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Rokdung (Sikkim, India) - Language Snapshot

KTIEN HIMA & R. KARTHICK NARAYANAN

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Rokdung (Sikkim, India) – Language Contexts

Ktien Hima & R. Karthick Narayanan
Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University, Gangtok

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Language Name: | Rokdung |
| Dialects: | None |
| Classification: | Kiranti, Tibeto-Burman |
| ISO 639-3 Code: | Undocumented |
| Glottolog Code: | Undocumented |
| Population: | Speakers 20, Ethnic group 200 |
| Location: | 27.276155, 88.733167 Rolep, East Sikkim |
| Vitality rating: | Critically endangered |

Summary

Rokdung is the language of a small clan subdivision of the Rai community, mostly living in the village of Rolep, East Sikkim district, Sikkim, India. This previously undocumented language is classified in the Kiranti sub-branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The language has no more than 20 speakers and is critically endangered; current speakers only have partial fluency and low lexical recall. There is no previous scholarly work available, nor is it recognized by the Indian or Sikkim governments, or other formal bodies. We provide a brief description of the linguistic milieu, vitality, and current research on the language.

रोकदुङ राई समुदायको सानो पाछाको भाषा हो जसलाई यही रोकदुङ नामबाट चिनिन्छ। रोकदुङ समुदाय भारतको २२औँ राज्यअन्तर्गत पूर्व सिक्किमको रोलेप गाउँमा बसोबासो गर्दछ। रोकदुङ मानिसहरूले आफ्नो पुर्खाँली वंशलाई राईको उपपाछा 'युपाछा' भन्दछन् जो पोखरा नजिकैको याक्कु गाउँमा बस्छन्। रोलेप गाउँका करीब २०० भन्दा बढी व्यक्तिले राई कुल अन्तर्गत रोकदुङ पाछाका सदस्यहरूले दावी गरेका छन् कि केवल २० जनाले मात्र रोकदुङ भाषा बोल्दछन्। यी अधिकांश रोकदुङ भाषीहरू रोकदुङ, बान्तावा, नेपाली, हिन्दी र कहिलेकाँही अंग्रेजी बोल्दछन् र उनीहरू बहुभाषी हुन्।

हालमा भइरहेको दस्तावेजको प्रमाणको आधारमा पहिला दस्तावेज नभएको रोकदुङ भाषा भोट-बर्मेली भाषा परिवारको किँराती उपशाखा अन्तर्गत वर्गीकृत गरिएको छ। रोकदुङ अर्को राई पाछाको भाषा बान्तावासँग शाब्दिक र व्याकरणिक समानताको हिसाबले बन्दछ जस्तो देखिन्छ। जहाँसम्म, त्यहाँ क्षेत्रगत समयमा सङ्कलन गरिएको भाषिक तथ्याङ्कमा अवलोकन गरिएको रोकदुङको स्वनिमिक, शब्दात्मक, रुपात्मक, वाक्यात्मक सुविदाहरूको क्षेत्र संख्या रहेको छ। जसले हामीलाई यो निष्कर्षमा पुरयाउँछ कि यो भाषा बान्तावा वा अन्य राई भाषाहरू भन्दा फरक छ।

बीस भन्दा बढी वक्ताहरू नभएको यो भाषा 'युनेसको LVE' को दिशा निर्देशन अनुसार क्रिटिकली एन्डेनजर्ड' को रूपमा वर्गीकृत गर्न सकिन्छ। हालको वक्ताहरू भाषामा कम शब्दावलीको स्मरण र आंशिक प्रवाह मात्र पाउँदछन्। रोकदुङ समुदायको अग्रज सदस्यहरूले एकात्मक सदस्यताका लागि घरमा सूचकको रूपमा भाषाको प्रयोग गर्ने गर्दछ। यद्यपि हेवेनली पाथ वा लभिजम भन्ने आध्यात्मिक आन्दोलनको ग्रहणले दुर्भाग्यवश पूर्वनिर्धारित धार्मिक रीतिरिवाजसँग सम्बन्धित भाषिक अभ्यासहरू गुमाइसकेको छ। घर र धर्म बाहेक रोकदुङ भाषा आज कुनै पनि अन्य प्रान्तहरूमा प्रयोग गरिँदैन। यद्यपि रोकदुङ समुदायका मानिसहरूले र भावी पुस्ताले आफ्नो भाषा बोल्न र प्रयोग गर्न चहान्न र सकारात्मक दृष्टिकोण राखे पनि उनीहरू न रोकदुङमा आफ्नो भाषिक क्षमता र ओहदाको बारेमा विश्वस्त छन् न त उनीहरू आफ्नो भाषाको भविष्यको बारेमा आशावादी छन्। सिक्किमका प्रायः सबै जातीय समुदायहरूको सामाजिक एकीकरण मूलधारको नेपाली संस्कृति र त्यसपश्चात नेपाली भाषाको प्रभुत्वको साथसाथै अखिल सिक्किम किँरात राई सङ्घले राई समुदायको एकल साझा भाषाको रूपमा बान्तावालाई अप्राउने र बढावा दिएको छ, रोकदुङ भाषालाई खतरामा पुरयाउने महत्वपूर्ण कारकहरू हुन्। समुदायको असवर्ण विवाह र पेद्रीलोकल विवाह प्रथाले पनि भाषाको अंतर पीढीगत हस्तांतरणको अवरोधमा सहयोग पुरयाएको छ, जुन रोकदुङको निरन्तरताप्रति सकारात्मक दृष्टिकोणको अभावकोसाथ घट्दो वक्ताको जनसंख्याले हामीलाई क्रिटिकली एन्डेनजर्ड भाषाको रूपमा वर्गीकृत गर्न प्रेरित गर्दछ।

यस भाषामा कुनै पनि अधिल्लो विद्वान कार्य उपलब्ध छैन, न त यो भारतीय वा सिक्किम राज्य सरकार वा अन्य औपचारिक निकायले मान्यता पाएको छ। लुप्तप्राय भाषा केन्द्र, सिक्किम विश्वविद्यालयले २०१८ देखि भाषा दस्तावेजीकरणमा काम गर्दै आएको छ, अनि सिक्किम विश्वविद्यालयद्वारा सञ्चालित 'सिक्किम दार्जिलिङ्ग हिमालयन एन्डेनजर्ड ल्याङ्ग्वेजेज आर्काइभ' (सिधेला) को माध्यमबाट यसलाई उपलब्ध गराउने कार्य भएको छ।

1. Introduction

Rokdung is the language of a small sept (a subdivision of a clan) of the Rai community, known by the same name. The Rokdung community is exogamous, and settled mostly in the village of Rolep in the East Sikkim district of Sikkim, India. A few families are claimed to have settled in Namchi, Gangtok, Samsing, and Geling as well.

Rolep village is located in the Rongli sub-division of East Sikkim district, about 75 km from the state capital of Gangtok. The total population of Rolep is about 808 residents (as of the 2011 Census of India) with 174 households.

Rolep is a multi-ethnic village comprised of Rai, Gurung, and Chettri groups (see District Census Handbook East Sikkim, Census of India, 2011). The Rai septs other than Rokdung living in and around Rolep all speak Bantawa, a Tibeto-Burman language also spoken in Nepal. The Gurung and Chettri speak Nepali; even though Gurung have their own language, it is not spoken by them in Rolep.



Figure 1: Location of Sikkim

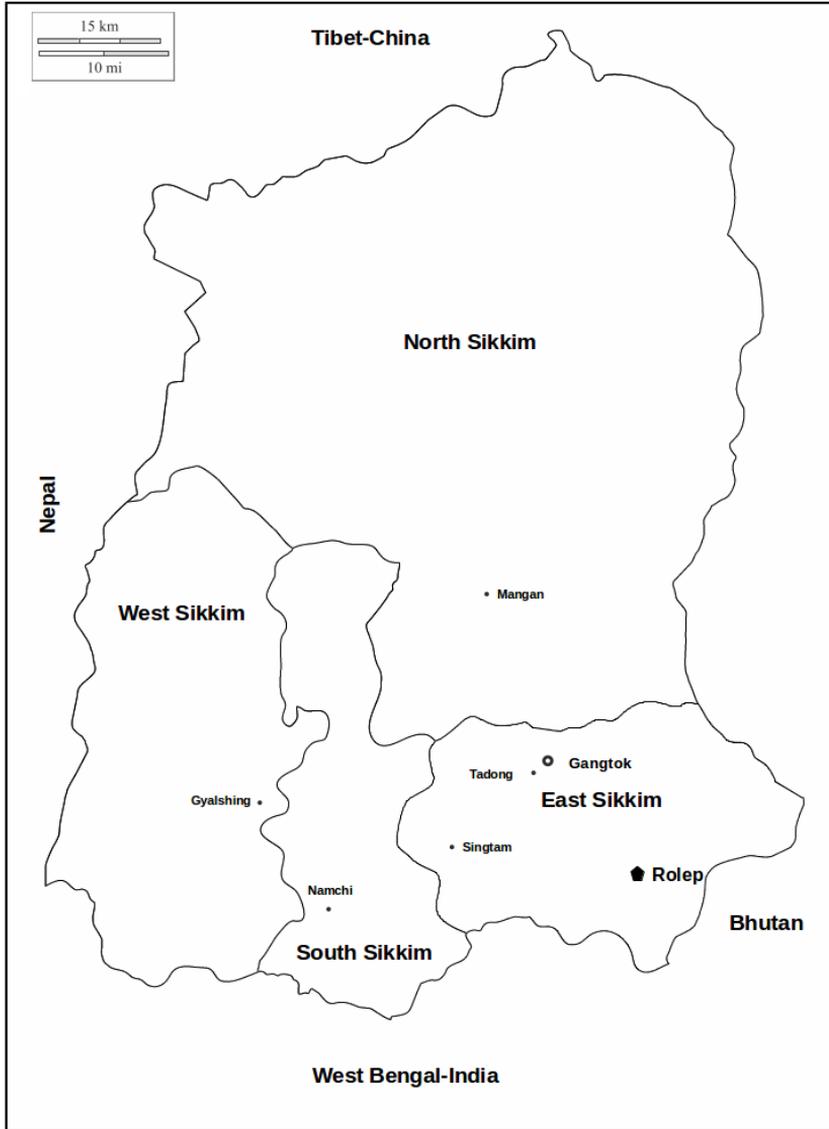


Figure 2: Location of Rolep village

Members of the Rokdung sept claim to be the descendants of two brothers who migrated about four to five generations ago (nearly 200 years ago) from Yaku village near Pokhra, Nepal, to their present-day settlement in Sikkim. They trace their ancestral lineage to the sub-sept (smaller sub-group of a sept) of the Rai clan called *Yupacha*¹, which resides in Yaku village. They claim that other subsepts of their clan, namely *Yangbung* and *Hangbung* (Nar Bir Rokdung, 2020-01-08) still reside in Yaku, and that some of them even visited Rolep in recent times to meet their long-separated clanspeople. However, no official documentation of the existence of such clans is available in our knowledge. According to our language consultants, the two brothers belonging to the *Yupacha* subsept happened to cross the Himalayas on a hunting trip, and settled at Rolep at the request of the then local landlord. They were also granted land on the hill adjacent to the Shokey Khola river. The brothers agreed to this offer, and married into the other Rai communities already settled in Rolep, and prospered thereafter (Nar Bir Rokdung, 2020-01-08).

Close to 200 individuals in the Rolep village claim membership of the Rokdung sept under the Rai clan; however, from a sociolinguistic survey conducted by the Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University (Hima et al, 2019) it was found that only 20 individuals claim to speak the Rokdung language. Most of them are multilingual in Rokdung, Bantawa, Nepali, Hindi, and sometimes English.

2. Rokdung as a distinct language

Rokdung seems to be closest in terms of lexical and grammatical similarity to Bantawa (ISO 639-3-bap), the language of another Rai sept. However, there are a number of phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic features of Rokdung observed by us in the linguistic data collected during fieldwork that lead us to conclude that it is a language distinct from Bantawa or the other Rai languages.

There are many cognates where Bantawa forms have voiced plosives and the corresponding Rokdung words have voiceless plosives, however the pattern is not entirely consistent. Examples are:²

¹ All clan and community names are in standard Roman transcription.

² All linguistic examples are transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

| English | Bantawa | Rokdung |
|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| belly | <i>buk</i> | <i>puk</i> |
| ear | <i>nab^hak</i> | <i>nap^hak</i> |
| nose | <i>nab^huk</i> | <i>nap^huk</i> |
| mouth | <i>do</i> | <i>to</i> |
| egg | <i>wadin</i> | <i>watin</i> |
| what | <i>di</i> | <i>ti</i> |
| who | <i>saŋ</i> | <i>sak</i> |
| drink | <i>duŋma</i> | <i>tunma</i> |

Table 1: Bantawa-Rokdung cognates

A second lexical difference is in the personal pronouns. Two of the most important characteristic features of Rai-Kiranti languages (exemplified by Bantawa³ in Table 2) are the marking of an inclusive-exclusive contrast in the first person plural, and the existence of first and second person dual pronouns. Rokdung lacks both these features, however apparent remnants of inclusive-exclusive marking are found in verb agreement, although not consistently among speakers. Since almost all speakers are also fluent in Bantawa, in which these features are very well attested, it appears that the loss of the inclusive-exclusive contrast in their Rokdung is due to its endangerment, and evidence for speaker perception that they are two distinct languages.

³ Bantawa examples come from our fieldwork and Doornenbal (2009).

| Pronoun | Rokdung | Bantawa |
|----------------|---|----------------------------|
| 1SG | <i>iŋka</i> | <i>aŋka</i> |
| 1DU | | <i>ənkatsa ~ ənkatsiʔa</i> |
| 1DU.INCL | | <i>ənkatsi</i> |
| 1PL.INCL | <i>ənkən</i> | <i>ənkəni</i> |
| 1PL.EXCL | <i>ənkən</i> | <i>ənkənka</i> |
| 2SG | <i>hana</i> | <i>k^hana</i> |
| 2DU | | <i>k^hanatsi</i> |
| 2PL | <i>hana-tse ~ hananin</i> | <i>k^hananin</i> |
| 3SG.PROX | <i>iko</i> | <i>k^ho</i> |
| 3SG.DIST | <i>moko ~ fioko</i> | <i>mo ~ o</i> |
| 3PL.PROX | <i>ik^hatse</i> | <i>k^hotsi</i> |
| 3PL.DIST | <i>mok^hatse ~ fiok^hatse</i> | <i>motsi ~ otsi</i> |

Table 2: Personal pronouns in Rokdung and Bantawa.

One of the most noticeable morphological differences between Rokdung and Bantawa is in the argument indexation paradigm on the verb (called ‘pronominalisation’ in the Himalayan languages literature). Firstly, Rokdung has a newer, ‘marked’ second person pronominal prefix *a-* on verbs, considered a secondary development from Proto-Tibeto-Burman, whereas Bantawa has the older prefix *te-* (see de Lancey 2011). Secondly, the pronominalization paradigm in Rokdung appears quite haphazard compared to the systematic patterns in other Rai languages, including Bantawa.

On the basis of these grammatical phenomena, we may conclude that Rokdung is quite distinct from the other Rai languages.

3. Linguistic milieu

Sikkim, like the rest of the Eastern Himalayan region, is characterised by multi-ethnic villages and people of multi-ethno-linguistic identities. People of the region today identify themselves culturally as Nepali or Gorkhali, with a common set of festivals and foods. The lingua franca is also Nepali, while modern school education and media are instrumental in the spread of Hindi and English as well.

In addition to Nepali cultural identity, people also try to maintain their ethnic identities as different tribes and communities with their own distinctive attire, food habits, and ritual practices. The traditional ethnic and religious lines have been blurred due to the rise of inter-community marriages under the influence of Article 371F of the Indian Constitution⁴ following the annexation of Sikkim by India (see The Constitution (Thirty sixth Amendment) Act, 1975). This has led to a multiplicity of experiences and a compounded sense of identity among the people of Sikkim. For instance, depending on the situation and context in which a person is speaking, she may truthfully claim to be a Nepali, or a Rai, or a Rokdung Rai.

Hima, et al, (n.d) found that most Rokdung community members identify themselves as a member of the Rai or Kirawa (Kiranti) groups, while some self-identify as Nepali. Only a few identify themselves specifically as being part of the Rokdung Yupacha or as Yaku. This demonstrates that the Rokdung, like others in the Eastern Himalayan region, situate their identity with respect to the wider socio-political context.

Rai is a very large ethnic group, under which are present several clans and septs like Sampang, Khaling, Kulung, Thulung, Chamling, etc. In earlier times, almost every Rai sept had its own language, most of which are today extinct or critically endangered (van Driem 2007). One of the major reasons for language endangerment in the Eastern Himalayan region, according to our understanding, is social assimilation of the various ethnolinguistic groups into a unified homogenous cultural identity of ‘Nepali’ (Sarkar 2008). This social assimilation has gained traction since the recognition of the Nepali language (the lingua franca of the region) as a scheduled language under Schedule Eight of the Indian Constitution (The Constitution (Seventy-first Amendment) Act, 1992).

After the annexation of Sikkim to India, the Sikkim Official Language Act came into force on 17th October 1977, establishing Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha

⁴ The Article 371F under clause 7(B) takes away a Sikkimese woman’s domicile privileges if she marries a person of non-Sikkimese origin. The traditional marriage practices prevalent in Sikkim prohibit marriage within a subclan, and the restrictions of Article 371F have thus pushed the Sikkimese women to choose a partner who has domicile rights, even if they are from another community.

as official languages. It has been amended several times since with additional languages being recognised, as set out in Table 3, so that today Sikkim has recognised eleven languages as ‘state languages’. Note, however, that almost all official notifications and public notices are issued only in English.

| Year | Official languages |
|-------------|---|
| 1977 | Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha |
| 1981 | Limboo |
| 1990 | English |
| 1995 | Gurung, Manger, Mukhia, Newari, Rai, Sherpa, Tamang |
| 1996 | Sunwar |

Table 3: Sikkim official languages

The Rai community in Sikkim has adopted Bantawa as *the* ‘Rai language’ (50th Report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India, 2016). This has unfortunately pushed other Rai languages (including Rokdung) to the brink of extinction.

Schools run by the Sikkim Government are affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education, with English as the medium of instruction. All 11 officially recognised languages are part of the school system, and, additionally, the Sikkim Government Directorate of Languages encourages the learning of Hindi, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. The Government of India’s ‘three language formula’⁵ has been adopted for school curricula: (1) three languages are taught up to Class 8 (high school), one of which has to be Hindi, (2) after Class 8, two languages are taught, one of which must be a language of national significance (English, Hindi, Sanskrit, or Nepali), and the other must be a regional language of the state. However, not all recognised languages of Sikkim find space in this: only Bhutia, Limbu, Lepcha, Rai, Gurung, Sherpa, and Tamang continue after Class 8. There are efforts to include other recognised languages of Sikkim. The medium of instruction of the only government school in Rolep village is English, and Rai (Bantawa), Nepali, and Hindi are offered as subjects.

⁵ See National Education Policy (1968: 20) at https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/NPE-1968.pdf (accessed 2020-09-03)

The languages of popular print media in Sikkim are English and Nepali, and the official bi-weekly newspaper of the Government of Sikkim is published in thirteen languages, i.e. English, Nepali, Newar, Lepcha, Gurung, Limbu, Tamang, Sunwar, Manger, Sherpa, Bhutia, Rai, and Tibetan. There are no established regional broadcasts in Sikkim. The Gangtok station of All India Radio (the official radio broadcaster of the Government of India) broadcasts shows and news bulletins only in Nepali, English, and Hindi. Similarly, TV programmes from Sikkim are aired on DD Northeast (official TV channel of the Government of India for the Northeast region) between 9am and 10am only from Monday to Friday, and do not feature content in any of the regional languages of Sikkim. Improvements in mobile phone connectivity has given internet access to more users from the region, and social media is becoming a major platform for community mobilisation, with individuals using social media and messaging platforms to communicate in their languages. However, we did not observe Rokdung speakers using the language on the internet during our interactions with them.

4. Linguistic vitality

Even though Rokdung has always had a small population base, the core domains of its use, namely home and religion, were not challenged in the past. In the following sections we show that discontinuity in intergenerational transmission, lack of positive attitudes towards its continuation, and a dwindling speaker population lead us to classify it as a critically endangered language. The influence of Nepali, assimilation towards mainstream culture, and the impact of other Rai communities, especially Bantawa, seem to be creating unfavourable conditions for Rokdung's continuing use. Moreover, the exogamous and patrilocal marriage practices have also aided in the disruption of intergenerational transmission, since daughters who marry out to other communities stop using Rokdung, and the daughters-in-law who marry in do not know or learn the language.

Rokdung speakers are multilingual; all the participants in our survey spoke three or more languages. Apart from the local lingua-franca Nepali, the next most widely spoken language is Bantawa, which is one of the more populous Rai languages and taught in government schools. Hindi and English are also gaining popularity among the Rokdung.

5. Domains of use

In our language documentation and sociolinguistic survey we observed strong use of Rokdung in the home domain only when family members speak with their grandparents. Rokdung use among spouses has been traditionally low, as

the community follows marriage patterns of exogamy. Half the participants claimed that they use Nepali with their spouse, and almost one third claimed to use Bantawa with their spouse, with only a few couples using Rokdung. Rokdung children are also spoken to mostly in Nepali, partly because of mixed ethnicity at home, and partly because of Nepali influence. Those who claimed to speak in Rokdung with their grandparents also claimed that they speak to their grandchildren in Nepali. Rokdung use is strong when adults interact with their siblings, showing that it functions as an indicator of group solidarity and family membership.

Minority languages enjoy significant strength in the context of religion and faith. Traditionally animists, the Rokdung community has recently adopted the international spiritual movement called Heavenly Path or Lovism (which seems to be an amalgamation of the major religions of South Asia).⁶ It accommodates their traditional beliefs, with the exception of alcohol consumption and animal sacrifice, so they hold reverence for all other symbols and objects considered sacred to Rais, especially in rituals. However, this has resulted in the forfeiting of linguistic practices associated with forgone ritual practices, breaking their intergenerational transmission. Most research participants reported that Rokdung used to be the most preferred language when praying to god, reciting or performing rituals, and having religious discussions at the place of worship with the priest, before adoption of Heavenly Path. Now Nepali dominates the religious domain.

During our documentation research we have observed that Rokdung speakers frequently disagreed about the forms and functions of lexical items and phrases, and exhibited poor lexical recall, reflecting a high level of language attrition. Apart from home and religion, Rokdung is not used in any other domains today.

6. Language attitudes

Language attitudes are an extremely important perspective for the study of language maintenance, and community members' attitudes can play a deciding role in the continuing use of a language. Rokdung speakers feel that the language they speak today is not as fluent and as pure as what their elders spoke, indicating a lack of confidence in their linguistic abilities, something that is common across minority communities whose languages and cultures are under threat. Further, although most people agreed that they wanted their children to learn Rokdung, they emphasised that the children would not

⁶ See http://sanjina-heavenlypath.blogspot.com/2011/11/lovism_20.html and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJPZEK2z4XA> (both accessed 2020-09-03)

because of current socio-economic pressures. Most believed that they would only learn Nepali or Bantawa; adults perceive their language as dying, and agreed that within the next 20 years it would cease to exist.

In a very hopeful turn of events, during our field visit in January 2020 we found that male speakers are coming together weekly in an effort to revitalize Rokdung, with the grandparent generation trying to pass on the language to the parent generation. In the gatherings, older speakers discuss the use of words and their meanings with younger speakers, who actively note them down and try to use them. The attendees at the meeting we observed tried to speak only in Rokdung, and to use other languages only to explain meanings that could not be adequately expressed in it. Women and children were conspicuously absent from these meetings.

7. Current research

There has not been any previous scholarly work on Rokdung. The Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University has been working on documenting the language since 2018. Up to September 2020, a dictionary, a sketch grammar, and a sociolinguistic sketch have been prepared, and will be published soon. Field recordings and an Android dictionary application have also been made available on the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayas Endangered Language Archive (SiDHELA) hosted by Sikkim University.⁷

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