

Religious Moderation Agency Among Religious Minorities: A Narrative Inquiry into Muslim Experiences in Humbang Hasundutan

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the construction of religious moderation among a Muslim minority community in Pearaja Matiti II Village, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The study focuses on identifying the role of social capital, the negotiation of interreligious relations, and the contribution of religious actors in fostering and sustaining social harmony within a multicultural society. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, data was collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving religious leaders, village authorities, and community members. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that religious moderation within the Muslim minority community is socially constructed through the interaction of non-formal religious education, trust-based social capital and cooperation, interreligious reciprocity, and the leadership of religious figures and local government authorities. Non-formal Islamic education functions as a medium for reproducing moral values that encourage social openness, while reciprocal relations between Muslim and Christian communities are manifested through collective participation in religious, social, and humanitarian activities. Furthermore, religious leaders and local authorities serve as agents of moderation who bridge differences and strengthen social cohesion. This study concludes that religious moderation among Muslim minority communities is a social construct shaped by the synergy between a strong religious identity and openness to diversity.

Keywords: *Muslim Minority; Agency; Religious Moderation.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis konstruksi moderasi beragama pada komunitas Muslim minoritas di Desa Pearaja Matiti II Kabupaten Humbang Hasundutan, Sumatera Utara. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada identifikasi modal sosial, bentuk konsensus hubungan antarumat beragama, serta peran aktor-aktor keagamaan dalam membangun dan memelihara harmoni sosial di

tengah masyarakat multikultural. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data diperoleh melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi terhadap tokoh agama, kepada desa dan masyarakat yang kemudian dianalisis melalui tahapan kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa moderasi beragama pada komunitas Muslim minoritas dibentuk melalui hasil interaksi antara pendidikan keagamaan non-formal, modal sosial berbasis kepercayaan dan gotong royong, budaya resiprositas lintas agama, serta kepemimpinan tokoh agama dan pemerintah desa. Pendidikan Islam non-formal berfungsi sebagai sarana reproduksi nilai-nilai akhlak yang mendorong keterbukaan sosial, sementara hubungan timbal balik antara komunitas Muslim dan Kristiani diwujudkan melalui partisipasi bersama dalam kegiatan keagamaan, sosial, dan kemanusiaan. Di sisi lain, tokoh agama dan pemimpin lokal berperan sebagai agen moderasi yang menjembatani perbedaan serta memperkuat kohesi sosial masyarakat. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa moderasi beragama pada komunitas Muslim minoritas merupakan konstruksi sosial yang dibangun melalui sinergi antara identitas keagamaan yang kuat dan keterbukaan terhadap keberagaman.

Kata Kunci: *Muslim minoritas; Agensi; Moderasi Beragama*

Introduction

Religious moderation has become a central issue in religious and national discourse in Indonesia (Singgih, 2023). Rising social polarization, the spread of intolerant narratives through digital media, and the strengthening of exclusive religious identities have driven various stakeholders to seek models of religiosity capable of balancing commitment to religious beliefs with respect for social diversity (Hadi Kusuma & Susilo, 2020). In a multicultural society, religious moderation functions not only as a normative concept emphasizing a middle ground (*wasathiyyah*), but also as a social practice that enables groups with distinct identities to coexist peacefully within a shared social space (Mubarok et al., 2025). Consequently, scholarly attention to religious moderation continues to grow, particularly to elucidate the factors that sustain social harmony amid complex interfaith dynamics.

Most studies on religious moderation continue to focus on state policies, formal educational institutions, or the role of major religious organizations in disseminating moderate values (Efendi et al., 2026; Fauzi & Rohmadi, 2022; Sabarudin et al., 2024). Religious moderation is frequently framed as an institutional, top-down program, leaving the concrete experiences of grass-roots communities relatively under-researched (Rohman, 2017). As a result, empirical research explaining how religious moderation is produced in daily life through the social actions of

local actors in multicultural environments remains scarce. Yet, the success of religious moderation at the community level hinges on the capacity of individuals and groups to translate religious values into social practices accepted by diverse populations.

This gap extends to the positioning of minority groups in the construction of social harmony. Existing literature often portrays minority groups as adaptive entities conforming to social structures dominated by the majority (Mahardhani, 2022), reducing minorities to mere objects of social integration. Conversely, recent studies demonstrate that minority groups are not inherently passive; they possess the capacity to act, build consensus, and deploy social strategies that position them as crucial agents in safeguarding social cohesion. Within this framework, the concept of agency becomes essential for analyzing how individuals and groups utilize their social, cultural, and religious resources to shape their social environments.

This research gap is particularly pronounced regarding Muslim communities living as minorities in Christian-majority areas. Most studies on Muslim minorities in Indonesia remain oriented toward issues of identity, discrimination, social adaptation, or majority-minority relations. Meanwhile, research specifically investigating how minority Muslim communities act as agents of religious moderation remains limited. Being a minority engenders unique social dynamics, as these groups must preserve their religious identity while building harmonious relations with surrounding communities. This positions minority Muslim communities as a vital locus for understanding how religious moderation is practiced, negotiated, and reproduced in daily social life.

This context is evident in Pearaja Matiti II Village, Dolok Sanggul District, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra. This village presents a compelling social configuration, where the Muslim community exists as a minority amidst a predominantly Protestant and Catholic population. Nevertheless, interfaith relations remain harmonious, characterized by high levels of social participation, cooperation (*gotong royong*), and cross-religious engagement in community activities. Crucially, this harmony relies not merely on passive tolerance but is constructed through social practices involving non-formal religious education, a culture of reciprocity, and active religious leadership that shapes social consciousness. These conditions demonstrate that the minority Muslim community does not merely adapt to the majority environment but actively acts as an agent in constructing and sustaining an ecosystem of religious moderation.

Building upon this background, this article argues that religious moderation within minority Muslim communities cannot be understood solely as a product of state policy or religious doctrine, but rather as an outcome of social agency exercised by local actors through religious education, social capital, and daily social practices. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the Muslim community in Pearaja Matiti II Village constructs its role as agents of religious moderation, identify the social

capital sustaining this process, and explain the forms of social consensus that enable interfaith harmony. By establishing agency as the central analytical framework, this study offers a novel contribution to the scholarship on religious moderation, particularly in understanding minority Muslim communities as active agents in the production and reproduction of social cohesion within multicultural societies.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry method to understand and interpret the lived experiences of Islamic religious leaders in building social relations and fostering tolerance within a multireligious community in Pearaja Matiti II Village, Dolok Sanggul District, Humbang Hasundutan Regency. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to reconstruct the experiences, meanings, and social interaction processes of the participants through personal narratives embedded in daily life. From a narrative inquiry perspective, experience is understood as a phenomenon shaped by the interplay of temporality, sociality, and place; thus, each narrative serves as a representation of the meaning-making process in social and religious life.

Data collection was conducted in-depth using narrative interviews as the primary technique, complemented by participant observation and documentary analysis of social-religious activities and interfaith practices within the community. Research participants were selected purposively based on their active involvement in cross-religious interactions, comprising Islamic religious leaders as primary narrators, alongside the Village Head, community leaders, and local residents. The acquired data consisted of participant narratives, experiences, reflections, and insights regarding tolerance dynamics, social cooperation, and strategies for fostering harmony in a pluralistic society.

Data analysis was performed narratively through transcription, repetitive reading, restorying, thematic coding, narrative sequencing, and textual interpretation. This analytical process aimed to identify experiential patterns, socio-religious values, and the construction of meaning emerging from participant stories. To ensure data credibility, the study applied source triangulation by cross-analyzing narratives across participants, technical triangulation by corroborating interview data with observational and documentary evidence, and member checking to verify that the researcher's interpretations aligned with the participants' intended meanings. The resulting interpretations were then organized thematically and contextually to form the empirical foundation for the findings and discussion.

Results and Discussion

Interfaith Social Interaction

The sociological reality of Pearaja Matiti II Village is deeply rooted in a highly specific geographical landscape and demographic structure,

directly shaping the cultural character of its population. Deconstructing these topographical conditions and ethnic entities constitutes a fundamental step in qualitative scientific inquiry, as the natural environment and kinship ties provide the primary canvas upon which the dynamics of social and religious interaction unfold. Administratively and geographically, Pearaja Matiti II Village is situated in Dolok Sanggul District, Humbang Hasundutan Regency—a highland region characterized by a cool average temperature reaching 17°C (62.6°F). Spanning an area of 222.40 square kilometers, the district is predominantly inhabited by the Batak Toba ethnic group, whose social life is deeply intertwined with a patrilineal clan system (*marga*), including families such as Simamora, Purba, Lumban Gaol, Marbun, and Siregar. Thus, the challenging mountainous terrain combined with ethnic homogeneity anchored in the clan system yields a solid primordial bond and high societal resilience. This resilience of ethnicity- and geography-based genealogical ties subsequently provides a cultural foundation for the community to navigate the complexities of theological diversity (Siagian et al., 2025).

Behind the strong Batak Toba cultural fabric, Pearaja Matiti II Village harbors a rich dynamic of theological pluralism in which Muslims occupy the sociological status of a minority. This religious constellation serves as a crucial locus of analysis, given that minority positioning in many settings is frequently susceptible to social marginalization within structures dominated by a single faith tradition. Demographic data reveal that an absolute majority of the village population adheres to Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, whereas the Muslim community—emerging from historical cultural adaptation, intermarriage, and personal conscience—constitutes a numerical minority. Field data demonstrate a reality of pluralism extending beyond the public sphere into the micro-level, where individual households frequently comprise family members of differing religious affiliations. Consequently, the presence of Muslims as a numeric minority amidst a Christian majority has not led to exclusion or segregation, but rather to a peaceful, coexisting plural social order. The successful preservation of these deep theological distinctions relies significantly on daily spaces of encounter that bind residents functionally, notably through the local economy (Simamora et al., 2018).

The agrarian- and trade-based economic sector serves as a sociological bridge that effectively transcends religious boundaries in Pearaja Matiti II Village. Economic interdependence and shared livelihoods compel residents to continuously interact, collaborate, and build mutual trust without scrutinizing or harboring suspicion toward individual theological backgrounds. The majority of residents earn a living as farmers cultivating highland agricultural land planted with horticultural commodities such as coffee, chili peppers, tomatoes, and vegetables, which form the primary pillar of the regional economy. Beyond agriculture, livelihood structures are supported by local commerce and service sectors, including convenience store vendors, livestock farmers, teachers, civil servants, military/police personnel, laborers, and equipment rental

providers. In summary, diverse occupations and the frequency of daily economic transactions in both fields and local markets create an ecosystem of organic interdependence that naturally minimizes horizontal conflicts with religious undertones. Functional interactions centered on economic survival foster rational, open perspectives, manifesting in a collective vision regarding the importance of intergenerational advancement through education (Taufik & Kusumawardhani).

The residents of Pearaja Matiti II Village place strategic emphasis on education as the primary vehicle for intergenerational social mobility and civilizational advancement within the village. This forward-looking educational orientation stems from a rational awareness that global competition requires intellectual capacity to prevent succeeding generations from falling behind. Although most parents work as conventional farmers, they demonstrate a firm commitment to ensuring their children complete at least a high school education. Moreover, when family finances permit and academic interest is high, parents fully support their children in pursuing higher education beyond village borders. This reflects a shared, universal vision of intellectual progress that transcends religious affiliations. Nevertheless, the community recognizes that formal schooling remains incomplete without targeted moral and spiritual nurture delivered through non-formal religious education.

Agency Capital of Religious Moderation

The agency capital of religious moderation in Pearaja Matiti II Village did not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is the product of continuous religious instruction delivered through Islamic non-formal educational institutions. For a Muslim community occupying a demographic minority position, institutions such as the Qur'anic Education Center (TPQ), Qur'anic study groups (*pengajian*), and educational activities facilitated by the Dolok Sanggul District Religious Affairs Office (KUA) serve functions extending far beyond the simple transfer of religious knowledge. These institutions act as arenas for value reproduction, the internalization of faith (*akidah*), and the cultivation of socio-religious character adapted to a multicultural environment. This indicates that non-formal religious education operates as a strategic instrument for preserving Islamic identity without encouraging social exclusivism. On the contrary, the instructional process yields a balance between reinforcing religious identity and fostering harmonious interaction with other religious groups (Fitri et al., 2025).

Sociologically, this phenomenon demonstrates that the strengthening of religiosity does not automatically correlate with heightened exclusivity. Findings in Pearaja Matiti II show that a stronger religious foundation enhances the community's capacity to manage differences maturely. This occurs because the religious education provided emphasizes not only ritualistic aspects, but also instills moral character (*akhlak*), respect for humanity, and social awareness regarding community cohesion. In other words, non-formal education in this village

has successfully translated normative Islamic teachings into actionable social ethics in daily life. Moral principles cultivated through Qur'anic studies manifest in tolerant behavior, respect for diversity, and a willingness to collaborate on civic matters (Priyono, 2023).

The success of these educational efforts is reflected in associative patterns of social relations. Cross-religious interactions in Pearaja Matiti II Village take place in a fluid, equitable atmosphere free from group domination. Collective awareness of religious diversity is treated not as a source of conflict, but as a social reality to be managed collaboratively. From a religious moderation perspective, this reflects the operationalization of *tawazun* (balance) and *tasamuh* (tolerance) as social norms. Residents understand religious belief as a private domain to be respected, whereas community development is viewed as a public space requiring cross-religious collaboration (Singgih, 2023). Consequently, communal work projects, public facility construction, and social initiatives are carried out collectively without being undermined by religious sentiments.

Furthermore, the practice of tolerance in this village exhibits a substantive character. Tolerance is conceived not merely as passive non-interference, but as active participation through direct social interaction. This is clearly observed during Islamic holiday celebrations, which function as interfaith social gathering spaces. The tradition of communal dining following Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha prayers, for example, serves both as a religious expression of gratitude and as a social mechanism to strengthen inter-group solidarity. The attendance of non-Muslim residents at these events indicates that specific religious spaces have evolved into arenas for social integration, reducing psychological distance between faith communities. In this context, religious rituals yield internal cohesion among Muslims while contributing to broader societal cohesion (Muhajarah & Soebahar, 2024).

A similar dynamic is evident during the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday (*Maulid Nabi*) and *Isra Mi'raj*, which receive active support from the non-Muslim community. Non-Muslim involvement in preparing event infrastructure illustrates that interfaith relations have transcended formal tolerance toward collaborative engagement. This support represents an expression of respect for the religious rights of others rather than a theological compromise. Concurrently, the Muslim community reciprocates by offering equal respect during Christian religious observances. This pattern of mutual space-sharing and support serves as a strong indicator that religious moderation in Pearaja Matiti II is built upon a solid foundation of social trust (Muhajarah & Soebahar, 2024).

From the framework of social capital theory, this reality demonstrates the effective operation of bridging social capital within the community. Networks spanning across religious boundaries foster sustainable trust, solidarity, and cooperation (Sumi et al., 2025). This social capital functions as an agent of religious moderation by connecting diverse religious identities toward the common objective of maintaining a

peaceful and harmonious social environment. Thus, religious moderation in Pearaja Matiti II Village is sustained not only by state regulations or government programs, but grows organically from non-formal religious education, internalized Islamic ethics, and robust social capital. These findings highlight that successful religious moderation within minority Muslim communities depends heavily on the capacity of religious institutions to balance identity reinforcement with social openness toward differing groups.

Consensus on Religious Moderation

The consensus on religious moderation in Pearaja Matiti II Village operates through reciprocal mechanisms consistently practiced in daily social life. Religious moderation is expressed not through normative slogans or formal agreements, but through daily interactions involving mutual respect, solidarity, and care across religious lines. Within this context, the minority Muslim community does not isolate itself; instead, it actively builds open social relations with the Christian population. This openness is met with an equivalent response from the majority, producing a reciprocal relational pattern. Relationships constructed upon mutual respect serve as a vital foundation for long-term social stability amidst religious diversity (Pahrudin et al., 2025).

This reciprocity indicates that tolerance in Pearaja Matiti II has progressed from passive coexistence to substantive social cooperation. Each religious group not only grants space for others to practice their faith but actively engages in civic moments carrying emotional and cultural significance. This phenomenon reflects a transformation from formal tolerance to humanistic social solidarity. From the perspective of religious moderation, this condition illustrates the community's success in balancing personal religious commitments with respect for the rights of others to freely express their faith (Dennerlein, 2006).

The most tangible manifestation of this moderation consensus is seen in Muslim participation during Christian social and religious occasions. During Christmas celebrations, the presence of Muslim residents as invited guests is understood not as theological syncretism, but as a social expression of neighborly brotherhood. This presence demonstrates the community's capacity to distinguish proportionally between exclusive doctrinal domains (*akidah*) and inclusive social spheres. Such awareness marks an important indicator of religious maturity, as residents maintain boundaries of faith without creating social distance from neighbors of different religions (Latifa et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the consensus on religious moderation manifests strongly during moments of social bereavement affecting the community. Local bereavement traditions such as *Seripahan* and *Lelayu* demonstrate that religious identity does not impede human solidarity. When a resident experiences misfortune, illness, or death, community members regardless of faith participate in providing social assistance, offering condolences, and extending moral support to the grieving family. In fact, grassroots

initiatives to provide transportation using private vehicles highlight the community's deep social capital. These practices indicate that shared human values serve as a common ground unifying diverse religious identity.

This dynamic can be analyzed through social capital theory, which emphasizes trust, reciprocity, and social networks as foundations of a harmonious society. High levels of cross-religious civic participation reveal that Pearaja Matiti II Village possesses substantial reserves of social capital. Trust built over years enables residents to prioritize human needs over potential identity conflicts. In this setting, religious moderation is not produced solely by religious doctrine but is continually reinforced through shared experiences in common social spaces (Husaini & Islamy, 2022).

Importantly, these harmonious relations do not occur spontaneously without local actors actively managing social balance. Key figures behind this interfaith stability include religious leaders, customary (*adat*) leaders, village officials, religious extension officers (*penyuluh agama*), and influential informal figures. These individuals function as agents of moderation by mediating disputes, modeling inclusive behavior, and facilitating cross-group communication when potential misunderstandings arise. Their role is exercised both structurally through policy and culturally through social practices that promote peaceful coexistence (Jati, 2023).

Accordingly, the consensus on religious moderation in Pearaja Matiti II Village demonstrates that social harmony does not require the erasure of religious identity; rather, it relies on the community's capacity to continually negotiate differences within a framework of respect, trust, and human solidarity. Religious moderation in this context operates as a dynamic social process wherein each group maintains its faith while collectively constructing shared spaces for social cohesion. These findings confirm that successful religious moderation in multicultural societies is determined by social capital, a culture of reciprocity, and local actors consistently sustaining interfaith relations in daily life.

Becoming Agents of Religious Moderation

Serving as an agent of religious moderation in a multicultural society requires more than holding formal authority or social status; it entails the capacity to manage differences, build collective trust, and direct diversity toward productive social cohesion. Empirical findings in Pearaja Matiti II Village show that harmonious interfaith relations do not automatically result from coexisting within the same geographical area. Instead, social harmony is the product of continuous social construction sustained by local actors possessing structural and cultural legitimacy. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, these figures act as agents of religious moderation who bridge group interests, de-escalate potential conflicts, and foster dialogue that allows distinct religious identities to coexist (Zainal Arifin et al., 2025).

The presence of religious moderation agents is vital in communities where majority and minority groups live together. Theoretically, majority-minority dynamics carry inherent potential for tension due to unequal access to social, political, or symbolic resources (Liu et al., 2025). However, such tensions have not escalated into open conflict in Pearaja Matiti II Village because local figures manage differences constructively. These actors perform functions beyond administrative or normative duties, serving as social mediators who bridge diverse community interests. In this context, religious moderation is produced not through formal regulation alone, but through personal example, interpersonal communication, and repeated social practices in everyday life.

At the structural level, the Head of Pearaja Matiti II Village, Mr. Arani Simanullang, plays a central role as a facilitator of diversity. His leadership prioritizes social justice and accommodation for all residents regardless of religious affiliation, rather than majority domination. This inclusive approach demonstrates that local state institutions can serve as effective instruments for strengthening religious moderation. Equitable development policies, non-discriminatory empowerment, and openness to civic participation represent concrete ways in which formal authority fosters a shared sense of belonging within the village. This perceived fairness remains a key factor in preventing exclusive sentiments and identity-based social jealousy (Arifinsyah et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, in the cultural and spiritual domains, the role of Mr. Munzir Simanullang highlights the importance of religious leadership in reproducing values of moderation. Notably, his social legitimacy derives not only from his formal standing as a religious leader, but from his close ties to the community as a fellow farmer sharing the same daily realities as other villagers. This social proximity enhances the efficacy of his religious teaching delivered through *pengajian* and *majelis taklim* (study circles). In these forums, Islamic teachings are framed not merely as ritual obligations, but as sources of social values guiding adherents to respect others, maintain social brotherhood, and avoid actions that disrupt harmony. Thus, religious education serves as a vehicle for cultivating social piety oriented toward the common good (Abdullah et al., 2023).

The collaboration between structural and cultural leadership establishes a complementary moderation mechanism. The village government provides structural guarantees and spaces for preserving diversity, while religious leaders reinforce the moral foundations sustaining social life. This synergy generates what sociology terms *social resilience*—the capacity of a community to maintain stability and solidarity amidst potential divides. This resilience is manifested in the community's ability to resolve issues through deliberation (*musyawarah*), avoid identity polarization, and preserve positive neighborly relations despite differing beliefs.

The empirical reality of Pearaja Matiti II Village reveals that religious moderation is a continuous social process constructed through interactions among social structures, local culture, and individual agency.

The resulting harmony does not stem from relinquishing religious identity, but from placing that identity proportionally within shared civic life. Religious differences are perceived not as threats, but as aspects of social reality to be managed wisely. This capacity emerges from long-term social learning, reinforced by local leadership examples, and sustained through communal practices of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) (Budiwanti & Eidhamar, 2024).

More broadly, these findings contribute to the scholarship on religious moderation and the sociology of religion in Indonesia. Pearaja Matiti II Village demonstrates that building harmony relies heavily on local actors' ability to transform religious values into productive social energy, alongside government policy. The presence of religious and community leaders as agents of moderation ensures that values of tolerance translate into lived social practices. Therefore, the construction of tolerance in this village is the outcome of an interconnected social process involving social capital, local leadership, religious education, and a culture of *gotong royong*.

In conclusion, the harmony established in Pearaja Matiti II Village cannot be explained solely by demographic heterogeneity or the absence of religious conflict. Rather, this harmony is the product of social agency consciously exercised by local leaders who transform differences into a source of collective strength. These actors leverage diversity as social capital, direct community energy toward productive cooperation, and ensure equal space for all residents in social life. Within this framework, Islamic religious leaders function not only as guardians of religious orthodoxy, but as peacebuilders actively developing an ecosystem of religious moderation within a minority Muslim community.

Conclusions

Religious moderation in Pearaja Matiti II Village did not emerge spontaneously as an inevitable consequence of a pluralistic society; rather, it is the outcome of a continuous social construction produced and reproduced through the interplay of non-formal religious education, community social capital, a culture of reciprocity, and the active engagement of religious moderation agents. Sustained non-formal Islamic education has successfully built a robust foundation of faith (*akidah*) and moral character (*akhlak*), while simultaneously cultivating a critical awareness of the need to respect diversity. These core values subsequently transform into lived social practices, manifested through cross-religious cooperation, active civic participation, shared engagement in moments of both celebration and bereavement, and the formation of networks of trust that transcend boundaries of religious identity. Consequently, the construction of religious moderation within the minority Muslim community of Pearaja Matiti II demonstrates that reinforcing religious identity does not inherently foster exclusivism; instead, it can serve as the very foundation for an inclusive social piety when paired with sound moral nurture and constructive social management.

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