The Multicultural Library: Staff Competence for Success. A Satellite Conference of the 71st IFLA General Conference and Council 2005. IFLA, Estocolmo (Suecia), 2005.

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Civallero, Edgardo.

Cita: Civallero, Edgardo (Agosto, 2005). The sound library: Sound documents and collections as means of recovering and protecting endangered languages. *The Multicultural Library: Staff Competence for Success. A Satellite Conference of the 71st IFLA General Conference and Council 2005*. IFLA, Estocolmo (Suecia).

Dirección estable: **http://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/101**

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The sound library

Sound documents and collections as means of recovering and protecting endangerred languages

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Abstract

Oral tradition is still a strong mean of communicating information and knowledge, not only among traditional peoples or in rural areas, but also inside urban societies. Oral transmission, besides of perpetuate intangible cultural heritage, compels to the prolix and creative use of the own language. By employing the words of native idioms, a specific culture can be expressed in all its richness.

By this spoken process, illiterate societies –human groups lacking writing systems and therefore, lacking books- try to preserve their cultural store, currently threatened by the pressures of dominant cultures (mass-media, official education and religion, etc.). Sounds allow memory to survive, even under strong influences.

Sound reservoires and documents, collected and managed by libraries, could become powerful tools for the study, preservation and revitalization of languages, specially minority, indigenous and endangered idioms. By using audiovisual technologies, linguistic diversity could be protected and the fulfillment of language and human rights, encouraged and accomplished.

However, the management of oral resources has not been widely developed inside the theoretical frame of Library & Information Sciences (LIS). In fact, a general absence of concepts, techniques, operational tools and methodologies concerning these special sources can be detected in Librarianship. Even if elements coming from History and Sociology are used, there is an important lack of specific work of LIS in this area.

Experiences in the generation of oral libraries in aboriginal communities in Chaco region (northeastern Argentina) provide(d) wide information on important issues related to the work with spoken documents: recording and interviewing, catalogation, transcription, support materials, physical organization, linguistic studies, documental analysis, diffusion and intellectual rights on contents.

General information on these topics is provided in this paper, aiming at initiating, through the examples of such experiences, the development of specific tools, terms, theories and methods for oral documents by LIS.

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The power of writing

To some degree, writing was a step forward for humankind. It emerged almost simultaneously in different parts of the world and allowed for actions, wisdom, and historical moments to be recorded for posterity. Without writing, all this would have disappeared along with the social actors who generated them.

By setting down knowledge on different mediums, the codification of language facilitated an efficient management of information. But, on the other hand, the dominant classes and rulers could now control information by selecting, filtering and distorting it, denying access to it and, definitively, managing it according to their desires and ideologies. In fact, most of the archaeo-historical theories concerning the origin of writing point to political, administrative or religious motives (Wilford, 1999) relegating social, humanistic or artistic reasons to a degree that is almost hidden or inconsequential.

From their beginning, these written codes became a barrier, to which access by the community was an almost insurmountable feat [2]. The written word was owned and used by a minority, which had to undergo long and specialized training for employing it in an accurate and efficient way. Scribes acquired, in Ancient Ages, an immense socio-political importance, as demonstrated by a satirical letter included in the Egyptian papyrus Anastasi I. In this text, the advantages and profits awaiting scribes, who were *superior to any other professional* (Pritchard, 1991 : 50), is openly proclaimed.

Thus, from the beginning of the so called Historical Periods (those where written documents and evidences were produced), the possession of reading and writing skills was a luxury reserved to only a few individuals who were normally linked to the powers of the day and thus granted an excellent social standing. In effect, writers – priests, functionaries, scribes – praised the official gods and rulers (Sumer, Persia, Central America), administrated their resources (Mari, Ninive, Ugarit) or served as their instruments of power or domination (Rome, Greece, Babylon).

The written word had its own power, an existence that was quite independent of the transmitted contents. They had a divine origin (Central America, China, Mesopotamia, Egypt) disseminating the "true messages" and discrediting other possible options (Sacred Books). Written laws had great authority (Hammurabi Code, Mosaic Tables, Roman Twelve Tables) and religious texts sometimes became a sort of passport to the afterlife (Books of the Dead).

This slight analysis suggests that information was (and still is) a synonym of "power", due to its capacity for solving problems and for generating growth and development in a society. It also suggests that writing, aside from perpetuating knowledge, could (and still does) decide who can access this power, who can manage it and who can profit from it...

The first archives and libraries (primary storehouses of the written word) became strategic places, vital points for commerce, politics, international relations, administration and religion of vigorous and expansive states. Due to their important role, their destruction was a primary objective during armed conflicts, as the famous Egyptian and Mesopotamian examples sadly demonstrate [3]. The literature and code of a whole people were razed, and their memory, deleted. Scribes' destinies were not much

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[2] Such barriers have not disappeared, if the current international illiteracy levels are considered, and the problems and divides derived from this situation a re analysed.

[3] Examples may also be found in XX century (Sarajevo Library, Bagdad Library and Museums, etc.)

better: some Mayan frescos from Bonampak (Guatemala) would represent – according to several archaeologists – the capture of a city and the punishments that the conquered suffered. This included the cutting of hands to stop the conquered from recording the grandeur of their past and the memories of their defeated nation.

Writing systems preserved for posterity the achievements of small groups of human beings: their transactions, their letters, their prides and their fears. An important percentage of humankind, however, never had access to these tools. Later labelled as "illiterate peoples", these communities and individuals kept alive their cultural heritage, their past and their daily experiences by using artistic expressions and oral resources. These unstable (but effective) means of transmission based their survival on the accurate employment of voices and memories, which allowed the communication of all their heritage from generation to generation throughout time.

Orality

Through the centuries, oral tradition has been one of the most utilized methods of knowledge transfer. This fragile and complex human miracle is made up of a heterogeneous ensemble of memories and understandings of past events, mixed with present events and hopes for the future (Moss, 1988 : 5-14). It is born and developed in the bosom of a community as a spontaneous expression, aiming at protecting and perpetuating identities, dreams, victories, failures, ethical codes and artistic rules beyond forgetfulness and death. It is intimately related to the group of people who produce it and with their social, intellectual and spiritual dynamics. In fact, it always adapts itself dutifully to community changes and crises.

It is transmitted in a personal, verbal way. This fact allows the strengthening of social links and community structures, the development of socialization and educative processes, the maintenance of spaces of cultural (re)creation and the correct and careful use of the language.

The development of oral tradition is independent of material supports and writing systems. This absence of a material stability endows it with a conflictive variability, which is not free from problems. For due to the simple fact of being transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next, it is slowly changed and transformed. And it is even unconsciously adapted to the necessities of the people, answering to the struggles they face or the cultural pressures they suffer during a certain historical moment.

This vital, dynamic and rich form of informative transmission is not limited to those groups who lack writing systems. It is maintained also within "literate", highly-developed societies, especially in those sectors which have not access to education services or literacy programs. And curiously, all the knowledge which does not find space in the "official" written texts – alternative, non-dominant forms of information – finds refuge in the communal channel of Orality.

Oral niches

Orality allows the transference of a huge volume of knowledge; most of it is the sum of events, personal testimonies and individual or group experiences accumulated over the years. This transmission form has an undeniable importance for the cultural, social and spiritual life of illiterate peoples (especially indigenous and rural / peasant

communities), demonstrating that human voices can become a powerful instrument of information dissemination.

Orality has also an exceptional role within societies where knowledge transmission is strongly based on written documents. Inside these social structures, a number of oral niches can be found where writing is not the rule, but the exception. People verbally keep the details of their daily life, as well as customs and traditions, innumerable and humble representations of the great mosaic of human history (NEHO, 2003).

Orality perpetuates particular narrations and points of view, but this reality can be framed within a larger context. In fact, orality reflects plurality, infinite and different perspectives and an incredible and invaluable diversity. This diversity of opinions and thoughts are usually forgotten or hidden under the cloak of dominant cultures and ideologies.

The survival of these oral niches inside "literate" spaces can be motivated by its popular and egalitarian character. In fact, orality does not require education or training, and so does not create differences or divides. For participating in the universe of spoken words, the only requirement is a basic command of the speaker's own language or dialect.

Orality has become a major vehicle of discourse that opposes the dominant models and paradigms. It represents the "alternative" history; speeches and narratives that complete and equilibrate the "official" image of a nation, a culture or a people. They are preserved in the voices of the protagonists, usually lacking the means and the resources for expressing their ideas on lasting materials.

Probably a high percentage of human information is currently moving through oral circuits. In peasant communities, in *favelas*, in minority or urban "literate" groups, a great number of stories, thoughts and beliefs are circulating through these interesting – and forgotten – ways.

Recovering endangered voices

The origin of libraries is linked to the creation of written texts. These institutions became the first spaces for recorded memory. But they were also spaces for the control of information, resources and identities. Because, as LeGoff explains (1986 : 350), one of the greatest concerns of human beings is to take possession of memories, for their management is one of the subtlest forms of power.

Written texts perpetuated partial points of view. According to Zanni Rosiello (1987), they are the image that power has chosen for being represented in the future. Information centres acted as instruments of this process, or maybe as unconscious accomplices of it.

Those voices which could not occupy a space on the bookshelves disappeared along with their owners: the elderly, women, children, slaves, poets, soldiers, strugglers, rebels, narrators, indigenous peoples, invalids, madmen, sailors and all the defeated, discriminated and excluded people. The list is alarmingly long and goes to show the tiny fraction of human reality that is disseminated through books and written documents. As the old African proverb states... "until the day lions learn to write, hunting stories will glorify the hunters".

The development of sound recording technologies and, later, of audiovisual and digital devices, started a movement, lead by historians, sociologists and anthropologists,

of the recovery of oral traditions. Oral history – a resource employed by Thucydides and Herodotus in Classical Greece – had its revival after World War II. Experiences with anonymous soldiers opened the door to others in different areas and contexts, all around the world (CMH, 2003). Spanish miners, French anarchists, Brazilian *sem-terras*, political dissidents, unionists and *guerrilleros*, participating in contemporary socio-political processes, provided their personal and particular opinions and evalutations...

This spectrum of social actors was extended later with the contribution of linguists and ethnologists (on indigenous communities) and sociologists (minority populations, women, homosexuals, etc.). The recovered contents widely transcend the historical *racconto*: they include art, linguistics, religion, medicine, ecology, philosophy, literature, and every human experience about which a person may talk. The richness inherent in this communicative mean has been deeply undervalued and neglected, maybe due to the great (and uncritical) respect professed to written texts. In this manner, a huge cultural heritage is daily lost. As pointed by murdered Senegal poet and president, Leopoldo Sedar Senghor:

> "White men: go to the villages of my land with your recorders and your cameras, and record the tales of the shamans, the jugglers, the old people, the last custodians of a long human history just entrusted to their voices. When they die, it will be like if for you, for your civilization, all the libraries were burnt" [4]

Orality and endangered languages

The previous paragraphs demonstrate that orality can express, in a complete form, human diversity: the plurality of its voices and sounds, of its languages and vocabularies, and of its ways of expression. For indigenous and/or minority populations, oral tradition represents a last recourse for conserving their identity. Culturally pressed by majority, homogeneous societies, they keep codifying their purest and deepest thoughts and beliefs in their tales and narratives.

Such a way of transmitting knowledge is based in the accurate and yet imaginative use of their languages, which are as traditional, intimate and menaced as their speakers. Most of them run a high risk of disappearing or weakening during the next decade. They are kept alive in the memory of a handful of old people, living books whose descendants refuse to learn the original languages. To these descendants, knowing their ancestors languages represents a motive for being discriminated against. These idioms, made up of unique sounds and words, represent irreplaceable ideas, and tales which express whole visions of the world.

Idiom and cultural heritage are intimately linked: to protect, conserve and diffuse the former will preserve the latter. Together, they support the identity of hundreds of human groups and the diversity of our global society.

Elements like official education or religion and mass-media collaborate in the disappearance of endangered languages. Discrimination, marginalisation, exclusion and racism are phenomena that also induce the oblivion of minority idioms. Currently, there are around 5000 menaced languages in the world

[4] Quoted from an interview in the journal "Gente", oct.1978, nº 84, p.21.

(UNESCO, Red Book). Some of them have their own writing and texts; most of them, however, exclusively survive through oral channels. Therefore, their conservation depends strongly on the use of audiovisual recordings and oral history-like techniques.

These techniques, used in the rescue and recovery oral traditions, have been used, a number of times, by linguists and anthropologists the world over. However, they have been developed at a small scale, for limited contexts, and to fulfil the objectives of specific investigations. And their outcomes (recordings, transcripts texts, videos...) are usually managed in academic spheres. The recovered information rarely reaches the concerned community, and it is often completely useless for their cultural life.

Working together with community institutions and individuals as well as with academic professionals, a community library could develop a valuable system of creation and diffusion of oral documents and materials. This material could then be employed as research data by professionals and would also represent a useful collection and heritage for the community whose oral traditions are being preserved.

Avoiding the issue of the existence of libraries in minority, traditional communities, a main question still arises from this proposal: does librarianship, as a field of study, have the pertinent tools, methods, concepts and instruments for developing such a system?

Libraries and oral tradition

Libraries early incorporated sound recordings into their collections, especially those materials recording chants and music of different peoples. Progressively, other contents were added: sounds and voices reflecting places, personalities and times.

Together with other elements of the collection, they were labeled as “special” or “audiovisual” materials. But libraries did not incorporate oral experiences in its widest expression. Alternative recordings were scarcely found, and endangered languages were included just in a few libraries, specialized in anthropology, history and linguistics.

Nowadays, these kind of materials are mainly held in oral archives (whose description more closely resembles that of a library than an archive) and by the few indigenous libraries in existence in the world.

At this point, two research questions could be considered. First, there is the question of the design and implementation of library models for aboriginal, rural and minority communities, and the use of linguistic and anthropological documents – which have until now only been employed in academic circles – in the education of these groups and of the societies in which they are inserted. The second research question that can be addressed is the generation of LIS concepts, methodologies, work tools and instruments for the management of oral materials (and the texts derived from them). For, without these elements, oral collections become useless resources, stored documents that record memories but do not make them available to the community, the real owners of this knowledge.

In this study, it is the second research question that will be addressed. Problems inherent to this topic will be outlined, as well as several ideas that were

born out of different experiences of creation and management of oral resources as encountered by the author of this paper in indigenous communities from northeastern Argentina ("Aboriginal Libraries" Project, 2002-2005).

Finding problems, looking for solutions

Even if the creation of oral materials is not considered a task concerning libraries and librarians (though it could be included among acquisition policies), activities like transcription, translation, classification and organization deserve a deep analysis by LIS, an analysis that has, up to now, not been carried out. A library is not a simple center for data storing: the work of a documentalist comprises the examination of materials' intellectual content as well as its management, in order to facilitate its subsequent diffusion.

For this reason, the creation of LIS tools for oral documents should have priority in those institutions that collect, preserve and manage oral documents.

The creation of oral documents (including the recollection of oral testimonies) has always been considered a work concerning mainly historians or sociologists, since these documents have often been used in the writing of books. However, there are several examples of books being written by librarians about native communities from southern Chile and Venezuelan Amazonia[5], and with sounds materials in Mauritania. Considering the previous examples, the author initiated a collection of oral resources in *Qom* and *Moqoit* locations[6] in Chaco, Argentina ("Aboriginal Libraries" Project, 2002-2004), incorporating recording and interview techniques used in oral archives. The resulting product, a set of 80 cassettes, recorded approximately 120 hours of indigenous oral traditional history, religion, literature and customs, both in Spanish and *Qom´lek*[7]. The whole community participated in this activity: the elders as narrators, and the young people, recording their speeches. Thus, it was demonstrated that, by respecting basic guidelines, and by doing interdisciplinary work, librarians are able to expand their horizons for the benefit of the library´s final users.

The transcription of these oral records into text is an activity scattered with difficult aspects, which should be carefully considered before the work is started. Some of the endangered languages, being mainly oral, have never been written. Some of them, have been encoded, but using the alphabets (and, therefore, the sound representations) of other (dominant) languages[8]. This fact has been strongly refused by native speakers claiming inaccurate representation. During the previously quoted work, the author did not face such a problem due to the existence of a *Qom´lek* alphabet. But, while working with the *Pit´laxa* people[9] ("Aboriginal Library" Project, 2004-2005), this problem was faced. Curiously, it

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[5] Services in Mapuche communities in southern Chile (Fresia Catrilaf) and in the Amazonian Boat-Library in Venezuela (Milagro Medina de Silva). Works included in a compilation o Latin American Indigenous Communities prepared by Rocío Graniel Parra and edited by the National Univeristy of México in 2001.

[6] Aboriginal nations, with a population of around 60.000 people, inhabiting Chaco province (north-eastern Argentina), known as "Tobas" and "Mocovíes" in Spanish.

[7] A native minority. highly endangered language, spoken by *Qom* and *Moqoit* groups.

[8] In Argentina, the 11 native idioms have been written using Spanish sounds. Five of them have their own alphabet, and three of them are still coded through the International Phonetic Alphabet.

[9] Known, in Spanish, as "Pilagá", they are 30.000 individuals inhabiting Formosa province, north-eastern Argentina.

led to the elaboration of an alphabet, a task carried out by a multicultural group of indigenous representatives, linguists and local teachers. This experience was followed by other aboriginal peoples[10] and represents the only real (external) solution to the question. In other cases, dominant languages and alphabets should be used. Besides this linguistic point, an ensemble of transcription techniques – already developed and tested by oral historians- must be fully respected, in order to achieve pertinent results.

Classification and indexation are extremely complicated activities. Classification codes and thesauri have been built in euro-american countries, from a European perspective, using European concepts and ideas, quite different from aboriginal definitions, perpectives and points of view. Therefore, the creation of local thesauri is necessary. It is not a question of a simple translation of the European concepts, for some native ideas cannot be expressed in western terms without forgoing a great part of their meaning. Moreover, several of the European concepts still conserve traces of racism, colonialism and discrimination (for example, "primitive peoples", "indian", "mixed breed" or "colonial races"). A local system must be built, which considers the basic concepts of documenting languages and the goals accomplished with previous classifications. But also they must reflect the reality and the ideas of the local community, their particular features, the terms that cannot be translated and the main trends of the language.

Such a labor of creation and revision is currently being developed in several Latin American countries; in Brazil, Chile and Peru, experiences analysing indigenous classifications are carried out, and corrections to the main classification tables (UDC, DDC, LCC) are being proposed. The author himself led the community elaboration of an on-line multilingual, multicultural and interdisciplinary Latin American anthropological thesaurus (see: http://www.tesauroantropologico.blogspot.com).

Another classification problem is related to the nature of oral recordings. Each record may contain several testimonies and each testimony can include a good number of subjects, from philosophy and religion to comedy or sex-related tales. How should such materials be classified? During the author´s work, original recordings were re-arranged in new cassettes organized by broad subjects, though the original sesions with each narrator was conserved as an special collection, arranged by their names.

The spacial organization of the oral collection is not exempt of problems. Each sound document (even if re-arranged by broad subject area in a new cassette or CD) has several written counterparts, which should be linked to the sound recording in some coherent way. The author also observed that users of community libraries were very fond of oral documents, but the usual organization "by broad subject" was not understood, even if it was simplified using colour codes. *Qom* people, for example, do not understand the differences between *religion* and *philosophy*, or between *literature* and *music*, but they can distinguish an immense number of categories within the *natural sciences*. They do not recognize *history* or *geography* as concepts that can accurately define their spatial and temporal organization. Thus, new categories were invented, following the ideas of the Native people and the whole collection (including books and images) was appropriately reorganized.

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[10] Today, several books are being edited employing these alphanets. Last example is Saint-Exupery´s "The little prince" using *Qom´lek*.

The preservation of sound (and text) materials is an important subject, which, if left neglected, produces irreparable damages to collections. Aboriginal and rural communities, have been commonly confined in rough geographical regions, with hard climatic conditions (eg, in Chaco and Formosa provinces, libraries must stand 35º - 45º C, 90% humidity and a tremedous variety of insects most of the year). And, generally, minority populations (urban or rural) lack economic resources; this problem leads to the acquisition of cheap materials (acid paper, low-quality cassettes) with little shelf life. A well-defined set of acquisition, management and conservation policies must be built and applied in these cases, in order maximise the lifetime of the materials that can be afforded.

All this work with sound documents is developed in order to fulfil its ultimate goal: the diffusion of the oral contents. The dissemination of the recorded voices represents an invaluable mean for transmitting traditional knowledge, and for securing the survival of the ancient words of endangered languages. The author's "Aboriginal Libraries" Project, originally developed in Chaco province (2002-2005) for three different ethnic groups, extended to two other provinces and five other ethnic groups in 2004-2005. During this time, a broad oral collection, used mainly in schools as educational material, was recorded. The big success following these experiences was unexpected. The targeted communities started recording their stories – despite the scarcity of resources – and a good number of aged people offered themselves as narrators. Children and young people found renewed interest in their culture and were no longer ashamed to speak their native language.

However, dissemination is the major problem in this process: in all cases, oral documents contain a cultural heritage which belongs to a particular society or group or individuals, but their intellectual rights on these recordings are inadequately recognized. On the one hand, the free dissemination of this knowledge through digital and paper mediums assures its survival, and a better understanding between different peoples living within a multicultural society. But, on the other hand, previous experiences of (maybe unconscious) aberrant use of the contents, influenced by dominant ideologies, should be used as a warning against such a free diffusion. An ensemble of policies should be written, defining allowable uses for this information. The policies must be discussed with the community, and should be developed according to their own desires and expectations.

The previous examples demonstrate that there is a precedent, in the field of librarianship, for the development of oral resources. It is the responsability of librarians to recover, preserve and disseminate – as cleanly, neutrally and safely as possible – the memories and the voices of millions human beings. Without this work, all this knowledge is doomed to disappear very rapidly.

Departing sounds, remaining ideas

Ancient (and endangered) Argentinean aboriginal languages, with which the author worked for years, are just a small facet of the immense volume of threatened voices, not only in South America, but throughout the world. The preference for the use of dominant languages has brought about the extinction and sometimes even the scorn of less prevalent (albeit no less valuable) languages. If

they are lost, centuries of accumulated human successes, mistakes, dreams and events will disappear with them.

The use of modern information and communication technologies for the recovery of such a volume of knowledge would allow the safeguard of a real treasure. Libraries (traditional guardians of our memory) have a great responsability in this area. The work should not be simply transfered to other disciplines "more in agreement with the task". Libraries and librarianship must become the last refuge of popular culture, the chest where the most valuable heritage of a people can be kept, to be bequeathed to future generations or shared with other cultural groups. Libraries must assume their role and start working. They already have the experience required and thus the necessary tools for building valid, pertinent, ethical and successful models, methods and instruments.

The work with minority languages opens doors in several ways. First, it rescues endangered cultures. Second, it allows predominant societies to recognize the diversity within them. By recognizing it, they can make use of the necessary elements for approaching, accepting, understanding and appreciating it with all its richness and splendor. And this can be done through the best medium: language and its expressions.

The work with oral documents goes further beyond the labor with endangered idioms and multicultural or minority populations. It allows the collection of the different discourses of a culture, the different opinions of the people. In a plural, democratic and free world – the one we wish, but not the one we inhabit – this is not an option: it is a necessity. And again, libraries have much to do here. They hold in their hands the chance to give support and to disseminate the thousands of words and thoughts that every day, are forgotten.

Extending the vision, the sound recordings should not be limited to oral documents, or to oral fonts employing threatened languages. Other sounds are lost daily: chants, music, rhythms, and musical instruments all run the risk of disappearing. The task of recovering for preservation is not enough. It is necessary to diffuse, to disseminate, to teach, to show, to reach the community and to make the community acquire this knowledge. For sound expressions are important parts of peoples´ spirit: they reflect their happiness and their sadness. And, if a library disseminates such feelings when they are written on paper by famous authors... why should it forget the anonymous oral narrators?

To keep silence is to forget. To forget is to lose the memory. And a people without a memory are doomed to disappear. Libraries can make even the slightest contribution, to make a difference, to change the situation, and thus avoid the possibility that a great number of human voices are silenced forever.

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