

# A Study of Rehals Forms in the National Museum Collection

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of using *Rehals* goes beyond its use which includes emotions, spiritual and physical journeys, and youth. In most cultures, *Rehals* are used as a support for religious texts while studying or praying. In addition, *Rehals* symbolize the importance of knowledge and spiritual growth in life. In the tradition of the Islamic community, *Rehals* are not just a tool to place the Qur'an but also as a symbol of respect for the Qur'an in the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. *Rehals* are found in mosques and houses that place values and spiritual education in the Islamic society. However, most *Rehals* have been modified according to the passage of time. The objective of the study is to identify the form of *Rehals*. An in-depth study of *Rehals* is not commonly done, especially about the materials and shapes. Samples of *Rehals* were collected from the National Museum of Kuala Lumpur. This research aims to identify the form of *Rehals* in the year 1957 until 2020. As a result of this study, the findings were obtained from interviews and the researcher's observations. The findings of this study are expected to help researchers and various parties to explore the form of *Rehals* from the point of view of size, height, manufacturing materials and types of carving.

**Keywords:** *Rehal, Form, Wood Carving, Meaning, Influence*

## INTRODUCTION

This research is about the Malay *Rehals* or Qur'an stands based on their characteristics, from the aspect of designs, decorative varieties, aesthetics, functions and philosophies. The *Rehal* is an X-shaped, foldable book rest or lectern that is used for placing holy books during recitation. It is usually made of wood, but it is also increasingly being made of other materials such as plastic, which is commonly used by Muslims. In addition, it is also essentially a small stand used by Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians to hold and ensure respect for religious texts during recitation. The use of *Rehals* will also be studied from the perspective of Muslims and other religions which also use *Rehals* to place their holy books.

According to Zamre et al. (2011), the word *Rehal* is derived from Arabic words. The wooden Qur'an holder, known by various names such as *Rehal*, *Rihal*, *Rahil*, or *Tawla*, has been an integral part of the Islamic scholarly tradition in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. This unique and functional object has served as a crucial tool for students who are reading the Qur'an, facilitating the proper recitation and preservation of the sacred text.

*Rehal* is made of two pieces of board that are crossed crosswise and on the surface of which is placed the holy book of the Qur'an. Traditionally, *Rehals* are made from wood, and assembled by interlocking two similarly sized pieces of wood. *Rehals* can be easily dismantled for storage when not in use. The surface of *Rehals* is usually decorated with Islamic calligraphy, abstract flowers or Arabic motifs. This wood carving art is one of the special creations of Muslims. And because Islam is so closely related to the Malays or is often synonymous with the Malays, it is not an exaggeration to say that in the homes of the Malays there must be at least one *Rehal*. The art of carving on the *Rehals* displays the beauty of various decorative designs and at the same time depicts the height of Muslim civilization from ancient times to the present. Most *Rehals* produced in Malaysia use materials such as wood and plastic. Each *Rehal* has a carved motif. *Rehals* use Arabic calligraphy and various motifs such as geometric and flora motifs including motifs that come from carver's imaginations. Geometric and floral patterns are the main motifs. The art of *Rehal* carving in Malaysia does not use fauna motifs.

This study will examine more in depth about the form of the *Rehals* which were produced starting from 1957 to 2020, and the philosophies behind the form of *Rehals* in social cultural context. This study is expected to provide additional information to researchers, museums and individuals who are interested in *Rehal designs*, especially related to the motifs, the influence of its manufacturing and the meaning behind the motifs.

According to Shahanamahdi77 (2021), people living in India, South Asia and the Middle East have respected their literature and sacred books such as the Ramayana, Gita (Hindu), Japji Sahib (Sikh) and the Qur'an (Muslim) by reading them on a book stand that can be passed down from generation to generation. This way is one of the basic manners of reading a book. This book stand or *Rehal* was created to facilitate reading and respecting the sacred text while sitting cross-legged. Shahanamahdi77 (2021), also cited, in Sanskrit or Hindi, the collapsible bookend is called Pustak Pithika. In Arabic, it is called Manzarah, while in Urdu it is known as *Rehal*. In English, it is called a book stand or lectern. In the Islamic world, this simple place to put the Qur'an is known by different names, such as *Rehal* or Qur'an stand in the Indian subcontinent, Kursi in some regions of the Middle East, Miz in Azerbaijan, Laukh in Central Asia and Marufaa in Swahili. *Rehals* have a special significance in the Islamic culture because they are not only used as a tool for reading and memorizing the Qur'an, but also represent a deep respect for the purity of the Qur'an and signify the relationship between the reader and God.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Form of *Rehal*

Tenas Effendy (2011) stated that by explaining the shape of the *Rehal* when it is closed, the *Rehal* looks like a sheet of board. But when it is opened, it looks like the letter "X". Also, from the intersection upwards it is called "Badan *Rehal*", and the intersection is called "Pinggang *Rehal*" or "Sendi *Rehal*", the lower part is called "Kaki *Rehal*" or "Injak-injak *Rehal*". When the *Rehal* is opened, the upper or inner side of "Badan *Rehal*" is called "Muka *Rehal*".

Shahanamahdi77 (2021) defined book holders are handmade products designed to simplify the reading process. They support the book while reading and keep it at a comfortable level for the eyes. These versatile tools are used in homes and religious institutions, providing an X-shaped foldable rest for placing books during recitation or reading sessions.

Zamre et al. (2011) stated that the width of the *Rehal* is usually between 120 to 130 degrees when opened, depending on the margin of the Al-Qur'an manuscript. The angle can not only preserve the durability of a copy of the Qur'an, but also help provide comfort to the readers to sit for a long period of time. There is a philosophy stating that the human body part which is the navel is considered impure and not glorifying the Qur'an. This is related to the creation of the *Rehal*, where it comes in line with the idea of maintaining cleanliness and purity when handling religious texts. These guidelines are meant to ensure that the Qur'an is treated with utmost reverence. Typically, *Rehals* are made of wood. Originally, there were two types of *Rehals*, namely interspersed *Rehals* and radial *Rehals*. Interspersed *Rehals* are made of two pieces of board that are cut apart in the middle to form a V-shaped formation. On the other hand, radial *Rehals* are made of a piece of wood that is split at the top and bottom while the radius of the *Rehal* is built to form a V-shaped opening that holds the book. Zamre et al. (2011) also defined, in terms of the number of radii, it is usually in an odd number. It is in accordance with the Malay philosophy that sees an odd number as a good blessing in accordance with the practice of the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. It was also explained that the V shape on the *Rehals*, gives a visual effect as if the text of the Quran is floating while being read. Furthermore, there is an explanation behind the V shape, in which it represents two human palms extending their hands in prayer to God. This adds a symbolic dimension to the object. Ideally, a *Rehal* must have a radial height that is higher than a person's current center level. The person is usually reading, while sitting in a cross-legged position.

Furthermore, Zamre et al. (2011), stated that the "Pinggang *Rehal*" which is considered as "Panca Fari" or "Panca Sendi", can be interpreted as a center of strength or balance. This is in response to the knowledge, grace, gift of *Taufik*, and guidance revealed by God. The analogical use of "Panca Fari" or "Panca Sendi" on "Pinggang *Rehal*" gives a strong impression of the importance of balance, harmony, and strength towards religious knowledge. The height of the *Rehal* must have a radial height that is higher than the center level when someone reads it.

Xiao and Hwee (2022), cited the *Rehal* as an X-shaped book stand that can be collapsed into a flat form. It is used to hold sacred texts during recitation by keeping them elevated off the floor. There are various types of *Rehals* in the market today, which are mainly made of wood, plastic, and metal. Xiao and Hwee (2022), also cited that commercial *Rehals* have a height that ranges from 200 to 250 millimeters.

### The Motif of *Rehal*

Tenas Effendy (2011) mentioned, the use of plant motifs, especially flowers, leaves, and roots, on *Rehal* decorations reflects the values of honesty, purity, diligence, and peace. It is a choice that is full of

symbolism and meaning. Calligraphy motifs are taken from the verses of the Qur'an which help enrich and deepen Islamic values in the *Rehal* decoration. Al-Qur'an calligraphy, or the art of writing beautiful verses, is not only a form of visual art, but is also a form of faith, piety, and respect for God's words. Motifs of nature objects, such as stars, full or crescent moons, help to add elements of beauty and deeper meaning to the *Rehal* decorations. The use of these motifs reflects a deep understanding of the relationship between nature, science, and spirituality in a religious context.

## The symbolic meaning of the form of Rehal

These book stands, known as *Rehals*, are not only practical tools for reading and reciting these sacred texts, but they also hold deep symbolic meaning within cultural contexts. The use of the *Rehals* as a symbol of spirituality, knowledge, and artistic expression is not limited to any specific culture or religion. It transcends boundaries and is embraced by diverse societies that value the connection between spirituality and literature.

According to Kamus Dewan 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (2005), a *Rehal* is defined as a small bench used to hold the Quran for reading. Each part of the *Rehal* has its own meaning. Tenas Effendy (2011), stated that the description of the "Muka Rehal" facing the sky as a symbol of the "Muka Yang Tengadah" or "Tangan Yang Tengadah" that prays for God's mercy. *Taufiq* and guidance, gives a deep spiritual and symbolic dimension to the object. The analogical use of "Panca Fari" or "Panca Sendi" on "Pinggang Rehal" gives a strong impression of the importance of balance, harmony, and strength in facing religious knowledge.

It was advised to keep the width of the "*Rehal Face*" opening not too narrow or too wide. This shows wisdom and a deep understanding of the symbolism and meaning of the religious object. In this context, the width can be considered as a symbol for the blessings, knowledge, and grace that come down through the recitation of the Qur'an. "Sendi Rehal" which consists of five fingers is connected to the "Five Pillars of Islam", which consists of Shahadah (testimony), Salat (prayer), Zakat (obligatory payment), Ramadan (fasting), and Hajj (payment of Hajj if able). This connection can be seen as a symbol of the integration between the acts of worship and the Al-Qur'an as a reading tool. The concept of "Kaki Rehal" which has a "door" with the shape of an arched gate. This portrays a beautiful and symbolic picture of knowledge in a religious context. A large door called the "Door of Knowledge" and a small window called the "Tingkap Ilmu" as stated by Tenas Effendy, (2011).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the intricacies of wood carving, a centuries-old art form that has captivated artisans and enthusiasts alike. The researcher collected data through a multifaceted approach, including observations, interviews, video recordings, visual photos during field work, and photographs provided by museums. The data was then subjected to a thematic analysis, comparing the responses of participants to identify similarities and differences in their perspectives, thereby ensuring the validity of the research (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

To provide a robust understanding of the topic, the researcher consulted an expert on wood carving as a reference. The data collection was divided into two parts: primary data, obtained through interviews and observations of the collection of *Rehals*, and secondary data, gathered from various sources such as books, journals, websites, photographs, and articles. This study involves four *Rehal* samples taken from the Kuala Lumpur National Museum. Data analyzed through the process of observation and interviews

from two experts in making *Rehals* and wood carving. This study adopts Zakaria Ali's theory, which focuses on the concept of Malay aesthetics through five key formulations (Zakaria, 2006).

### **Primary Data**

The primary data involved with collecting new information, especially towards the objective of the findings. The research method included an interview and an observation in obtaining data or research findings.

### **Interview**

The interview is one of the main methods of collecting information. Shedlock (2024) cited that researchers interact with participants through open-ended dialogues to obtain comprehensive insights into their experiences, opinions, and perspectives. These interviews may be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, providing a flexible framework for data collection. According to Chua (2006), interviews can be categorized into three types, namely structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews. A structured interview is an interview conducted formally, thoughtfully planned and implemented in accordance with a list of questions that needs to be answered by respondents. This method was used by the researcher to carry out the study. The interview was held via video and audio recording. The answers from the respondents were compared based on similarities and differences of their gathered opinions as for validity to this research.

### **Observation**

The observation method is an important technique of data collection in the studies of the motifs and categorizes the motifs of the *Rehal* designs. Observation is a systematic data collection approach. The researcher also recorded and captured photos to examine the motifs and the uniqueness of the *Rehal* designs. Apart from the pictures provided by the museum, artisans, local mosques, antique collectors, and personal collections, the researcher also took pictures from the museum collection that was on display.

## **FINDINGS**


The results of the study were reported and presented in the form of tables. In addition, the findings were discussed to explore the answers for the research questions. The primary data was from the collection of museums. The research objective which was to identify the form of *Rehal* in the year 1957 until 2020 was answered. Figure 1 until Figure 4 showcased the collection of *Rehals* from the National Museum.

### **Rehal collection from the National Museum**

#### **V-Shaped Rehal**

This *Rehal* is V-shaped. The material is different from the normal *Rehal* because it is made of bamboo. The bamboo is nailed and woven. The height of the *Rehal* is also below the center level when a person reads with cross-legged or side seating. This *Rehal* does not have a radius. The bamboo halves are cut to size and woven alternately to allow the *Rehal* to open with a radius.

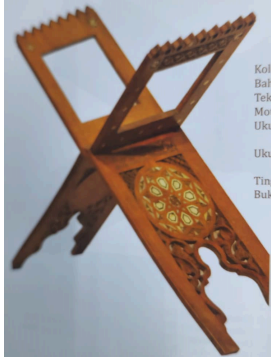
**Table 1. V-Shaped Rehal**

No	Rehal	Description
1	 <p data-bbox="451 730 779 793"><b>Figure 1. V-Shaped Rehal</b> (Source: Katalog Rehal, 2011)</p>	<p data-bbox="971 430 1380 766">Year: unknown                      Collection: Jabatan Muzium Negara                      Material: Bamboo                      Type of form: V Shape                      Type of carve: -                      Design:                      Size                      Open size: Tread length 22cm x Tread Width 13cm x Height 18cm                      Radial height: -                      Surface: 110°</p>


### X- Shaped Rehal

This *Rehal* is X-shaped. The *Rehal* opening is smaller than the usual 90-degree. The height when opened is also 34 centimeters compared to the normal *Rehal* which is 20 centimeters high. This *Rehal* has a radius.

**Table 2. X- Shaped Rehal**

No	Rehal	Description
2	 <p data-bbox="451 1560 779 1623"><b>Figure 2. X- Shaped Rehal</b> (Source: Katalog Rehal, 2011)</p>	<p data-bbox="971 1165 1429 1585">Year: unknown                      Owner:                      Collection: Jabatan Muzium Negara                      Material: Wood, Oyster Shell                      Type of form: X shaped                      Type of carve: <i>Tebuk Tembus Bersilat</i>                      Design: Islamic Geometry                      Size                      Close size: Height 79cm x Width 25.5cm x Thickness 3cm                      Open size: Tread length 70cm x Tread Width 25.5cm x Height 55cm                      Radial height: 34cm                      Surface: 90°</p>

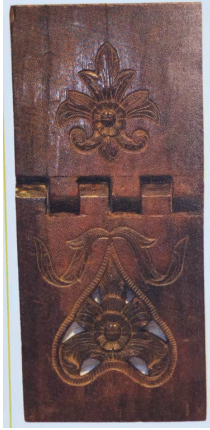
**Table 3. X-Shaped Rehal**

No	Rehal	Description
3	 <p data-bbox="451 737 776 800"><b>Figure 3. X- Shaped Rehal</b> (Source: Katalog Rehal, 2011)</p>	<p data-bbox="967 432 1409 856">Year: unknown                      Owner:                      Collection: Jabatan Muzium Negara                      Material: Wood, Oyster Shell                      Type of form: X Shaped                      Type of carve:                      Design:                      Size                      Close size: Height 49cm x Width 20cm x Thickness 3.5cm                      Open size: Tread length 50cm x Tread Width 20cm x Height 29cm                      Radial height: 19.5cm                      Surface: 110°</p>

**Description**

This is an X-shaped *Rehal*. It can be opened at an angle of 110 degrees. When opened, it is 29 centimeters which is the normal size of a *Rehal*. This *Rehal* has a radius.

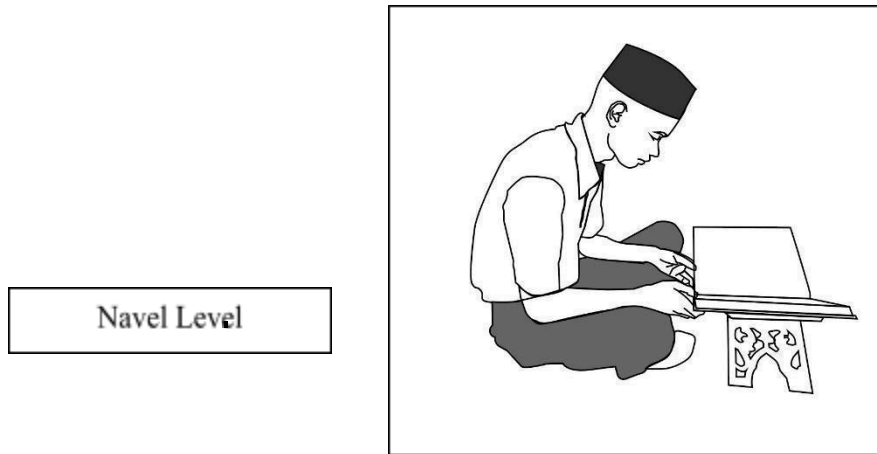
**Table 4. X- Shaped Rehal**

No	Rehal	Description
4	 <p data-bbox="373 1698 854 1761"><b>Figure 3. X- Shaped Rehal</b> (Source: Katalog Rehal, Zamree et. al.,2011)</p>	<p data-bbox="967 1230 1425 1688">Year: unknown                      Owner:                      Collection: Jabatan Muzium Negara                      Material: Cengal                      Type of form: X Shaped                      Type of carving: Tebuk Tembus Bersilat &amp; Tebuk Timbul Bersilat                      Design: Bunga Cina                      Size                      Close size: Height 45cm x Width 20.5cm x Thickness 2.5cm                      Open size: Tread length 43.5cm x Tread Width 20.5cm x Height 23cm                      Radial height: 13.5cm                      Surface: 120°</p>

**Description**

This *Rehal* is X-shaped. It can be opened at an angle of 120 degrees. The height when opened is 23 centimeters high. This *Rehal* has a radius. The height of this *Rehal* is a bit lower because of the size.

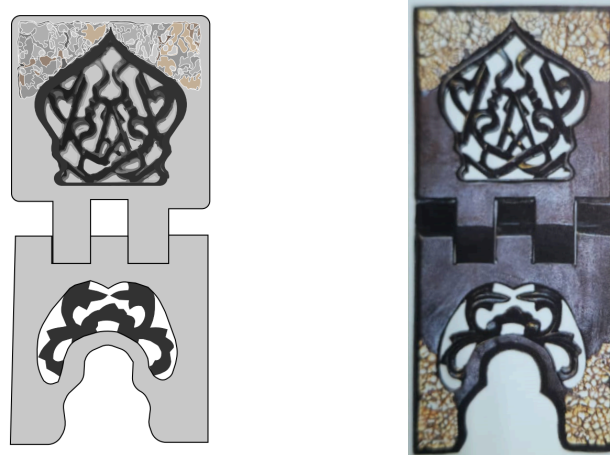




**Figure 5. Appropriate level to read Al-Qur'an**  
(Source: Nor Amizah Abd Jamil, 2024)



**Figure 6. X shaped Front View**  
(Source: Katalog Rehal, Zamree et. al.,2011)



**Figure 7. X Shaped Close View**  
(Source: Katalog Rehal, Zamree et. al.,2011)



**Figure 8. Table-shaped Front Perspective View**  
*(Source: Ubudiah Mosque)*



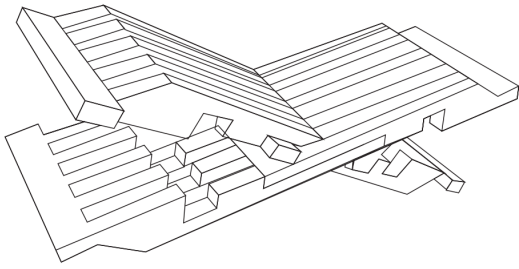
**Figure 9. Table Shaped Rear Elevation**



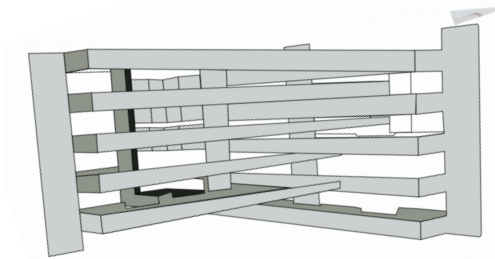
**Figure 10. Table Shaped Side Elevation**  
*(Source: Ubudiah Mosque)*



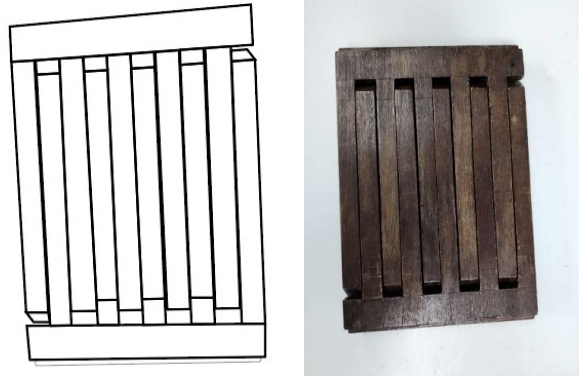
**Figure 11. Table-shaped Top View**  
(Source: *Ubudiah Mosque*)



**Figure 12. Laukh shaped Front Perspective View**  
(Source: *Terengganu State Museum*)



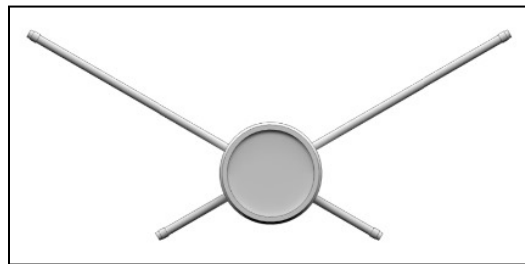
**Figure 13. Laukh Shaped Top View**  
(Source: *Terengganu State Museum*)



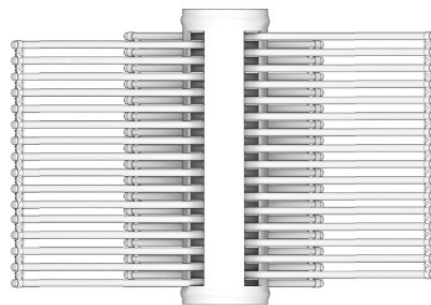
**Figure 14. Laukh Shaped Close View**  
(Source: Terengganu State Museum)



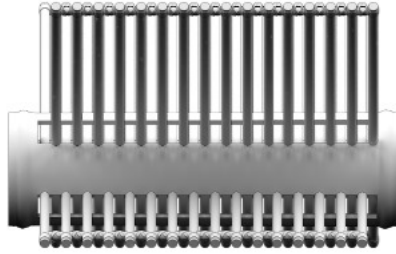
**Figure 15. V-Shaped Rehal**  
(Source: Katalog Rehal, National Museum, 2011)



**Figure 16. V-Shaped Front View**



**Figure 17. V-Shaped Top View**



**Figure 18. V-Shape Side View**

**Table 1. Form of the Rehal**

No.	Rehal	Form of Rehal				
		X Shaped	Table Shaped	<i>Laukh</i> Shaped	Radial	Non-Radial
	The National Museum					
1	Figure 1	/	-	-	-	/
2	Figure 2	/	-	-	-	/
3	Figure 3	/	-	-	/	-
4	Figure 4	/	-	-	/	-

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, the majority of the *Rehals* are X shaped. Based on the study, the thickness of each *Rehal* is between 1 centimeter to 3 centimeters. There is a *Rehal* that is 6 centimeters thick. The opening of the *Rehal* is at an angle of 125° to 130°. Based on the National Museum collection, there are 4 types of *Rehals*: 3 X-shaped and 1 V-shaped. There are also *Rehals* in the form of tables and *laukh*-shaped. Each *Rehal* has a different height, the *Rehal* is opened according to the size of the *Rehal*. The materials used are cengal wood, bamboo and oyster shell. There are two types of carving found such as *Tebuk tembus bersilat* and *Tebuk timbul bersilat* while the other two *Rehals* are not carved. The making of *Rehals* is made to the same level of a person's navel because it is meant to show the position of the Al-Qur'an as a holy book.

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