or more fully Shar rGyal mo tsha ba rong, meaning the "Eastern Queen's hot valleys" or "Queen's River valley", with "queen" referring to Mount dMu rdo, the seat of the rGyal rong Bon protector deity, Tsha ba rong meaning the river valley, and with rGyal rong itself being a queendom in ancient times (See Prins, 2011, p.18; Burnett, 2014, p.24). The Chinese name Jiarong is a transcription of the Tibetan name Gyalrong. During



Figures 7 (left) – Lama sGrib bral at rDo lho dung dkar ri khrod (*photo* Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018).
 Figures 8-9 (right) – A view of Chu dmar 'ug chang sde ba and the retreat cabins at rDo lho

Figures 8-9 (right) — A view of Chu dmar 'ug chang sde ba and the retreat cabins at rDo lho dung dkar ri khrod (*photo* Varvara Chatzisavva, 2023).

The day before his passing, he told his patrons:³² "I am going to die now. I am thanking you very much. If I have ever spoken harsh words to you, please forgive me."

On the 6th day of the 11th month of the Earth Dog year (December 2018), he asked to have his breakfast, and then required to have his religious robes put on. He then sat upright and crossed-legged in the vajra position, and passed away like this. He was 73. In the sky there appeared many signs and rainbow lights.

The Mi nyag *bla ma* Blo gros rab gsal (*fig. 11*) confirmed that the death signs were extremely auspicious and that he had never before seen such a variety of signs in other people. Although the last wish of Lama sGrib bral was to be taken to the burial ground in Bla rung sgar when he died, since his body started the shrinking dissolution process, the Mi nyag lama Blo gros rab gsal advised that, on the 18th day, the *sku dung* (the corpse of a person who is considered to be a saint) should be concealed as an "earth treasure" (*sa gter*) in rDo lho dung dkar.

According to reports by witnesses, Lama sGrib bral's physical body

the Qing dynasty the region itself was called *Jinchuan* (literally "Gold River"). Under Chinese administration, rGyal rong is cut in two, a northern part under the administrative unity of rNga ba (Ch. Aba) whose center is 'Bar khams (Ch. Maerkam); and a southern part which begins just after the Tsu tsen county (Ch. Jinchuan) and comes under the jurisdiction of Garzê whose capital is Dar rtse mdo (Ch. Kangding). See Karmay, 1996, p.1, 3.

³² It is said that he had many patrons, some from 'Khor gdong.

gradually shrank down from the height of about 1.70m down to the size of a 1-year-old toddler³³ and many local people in Chu dmar 'ug chang sde ba saw it. This phenomenon is known as attaining the "small rainbow body" or '*ja*' lus chung ngu, a mark of supreme accomplishment in Dzogchen practice.



Fig. 10 (left)—Monks and laymen arriving at rDo lho dung dkar ri khrod when Lama sGrib bral passed away (photo: photographer unknown; various monks and laymen at 'Khor gdong sent me this photo in 2019).

Fig. 11 — The Mi nyag bla ma Blo gros rab gsal at rDo lho dung dkar ri khrod with the sku dung of Lama sGrib bral (photo Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018).

As was his wish, there were offerings (*phud kong*), Dharmapāla petition offerings (*gsol kha*) and mantrayāna teachings at 'Khor gdong conferred by the head of the monastery, *sPrul sku* 'Chi med rgyal mtshan. Lama sGrib bral was known as a man with no material possessions, his only belongings were 700 RMB, a couple of books, a few butter lamp vessels (*dkong bu*), and some cooking utensils for the stove (*fig. 13-16*). He did not have a mobile phone. As he was a meditator, he was not into books, study, and scholarship. He was not married and did not have children. He was in good health until his passing.

³³ A measure known as *khru gang tsam*, the Tibetan equivalent of a cubit, or about 40cm.



Figures 12-15 — Personal items of Lama sGrib bral and his handwriting of 'Jam dpal tshe bdag gshin rjea'i 'cham gdag (photo Varvara Chatzisavva, 2023).

For the people who knew him, his attainment of the Rainbow Body is regarded as a natural result of his lifetime dedicated to Dzogchen practice and living a simple life mostly as a Hidden Dzogchen Yogi (*rdzogs chen sbas pa'i rnal 'byor pa*).

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The Rainbow Body and the Chinese Communist Party

In his articles in Tricycle, Sheehy wrote that "The CCP has declared going rainbow to be illegal." ³⁴ But this is not news. Since the annexation of Tibet and the Cultural Revolution, the CCP has

³⁴ Sheehy, 2018, 2019.

persecuted people involved with anything in relation with the Rainbow Body, censored and discouraged discussions about this phenomenon. When Dzogchen 'Jigs bral byang chub rdo rje (1935– 1959) dissolved his body, Pad ma bskal bzang (b. 1943) kept hold of his holy relics throughout the Cultural Revolution and had them enshrined at the main temple in Dzogchen Lotus Ground Retreat Centre.³⁵ The shrunken bodily remains of Nyag bla Rig 'dzin Byang chub rdo rje (1863–1963) were kept hidden from the Chinese authorities for years until proper ceremonies could be openly performed. When the Chinese heard about Yid lhung pa bSod nams rnam rgyal (d.1952), Ma ni gang ngo, Khams, leaving only hair and nails behind at death, they discouraged discussions about it.³⁶ The uncle of Nam mkha'i nor bu (2010, pp.67-69), rTogs ldan O rgyan bstan 'dzin (1888–1962), was arrested and underwent thamzing (struggle session); when he dissolved his body while in custody, the inspecting CCP officials and policemen were baffled to see only hair and nails inside his sheepskin robe. Tapontsang (1997, p.109) speaks of seven Rinpoches consciously dying on the same day at INga mchod monastery-prison, Dar rtse mdo, Khams, puzzling the Chinese officials. Tshe dbang bde chen nor bu passed away while hidden by villagers during the Cultural Revolution; his Small Rainbow Body was kept hidden in a basin—a considerable danger to the villagers—and only displayed in 1984. The Small Rainbow Body of gTsug phud 'od zer (d.1983) was kept for two months along with Tshe dbang's.³⁷ The Small Rainbow Body of the Bon monk Rag shi rtogs ldan (d.2002), in Ba chen, Nag chu, was cremated in secret after the alerted Chinese police arrested his nephew.³⁸

Considering the importance of death in the context of Buddhist soteriology, i.e. it being the very problem to overcome, then "the most pervasive index of spiritual power and authority throughout the Buddhist world and legitimation of enlightenment lies in the perceived mastery and control over death."³⁹ This clarity of death and power over death was in fact a major factor in the successful transmission of Buddhism from its original Indian cultural context and up to our times.⁴⁰ Finally, realizing that Tibetans maintain since antiquity a great funerary tradition with a panoply of means to deal with death (i.e. predicting it, ransoming it, navigating and guiding through it, returning from it, transcending it altogether), a tradition

³⁵ Kalsang, 2011, p.185.

³⁶ Trungpa, 1966, pp.95-96; Kapstein, 2004, p.120.

³⁷ Gyaltsen 2002, pp.135, 137.

³⁸ Tiso 2016:16.

³⁹ Stone in Lopez, 2005, p.57, 59, 60.

⁴⁰ Williams & Ladwig, 2012, loc.177-189/9,426.

which has been brutally violated and oppressed by the CCP since the 1950s, we can appreciate better the phenomenon of the Rainbow Body and the attainment of Lama sGrib bral and their significance.

With the above as the wider background and against a backdrop of rapid and widespread sinicisation,⁴¹ the fact that the pictures of Lama sGrib btal's '*ja*' *lus* appeared online in Chinese media in 2018⁴² and even a prayer allegedly composed by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche published in an individual article on WeChat,⁴³ can be seen as a change in the policy of Chinese media. And that is simply because the news about other Tibetan '*ja*' *lus pa* and '*ja*' *lus ma* and following appraisals by Tibetan Rinpoches, are not aired on Chinese media.⁴⁴ It should be noted here that the Tibetan sense of normality may be stretched enough to include human beings dissolving their physical body into thin air, but the phenomenon of the Rainbow Body is not so commonplace as to not be worthy enough to make a headline or two in the daily news.

⁴¹ To the point that, in the aftermath of Lama sGrib bral's passing, it was even claimed, according to a lama from 'Khor gdong, that Lama sGrib bral was Chinese. A crucial comment reflecting the current state of affairs including the accelerated sinicisation of Tibetan Buddhism, the so-called "integration of cultures" policy, as well as the ever-increasing influx (or infiltration, one may ask) of Chinese converts into Tibetan Buddhist institutions (e.g. see Shmushko, 2022, p.17; Roche et al., 2020, p.4). At this point and under this kind of circumstances when all things Tibetan are claimed as Chinese, such a cultural appropriation and even claiming the 'ja' lus pa Lama sGrib bral as Chinese, shouldn't surprise.

⁴² And these articles remain up to present describing him variously as "Dzogchen yogin", "Dzogchen lama", "'Khor gdong lama Driptal".
⁴³ "In all my [future] rebirths, | [As long as ordinary] things are not exhausted, as

⁴³ "In all my [future] rebirths, | [As long as ordinary] things are not exhausted, as long as [the ordinary mind] has not vanished | Let me hear again [and again] the names | of both Dri med 'od zer [Klong chen pa] | and mKhyen brte'i 'od zer ['Jigs med gling pa] | and with [whichever] faith, blind, | limpid or subtle that I may obtain, | as long as I have not got rid of the garland of [successive] rebirths, | there is nothing higher than that to what I aspire." (bdag ni skye ba thams cad du/ /chos ma zad cing blo ma zad/ /'on kyang dri med 'od zer dang/ /mkhyen brtse'i 'od zer rnam gnyis kyi/ /mtshan yang thos shing blun po yi/ /dwangs dad phra mo gang thob pa/ /tshe rabs phreng bar ma bor na/ /'di las lhag pa smon rgyu med. Bonza Buddhist and Cultural Exhibition Center, 2018 (4).

⁴⁴ For example, that same year, a woman called bKra shis lha mo, said to be the mother of a certain Lokgar Rinpoche from Ka thog monastery, sDe rge, Khams, was reported to have attained the small rainbow body (Naldjor 2018/2020, <u>https://www.facebook.com/280100425371178/posts/pfbid02W2VhDjh7cjTiviH</u> <u>WukbfgXnozeBPPcsUgJbMLeXmKFEpVA8RC6fZaSagrTGcHbhpl/?app=fbl</u>, accessed 2018/2020) and since then there have been several other reports on Facebook, but none of these appeared on WeChat.

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sTong dpon 'chi med nor bu, 2023

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