

THE BHUTAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



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PRESIDENT: SIR SIMON BOWES LYON

SUMMER 2021

Society visit

It was an exciting moment when, after such a long period of Covid-19 restrictions, members were able to gather together again. Our first “non-virtual” meeting, on a pleasant day in late May, was to visit Michael Blooman’s Arboretum in Dorset.

Michael Blooman’s talent as an adventurer, print maker and watercolour artist is well known in the Bhutan Society. It is exemplified in his exciting Studio/Gallery including works from his travels in Bhutan and the mature, mainly Himalayan, horticultural specimens in his stunning Arboretum in Uplyme with, at about 160 feet tall, possibly the tallest *Sequoiadendron giganteum* in England.



The select group, pictured here beside Michael’s superb yellow *R. sinofalconeri*, picnicked on his wild meadow overlooking the sea, seen as the sun came out through a cleft between hills on either side with a backdrop of the Jurassic Coast curling away from Lyme Bay towards Chesil Beach and beyond. Michael’s excellent tour of his rhododendron species, including Frank Kingdon-Ward’s famous ‘Orange Bill’ *R. cinnarbarinum*, and many from Bhutan such as *R. griffithianum* and *R. keysii* and the Chinese Handkerchief tree *Davidia involucreta* in full flower, gave insight of his knowledge and care in choosing species that would thrive on the sandy acid soil in the lee of the adjacent pinetum planted in the 1850s. All members reported to have really enjoyed the day.

Diary Dates

2021 AGM

***This meeting will be held online on
Tuesday 21 September, 2021 at
6.00pm. After the AGM, Steve
Berry will discuss
“Tourism Opportunities in Bhutan”
AGM Agenda and Treasurer’s
Report for 2020 are enclosed***

***“Charities supported by The
Bhutan Society Trust Fund”***

***This online meeting will be held on
November 23, 2021***

***Next year will be the 30th
Anniversary of The Society.
We are planning a number of
events one of which will be an
Annual Dinner in November 2022***

***More details of both these and
other events to follow later***

SOCIETY REPORT

A glimpse into George Sherriff's expedition to the Black Mountain in 1937

Dr David Long, Honorary Research Associate at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in his lecture to the Bhutan Society in London on 29 January 2020, described past botanical explorations of the Black Mountain of Central Bhutan, first by R.E. Cooper in 1915, then by George Sherriff in 1937 and thirdly by a German/ British/ Bhutanese expedition in 2017 in which he participated.

The talk drew heavily on the recently transcribed expedition diary of George Sherriff which is archived at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. In his diary, Sherriff wrote daily of the trials and tribulations of trekking and botanical collecting in Bhutan in 1937, but also the great joys of the mountain scenery, plant life and especially the thrills of finding rare plants, particularly his favourite genus *Primula* (the Primroses). Indeed, it may be that the main objective of this expedition was to find a *Primula* he had never seen before, *Primula chasmophila*, which had been



R. Succothii - a new Rhododendron discovered by Sherriff on his way to the Black Mountain in May 1937

found by Cooper in 1914 on the Black Mountain, and grows nowhere else in the world. In 1937 there were no roads in Bhutan, and Sherriff started his journey at Hatisar (now Gelephu) on the Indian border on 23rd April and travelled with ponies and porters north to Nabzi. His first setback was that he could find no path direct to the Black Mountain from Nabzi, so he abandoned this route and made the long walk north up the Mange Chu valley to Chendebji, then south to the Phobsikha valley which is now on a popular trekking route for visitors wishing to see the beautiful Black-necked Cranes which winter here each year and are

proudly protected by the local people. When Sherriff visited the valley in May the Cranes were not about, but he was a keen ornithologist and wrote extensively about other birds he encountered, particularly the Blood Pheasants and the Grandala, a bright blue bird found at high elevations.

From Phobsikha he launched two more attempts on the Black Mountain. On the first he reached the base camp but found still too much snow preventing further progress, but finally on 23 June he reached the mountain itself and to his great delight successfully re-found *Primula chasmophila*, and even photographed it in colour -no mean achievement in 1937.

His diary is full of wonderful anecdotes of his activities and those of his assistants, and the setbacks due to the weather, to illness and to the deities of the Black Mountain. The locals told him he would anger the deities who in turn would bring on violent hailstorms which would damage their crops, and they begged him not to go there. Below is a diary extract of just one day on the expedition, and describes one of several instances where 'H.H.' - the second King of Bhutan (Jigme Wangchuck) and his wife, the Maharani, sent him gifts to help him on his way.

"Soon after leaving camp I met a sepoy and a train of coolies from H.H., who had not yet had my letter, but had heard from someone that I was up this way. Both his letter and the Maharani's were very friendly. "Since our first meeting, we became such great friends that we are now like the members of one family." Both sent presents, from H.H. "1) One load butter. 2) One bag parched rice. 3) Two cases native brewary. 4) One box native biscuits." And from the Maharani - "a trifling present of a native made chadar, one bag parched rice, and a case of native brewary." The "native brewary" I had hoped would be chang (beer) but it is arak (spirit) which I cannot touch. Everything else will be very good though, especially the 60 pounds of butter. I had hoped for a mail too, but there is no news of it yet"

SOCIETY REPORTS

House Blessing Ceremony

Many members will have recently enjoyed watching the video about the House Blessing Ceremony that took place at Michael Rutland's new home in Thimphu. Curious to know more, we asked Michael if he could elaborate on some of the rituals that took place during this two day event. Here are his comments.

"I am not an anthropologist, neither am I an academic nor an expert on Buddhist philosophy. So these few notes are the views of a non-expert layman who has had his new house in Thimphu, Bhutan, blessed in a traditional two-day Buddhist Ceremony. The need for ritual seems to be deeply embedded in the human psyche, and it forms an integral part of religious belief and practice. In many instances the ritual will revolve around getting rid of evil, evil spirits, bad luck, avoiding disaster, and bringing good fortune for the future. Here in Bhutan, the role of prayer and ritual are particularly important. As I understand it, the Vajrayana Buddhism found here has as a precept the belief that we are all born with nascent Buddhahood inside us, but due to clouds of ignorance we do not realise it and the way to dispel those clouds is through prayer and ritual. Every year every household will hold a ritual, to bring good fortune on the house and family, involving reading of the Buddhist scriptures by as many monks as the household can find or afford; usually we will have between ten and twenty monks. When a site for a new house is identified, the first thing to be done is to carry out a ritual to pacify the deity of the ground; this must be done before any foundation construction takes place. The family will employ a monk or monks to identify the auspicious location for a small hole to be dug and later when the construction has



The Union flag is being flown as this is the residence of the British Honorary Consul to Bhutan

commenced, small offerings will be placed in the ground in the four directions.

When you move into a new house, it is very important to hold a 'House Blessing Ritual'. For my new house, in a forest above South Thimphu, our ritual was led by Lama Choney, an old friend who has performed many rituals for us in the past. During such an important ceremony, it is customary to have more than eight monks performing the rituals. In Dzongkha it is called "dung-chaa drome", which means there must be enough monks to use all religious instruments such as *dung* (long trumpets) *rem* (cymbals) *nga* (drums) *dribu* (bells) *dradu* (small hand held drums) and *kangdur* (trumpets made from human leg bones) etc. The chanting of mantras, which are believed to be the direct words of the Buddha, took place in our temple room, on the top floor of the house.

On the morning of the first day, the house is decorated with all five uniting colours of silk scarves and prayer

flags to signify the completion of a somewhat stressful year of construction. Various religious offerings are made including ornamental cakes (Torma) made from rice or baked wheat flour. Decorations of coloured butter are created by the monks. Karming (butter lamps), milk and water and *serkem* (an alcoholic beverage) are offered to signify that eternal lights may never dim and also to appease the local deity so as to seek their protection for years to come.

On the evening of the first day the monks light bundles of aromatic wood and parade through every room of the house, including walk-in cupboards, to the dramatic sounds of drums and cymbals! The flames drive out evil spirits and miraculously the many falling sparks from the flaming bundles of wood do not harm the rather good carpets on the floors of my living room and dining room. Perhaps this is where 'faith' comes in as I hadn't yet taken out fire insurance! The main event of the house inauguration starts with this Fire Dance and two monks wearing fierce red and blue masks, dressed in Buddhist ritualistic dress, dance through the house with the flaming torches in their left hands whilst with their right hands they throw 'fire powder' to ignite in the flames and create a spark shower. At the same time the Head Monk throws small stones around all the rooms to chase out evil.

On the second day, many friends, extended family and well-wishers visit the house to take part in the ceremonies and to offer 'khadar' (white silk scarves). We were blessed to have over a hundred and twenty visitors! Religious objects including the Buddha's statue, pecha (the book of sutra), a small stupa, bumpa (a vase containing the holy water), banners and various other Buddhist objects are carried in a procession led by the monks and we all circumambulate the house three times. Meanwhile a group of traditional Bhutanese singers and dancers sing the song of joy and happiness. This is another significant moment in the consecration of the house, after which all the family and visitors enjoy lunch. This signifies that the Buddha Dharma may stand witness for the prosperity and long life of the occupants of the house. It is altogether a wonderful, colourful, noisy, impressive and moving ceremony and gives far more reassurance that all will be well in the future than taking out that fire insurance!! One consequence of such a ceremony is that for weeks afterwards if you walk around without shoes on in the house, you constantly bear the sharp pain of treading on small stones, or the tingle of walking on rice. So you have constant reminders of your house being cleansed of malevolent spirits and inauspicious influences! However it is a most reassuring ritual which I found impressive, moving and comforting. Do watch the video of the ceremony on the Bhutan Society web site and visit me when next in Bhutan"

NEWS FROM THE

What is a Dessup and what do they do?

In April 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic started, HM The King announced that to supplement the efforts of the health professionals and armed forces, an Accelerated Desuung Programme would be created.



The phrase De-Suung means "Guardians of Peace" and becoming a Desuup is considered to be the highest form of volunteering in Bhutan. The Desuung Programme was started in 2011 and, prior to this recent accelerated programme, when 2,400 new volunteers joined, over 12,000 Desuups had already been trained in 7 centres across the country. The Desuung Integrated Training Programme was instituted to be a value-based personal development programme with the main objective of encouraging all citizens to be active in the greater role of nation-building.

Through these intensive three week training programmes, all Desuup trainees are expected to appreciate the sense of community, harmony and cooperation as a group and as active members of society. They will attend and help during peace time e.g. help to manage crowds at festivals and at celebrations, assist at major national events and religious congregations etc. Desuups are volunteers from all walks of life. They all wear an orange uniform and will be easily spotted. In times of emergencies, when there may be an acute shortage of skilled manpower to take up the challenges of search and rescue operations, relief operations, and rehabilitation and reconstruction etc, trained



Desuup volunteers would be able to assist. On occasions that may even transcends borders and in 2015 some Desuups went to Nepal to assist during the major earthquake. They were deployed as part of the first-ever Bhutanese Medical Response team, which operated a self-sufficient district hospital in Nepal for several weeks. Today they are actively involved in supporting the health professionals and armed forces in the many challenges of managing Covid-19 in Bhutan. They have been supporting staff on the front lines in various capacities such as loading and unloading goods to help healthcare workers in quarantine centres, screening people at points of entry and carrying out surveillance and patrolling in the towns and borders. Desuups, in serving the nation in this way, have to stay away from their families to avoid any risk of transmission, sleep on school floors with their own bedding and eat food from a common kitchen.

A young poet is recognised

18 year old Seeta Maya Rai Penjor, currently studying in Peljorling Higher Secondary School, received the honour of the 'Order of Shakespeare' medal from the 'Motivational Strips', one of the world's most active writers' forums. She was one of the 90 poets across the globe recognised for her creative achievements, writing quality and outstanding contributions in the field of global literary acumen and her devotion to literature. Seeta Maya Rai said, "Though I have received many awards from different writing forums, this award from the 'Motivational Strips' forum is what I have always desired. I felt very honoured to be one of the Bhutanese recipients of this award among 90 poets from different countries". She said that she started writing poetry at an early age and it has become her task to create a piece every day. She said that she spends time writing poems, stories and other articles as it generates happiness. "It builds one's confidence in writing and speaking, it empowers my thinking capability and gives pleasure to my mind".

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Lost gold mine?

Deep in the thick forests, not far from Trongsa, there are remains of worn out tyres and rusted metal poles. There are also parts of a Jeep truck; the engine removed and most of its parts rusted and discarded and there are many stories from locals about helicopter movements to and from the area. There is a story that no one can tell in full, a story that is passed down to the younger generations by the elders in the area.

Sometime between the 1960's and 1970's the dense jungle was cleared and a mining campsite was set up on the basis that a geological survey was being undertaken by India. Locals were employed to build new roads that crossed the three mountain ranges involved and to fell many trees. That "geological survey" went on for almost 15 years and local elders say that there were automobile workshops, a movie hall, and living quarters for more than 400 workers and officials. Damchoe, 67, remembers the site as a big establishment. "It was almost like a town. There was electricity, also some generators. There were Bhutanese officials too. Nobody knew how the mining was done or what they were mining. We would not be allowed near the site."

Today there is no sign of the large drilling machines and only the paved footpaths, some ruined vehicles and the remains of three helipads are visible. The mining went on for around 15 years then suddenly stopped. Samples were said to have been taken to India for testing and many believe it was gold that was being mined. Workers slowly disappeared until eventually only two caretakers were left looking after the site. They left in 2002.

Swimmer at Olympics

The Bhutan Olympic Committee (BOC) plans to send a Bhutanese swimmer to the upcoming Olympic Games to be held in Tokyo, Japan this year for the very first time.

With the support from Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA), an international swimming federation, Kinley Lhendup and Sangay Tenzin, both in their teens, have been training at the FINA training centre in Thailand for the last two years. "We are completely new to this sport. Even our officials are new to the sport. But we are still learning the basics of swimming and as time passes by, we hope we will reach the level of other sports as well," said Sangay Tenzin. With the support from FINA, the pair also took part in numerous swimming events in Thailand, Russia, Singapore, and Malaysia in the last two years. Likewise, the BOC also plans to send two additional archers, one judo fighter, and a shooter through wild card entries.

Electric Vehicle Project not yet running smoothly



Nearly seven years ago, the Government introduced an initiative to import Electric Vehicles (EV) to reduce dependency on fossil fuel and emission of harmful greenhouse gases. To encourage people to go for electric vehicles, tax on the import of EV's was exempted. However there was not much enthusiasm for this initiative primarily because of the relatively high cost of EV's and the lack of trust among potential buyers in the new technology. In the past four years over 412,000 vehicles were imported and less than 1% of them were Electric Vehicles. To help revitalise the EV initiative, a three-year Project called the "Bhutan Sustainable Low Emission Urban Transport System," began in 2019. The Project aimed to replace 300 fuel driven taxis in the country by providing a 20 percent subsidy on the cost of the EV and a 70 percent loan facility from a financial institution to the taxi drivers who also paid only 10 percent of the cost up front. Whilst the Project attracted much interest, because of pandemic and clearance issues, only nine of the 124 confirmed orders have reached the country.

One of the biggest hurdles is the lack of infrastructure. While recognised as a challenge since the beginning of the EV initiative, there are very few charging stations. Five were installed in 2015 and it is expected that a further twenty-five would be installed by end of May. A World Bank report estimated that at least 648 normal charging stations would be needed across the country. At home, lack of technical expertise also hampered the project and the country's topography and road infrastructure would limit the places where EV's could function smoothly. With the Project ending this year, funding from the donor agency will also stop and the Government will have to find new sponsors to continue the EV programme.

NEWS AND UPDATES

Bhutan Society Trust Fund Project

In 2019, a Project entitled " Safe Drinking Water for Every Child" was initiated to improve the quality of drinking water for school children around Bhutan. The Project was started initially with financial support from The Bhutan Society Trust Fund and the Rotary Clubs of Sandwich UK and Thimphu.

The installation of a water filtration system in a school means that the students and staff no longer have to worry about not having access to clean drinking water. The students will also develop a habit of drinking more water as it is clean and unlikely to cause them to be unwell, miss school or possibly even need to visit a hospital. Encouraging children to drink clean water also helps to ensure that they are at all times hydrated and energized since mild dehydration can have negative impact on the energy levels. Other benefits would be to help prevent some common diseases like dysentery, typhoid and diarrhoea. It will also have a social, economic, and environmental impact as it will reduce the waste related to use of plastic bottles and minimize the weight of children's bags which seem to be mostly filled with water bottles.



Students of Chapcha Primary School

So far, water filtration systems have been fitted in 8 schools, which will benefit over 2,000 children and teachers. The work at Chapcha Primary School & Darla Middle Secondary School in April 2021, was undertaken by The Druk Water Solution Company as they were also able to provide clear instructions on how filters should be maintained and could be contacted should further technical advice be needed.

As an additional community service, a team from Opening Your Heart to Bhutan conducted a short awareness programme on "The importance of safe drinking water" and its contribution for the individual's health.

A Glacial rethink

Findings recently published by the National Centre for Hydrology and Meteorology (NCHM) defies the two-decade old belief that the country has more than 2,500 glacial lakes and over 20 potentially dangerous glacial lakes.

According to the report, of the 2,979 water bodies mapped during the recent Bhutan glacial lake inventory, 567 which are within the four river basins, are classified as glacial lakes, of which 17 are potentially dangerous. Phochu sub-basin has the highest number of glacial lakes (157), of which nine are potentially dangerous. Thorthomi is the largest glacial lake, which lies in the headwater of the Phochu basin with a surface area of 4.20km². With only nine, Dangmechu has the least number of glacial lakes. Wangchu basin has 13 glacial lakes that are in stable condition.

In the latest criteria set by NCHM, lakes that fall above the elevation of 3,500masl and are not more than two kilometres from glaciers, are considered to be glacial lakes. In the past, the criteria set by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, stated that all lakes above the elevation of 3,500masl were considered as glacial lakes.

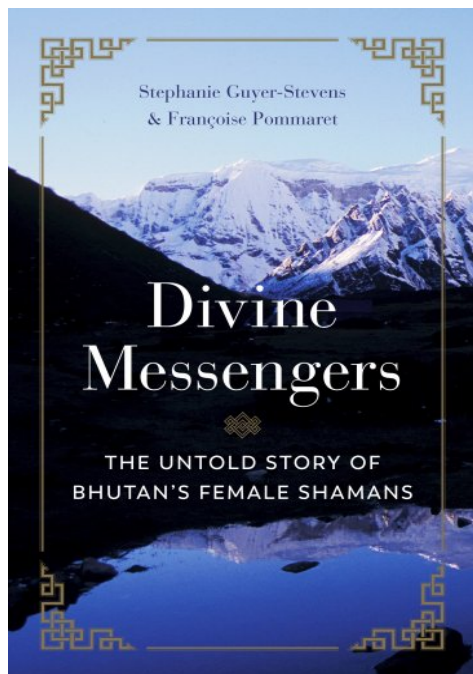
An official with NCHM said that the differences in the current and past inventories were caused by additional criteria being used in the current inventory to define glacial lakes and the use of different base materials with differing resolution and techniques. The data for the Survey was collected using satellite images and remote sensing techniques. The updated inventory is expected to serve as the primary source of information for scientific studies and as a basis for socioeconomic developmental planning in the country. Due to climate change impacts, studies indicate that glaciers in high mountain regions are experiencing an accelerated retreat rate. As a result of higher precipitation in the eastern Himalayan region in which Bhutan falls, the country's glaciers face a higher recession rate. The presence of active glaciers in the country has also resulted in the formation of new lakes, expansion of existing supra glacial ponds, and an increase in water level in the pro-glacial lakes. However the risk from glacial lakes downstream is ever-present. According to records, Bhutan has experienced a total of 21 Glacial Lake Outburst Floods.

NEWS AND UPDATES

Divine Messengers The Untold Story of Bhutan's Female Shamans

By Stephanie Guyer-Stevens and Françoise Pommaret

ISBN: 9781611809183 Price: \$18.95 Available to order in September 2021.

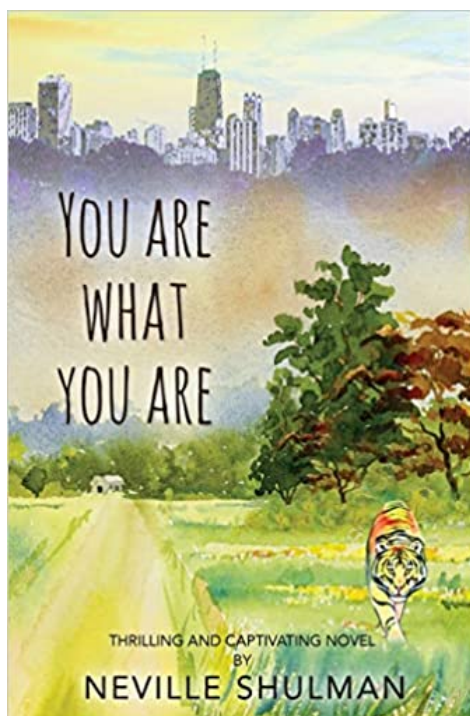


In Bhutan, female shamans fill an important spiritual role as mystics and healers. These women communicate with local spirits, cure diseases through prayer, travel to the netherworld, and return to communicate their encounters with the dead and the horrors of the hell realms. Their spiritual authority is immensely important to their communities, but is often overlooked in the male-dominated monastic institutions traditionally associated with Tibetan Buddhism. Award winning Journalist Stephanie Guyer-Stevens and celebrated anthropologist Françoise Pommaret travelled to the Himalayas to meet the living female shamans of Bhutan. *Divine Messengers* is their written account of the extraordinary lives of seven Bhutanese female shamans and their reflections on the centrality of the divine feminine in Himalayan Buddhism. The book shares their stories, including their accounts of "falling dead" and communing with the Lord of the Dead; predicting someone's well-being or misfortune through divination; consciously reincarnating in order to help others; and retaining their important roles in society outside of formal Buddhist lineages and hierarchies.

You Are What You Are

By Neville Shulman

ISBN: 9781736197318 Price: Paperback \$18 (£12.99)



'You Are What You Are' is an exhilarating, compelling, passionate and ultimately uplifting novel, involving the reader in the life of Gabe who, when very young, was devastated by being abandoned by his father. Jazz has been his only true refuge, until his mother's sudden death and the discovery of part of a letter compels Gabe to finally search for his lost father. What happens next is a cocktail of love, fate and startling revelations that make the novel unlike anything else on the shelves. Film director Ridley Scott said, "This novel is a first class read with a very challenging and startling storyline and is full of surprises right to the end."

Neville Shulman CBE is a member of The Bhutan Society of the United Kingdom; Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society(RGS); the Explorers Club of New York; the Travellers Club of London ; and the Scientific Exploration Society (SES). Neville provides annual Awards through the RGS and the SES to support explorers with their overseas expeditions.

Vocational success

Wangchuk, a 42 year old graduate of the National Institute of Zorig Chusum, is not only a successful entrepreneur, but his skills have seen him and his 12 employees through the pandemic. He runs a traditional woodwork business in Babesa in Thimphu. His business specialises in patra (wood carving), lhadri (painting) and shingzo (carpentry). He makes choesham (altar), zhugthri (throne), chodom (hand craved tables) and other traditional furniture. At his small workshop that also functions as the showroom, there are choeshams, thris, chodoms and many more that are waiting for the last touches. All the goods were ordered and his furniture is sold from as little as Nu 3,000 to Nu 500,000.



After graduating from the Zorig Chusum Institute in 2006, Wangchuk had worked in eight furniture houses before he opened his Radak Puensum Traditional Wood Works in 2015. The graduate in lhadri (painting) learned carpentry and carving from his friends then brought them in to join the business. "Before 2015, I was hardly earning anything. I did not even have a taxi fare to travel," Wangchuk recalls. Whilst he is reluctant to calling himself a successful entrepreneur, he has bought a pickup truck and "can manage to help my family and relatives." Wangchuk has seen the opportunity for people with skills and wants to help young people acquire skills if they are ready to dirty their hands. He is disappointed however that not many are showing up or are interested. Ready to help curious walk-in customers, Wangchuk feels there is a huge scope in carpentry, especially making traditional furniture. With families becoming nuclear and everybody wanting to live independent lives, he feels his market is secure.

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NOTE

*If you have not done so already, please send your e-mail address to ***rosieglazebrook@hotmail.com*** who will add it to the database.*

There is no plan to go paperless, but it is often convenient to communicate information electronically at short notice.

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