




# The Sechabaism Scholarship of Humanity to African Research: Reflections from the Life and Works of Professor Sechaba Mahlomaholo

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a reflection and proposes a theory based on the work and life of Sechaba Mahlomaholo. To consolidate points in this paper, the Sechabaism scholarship of humanity is used as an embodiment of his life and work in South African Higher Education and beyond. Those who knew and read his works would agree that his scholarship did not diminish his humanity through which people can be great scholars and be able to create a convivial community that emancipates people facing systematic injustice, xenophobia, and racial segregation among many others. His scholarship was always open to all disfranchised people excluded from higher education based on race and nationality. This act of conviviality was optimised in his movement known as Sustainable Learning Environments (SULE). In this paper, I deduce five critical elements which are Civic Research, Social Justice, Positive Change Research and Respectful Research which premise the Sechabaism scholarship of humanity. I argue in this paper that the Sechabaism scholarship of humanity presents a new outlook of African scholarship that has an impetus to contribute to social transformation and improved relations in higher education.

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## INTRODUCTION

I first met Prof Sechaba Mahlomaholo on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2015 when I registered as a PhD student at the University of the Free State, South Africa. At that time, he was the Dean of the Faculty of Education and a leader of a research group known as the Sustainable Learning Environments (SULE). The group consisted of various academics across South African Universities and beyond, Masters and PhD students, who met regularly to present, debate academic issues, and listen and critique student presentations. SULE became a household name at the University of the Free State, where a convivial community was created to improve human conditions through the adoption of the transformative paradigm as the lens to do research. The SULE approach ensured that postgraduate students finished their studies in record time with a high emphasis on quality work. It allowed communal supervision of students and created an enabling environment of support, and care especially for black people who had always suffered structural exclusion. While the foregoing may be common with other research groups, the SULE approach was unique in many ways.

Sechaba created a family within the academic space and was able to make students feel human in pursuit of scholarship. Through this, he demystified power dynamics between the supervisor and student in postgraduate studies, in which in many cases the supervisor occupies the central role in the academic journey, and has the power to determine the direction of the study and completion of studies.<sup>1</sup> In his approach, the student and the supervisors became co-partners in knowledge production.<sup>2</sup>

This approach was necessary to present new thinking to supervision where the voices of the students were empowered in shaping their academic destinies. In addition, the cohort supervision allowed interaction among the students and supervisors because there was a realisation that students learned best when learning from a multiplicity of sources.<sup>3</sup> Through this, students and supervisors could not continue to blame the past since collectively they could reconfigure the academic terrain. In this regard, he noted that,

*“We cannot blame the situation or the context or history anymore, because we are capable of interpretation and acting according to our own understanding of the situation. We can still create history even if this is not under conditions of our own choosing.”<sup>4</sup>*

The words ignited energy from the base and saw a PhD journey as doable, desirable and made possible through a collegiality approach to supervision. This enabled him to produce or promote various PhD and Masters graduates since everyone around him felt safe and accommodated, loved, and appreciated as a human being but at the same time pushing the agenda of quality scholarship that contributes to positive change. Before one can unpack the Sechabaism Scholarship of Humanity, it is critical to contextualise the readers on who Sechaba Mahlomaholo was and why he is a subject of this paper and special issue.

### **Who is Sechaba Mahlomaholo?**

Professor Sechaba Mahlomaholo was born in Morija, Lesotho on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, 1958. He was the firstborn of the only two children of Mme Lillian Mante Grace and Ntate Ezekiel (Tsamaisane) Mahlomaholo. He began his schooling journey at Pitseng Primary School in Lesotho and Twespruit Primary School in the Free State. He attended high school at Makabelani and matriculated in 1975. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1980, a University of Education Diploma (UED) in 1981, and a Bachelor of Education in 1986 as well as his honours degrees at the University of the North (Turfloop). He went on to obtain a Master of Education (MED-Counseling and Consulting Psychology) from Harvard University and obtained a Doctor of Education Degree at the University of the Western Cape. Apart from these qualifications, he also obtained a certificate in Quantitative Social Sciences and in 1994 he was awarded a certificate in Instrument Enrichment, Assessment and Intervention Techniques from the University of Witwatersrand.

In terms of employment, he became a teacher at Maralleneng High School in Ficksburg in 1981. From 1982 to 1983, he taught at Sefikeng College of Education in QwaQwa. From 1985 to 1995, he was employed at the University of the North where he rose from being a Junior lecturer

<sup>1</sup> Hee-Sun Cheon et al., “The Influence of Supervisor and Supervisee Matching, Role Conflict, and Supervisory Relationship on Supervisee Satisfaction,” *Contemporary Family Therapy* 31, no. 1 (March 24, 2009): 52–67, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-008-9078-y>.

<sup>2</sup> Molaodi David Tshelane, “Participatory Action Research and the Construction of Academic Identity among Postgraduate Research Students,” *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 9, no. 3 (2013): 401–29.

<sup>3</sup> Dianne Faye Bills, *Characteristics Associated with Research Degree Student Satisfaction, Completion and Attrition at the University of South Australia* (University of South Australia Adelaide, 2003); Gustav Butler, “The Design of a Postgraduate Test of Academic Literacy: Accommodating Student and Supervisor Perceptions,” *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 27, no. 3 (2010): 291–300; Marie De Beer and Roger B Mason, “Using a Blended Approach to Facilitate Postgraduate Supervision,” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 46, no. 2 (2009): 213–26; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, “Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth,” *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 5, no. 3 (2012): 429; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, “On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments,” *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 9, no. 3 (2013): 379–92.

<sup>4</sup> Mahlomaholo, “Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth.”

to a senior lecturer. In 1995, he joined Vista University, where he became the head of the professional education department. In 2001, he joined Medunsa, where he was the director of research and post-graduate studies. From 2004 to 2008, he was appointed a Professor and Director of the Centre for Curriculum Development and later moved to North West University between 2008 and 2010. In 2010, he joined the University of the Free State as head of department for the School of Mathematics and Natural Science Education and later became the dean of the faculty of education. In 2017, he accepted an offer to be the Deputy Vice Chancellor at Walter Sisulu University but did not stay long. He moved to the University of Zululand to take the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor of teaching and learning. Prior to his earthly departure, he was a Research Professor at the University of Mpumalanga (notes taken from his obituary and supplied to me by Dr Mahlomaholo). From this, Sechaba's career lasted more than 44 years of social and academic impact which, it would be disingenuous to ignore. Thus, this paper synthesises some of his works and it is not by any means exhaustive of his personality, impact and contribution to scholarship. As such, there is a need for systematic documentation of his work, not only for him but for other African scholars who have positively contributed to the Transformation and betterment of the African people. In this following section, I make arguments on the importance of profiling scholars systematically to tease new theorisation.

### **Why Should We Theorise African Scholars?**

The greatest challenge confronting African scholarship is the lack of theorisation which has led Western theories to detect its direction. Generally, there is over-reliance on Western theories to develop education and other sectors which unfortunately downplays the role of African scholars such as Sechaba Mahlomaholo. There is a lot of knowledge base that can be retrieved from African scholars to shape scholarship that addresses the aspirations of the African people. There is a need to fill the scholarship vacuum by intentionally documenting systematically the life and works of scholars which can enrich current discussions of transformation and rejecting of Global North as a standard for scholarship. This urge began in 2022 when I had an opportunity to visit Sabelo Gatsheni Ndlovu in Germany. By then, he was a chair of African Epistemologies at Bayreuth University. During one lunch session, Prof Sabelo engaged on the topic of why we need African theorisation. He posited a critical question; Why do we collect data in South Africa and then use European theories to analyse data? To him, this was disingenuous to scholarship. In different platforms, he advanced this argument with the need to decolonise knowledge. Often Sabelo would argue "*We needed to shift the geography of knowledge as well as the biography of knowledge.*"<sup>5</sup> Thus, through this engagement, I took a challenge to begin to cultivate African theorisation in my work as a PhD promoter. This does not imply Western theories have nothing to offer to African scholarship but that there is no standard for doing PhD studies and life in general. Thus, through this paper that consolidates some ideas of Sechaba Mahlomaholo, I present an opportunity not only to celebrate his life but glean cultural knowledge in a systematic way to shape the African scholarship agenda. Thus, to begin this, I base this paper on his famous scholarship movement called Sustainable Learning Environments, then followed by what I call the Sechabaism scholarship of Humanity, which to me, sums or embodies intellectual and human presence to African people and beyond.

### **The Sustainable Learning Environments in the South African Context**

The conceptualisation of Sustainable Learning Environments in the South African context started at Goedgevonden High School.<sup>6</sup> Sechaba Mahlomaholo and his team were invited by the school for an address. While there, the team observed that a day's visit to the school was not enough to address the challenges the school was facing. Continuous engagement was necessary to ensure that

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<sup>5</sup> Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The Dynamics of Epistemological Decolonisation in the 21st Century: Towards Epistemic Freedom," *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 40, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth."

the school improved. It is through the engagement with the school that there was a need to establish a movement centring on this approach. While it started in school, the concept was better developed in higher education through supervising students around this concept with a thesis oriented towards improving the human condition, justice, and emancipation in schools. He was persuaded that “academic identity is not just about theorisation and desk-top searchers; it is about being involved in life, where knowledge and history are created, and it is acted out in praxis. Our view is that the latter characteristic is a challenge to many established ‘academics’ as well since their true identity should be measured in terms of the positive changes they affect in the civic life of all. True academic identity, as I see it, does not end with publication in scientific journals, but should culminate in the improvement of the life for all, in one respect or another.”<sup>7</sup> From this quote I deduce the following on *Sechabaism scholarship of Humanity*, a). Civic Research, b) Productive research, c) Action based research, d), positive change research, and e) respectful research. These concepts will be discussed later to consolidate his ideas in teasing a new theory.

### Theorisation: Sustainable Learning Environments

Throughout his career, Prof Sechaba Mahlomaholo cultivated the notion of sustainable learning environments (SULE), derived from sustainable development goals which seek to improve humanity by 2030. Mahlomaholo with the SULE team sought to fulfil SDG agenda number 4 and 16 which entails the need for quality education and peace, justice and strong institutions respectively. The view that SULE operated along the SDG goals meant that the group was relevant in using education to address the lived realities of the learners. SULE is premised on values such as collaboration, compassion, critical thinking and creativity which open avenues that create sustainable solutions for humanity.<sup>8</sup> To those who knew Sechaba, the values forementioned were part of his professional and private life to ensure a vibrant scholarly or convivial community that is positioned to contribute positive change. In addition, SULE as a theoretical lens, involves an active approach by societies to enhance and protect human dignity, equality and freedom for all of a country’s citizens.<sup>9</sup> The foregoing argument resonates with number 16 SDG, where education should not only be about literacy but contributing to a just society where all learners are equally represented and accepted despite historical antecedents. While the above seems possible, and doable, there are other actors critical to ensure SULE is a success, hence Mahlomaholo argued that it,

*“...starts from providing an enabling educational legislative and policy context, through the provision of adequate and conducive infrastructure, the necessary teaching and learning resources, the improvement of teacher competencies to discharge their duties effectively, the involvement of parent communities and the creation of learner-centered holding environments where [students]’ community cultural wealth is valued and validated.”*<sup>10</sup>

Thus for SULE to succeed, policy issues should be supportive, responsive and accommodating to ensure all learners benefit from the teaching and learning process. Through theorising studies within SULE thinking, there was a possibility that “identities of students, academics and stakeholders in education are created and restructured accordingly across disciplines towards borderless curriculum where various nations learn from one another to improve humanity.”<sup>11</sup> The following section covers the discussion on the Sechabaism scholarship of Humanity.

<sup>7</sup> Sechaba Mahlomaholo, “Critical Emancipatory Research and Academic Identity,” *Africa Education Review* 6, no. 2 (October 2009): 224–37, 235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146620903274555>.

<sup>8</sup> Makeremese Rosy Mahlomaholo and Sechaba Geoffrey Mahlomaholo, “Assessment in Sustainable Remote Teaching and Learning Environments During Emergency Situations,” *Journal of Culture and Values in Education* 5, no. 2 (June 9, 2022): 16–31, <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2022.17>.

<sup>9</sup> Sechaba Mahlomaholo, Milton Nkoane, and John Ambrosio, “Sustainable Learning Environments and Social Justice Comment,” *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 9, no. 3 (2013): V–XIII.

<sup>10</sup> Mahlomaholo, “Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth,” 430.

<sup>11</sup> Bekithemba Dube et al., “Creating Sustainable Learning Environments in the Era of the Posthuman: Towards Borderless Curriculum,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research* 5, no. 1 (2023): i–x.

### **Sechabaism Scholarship of Humanity: A synthesis of life and work of Sechaba Mahlomaholo.**

This section consolidates various aspects of Sechaba Mahlomaholo intending of proposing Sechabaism scholarship of humanity as an ideal approach to educate and supervise masters and PhD students towards transformation, equity and democracy through education. The proposed theorisation is not an end in itself. There is hope that other scholars will expand the conceptualisation of his life and work to reflect the true essence of Sechaba Mahlomaholo's scholarship, impact and contribution to African scholarship. Thus the following sections summarise the ideas of Sechaba Mahlomaholo and how they manifested in his scholarship of humanity.

#### ***Need for civic research***

Civic research as used in this paper refers to the research that goes beyond publication and the university library. It value human beings involved in the entire research process. Sechaba saw research as an act of not only enriching one's life but also contributing to changing the lives of the people who are involved in research. To him, people involved in research are equally important in the research process to ignite the best ways of living. Through his engagement with postgraduate students, he preferred to refer to the participants as co-researchers, a status which does not reduce people as subjects of research but, very key stakeholders in the research process. This was largely because he operated within the transformative paradigm that seeks to diffuse power dynamics. To show appreciation and respect for the co-researchers, every year on the eve of the graduation of the Masters and PhD students, there was a celebration which included co-researchers and researchers and allowed parties involved to reflect on the academic journey. The pre-graduation celebration was critical to instil a new mentality that co-researchers, although not formally degreed by the university were very critical players in the development of scholarship. Hence, their intellectual property ought to be recognised, appreciated and celebrated together with the graduates. This contrasted with the common tradition that participants are only important as far as 'telling the researchers information' but have contributed to knowledge production. The co-researchers were either by design or default to enrol for further studies since research was demystified and encouraged. In addition, this allowed the co-researchers to understand how their intellectual property was being used and for what purposes. This was important according to Sechaba since it made the co-researchers trust the university system concerning the data they have contributed.

#### ***Social Justice Education***

One of the critical elements of the Sechabaism scholarship of humanity is the view that education is a vehicle to support social justice. Thus, through his supervisory role, he located or theorised his work within the Critical Emancipation Research, a theory which advocated for various issues. A One of such issues is social justice. To him, social justice encouraged sustainability for respect for the environment and its use such that subsequent generations can still be able to derive optimum benefits from it.<sup>12</sup>In addition, social justice to Sechaba, "concerned quality in the distribution of an education service, and it also concerns the nature of the service itself and the consequences for society through time."<sup>13</sup> To demonstrate his passion for social justice, he was worried about the rural learners who often were disadvantaged by policy compared to the learners in cities. He argued that "rural education policy and curriculum practice should take rurality as their point of departure and continue to validate the community cultural wealth thereof because of its own experiences, fears and aspirations just like its urban counterpart."<sup>14</sup> Premised on the foregoing, he argued that the schooling system and policies should be critiqued to allow a positive climate among the

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<sup>12</sup> Mahlomaholo, Nkoane, and Ambrosio, "Sustainable Learning Environments and Social Justice Comment," viii.

<sup>13</sup> Raewyn Connell, "Just Education," *Journal of Education Policy* 27, no. 5 (2012): 681–83, 681.

<sup>14</sup> Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth," 102.

learners regardless of their background. To shed light on the need for social justice within the schooling system, Mncube and Harber, note that some teachers are domineering and authoritarian rather than democratic, thereby creating tense school relations that have the potential to escalate into school violence.<sup>15</sup> Thus, social justice when cultivated with the curriculum space, has an impetus to promote quality education and safe schools which contributes to the attainment of the SDG. As Traitler contends, social justice has the potential to encourage a move toward equality, and to foster the initiative of peace-building and shared lives.<sup>16</sup> Nkoane sums very well Sechaba's philosophy on social justice, which was "opposed to any classroom practices that undermine the rights of learners and allow a focus on the critical pedagogy principles such as dialogue and dialectic voice."<sup>17</sup> In short, the Sechaba Scholarship of Humanism has many concepts, relevant among them is social justice which addresses the lived realities of the African people. Through the love and the need for a just society, Sechaba saw social justice as engendering feelings of hope and confidence and igniting a sense that the world would become a better place through knowledge and practice.<sup>18</sup>

### **Positive Change Research**

One of the things that stood out from Sechaba Mahlomaholo is that research should bring positive change to people's lives. To him, research was not supposed to be a collection of information that is stored in libraries but should benefit the community to ensure that there is positive change. Cognisant of this, he was an advocate for the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which of course other colleagues felt was not a enough approach to research, and that led to the eradication of the SULE group after his departure to the Walter Sisulu University. At this point, it is worth noting that although Sechaba embodied humanity that attracted many people to him, some did not appreciate him and did everything possible to eradicate his work. In fact, while he was at one of the University in South Africa, some colleagues were not courageous enough to engage him in his approach to research, thus, with his departure, there was an opportunity to destroy the SULE movement and eliminate its assumed 'disciples'. However, regardless of the movement being dormant at that University, colleagues reunited in different ways to ensure the movement started by Sechaba outlived its enemies. It certainly emerged that SULE as a movement was not just about Sechaba Mahlomaholo but a spirit of resistance to neo-liberal universities where few benefitted and people of colour were relegated to the peripheral. Through my engagement with him, I would hear the words of Benjamin Burombo saying, each time I want to fight for African rights, I use one hand because the other one is busy trying to keep away Africans who are fighting me."<sup>19</sup> Due to his stance of positive change, he always laughed when I told him that the movement was under threat but he chose peace and assured me that the deposit he had made in us was enough to take the movement further. He succeeded in depositing much potential in many because he believed in consultation with everyone around him which was enough to contribute to significant change. In agreement with the foregoing, Duden, et al (2023) argued that research to provide positive change, consultation, and participation are essential as they provide Indigenous peoples with space to define their own goals, outcomes, and perspectives on matters that impact them (p.13). As a way to ensure that research contributes to positive change, Sechaba argued that a PhD graduate should thus learn to be sensitive to discrimination of any kind and his/her role should be to use his superior learning to address and resolve that in favour of, for example, aspects such as the equitable distribution of resources, learning and employment opportunities.<sup>20</sup> It was evident through him that

<sup>15</sup> Vusi Mncube and Clive Harber, *The Dynamics of Violence in South African Schools: Report* (University of South Africa, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Reinhild Traitler, "Mission on the Move for Justice and Peace.," *International Review of Mission* 104, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Milton Nkoane, "Critical Liberatory Inclusive Pedagogy: Arguing for a Zero-Defect Discourse," *Acta Academica* 43, no. 4 (2011): 113-114.

<sup>18</sup> Mahlomaholo, "On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments," 383.

<sup>19</sup> Tales of Africa, "Benjamin Burombo," 2021,

[https://web.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=834716240537080&id=244720436203333&set=a.279652436043466&\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=834716240537080&id=244720436203333&set=a.279652436043466&_rdc=1&_rdr).

<sup>20</sup> Mahlomaholo, "On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments," 383-384.

a PhD was just a desired qualification but there was more expected from the graduates which is the contribution to positive change.

### **Respectful research**

To reconfigure research in Global South, Sechaba Mahlomaholo approach was respect for all academics and postgraduate students. That is, he believed that research should be respectful to all involved in the process. Respectful research as embodied in the personhood of Sechaba was centred around the notion of demystifying power dynamics which have always controlled the relationship between the student and the supervisor and also between a manager and the subordinate. Through embracing the demystification of power, he was able to build a research movement that aimed at improving human conditions. In addition, this approach enabled “trust between participant and researcher to be (pre-)established through having a mutual connection as a community leader, a friend, a colleague or a family member.”<sup>21</sup> This mutual engagement, as he always argued should result in improved scholarship that values humanity. To illustrate this further, his ideology of respectful research was anchored in that,

“the learning environment should thus enable the graduate to strive towards just and respectful relationships. It is also our understanding that a sustainable postgraduate learning environment enabling PhD graduates to function in the manner described above will contribute towards the enhancement of the notion of freedom for all, as well as protecting our democracy, which will be free of strife and full of peaceful coexistence.”<sup>22</sup>

With the preceding argument, Sechaba Mahlomaholo was against “harmful, disrespectful, and abusive research practices involved, and still involved parachuting research, i.e., research that lacks reciprocity and accountability with researchers going “in the field”, collecting their data, and immediately leaving without giving anything in return (Tobias et al., 2013). Respectful research eliminates fear, anxiety and discouragement among early researchers and postgraduate students as they enter a new terrain of research which often has various liminalities that often derail efforts to push the scholarship agenda. In short, through Sechaba Mahlomaholo’s work, it emerged that it is possible to cultivate trust and respect towards postgraduate students and academics to improve human conditions.”<sup>23</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I looked at the life and the work of Sechaba Mahlomaholo. The main aim of this paper is to encourage African scholars to write down stories and works of people who will save as theories or conceptual frameworks to shape the academic space. Sechaba Mahlomaholo is one of the great scholars who emerged from post-colonial South Africa to shape academic discourses. His contribution which lasted for more than 44 years, does not only want us to talk about celebrating his life but also write down his work in a systematic manner so that future scholars can refer to and develop his ideas to make Africa a better place. In this paper, I coined a new term, which is the Sechabaism Scholarship of Humanity which I argued was an embodiment of Professor Sechaba Mahlomaholo. Several points or constructs were developed considering his life and work which can serve as a starting point to have a broader understanding of his life and work in South Africa and beyond.

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<sup>21</sup> Gesa Solveig Duden and Daniel Bagheri Sarvestani, “Respectful Research: Working with Indigenous Peoples in Psychological, Anthropological and Cross-Cultural Sciences,” *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 3, no. 1 (December 1, 2023),11. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1186>.

<sup>22</sup> Mahlomaholo, “On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments,” 384.

<sup>23</sup> Duden and Bagheri Sarvestani, “Respectful Research: Working with Indigenous Peoples in Psychological, Anthropological and Cross-Cultural Sciences”; Emmanuel O’Grady, “Research as a Respectful Practice: An Exploration of the Practice of Respect in Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Research in Education* 5, no. 3 (October 27, 2016): 229, <https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.2016.2018>.

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