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SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF GREETING  
AMONG THE EWES OF WEST AFRICA

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**Introduction**

Greetings and conversations have been recognised as being among socially relevant linguistic categories. They are among the principal types of sentences and usages we employ in our various social roles. Learning to greet and to converse, therefore, forms part of the socialization process. In the words of J.R. Firth, (1957: 28).

*through the period of our growth we are progressively incorporated into our social organization, and the chief condition and means of that incorporation is learning to say what the other fellow expects us to say under the given circumstances.*

Knowing the appropriate form of greeting and being able to do it well is, therefore, not only required of every member in the society, but is considered a mark of good breeding.

The aim of this paper is to describe briefly the various types of greetings used by the Ewes of West Africa and to discuss some of the social and psychological factors which influence their use.

Wallwork (1978: 94) regards conversations as roughly prescribed rituals in that once a person speaks to you, you are in a relatively determined context and you are not free just to say what you please. What a person says at a given point in a conversation, depends not only on the content, i.e. what he wants to say, but also on what has just been said or not said by someone else; what it is polite to say, and on the reception of his previous utterance. So it is with greetings, which in the real sense are dialogue.

Talking about dialogue in his "Technique of Semantics," J.R. Firth (1957: 30) uses the phrase "choric use" of language, defining it

*as when vocal interchange merely promotes or maintains affective rapport.*

and he quotes Malinowski's phrase 'phatic communion', which is defined as

*a type of speech in which ties of union are created by mere exchange of words. (Malinowski in Ogden and Richards 1927:315)*

Choric use of language thus refers to a situation where a language event has more than one participant. The following common language situations are described as 'phatic communion' or choric use of language:

- (a) Address, e.g. 'Simpson!', 'Look Here, Jones'.
- (b) Greetings, farewells, or mutual recognition of status and relationship on contact, adjustment of relations after contact, breaking off relations, renewal of relations, change of relations.
- (c) Situations in which words, often conventionally fixed by law or custom, serve to bind people to a line of action or to free them from certain customary duties in order to impose others. Your signature or your word is a very important piece of linguistic behaviour. Words and phrases are used with binding effect in everyday life, because their use releases overwhelming forces of public opinion, of social custom. (Firth loc. cit).

Before we proceed with our discussion, it is necessary to clear some misconceptions created

by the use of *merely* and *mere* in the two definitions above.

In the first quotation, Firth talks about a sort of choric use of language, as when vocal interchange *merely* promotes or maintains affective rapport. In the second, Malinowski, the originator of the term, 'phatic communion', defines it as a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a *mere* exchange of words. The two italicised words do not mean the same thing. In the first, *merely* gives the impression that the vocal interchange does no more than promoting and maintaining affective rapport. It seems that Esther Goody (1972) is right when she observes that when Malinowski described greetings and similar phrases as 'phatic communion', ie. setting the tone for communication but having no cognitive content (1927: 313-16), he was thinking, presumably, of the literal implications of the words contained in such phrases as 'so long' and 'how do you do?' She notes that the verbal salutations exchanged by Gonja on meeting are highly formalized and also carry primarily phatic content. Although some greetings contain slightly more content, the actual information is minimal. This is true of Ewe greetings. Indeed the same can be said of other African communities. But the importance attached to greeting, both in its verbal and non-verbal aspects, clearly indicates that the salutations lead beyond the realm of phatic communion (*op. cit.* : 47). Social structure and its attendant value systems are reflected in the systems of greeting. The implication of the second definition is that just by means of exchanging words, ties of union are created. This understanding tends to give a sort of magic function to the linguistic expression. This conforms well with the common notion of greetings and conversations as *rituals*, which according to Leach (1968) are those aspects of customary behaviour that make statements about the hierarchical relations between people. Wallwork defines 'phatic communion' as, "for instance the stereotyped exchange of greetings and small talk," and gives the following as an elaboration:

*In English society in middle-class culture if you hold out your hand and say, 'How do you do?' you expect the other person similarly to hold out his hand, shake yours and say, 'How do you do? If the other speaker fails to hold out his hand, or to shake yours in response to your gesture and your words, this is likely to cause at least embarrassment and perhaps hostility. (Wallwork 1978: 94 ff.)*

Despite the fact that the same writer regards greetings as the most stereotyped and predictable parts of language and refers to them as "routine speech" or "prefabricated utterances," it can, nevertheless, be inferred from the last sentence of the above quotation that greetings do not *merely* promote or *maintain* affective rapport as Firth seemed to imply.

Rather than being mere acknowledgements of the social presence of others, or elements for establishing and or maintaining affective rapport, therefore, greetings embrace fundamental aspects of culture. They take place within the social context of meeting by two or more people normally occasioned by the visit of one party to another, or by the performance of some custom, or by the time, place and activity engaged in by one of the parties involved in the greetings. Sociolinguistically, therefore, greetings constitute language events consisting of participants, setting in time and place, code, channel, topic, situation, role-relationship and function.

Professor Kropp-Dakubu (1981: 171) has labelled participants in the greeting situation as "visitor" and "host," the visitor being the one who is not on his own ground and includes a member of the household who has been away. The basic distinction, she says, is actually between the one who was on the scene before and the new arrival. She also observes that among the Ga, with the exception of eating situations, the exchange is always initiated by the visitor. This is true for the Ewes also, except that there are occasions when the greeting is initiated by the 'host,' or where a person's antecedence at a place may not be taken into account. Examples

include exchange of greetings between two people meeting on the road, at certain stages in arbitration, and during libations and performance of some customs.

Esther Goody's observation about the Gonja, that it is the inferior who always initiates the greeting, applies only to a limited extent in certain situations among the Ewes. The principle of 'host' - 'visitor' is the one more generally applicable.

### Code or Language

As we have already seen, greetings are cast in special, predictable linguistic expressions. These expressions are influenced by the social categories of age, sex and status. The same thing applies to the non-verbal aspects which form an integral part of the greetings. The content of greeting expressions is determined by the time, activity and occasion.

### Types of Greetings

Ewe greetings can be put into three broad categories -

- (a) ordinary greetings
- (b) occasional or topical greetings
- (c) special greetings associated with ritual or customary situations, e.g. libation.

Ordinary greetings are time-related and reflect the various times of the day, e.g. morning, noon, afternoon, evening, and night. These include routine greetings within the home. The terms 'occasional' and 'topical' are used to designate those greetings which reflect the occasions, activities and circumstances around which the verbal and non-verbal expressions are built. Such activities and occasions include work, eating, child birth, achievement, misfortune, death and funerals, visits to the sick, chance meetings of friends and relatives, and so on.

It is normal for the members of a family to greet one another in the morning. Such exchanges do not normally go beyond enquiries after one another's health. In such situations it is customary for the child to greet the elder - *Papa Ddi na wò*, meaning, 'good morning, father.' The elder then replies - *Ddi, efɔ?*, meaning 'good morning, did you wake up (well?)' and he replies *Ee* i.e. 'yes'. If a child is not old enough to initiate greetings, the elder simply enquires after his or her health, *Efɔ?* or *Ele agbea?* - 'Did you wake up?' or 'Are you alive?' To which the answer is - *Ee!*, meaning 'yes.'

When the greeting is between adults from different homes, then considerations of the welfare of the members of each other's home come in. If one of the participants in the greeting situation happens to have benefited from a good turn from the other recently, that, too, is mentioned in the greeting with gratitude.

The usual morning greetings between adults is as follows:

- Visitor: ɔdi (good morning)  
Host: ɔdi Afemetɔwo? (Morning. How is/are your household?)  
Visitor: Wodɔ Deviwɔ dɔa? (They slept. Did the children sleep (well?)  
Host: Wodɔ (They slept).  
Visitor: Yoo. Etsɔfe dɔ (All right. Thanks for yesterday).  
Host: Yoo (All right).

This is the form which is general among all Ewes. Among the southern Ewes, however, it can be lengthened as the time and circumstances permit with the participants taking turns.

It needs to be mentioned that 'welcome' and 'farewell' are parts of the total greeting situation. It is conceivable for a person who has come from some distance to initiate greetings without the host first welcoming him. This is followed by the offer of a seat and then water for drinking before the greetings begin. The general greetings for noon or afternoon are,

Visitor: Dda. (afternoon)  
 Host: Dda afe metowo? (Afternoon; what about the household?)  
 Visitor: Woda. (They are fine).

For the evening and the night the greetings are the same;

Visitor: Fi# na wd (Evening)  
 Host: Fi# afe metowo? (Evening, the household?)  
 Visitor: Woda. (They are fine).

On parting at night, people wish each other healthy sleep.

Visitor: Do agbe loo. (Sleep life)  
 Host: Yoo, Neke mikpe (Thank you. May it (the day) break so that we meet).

### Occasional Greetings

In addition to the time-related greetings described above, the Ewes have special greetings for various occasions. These greetings are circumstance-oriented and always refer to what a person is found to be doing at the time of greeting or to something which has just happened. In some cases the mood appropriate to the occasion is expressed, e.g. joy or sorrow.

### At Meals

When V meets H at meals the greeting goes as follows"

Visitor: Asi le agba me. (Hand in the plate)  
 Host: Yoo! Va gbonye. (All right; come near).  
 Visitor: Enyo. (It's o.k.)  
 Host: Va midu nu. (Come let's eat).  
 Visitor: Netsa. (Let it be quick; or simply "all right").

Good manners require that you must invite anyone who meets you at meals even if you do not intend that they should share your meal with you. This way you would at least be expressing the willingness generally to give food to the person. No self-respecting adult, however, will join in a meal at being thus invited. Indeed the statement is more a formality than an invitation. The fact is that people do not eat indiscriminately every where. Nevertheless, anyone who fails to extend this greeting to people when he is eating, is seriously regarded as being selfish and asocial.

### In the farm or at work

Visitor: Wde le dzi loo!/Kpo asi loo!/Dana, dand  
 (You are on it, dear/Watch your hands).  
 Host: Yoo; megbetowo de?  
 (All right; how are those behind?)  
 Visitor: Woli.  
 (They are fine).

### When someone returns from farm, etc.

Host: Wde de loo!/Do afe loo!  
 (You have gone and come back/Reach home, dear).  
 Visitor: Yoo. Megbetowo de?  
 (All right; how are those behind?)  
 Host: Woli. Agbletowo de?/Daxmetowo de?  
 (They are fine. What about those in the farm/Those at the work place?)  
 Visitor: Woli. (They are fine).

In each of the above cases, the person who greets expresses satisfaction at the other's achievement (cp. You are hard on it; you have gone and come back). The enquiries after each other's relations whether at home, in the farm or at the work place show a general concern by the people for each other and for the general welfare of others in the society.

#### On the occasion of childbirth

Visitor: Wò do le me/Wò nunuwoe sè nu.

(You have come out of it/The things which surround you have done well).

Host: Yoo. Wò do gbe òa.

(All right. You prayed [for me]).

This greeting is also extended to all relations and neighbours of the woman who has had a baby, irrespective of whether they are male or female.

The *it* in the first statement refers to labour, which may result in the death of mother or child or both. People rejoice at the birth of a child for two reasons: First, an addition has been made to the community. Secondly, the mother has escaped from death. The odds are that one or both of them could have died. These fears are clearly portrayed by the verbal aspect of the greetings and the gifts which are made to mother and child.

The response, "You prayed for me" is of interest. The person greeting may not have said any prayers specifically for the expectant mother. And this is known to the two parties involved in the greeting situation. The prayer, therefore, is what can be referred to as community prayer. The general wish of the people is always that only good things should happen to members of the society. Such wishes are expressly stated in libation to the Gods and ancestors as well as in other prayers.

#### In times of luck

Another type of greeting which is similar to the above is that which is used when someone has good luck, e.g. passes examinations, buys a new car or builds or buys a house. These are some of the things which are for the good of the community and for which people always pray. Their acquisition by a member of the community, therefore, brings joy and people readily acknowledge the help and support of the gods and the ancestors. The greetings are as follows:

Visitor: Wò nu nuwoe wò òa.

(The things which surround you have done well).

Host: Yoo. Wò do gbe òa.

(All right. You prayed [for me]).

The *nuwo* (things) referred to here include a person's guardian spirit, the great God, household Gods, personal Gods, ancestral spirits and the spirits of living relatives.

#### On occasions of misfortune

Just as people readily identify themselves with the joys of neighbours, so also do they do with their sorrows. When someone meets with misfortune, or is bereaved, the greetings are:

Visitor: Wò kpee.

(You have suffered it [i.e. Have my sympathy]).

Host: Yoo. Wò ve ame ni.

(Alright. You are the benevolent one).

or Yoo. Wò hã.

(All right; you too).

The kindness of "Visitor" in expressing sympathy is immediately acknowledged by "Host", the

victim. In the response "Visitor" is recognized as one who shares in "Host's" sorrows.

### After a journey

When a person arrives at a destination after travelling some distance, the people to whom he goes welcome him,

Visitor: Wòezò  
(You have walked [i.e. are welcome]).

Host: Yoo.  
(All right, i.e. thank you).

He is then offered a seat and water is given to him. After that, depending upon the time of the day, he greets. For example:

Visitor: Ɔdi na wò.  
(Morning to you).

Host: Ɔdi. Mòdzitòwo ɔe?  
(Morning. How about people in your journey?)

Visitor: Wòdò.  
(They are fine; [lit. they slept well]).

Host: Nòviwo?  
(How are your relatives?)

Visitor: Wobia wò.  
(The ask of you).

Host: Wòezò  
(You have walked).

Visitor: Yoo.  
(All right).

Travelling entails many risks, especially in the past when people had to walk long distances along foot-paths through the woods. There was danger from highway men and from wild animals; they suffered from hunger and thirst. In welcoming a person, therefore, emphasis is laid on the "walking" aspect. Those welcoming a visitor are willing to share in his experiences before the usual enquiries about his family and relatives.

### Non-greeting times

There are certain situations when people are not expected to greet. These are (i) before a person washes his or her mouth in the morning; (ii) when going to the urinal, and (iii) when going to latrine. Of these the last one is the most important.

In traditional Ewe society, and to a large extent in the rural areas today, there are no water closets. Instead, pit latrines are dug at the outskirts of the towns and villages as places of convenience. A person on his way to the latrine may not greet anyone. At the latrine, too, he may not greet the people he meets there though he may enter into conversation with them. He can greet people at the latrine only when he has finished and is going away. Once he has eased himself of the filth, he becomes clean and can greet anybody. So only those returning from the latrine are allowed by custom to greet on the way. Failure to observe this rule can land a person into trouble. For it is insulting behaviour to greet while on your way to the place of convenience. A person thus greeted may take offence and ask, *wò mie meɔuna a?* (do I live on your faeces?). To avoid this and also to avoid charges of not greeting people, it is normal for the person going to latrine to say, *aɔdzie meyina* (I am going to the latrine). This in effect replaces the greetings.

### **Non-verbal aspects of greetings**

The non-linguistic aspects of greetings include (i) handshake; (ii) nodding; (iii) bending of knees; (iv) waving of hand, and (v) facial expression and embracing.

If for one reason or other a person finds it inconvenient to engage in verbal exchange, he may nod in return or raise his hand. A woman or girl bows or slightly bends her knees when she greets a man or another woman who is older than her or is of a higher social standing. Thus chiefs and elders in society are shown reverence during greetings. Young people generally bow when they greet older ones. Boys put their hands behind them. Waving of the hand is done when people are not near enough to shake hands or when they are not within ear-shot.

When greeting chiefs and elders, people are expected to use both hands for shaking. In some cases, for example, when the greeting is done in the chief's court, people remove their sandals before greeting.

The expression on a person's face when he greets is a reflection of one's inner feelings towards the one being greeted. Under normal circumstances, therefore, people are expected to show a friendly face when they greet. Voice quality also counts. People must greet with a loud voice. Failure to do so indicates unwillingness to exchange greetings with a particular person, and this implies that you bear that person a grudge. Thus greetings can indicate whether relationship between two people is normal or not.

Of all the non-linguistic aspects of greetings the handshake enables people, especially men, to show the warmth of feelings towards each other. It ranges from merely holding each other's right hand to firmly squeezing and vigorous shaking of each other's arms and snapping of fingers in the process of disengaging the hands.

### **Factors that Influence Greetings**

As Hudson (1980: 122) rightly observes, the verbal expressions which constitute greetings are prescribed by the culture and are determined by the social relations between addressor and addressee i.e. the social distance between people - how much experience they have shared, how many social characteristics, such as sex, age, religion, race, occupation, interests etc. they have in common, and the extent to which they are prepared to share intimacies and other factors. These social and psychological factors also influence the choice of the non-verbal aspects of greetings such as handshake, embracing, removing of hat, saluting, bowing and courtesying, among others. Goody has observed kneeling and crouching among the Gonjas. The squatting by the Kotokolis and the prostrating among the Yorubas are among these.

### **Functions of Greetings**

Greetings are generally regarded as a means of establishing social contact and acknowledging the social presence of others - the phatic communion discussed above. However, sociolinguistic literature contains functions of greetings which vary from culture to culture. For instance, Goffman (1955) suggests that greeting is needed to show that the relationship which existed at the end of the last encounter is still unchanged, in spite of the separation, and that a farewell is needed in order to 'sum up the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when next they meet.' The participants in the greeting situation begin and end each piece of interaction by indicating their relation to one another. In-between these may come any 'business' transaction. Hudson (1980: 129) sees the structure of an interaction as

Greeting-Business-Farewell.

He observes that greetings and farewells may vary enormously in their sincerity and

creativity; creativity being more possible when participants use propositions or statements e.g. 'How nice to see you, than when they use non-propositional expressions like,

'Hello!' or 'so long!'

### The Forms of Greetings

The form of greetings varies from language to language and from society to society. But, as Ferguson (1976) has observed, certain general patterns have emerged with regard to what decides the form of greeting or farewell. For instance, the sheer length of greeting is generally proportional to the length of time since the last meeting (i.e. a greeting to a friend last seen ten years ago will be longer than one to a friend seen yesterday). The importance of the relationship also counts. For example, a friend will receive a longer greeting than a mere acquaintance. All these observations are true of Ewe greetings. The verbal expressions are not only expected to be long, but intensive and the physical expressions vigorous. Absence of these will be taken that something has gone wrong with the relations. It is this show of concern and interest not only in one another but also in absent relations which often makes foreigners wonder about the sincerity of it all.

The story is told of a European merchant and his Ewe store clerk. It was the end of the month and they were in the process of taking stock when another Ewe man came and there began a long verbal exchange between him and the store clerk. The European looked on in desperation. After it had ended, he asked, "And what is this dialogue about?" The clerk answered, "We were only exchanging greetings." The whiteman gasped and shook his head. Another European is reported to have asked, "when your people greet one another with so much show of love, are they sincere?" The answer is, "yes." Each time people greet, they express their concern for one another and for the society as a whole. They reaffirm group solidarity, love and fellow-feeling. What is more, greeting is a social duty.

All the same, the question of insincerity cannot be ruled out. Hudson postulates that it is relatively easy to be insincere at the greeting or farewell state in an encounter because those are the points where one comes nearest to 'reciting lines', like an actor on the stage. Faking sincerity can become expedient especially since one's inner feelings may easily be betrayed not only by what one says or does not say, but also by how he says it. The same thing applies in the case of gestures. However, we have seen that among the Ewes, improper greeting or absence of greeting generally reflects strained relations. It is common, therefore, for a person to use the situation of greeting as a chance to show discontent with some previous behaviour of the other person towards him.

Hudson also talks of the lack of greetings when people approach strangers to ask for information. Whereas this may pass in British or American societies where the expression, *excuse me*, is considered enough to establish the necessary rapport for interaction of this kind, it would be the height of misdemeanour among the Ewes to make enquiries from a person without first greeting him, since refusal to greet him implies non-recognition of his physical presence. I am reliably informed that among the Frafra of Northern Ghana people who do this are intentionally given wrong directions.

Two more examples of variety of greetings may be of interest here. According to a study of Apache Indians conducted by K.H. Basso (1970) and cited by Hudson, instead of using greetings to assure each other that relations are just what they were before the separation, they wait until they are sure that relations really *are* the same before they speak to each other at all, at least in situations where there is reason to think that relations may have changed, as when children return after a year in boarding school. Hudson comments that whereas

many British or American parents might chatter hard with their children as soon as they come off the bus, Apache parents apparently wait and say nothing up to fifteen minutes, while they assess the effect of the year's schooling on their children's behaviour. (Hudson 1980: 130-131).

The Ewe parents in a similar situation would welcome the child with all the warmth and show of love, *Wòe z:ɔ! wòe z:ɔ! wòe z:ɔ!* (welcome! welcome! welcome!). And as soon as they enter the house, the visitor would take a seat, be offered water, and then greetings would follow.

### Modes of Greetings

It has been suggested that speakers locate themselves in a multi-dimensional space in relation to the rest of their society, and locate each act of speaking in a multi-dimensional space relative to the rest of their social lives, each 'dimension' being defined by a particular concept of a typical speaker or typical situation (Hudson 1980: 83). The verbal and non-verbal or kinesic forms used in greetings indicate the social relationship between addressor and addressee. On meeting, and before greeting, the participants in the greeting situation take account of their role-relationships and each selects the expressions and actions which will not infringe upon the rights of the other. The above theoretical presuppositions indicate that greeting behaviour occurs in a wide variety of forms.

Children or persons of lower status are expected to use certain expressions when they greet their elders. These include kinship terms and titles. Children are generally not supposed to inquire about the health of elders and of the members of the latter's household. Conversely, elders do not ask children about the welfare of their household because the child has no dependents and no responsibility over the members of the house.

To greet an elder the subordinate slightly bows himself (girls and women courtesy). He does not extend his hand to the elder unless the latter does so first. Similarly when women greet men, they are normally expected to show deference in a number of ways: they may have to use a kinship term, a title or a recognized term of respect and they may not offer to shake hands first. It is normal for them to bow slightly or to courtesy. So, too, when male elders greet their seniors or elders, chiefs or persons in official positions they are expected to show respect.

On the other hand, when equals, especially adults, greet on ordinary occasions, there is great freedom both in the verbal expressions they use and the physical gestures they employ, both of which show friendship and solidarity. They may use each other's *ahanook* (praise appellation) and their handshake may be rather emotional and vigorous.

An analysis of Ewe greeting behaviours is given in the paradigm below:

### PARADIGM FOR THE ANALYSIS OF GREETING BEHAVIOUR AMONG THE EWES

Category	Type	Form
Verbal behaviour	a) form of address	i) kinship terms ii) official titles iii) praise names or 'guy' names.
	b) topical salutations	i) time of day

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ii) activity</li> <li>iii) health</li> <li>iv) special occasions</li> <li>v) thanks for service or gift</li> </ul>
Physical behaviour	a) abasement gestures (before superiors)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) removing of hat</li> <li>ii) bowing</li> <li>iii) courtesying</li> <li>iv) removing of sandals</li> <li>v) lowering cloth from shoulders</li> <li>vi) supporting the right hand with the left before shaking hands.</li> </ul>
	b) solidarity gestures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) slapping each others's right palms in vigorous handshake.</li> <li>ii) snapping of fingers</li> <li>iii) warm embrace.</li> </ul>
	c) approach pattern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) to see persons</li> <li>ii) to give thanks</li> <li>iii) to convey information</li> <li>iv) to congratulate</li> <li>v) to express sympathy.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) visits within vicinity</li> <li>ii) visits between communities</li> </ul>	
Prestation	a) gift of objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) gifts may be presented and received</li> </ul>

### Conclusion

Greeting among the Ewes is thus regarded as a responsibility and a right. It serves to identify the individual with his group and acts as an avenue for expressing solidarity and love as well as showing respect and deference to superiors. Greetings can easily betray ill-feeling and hatred as much as absence of greetings. Refusal to greet a person or respond to his greetings can be hurtful apart from showing that something is amiss.

Although the expressions used in these greetings are conventional and almost stereotypic in form and content, they nevertheless, have social, cultural and psychological implications. The people's fears and aspirations, their attitudes to others and to various life situations, concern for one another in the society, aspects of social structure as well as social and cultural values are significantly reflected in, and are the focal point as well as the source of the greetings themselves. Refusal to greet, and greet properly may be interpreted as denial of social recognition, which may cause offence and possibly lead to more serious consequences.

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