

Sense of Place and National Identity in Late–nineteenth Century Italian Navy Travel Writing

Fabiana Dimpflmeier

(University of Rome La Sapienza – La Tuscia University)¹

ABSTRACT

Reunified in 1861, Italy appeared on the international scene almost ready to rush into the scramble for the last outposts of the world not yet explored or conquered by other nations. Along the path that constructed her colonial *discourse*, considered as the totality of practices and representations supporting the birth and affirmation of Italian colonialism, particularly interesting are some diaries and travel notes written by Navy mariners, busy in oceanic campaigns and circumnavigations in the twenty years preceding the first African settlement. Indeed, these texts show us the dialectical intercourse between the marvel of new encounters and its domestication through the memory of personal and socio-cultural experiences, and, in particular, how the Italian mental attitude on men and lands of the time was influenced by an introspective and affective projection bound to preexisting visions of territory and agriculture. Moreover, the comparison of specific senses of places with the yet to be defined space and the men who inhabit it partakes to the process of selection and emphasis of the Italian national traits, delineating a sense of place of the entire Italian Nation.

Keywords: maritime sociology; travel writing; representation of otherness; identity construction; sense of place; environment.

1. Between marvel and domestication

Whoever has never left for distant shores
cannot understand the emotion of that sweetly sad
day, nor the strong pang you feel when you separate
from the beloved homeland. With steaming Vesuvius
last to disappear on the horizon, muttering a soft
goodbye, perhaps even a goodbye forever, it seemed to
me I was being ripped from my holiest affections of
family, friends, native soil
(Petella 1889: 59)²

During the first three decades following the Italian re–Unification, the Italian Royal Navy gradually began to strengthen its fleet and armaments: a movement that gained progressive importance in the process of nation building, intertwining with Italian colonialist ambitions. In those years the phenomenon of navalism began, although with initial ups and downs; a phenomenon defined by Giancarlo Monina as the “cultural and political movement that elaborated and propagated the myth of the *Grande Italia Marittima* [the Great Maritime Italy], as a key of interpretation, and as a model of representation, of the international role of Italy in function of a power policy” (Monina 2008: VIII). What was being created in Italy was a particular *sea mystic*: a strongly emotional mytho–symbolic corpus of ideas that would at first silently support the strengthening of the Navy, and then speed the country with swelling sails towards its *maritime destiny*. A passage that left behind a possible conception of the sea as a mirror of exchanges and intercultural dialogue, to make way for a new representation

¹ fabiana.dimpflmeier@uniroma1.it; fabianadimpflmeier@gmail.com

² All the quotes in the text, originally in Italian, have been translated into English by the author.

of geopolitics that led inevitably to a *boundarisation* and *territorialisation* of marine areas conceived as symbolic places of the assertion of identity.

At the base of this new vision there was a more general change in the approach to the fluid element. Started a few centuries before and in close connection with the development of European modernity itself, this vision became part of the Italian bourgeois pedagogy, literary universe, and journalism during the Liberal period (Corbin 1988; Mollat du Jourdin 1993; cfr. Cipolla 1983). In fact, although the peninsula could boast a privileged relationship with the sea due to its glorious past linked to the Maritime Republics, in the centuries after their hegemony Italy locked herself up, despite the extension of her coastline, in a protective and distrustful attitude that caused a maritime vacuum (Frascani 2008; Malatesta 2001).

It was only during the last third of the nineteenth century, not surprisingly in correspondence with the formation of navalism, that a new collective perception of the sea emerged in Italy with greater force, which was able to change the system of social and cultural references within which the languages of the nation were defined, starting from the educated classes and handed downwards in more or less conscious forms to the other levels of society (Monina 2008: 59).

In this process of renewed socialization of marine areas, the discovery of the ocean also played a role in the construction of the Italian identity. Considering that from 1866 to 1890 the Italian Navy effected eleven circumnavigations of the globe and twenty one oceanic campaigns, it is interesting to learn that the role played by these journeys, besides being commercial and expansionist, was mainly representative. During these voyages, Italian naval officers had the chance to come into contact directly, and for the first time, with the most diverse populations: from the Japanese to the Chinese, from the aborigines of Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia to the inhabitants of Papua–New Guinea³.

In a socio-anthropological maritime perspective that conceives ocean universes as stages of social exchanges and reciprocal influence, these encounters appear to be interesting social spaces where the structure of a discourse on Italian identity could be created (Dimpflmeier 2015). Mariners travel notes and diaries tell stories of curious, surprised, sometimes scared, sometimes teased views of people and their lands, showing us the dialectical intercourse between the marvel of new encounters and its domestication through the memory of personal and socio-cultural experiences. Indeed, most of the literature concerning the new cultural encounters – instead of exploring the particulars of the ‘Other’ – has a tendency to reaffirm ethnocentric perceptions; instead of picturing the space outside of Western ‘civilization’ in an objective manner, it simply codifies and preserves its own mental structures (Janmohamed 1985).

Furthermore, the Italian mental attitude in these new cultural encounters is influenced by an introspective and affective projection bound to preexisting visions of territory and agriculture. In actual fact, by reading the diaries and notes of the mariners we can establish an understanding of how Italians formed a picture of others and their home; how Italians encounter places, perceive them, and endow them with significance comparing habitats and habits with those found in their homeland, in a continuous dialectical process between intimacy and extraneousness, assimilation and exclusion/estrangement. Finally, we can investigate how diverse Italian senses of places helped building the sense of the Italian Nation and her potential colonialist projections.

³ This article refers for contents and theoretical assumptions to my PhD dissertation, in progress of publication (see also Dimpflmeier 2013b, 2015).

2. Dreadful nature and bestiality

First stop of our journey is the Magellan Strait in the extreme Southern point off the coast of Latin America. The first navigations of this body of water foregrounds the grandeur of nature. According to Navy doctor Giovanni Petella,

“only a brush could portray the picturesque succession of high mountains glistening with eternal snows, such as the solitary Mount Burney or the chains of mountains like the Cordillera Sarmiento; of bare rocks, steep inclines or cut in sheer precipices, bizarre in a thousand forms; of quiet coves, terse as a mirror and populated by strange birds [...]; of Antarctic beech woods, dense and impenetrable, which run down to the sea, to depict real walls of plants; of high and beautiful waterfalls that seem from the distance silver columns set against a green carpet; and of glaciers in shades of pale blue, which descend majestically from the peaks to the sea filling valleys of tortuous paths, prospecting backgrounds of bays and channels with amazing optical effects, and from which floating blocks of ice detach” (1889: 80)⁴.

Naturalist Enrico H. Giglioli, sailing on the ship *Magenta* from 1865 to 1868, reports that the crossing of those channels was “about 66 miles [...] in the midst of lands of a unique and grandiose appearance that have no equal in any other part of the globe’ and that he ‘could not wait to get into those beautiful galleries of great and singular Nature” (1875: 919). During the sailing, notwithstanding his several geological, natural and zoological annotations, he seems to become speechless attempting to evoke the wild beauty of the landscape: “I would try in vain”, he says, “to convey the impression produced by those grandiose paintings, now rendered gloomy and dark by blackish clouds, now pleasant by sunlight, always majestic beyond words” (1875: 946). Trying to make these images appeal realistic, he resorts to the testimony of Charles Darwin, who “observed very well [...] how] the channels dividing those rocks seem to have no end, as they are almost always wrapped in a gray twilight, [and] seem to lead off the edge of the world” (1875: 946). A striking feeling of grandeur, imposingness, but also uniqueness and estrangement characterizes these places, not comparable to any previously explored or recorded image. When he enters the Messier channel, once again the majesty and unfamiliarity of the landscape is underlined, making him hardly leave the deck, so pleased to contemplate nature from such a new angle (1875: 928).

The environment is unspoiled, pure, wild, and silence reigns perfect in it. Yet “man has pitched here his mansion and the miserable Fuegian, in constant struggle with hunger and cold, sometimes cross the placid waters of the channel in its fragile canoe looking for food” (1875: 929). Italian explorers’ first descriptions depicted Fuegians as naked, dirty and misshapen – smeared with rancid fat, unkempt hair, and brutal features (Dimpflmeier 2013a; 2015a). Giglioli commented that were “perhaps the lowest in respect to the psychical side of all of the natives of America. Indeed, from what I know it is doubtful if they do not compete with Australians and Negritos to occupy the last steps of the human scale” (1875: 948). He sees them as brutes because of their marriage practices, odd superstitions, sale of their own children, and cannibalism: Fuegians appear on the ladder of civilization much closer to animals than men (Puccini 2006).

This approximation to animal was often made to characterize these people as subhuman. In 1877 Giovanni Giorello writes that they were extremely noisy, and sometimes “filled the air with a deafening cry perfectly similar to what you hear from a bevy of seabirds when fleeing on water” (Giorello 1877: 120)⁵. In fact, characterizing

⁴ Petella was boarded on the vessel *Flavio Gioia*, who made its oceanic campaign on the Pacific Coasts of South America between 1883 and 1886.

⁵ First circumnavigation of the Navy vessel *Cristoforo Colombo* (1877–1879).

their voices as frightened birds shows he was comfortable with seeing them as lower life forms.

Petella, reporting about a meeting, tells us that they

“seemed at first enticed by our friendly gestures and clothes, [...] but when a mariner was about to tow the canoe, [...] the three were invaded by such fear, [...] that without saying a word, inflating their cheeks and blowing their lips, they began to row at full speed toward the land, [where] the young Fuegian, with one leap, disappeared into the thick bush, scuttling like certain monkeys” (Petella 1889: 74–75).

What the Italians notice the most about the Fuegians is their nudity and bad smell – the stink of wild animal (‘bestino’) – while they read often “hunger and little substantial nourishment” (Giorello 1877: 120) on their faces. “Gaglietta–tabacco e pantalon” (i.e. ‘biscuits–tobacco–pants’) are the words Fuegians often repeat, taught them by European travelers. Few expressions that reveal the representation of the indigenous made by Western man since the very first encounter, when he interpreted their needs – for food and clothing – projecting himself in their difficult environment.

In particular, is the impressive severity of the climate that made the native nudity seem particularly harsh and highlighted their fragility. Petella makes explicit at best the building of this dichotomy involving the relationship between their lack of clothing and the extreme cold. One evening, already soundly asleep “buried under a triple insulating layer of wool”, he was called on deck “where a wind that cut the face like a razor was blowing”:

“the whole crew and some official of goodwill woke up: barking of dogs, whimpers and monosyllabic human cries were coming from some pirogues: [...] a couple of fragile canoes, pushed by the current and paddled, had [...] approached a few spans from the side, [so that] one could see men, women and children in the cold squalor of their nakedness. [...] That scene of supreme commiseration has remained so vivid in my memory that it still seems to me to hear the monkey-like cries desperately pleading for rescue, the wail of babies and baying of dogs, all pressed one against the other: altogether a scene of saddening effect, yet so alive in the splendor of such a frozen landscape; unforgettable because of its time and place, and for the unexpected impact of people and things” (Petella 1889: 76–77).

Although Petella shows sympathy and pity for these people, he also emphasizes their human brittleness. He depicts an heartbreaking picture that clearly explains that the climate and nature of Tierra del Fuego has an extremely strong effect on the Italians who are used to more temperate climates, and this misery is transferred to their accounts of the Fuegians. “A wind that cut the face like a razor”; “in the cold squalor of their nakedness”; “a scene of saddening effect, yet so alive in the splendor of such a frozen landscape”; and “a state of perfect nudity, that makes me freeze, locked in my overcoat, more than the view of the surrounding snow” (1889: 78) are phrases that accurately represent the sad misery of the so called *savages*, but at the same time imply the sense of superiority the Europeans feel, due to the fact that they have a better system of clothing themselves to meet the harsh and unforgiving elements of nature.

3. ‘Ci era dolce l’essere al Giappone’⁶. Peculiar humanity in delightful nature

Of course one of the reasons these mariners were passing beneath South America in these harsh seas was to reach Japan, particularly prized in

⁶ ‘Sweet was to be in Japan’ (Graffagni 1877: 187).

trade because of the desire for silk and regularly patrolled by Italian ship to supervise the progress of negotiations.

Filippo Santini wrote, when the vessel Garibaldi entered Yokohama in 1881:

“what a superb view that of Fusi-yama, that neither pen nor brush will ever be able to translate, when the sun, either shining red behind the majestic bulk or gilding the superb cone or portraying the fantastic outlines, rich in picturesque shadows and inimitable light and shades, or radiating perpendicularly on the silver of its eternal snow, mirrors itself in a dazzling myriad of divine colors” (1895: 36)!

Mount Fuji, however, doesn't portray such a beautiful and charming picture alone: “laughing plains provide a stool for the personified mountain. Flowered hills give him a crown, most pleasant beaches offer him a mirror, and the entire vista unfolds in a rich panorama, luxuriously packed with so many delights to be materially impossible to describe” (1895: 36). Once again, the writer seems to miss words capable of fully depicting the wonders observed. But a very different relationship is established with the new land: Santini projects immediately over Japan's nature “the beautiful colors of our beloved flag, that overlook the enchanting view of Yokohama, where the dark green of centennial woods and the most kind of delightful meadows intersect here and there the candid white of the snow, while the red of rich camellias stands proud in the entire horizon” (1895: 35).

It is indeed a sense of admiration and familiarity characterizing Japan. According to Luchino Dal Verme, the Setonaikai, the Japanese Inland Sea, resembles the lake of Geneva, but six times longer, surrounded not by the gigantic Alps, but “modest crowns of jagged mountains and by a succession of hills and peaks, [...] studded by a maze of islands and islets” (1882: 302)⁷, while the stretch of land that runs from Yokoska to Yokohama is dotted with places to visit comparable to Versailles or Pompeii, Capri and Sorrento. Kanasawa remembers “a mixture of the Venetian lagoon and the Dutch seascape, framed in tiny Japanese nature which is the prettiest in the world” (1882: 224), the river Yahagni with its very broad bed recalls the Italian Trebbia or Tagliamento, while lake Biwa reminds Luigi Graffagni “the hills, the mountains, the blue skies and calm waters of the lakes [...] of our Italy” (1877: 90–91)⁸. Indeed, visited again a few years later in a sunny day, it became “like oil” into the eyes of Dal Verme, whilst the sky turned into the one of Naples, the green of the soil into the grass of England (1882: 292).

However, mariners admire not only the aesthetic of these landscapes, but even more the intelligence of cultivation and harmonious balance with nature the Japanese people's civilization exemplifies. In fact, regular plantations of tea, fields of wheat and rice, and orchards cared with extraordinary attention come in succession almost everywhere, forming an orderly framework of balance and cultivation. Pastoral images are often recurring. The city of Kobe, leaning on the South part of a verdant hill shows cultivated plains on both sides, where ‘in the midst of the shadow of thick woods and surrounded by country houses, [...] the traveller desires to stop to rest from the troubled and tired life’ (Graffagni 1877: 69). Dal Verme tells that during a walk in the countryside

“occasionally, conveniently placed on the slopes [...] or on the outlet of a minor valley [...], the farmsteads of the Japanese settlers appear, enclosed by bamboos, yews and camellias, shaded by cedars, camphor laurels, pine trees, persimmons, paulownias, and kasci [sic]. I do not know if it was the effect of optimism, and in this case I was not the only one who was effected by it, but it seemed to me that in those pleasant situations, in those delightful

⁷ Vettor Pisani third circumnavigation (1879–1881).

⁸ Navy officer boarded on the Navy vessel Vettor Pisani during the second circumnavigation of the globe (1874–1877).

little cottages, between fields which are gardens and forests that look like parks, the Japanese farmer should be happy" (1882: 226-7).

Japan appears to be inflated by an air of cheerfulness, joy and sympathy that refreshes the mind and makes people happy: "the old woman with the child hanging on the back, the Musume with the pot in her hand, the worker under the weight of a burden, the child with the fluttering kite, all greet each other laughing" (Graffagni 1877: 67).

In such a context, the picture that emerges of the Japanese is certainly very far away from that of the Fuegians. "I challenge", intimates Santini,

"to find even a single European that having once visited Japan did not leave satisfied, in admiration of things and men. Because it is really impossible to meet a kinder, nicer, more intelligent and, in all respects more interesting people than the Japanese, worthy inhabitants of its flowered beaches and its charming hills, where everything has the perfume of poetry, the mark of greatness, the genius of the good and the beautiful" (1882: 27).

The beauty, harmony, symmetry and controlled majesty characterizing Japanese landscape seem to reflect itself in the soul of the inhabitants, that appear the very opposite of savages. These people are "admirable, attractive, let me say, beautiful as their country is the character of the Japanese" (Santini 1882: 69). Exquisite politeness, grace, generosity, cordiality, the most open frankness, the most affectionate hospitality, joy and nobility of feelings, manly pride and civil and military courage, loyalty and self-sacrifice, penetrating intelligence, vivid imagination, thirst for knowledge, ambition, excellence in the arts, sense of national dignity "give the right to this people to call themselves great and to attract universal esteem, affection, and sympathy" (1882: 69).

An early form of cultural relativism seems to take hold in some reports, as to consider their customs "absolutely different from ours" so that comparisons "cannot and must not be established" (Dal Verme 1882: 270). Sometimes, doubts of European superiority arise. Such is the case when Dal Verme, having the knowledge of the Japanese intention to pave the Garden of Prince of Mito, does not hesitate to declare this dreadful desecration of a beautiful garden as evidence that civilization can be synonymous with barbarism. In fact, what "the good people of Japan could not reasonably think about the much-vaunted civilization of Europe, which is going to destroy the most beautiful memories of the so-called barbarous past ages, to save a few thousand dollars, and to get an esplanade more to be filled with guns, wagons, forges and other similar tools of civilization?" (1882: 214).

4. Full and empty. Sense of place, otherness and national identity

Japan and Tierra del Fuego are two extreme cases, but illustrative, of how differently nature is represented in Italian Navy diaries and notes of the second half of the nineteenth century and how these mariners characterized the relation to nature the people inhabiting these areas held to the degree of civilization or even humanity they were thought to possess.

Approaching new lands, the mariners' first impressions evoke a sense of surprise, wonder and admiration, generally shared by the Western society since the seventeenth century. However, marvel is immediately inflected and supported by two opposite feelings: a sense of alienation, particularity (the extraordinary, unusual, exceptional, rare) and non-familiar in the case of the Magellan Strait, and of similarity and somehow reassuring domesticity of Japan.

Resembling *sublime* tropes, in the description of landscapes of extreme South America there is no trace of the feeling of fullness and invigoration provided by nature in contact with her wildest soul, typical of the *wilderness*. What prevails is a sense of silence and emptiness, in which man disappears in nature, dominated by it. The inability of the Fuegian to influence and thwart a grim and powerful environment show how a conception of climatic determinism influences the judgments of Italian mariners, in a period in which race criteria of classification were making their headway. The representation of the native seems to be mainly the result of a paradigm that shares Montesquieu's ideas – i.e. the more the physical causes incline mankind to inaction, the more the moral causes should estrange them from it – mixed with an evolutionistic vision resembling that of Alfred R. Wallace, in which the environment has left its imprint on the development of the races. Therefore, the total inability to fight and provide for the most simple needs, such as food and protection from the cold, alongside their physiognomy, makes the Fuegians comparable to animals, at the opposite end of the scale of civilization. Petella, referring to a sentence of Charles Darwin, does not miss to emphasize how these encounters “convinced him that the gulf between civilized man and the savage is far deeper than the simple difference that exists between an animal in a state of nature and a tamed one” (1889: 79).

Japan, instead, offers an image that recalls some Italian regions (or some other European countries) in her features or cultivation. The adjectives that characterize it fall within pastoral genre and more specifically the idylls, where the possibility of a bountiful present is emphasized. The similarity with the Motherland, the tempered climate (according to a tradition that dates back to the time of Hippocrates of Kos), as well as the implicit comparison with Western society, which is implemented through the use of pastoral tropes, all indicate that Japan is potentially a country adapt to accommodate a people worthy of the highest rungs of civilization. In particular, it is the ability to tame and control nature, transforming it into something useful for humans, whether in landscape design, horticulture, or the kindness and hospitality of the people to mark the true line of distinction, so that as much ‘beastly’ were the Fuegians, ‘enable’ to cope with the environment, as much ‘human’ were the Japanese for their ability to control it. The representations of nature and man gambles on the alternation of full and empty: where there is a full nature (*dominatrix*) there is a man tamed by her, i.e. *sauvage*, but where the man is the master, she cannot but be bent. After all, as Giovanni Lovera di Maria says “even with the most beautiful nature nothing speaks to the heart where the absence of the past deprives history of poetry, where men like plants fall and succeed without their memories surviving” (1873: 166).

The Fuegian and Japanese cases reveal a nature/culture dichotomy that along aside with others (savage/civilized, child/adult, stupid/intelligent, amoral/moral, superstitious/religious, lascivious/temperate, idle/working, thief/honest), helped to define by contrast the Italian identity of the second half of the nineteenth century (Dimpflmeier 2015).

In general, considering that “place, as distinct of space, provides a profound center of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties – so much so it can be described as a multidimensional construct representing beliefs, emotions and behavior commitments (Jorgensen, Stedman 2006: 316) – and is part of complex processes through which individuals and groups define themselves” (Convery, Corsane, Davis 2012: 1), one can state that the Italian sense of specific places guided selectively the mariners' perceptions. The alien space is *cosmosized*, territorialized (reduced to a sense of belonging) and the lands distinguished on the basis of their affective resemblance to the Motherland in a reciprocal analogical identification at the turn of dominance and affection (Tuan 1984).

In this process of *domestication of the wild*, the populations encountered are also described on the basis of the Italian mariners' personal and social experiences of

the environment. In fact, “place is bound up in people’s sources of meaning and experience; people and their environments, places and identities are mutually constructed and constituted” (Convery, Corsane, Davis 2012: 1; Harvey 2001). Thus the more the environment moves away from Italian emotional canons, the more so does the man who inhabits it. The sense of place then falls within a pattern for classifying the encountered populations on a scale ranging from nature to culture, in which nature is *culturalized* and culture is *naturalized*.

Moreover, the comparison of specific senses of places with the yet to be defined space and the men who inhabit it partakes to the process of selection and emphasis of the Italian national traits, helping to delineate also a sense of place of the entire Italian Nation. Looking at others’ landscapes, Italian regional beauties are emphasized through a single national channel of observation, helping cementing a prismatic ‘sense of the Nation’. The Italian Navy oceanic campaigns had a dual political function: internal and external, as the Italian flag was to be seen and respected by other nations and populations, as well as being recognized by the *new* Italians. It is no coincidence that the long maritime campaigns had, as a declared aim, not only to train the crews to the hard life of the sea – to forge their body and mind – but also to mature individuals through the prolonged and forced cohabitation: a rite of passage that led from regionalism to nationalism.

The differential nature of the oceanic Italian border poetic mirrored a process supported in those years by books like Antonio Stoppani’s *Il Bel Paese* (1876) – that would flourish with the appearance in 1914 of the Touring Club series of booklets describing the different Italian regions and with the approval during the Twenties – among other examples – of a series of primary school textbooks highlighting the local cultures (Dimpflmeier 2013c). This process was part of a wider intellectual debate between nationalism and regionalism that involved nineteenth century personalities such as Carlo Cattaneo, Gabriele Rosa, Giovenale Vegezzi Ruscalla and Angelo De Gubernatis and that would have had its highest moment during the Ethnographic Fair organized during the 1911 in Rome by Lamberto Loria to celebrate the fifty years of the Italian Unification – a fair where the habits and customs of the different Italian regions were showed together with a thorough reconstruction of the different regional environments (Puccini 2005).

At this point it is obvious that, if we consider the idea of environment as socially constructed, the different images of nature contained in the Italian mariners diaries and travel notes are part of a corpus of representations that supported the ideological and political system of the time, providing a method to classify human otherness, strengthen identity and justify the dynamics of colonial appropriation.

Regarding colonialism, in the end, it is worth quoting Graffagni writing about Papua New Guinea, a land “there awaiting a hand to be lifted from her wild nature and be carried in the consortium of the civilized countries; there ready to offer immense riches of all kinds” (1877: 158). Whilst similarly, De Amezaga noted that “Yemen in Arabia, the country of Somali and Danakil in Africa, high and low Abyssinia, [...] are] all territories rich in a variety of products. [...] What fabulous production these areas could achieve if inhabited by less lazy people!” (1880: 19).

Without the touch of man, nature didn’t have a per se value: she contained only what could be later transformed into something valuable. Papuans, like Africans, Fuegians, Tahitians and other populations encountered by Italians along their travels let the nature grow wild, condemning themselves to be men of the *silva* or animals. Educating ‘savages’ to the exploitation of the land was then the task looming the Italians: a good reason to plant their flag on far away shores. Eventually, for the natives it was question of getting civilized or disappearing.

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