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#### **Learnings from the anti-fracking movement in Namibia**

Multi-level activism against global corporations in ecological conflicts

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Forschungsartikel untersucht die Strategien, mit denen die namibische Anti-Fracking-Bewegung auf die aktuelle Öl- und Gasexploration des kanadischen Unternehmens ReconAfrica im ökologisch sensiblen Okavango-Delta reagiert. Basierend auf Charles Tillys "Repertoires of Contention"-Konzept der Political Opportunity Theory werden drei Schlüsselstrategien herausgearbeitet: Erstens engagieren sich die Aktivist\*innen innerhalb nationaler Strukturen wie Parlamenten, Verwaltungen und indigenen Netzwerken. Zweitens nehmen sie aktiven Einfluss auf die Medienberichterstattung. Drittens etablieren sie transnationale Allianzen. Die Strategien basieren auf einem bemerkenswerten Spezialwissen zu verwaltungstechnischen Prozessen oder geowissenschaftlichen Hintergründen der Ölexplorationsverfahren. Die namibische anti-fracking Bewegung agiert auf lokaler, nationaler, sowie transnationaler Ebene. Das globale Unternehmen wird hierbei an verschiedenen Druckpunkten angegriffen, sodass zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure effektiv ihre demokratische Funktion ausüben können.

**Abstract:** This research article investigates the strategies used by the Namibian anti-fracking movement to respond to ongoing oil and gas explorations of the Canadian company ReconAfrica in the ecologically sensitive Okavango Delta. Grounded in political opportunity theory, the study

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employs Charles Tilly's concept of "repertoires of contention" to identify three key strategies: firstly, engagement with national structures through petitions, parliamentary interactions, and administrative processes; secondly, shaping media narratives by actively investigating new allegations; thirdly, building transnational alliances and collaborating with global activist networks. These strategies intersect with each other, leveraging the activists' expertise in administrative procedures, geoscience, and methods of petroleum exploration. This research contributes insights into ecological conflicts involving global corporations by emphasizing the importance of multi-level activism, spanning national and transnational dimensions, to effectively target global corporations on multiple pressure points.

## **1 Introduction**

In January 2021, the Canadian oil and gas company ReconAfrica initiated a drilling operation, asserting it would constitute "the last great onshore oil discovery" (Miller 2021; Viceroy Research 2021: 20). The licensed area encompasses more than 8,7 million acres of land, tracing the course of the Okavango River from the northeastern part of Namibia to the western region of Botswana (ReconAfrica 2021a). The exploration program has sparked considerable controversy: the Okavango Delta serves as a vital sanctuary for protected animals, including the largest remaining herd of African elephants, and stands as the ancestral home of indigenous Khoe and San communities. It remains uncertain whether the company intends to employ unconventional exploration methods, such as fracking, which is associated with risks of groundwater contamination, ecologically harmful chemicals, and problematic wastewater disposal (Umwelt Bundesamt 2018). Notably, opposition primarily emanates from civil society groups, some of which coalesced specifically to counter the exploration plans. Given that these groups are pivotal agents in the conflict, the research inquiry focuses on discerning the strategies employed by the Namibian anti-fracking movement to respond to the oil and gas exploration in the Okavango Delta.

The relevance of this topic is based on two major arguments: Firstly, Namibia and especially the people living in the Okavango delta belong to the group of MAPA (Most Affected People and Areas) which are highly vulnerable to the consequences of the climate crisis, including social and ecological dimensions. The carbon emission of the 120 billion of oil equivalent that ReconAfrica expects to find (ReconAfrica 2020) could furthermore strongly influence the remaining carbon budget left to limit global warming to 1.5°C. A study of the Namibian environmental movement is therefore of societal value. Secondly, the conflict has an extraordinary transnational character and therefore sheds light on political contention in a globalized modernity. Therefore, this research not only aims to uncover

the strategies employed by the Namibian anti-fracking movement, but to develop key principles useful for social mobilization in ecological and corporate conflicts all over the world.

## **2 Theory - Repertoires of contention**

As a theoretical basis, this study uses the concept of "repertoires of contention" originating in political opportunity theory. Political opportunity theory is a branch of social movement theory dealing with factors of the political and societal sphere that influence the possibilities of social movements to mobilize successfully (Giugni 2011). Tarrow defines political opportunities as *"consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements"* (Tarrow 2012 [1996]: 54, emphasis in the original). The opportunities are embedded into a system of causes and conditions with which they interact. The world outside the social movement is therefore called political opportunity structure (Tarrow 1994: 85). This study draws on political opportunity theory by focussing on how the interactions between structural elements, such as the Namibian political, media or administrative system, and the actions of the activists create opportunities to interfere with ReconAfrica's drilling project.

The strategic choices of the anti-fracking movement are further characterized based on the concept of repertoires of contention. The latter was developed by Charles Tilly (1977) in his foundational work about collective action of Burgundian wine-growers. Repertoires of contention describe sets of actions that activists draw from in a political conflict. The definitional core lies in the routine character of the claim-making: The activists are bound by their historically conditioned state of knowledge and thus fall back on a recurring repertoire of actions. These routines are applied to stable claimant-object pairs, such as peasants and landlords, employers and employees, or, in the case of Namibia, "the people" against a foreign company (Tilly 2006: 35). Tilly views actions in a political confrontation as performances, akin to a stage play. Following this metaphor, political stakeholders behave like theatre actors who assume specific roles and draw from a certain repertoire (Tilly 2008: 59f).

The concept of repertoire of contention serves this research in two key ways: First, the analysis centres around the idea of transnationalization, emphasizing the exchange of information on a transnational level. Fittingly, Tilly's version of the repertoires of contention concept is inherently modular. The core characteristic of modern repertoires is their ability to fluidly transfer from one place to another, thereby extending the reach of claims from the local level to broader entities such as whole nations (Tilly 1993: 272; Tilly et al. 2020 [2004]: 35). As shown later, this ability holds especially true for climate activism, since the source of their engagement—the climate crisis—

exceeds the narrow borders of nation-statehood. Second, Tilly, being a historian himself, emphasizes the historical embeddedness of the repertoires (Tilly 2006: 35). To better understand present social movements in Namibia, it is crucial to research them through the looking glass of the colonial past. The actions of a foreign company, such as ReconAfrica, can thus be understood not only in terms of environmental pollution but also in the context of land appropriation and exploitation.

### **3 Methods - Grounded Theory Methodology**

Keeping this premise of postcolonial studies in mind, one of the stated goals of this research is to avoid the pitfalls of a north-centric perspective. This study therefore aims to implement guiding principles of critical social movement theory (see Fadaee 2017). To meet the standards thus applied, this work is based on Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) approach of Corbin and Strauss (1990). One of the main paradigms of GTM is the notion of a theory that is derived by data and not the other way around (Glaser/ Strauss 2006 [1967]: 33). It is characterized by its strong inductive research strategy, the parallelization of the research stages (data gathering, analysis, and theorizing are carried out at the same time) and the focus on creativity. The latter positions the researcher herself in the centre of the research process and guides her self-reflection to prevent subjective distortions (ibid.: 12ff).

Kannengießner (2018: 219) therefore argues that GTM can be seen as a strategy to “de-westernize” scientific research because the approach includes critical self-examination thereby possibly preventing the researcher from reproducing a power imbalance. In addition, the openness of GTM should enhance a sensibility for non-western phenomena and reduces the risk of oversimplification (ibid.: 229). Furthermore, the strong, inductive focus on the empirical findings can lead to a better understanding of the reality of the respective Southern area. Consequently, by using GTM, research areas placed within the Global South are less likely to function as a mere test object for Northern theories.

All in all, the data pool consists of 123 different documents of various types, including social media posts (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter), official written documents (contracts, licenses, press releases, administrative documents), semi-official written documents (open letters, petitions), videos (recordings of networking events, panels, meetings with parliamentarians, investor presentations), and newspaper articles. The sample is comprised of two subsets:

The first sample is intended to create a detailed description of the conflict process and includes 58 different documents, mostly newspaper articles and official documents, that hint toward important events. It covers all important activities of the conflict from ReconAfrica’s first activities in the area in 2014 until the end of the data gathering phase in June 2022. It was then updated in the lead-up of this publication in August 2023. Based on the data collected during the initial phase of information

gathering, six primary activist groups were identified that played a significant role in driving the movement's activities during that period, namely Friday for Future Windhoek (FFFW), Save Okavangos Unique Wildlife (SOUL), Frackfree Namibia and Botswana (FrackfreeNB), IYX Africa, the indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC), and Khwedom Councen. Then, every digital documentation of anti-ReconAfrica activity of the selected groups were gathered, mainly by searching their social media accounts, but also their websites, blog posts or newspaper reporting. Thus, for the second sample 65 more documents were collected covering a time span from September 2020 to June 2022.

Corbin and Strauss suggest a three-step coding process that was applied to the second subset of my material pool. In the first open coding phase, the documents were coded according to the performance they describe. Secondly, during the axial coding phase, the thus constructed categories were regrouped according to a coding paradigm compromised of two elements: Addressee of activism and level of activism. Four types of repertoires were identified, and corresponding categories were constructed. In the third coding phase, selective coding, the constructed categories were integrated into a coherent theory based on Tilly's work on repertoires of contention and oriented towards principles of a critical social movement framework. At this stage, the "general public awareness raising" code was excluded due to its limited connection to the other categories. The three final repertoires include (a) engagement in national structures, (b) influencing of the media narrative, and (c) trans- and internationalisation.

#### **4 Description of the conflict**

The ecological conflict emerged in 2014 when ReconAfrica's founder, Craig Steinke, acquired License PEL073, spanning 6.3 million Namibian acres, and partnered with state-owned company NAMCOR for petroleum exploration (Republic of Namibia 2014). In 2020, ReconAfrica expanded, acquiring another 2,45 million licensed acres in Botswana (Heim 2020). NAMCOR's 2022 stock sale established a 95/5 ownership split (ReconAfrica 2022).

After securing its first Environmental Clearance Certificate (ECC) in 2019 (Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism 2019), ReconAfrica launched exploration in January 2021, drilling the first well 6-2 in Kawe, Namibia (Reed 2021). Simultaneously, UN pressure prompted the exclusion of Tsodo Hills from the Botswanan license (ReconAfrica 2021c).

Initially unnoticed, ReconAfrica gained first public attention in 2020 when "The Namibian" published a nationwide article on potential fracking damages of the project, highlighting the hiring of fracking

pioneer Nick Steinsberger (Barbee/ Nash 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Prompted by this, Fridays for Future Windhoek and groups like FrackFree Namibia, Botswana, and SOUL emerged, amplifying concern. International activism was triggered by a report of "The National Geographic" authors Jeffrey Barbee and Laurel Neme (2020). The resulting series of heretofore ten articles has been central for attracting international attention.

<sup>2</sup>Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, activism initially centered on the digital sphere (e.g., a digital panel (D3) or a Twitter storm (D5)). Physical protests began in December 2020, organized by FFFW and FrackfreeNB (D1), evolving into Windhoek protest marches by activist groups. In the following two years, activist groups like FFFW, Frackfree NB, and SOUL organized several protest marches in Windhoek (D7, D23, D38, D53, D60, D65), many of which ended with a hand-over of a petition or open letter to an official institution like the parliament or an embassy (D6, D24, D36). Media resonance was furthermore achieved by the "indigo-walk" of the indigenous group IYX Africa (D17, D18).

ReconAfrica's spudding of the first well in Kawe was followed by plans for a 2D-seismic survey (ReconAfrica 2021b), necessitating an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) under Namibian law (Republic of Namibia 2007). Activists were strongly engaged in the following administrative process. After the ECC was granted, the activists tried to challenge the decision multiple times: The High Court dismissed the first appeals in 2022 (Menges 2022). In April 2023, various environmental committees challenged the ECC's extension again, this time leading to a ministerial hearing (Legal Assistance Center 2023). Nonetheless, ReconAfrica secured another ECC in July 2023, permitting 12 more wells (ReconAfrica 2023).

Despite extensive national and international attention, parliamentary engagement remained limited until July 2021. After a petition from an activist group, the parliamentary committee of natural resources launched an investigation (Parliament of the Republic of Namibia 2021b, 2021e, 2021f, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d). The latter concluded in July 2022 with a report critiquing ReconAfrica's

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<sup>1</sup> The original article was significantly changed after this research was conducted, and the passage about Nick Steinsberger removed.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that from here on there is a peculiarity in the way of citation. For the sake of readability, those documents that refer to the actions of the anti-fracking movement are not listed in the bibliography. Instead, documents that served as the basis of the coding process are referred to with their respective numbering in Appendix 1.2. For example, code D24 refers to document number 24 in Appendix 1.2. These documents were scraped and are therefore available offline. Vice versa, primary sources that do not explicitly concern the actions of the activists and are not part of the coding process are cited in the publication bibliography.

practices but recommending the project's continuation (Parliament of the Republic of Namibia 2022).

ReconAfrica's drilling activities brought legal conflicts involving private property (Shihepo 2021a) and communal land rights (Shihepo 2021b), as well as environmental law violations. Operations began without proper land rights, including inside Kapinga Kamwalye Conservancy, accompanied by illegal road construction (Barbee/ Neme 2023). Furthermore, ReconAfrica faced allegations of water extraction and disposal without permits, improper wastewater pond lining, and attempts of intimidation and bribery against environmental groups (Barbee/ Neme 2021b; Steffen 2023). Investor accusations emerged, as an anonymous SEC complaint in May 2021 alleged ReconAfrica misled investors. The accusations concerned ReconAfrica's advertorials which promoted revenue projections based on unpermitted activities, such as fracking (Barbee/ Neme 2021c). The SEC complaint was followed by the publication of a report by Viceroy Research (2021), a company of short-seller Fraser Perring who focuses on reporting on alleged accounting fraud. So far, ReconAfrica drilled four wells in the Kavango region, none of which turned out to be a feasible oil or gas deposit.

## 5 Analysis<sup>2</sup>

After coding the collected data according to the coding techniques of the Grounded Theory Methodology three main repertoires were identified: 1) Engagement in national structures 2) Influencing the media narrative, and 3) Trans- and Internationalisation.

### 5.1 Engagement in national structures

The first repertoire includes all performances through which activists influence national structures on a political, administrative, and informal level. I hereby differentiate between three types of engagement: influence of official political institutions, influence of the administration, and mobilisation of local stakeholders.

Firstly, the activists exert *influence over political institutions* through targeted protests and direct interactions with parliamentarians. Notably, protest marches culminate at key government ministries, often accompanied by the presentation of petitions to parliamentary representatives (D27, D61). An illustrative instance involves activist groups engaging with the Committee of Natural Resources (D49), leading to subsequent investigations (Parliament of the Republic of Namibia 2021d, 2021e, 2021f) and consultations with ministries (Parliament of the Republic of Namibia 2021a, 2021c). This illustrates the cause-and-effect relationship between activist initiatives and parliamentary activities, highlighting the potency of indirect protest forms like petitions.

Secondly, activists immerse themselves within the bureaucratic processes to *influence administrative structures*. For example, prior to ReconAfrica's 2D-Seismic Survey, the company underwent an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), necessitating engagement with civic stakeholders. Here, activist groups like IPACC and FFW officially registered as "Interested and Affected Parties" (IAPs) (D9, D11, D13), thereby partaking in community meetings (D10, D37) and monitoring ReconAfrica's compliance with the administrative requirements of the EIA (D14, D28, D32, D63). This engagement necessitates comprehensive knowledge of administrative procedures and technical aspects of oil and gas exploration. Hence, activists were able to create transparency and accountability, contributing to a broader democratic function within the administrative realm.

Thirdly, activist groups *network with local stakeholders* like indigenous interest groups or conservatory committees. For example, IPACC and Khwedom Council hosted conferences and workshops that aim to enhance the network of indigenous actors (D55, D58). Mobilizing indigenous stakeholders is crucial for the democratic bargaining process: Indigenous leaders hold a special role in Namibian society. Not only are they part of the formal power structure since traditional leadership officially decides over issues of land allocation and certain judicial issues. Also, traditional authorities are an important part of the informal power structure, since the opinion of traditional leaders is a key component of the "general will" of the Namibia people (Miyamoto 2022). They are therefore central to democratic legitimation of the drilling project.

This comprehensive national engagement strategy is underpinned by the activists' substantial informational expertise. For example, in their interactions with parliamentary committees (D49) they were able to offer an alternative perspective on ReconAfrica's geological data, thus questioning the likelihood of an oil discovery. Moreover, they furnish comprehensive evidence against the project, navigating rigorous interrogation by elected officials. This showcases their proficiency and strengthens their position in shaping political discourse. Additionally, the activists' involvement in administrative procedures exhibits their detailed knowledge about Namibian environmental law.

In summation, the activists' multifaceted approach encompasses strategic engagement with political institutions, administrative processes, and indigenous stakeholders. This multifaceted engagement aligns with their aim to exert democratic influence and to foster transparency.

## **5.2 Influencing the media narrative**

The movement's second repertoire revolves around its influence on media narratives through publications, comprising both echoing existing information and introducing new data. On the more reactive side, the activist groups issue press releases and editorials that reproduce narrative



elements, that were already published in other newspapers (D39, D40, D41; D58). The activists thereby mainly amplify information published by the nationwide newspaper “The Namibian”.

The Namibian media system is structured as a duopoly comprised of media outlets owned by the state and media owned by the private Namibia Media Holdings. The private-state divide roughly determines the opinion trends of the respective publication concerning the ReconAfrica conflict. For example, state-owned “New Era” publishes mainly articles in favour of the project (e.g. Haufiku 2022; Ndjavera 2021), while “The Namibian” functions as its main critic (e.g. Barbee/ Nash 2020; Shihepo 2021b). The important role of “The Namibian” in the media landscape can be understood through the lens of the colonial past: Prior to Namibia’s independence the newspaper worked to overcome the South African rule and since proceeded to be the main source of state criticism. It thus suffered a variety of repressions as an advertisement boycott by the government (Wasserman 2010: 572). The historic continuation of government criticism makes “The Namibian” an important part of the independent media landscape. Therefore, it lies in the interest of the activist to amplify critical information, thus influencing the public opinion in their favour.

Beyond echoing existing narratives, activist groups also initiate fresh inquiries against ReconAfrica, generating material for international reporting. For instance, FFFW estimated ReconAfrica's potential CO2 emissions (D26), garnering attention from the South African "Mail and Guardian" (Berman/ Shikongo 2022). Moreover, SOUL's exposé on ReconAfrica's inadequate wastewater pond lining (D16) led to legal action (The Rosen Law Firm 2021) and was covered by National Geographic (Barbee/ Neme 2021d), thus playing a pivotal role in attracting international attention. These releases require highly specialised knowledge that enables the activists to evaluate technical reports for carbon estimates and discerning pond lining violations based on industry standards. This expertise underscores the activists' organizational capacity.

Within the constraints of the media duopoly, activists counter pro-ReconAfrica narratives in state-owned outlets by strategically engaging with the private sector. Their multifaceted approach involves reactive narrative reproduction and proactive agenda setting, creating opportunities for discourse transformation.

### **5.3 Inter- and Transnationalization**

The third pivotal strategy in the activists' arsenal revolves around their adept trans- and internationalization efforts. This strategy involves performances that engage with global and regional actors, indirectly influencing both the Namibian and Botswanan governments, as well as ReconAfrica. Two distinct approaches characterize this repertoire:

Firstly, the anti-fracking movement actively nurtures extensive global networks, collaborating with like-minded groups internationally (D3, D18, D22, D25, D29, D33, D43-47, D52, D54, D59). This strategic alliance-building proves particularly crucial for ecological conflicts, leveraging the experiences of countries facing similar environmentally detrimental practices. Namibian activists have been exchanging insights with international counterparts, notably UK and US activists experienced in lobbying against fracking (D3). This cooperation thrives through existing networks within transnational environmental movements, facilitated by platforms like Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Fridays for Future (FFF). These dynamic movements, characterized by fluid structures and robust digital presence, expedite informal networking and rapid cross-border information exchange. Additionally, IPACC and Khwedom Council capitalize on established transnational, indigenous networks, enhancing information sharing across interconnected ethnic communities (D34, D54). Exemplary, Khwedom Council exchanged information with Nigerian activists who shared their learnings from the Niger Delta crisis (D54). This approach bolsters the movement's informational resources, enabling the infusion of global insights into domestic actions.

Secondly, the Namibian environmental movement strategically engages international entities. Activists orchestrate marches culminating in petition submissions to foreign bodies, such as German or US ambassadors (D35, D36). This complements direct interactions with the United Nations (D6, D7, D51, D62), exemplified by participation in conferences like the 26th UN Conference of Parties COP26 (D51). Collaboration with transnational and international organizations, like Fridays for Future Windhoek's partnership with Deutsche Umwelthilfe (German Environmental Aid) (D42), further amplifies pressure on international governments.

Notably, engagement with actors from the Global North unveils informal power structures, addressing colonial dimensions intrinsic to the conflict. This aligns with Namibia's history, notably the German colonial rule (1884-1915) marked by resource exploitation. Activists frame their actions as anti-colonial, critiquing present-day Global North-led oil and gas exploration. Through connections with groups of the Global North, Namibian activists indirectly influence figures in successor states of former colonial powers. This strategic maneuvering underscores the activists' adeptness at navigating structural conditions. The activists harness digital communication to amplify transnational impact, advancing their cause on an international scale.

#### **5.4 Interactions between repertoires**

The identified repertoires are closely intertwined: Through their significant engagement at the national level, the activists acquire comprehensive knowledge about the administrative,

environmental, and social implications of the conflict. This involvement directly engages them in the dispute, enabling them to gather new information first hand. As a result, they attain expert status, recognized by both national and international journalists. They thereby provide international journalists with information, thus more effectively shaping the media narrative. Through publications in international newspapers, the conflict gains further international exposure, intensifying global pressure on ReconAfrica and the Namibian government. Illustrating the interconnected nature of these strategies is the plea of two US senators to conduct a "thorough and coordinated investigation" of ReconAfrica's project (Barbee/ Neme 2021a). This appeal by the senators is rooted in a series of National Geographic articles. The authors of this investigative series sourced information from the Namibian movement, amplifying the activists' concerns in their articles. Thus, a clear link emerges among the three identified repertoires: the activists' national engagement enhances their media influence, culminating in the escalated internationalization of the conflict.

## **6 Conclusion**

The study identifies three key strategies employed by activists in their efforts: Firstly, activists are engaged in national structures. They interact with official institutions by utilizing tactics like writing petitions, open letters to ministries, and engaging with parliamentary committees. They also oversee administrative processes to ensure transparency, and collaboration with local stakeholders. Secondly, the anti-fracking movement influences the media narrative by investigating new allegations against ReconAfrica, shaping international reporting. Thirdly, the activists establish networks with international activist groups, leveraging transnational movements and indigenous networks for support. These repertoires draw upon high expertise in administrative procedures, geoscience, and petroleum exploration.

The research acknowledges its theoretical limitations that may arise from the utilization of political opportunity theory: Tilly's repertoires of contention concept often narrowly views identity-based actions as expressive or power-oriented (Doherty/ Hayes 2019: 276). This study may have overlooked actions pursued for intrinsic reasons, for example in indigenous performances with deeper cultural meanings. The research proposes supplementing its data collection strategy with in-depth interviews to capture subjective significance.

As Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) point out, the Global South offers a more insightful backdrop for scrutinizing the world, given its markedly greater prevalence of transformative dynamics in the South as opposed to the North. The same holds true for the Namibian case: Since the struggle is embedded in a highly globalized context, the course of events could hold prognostic value for future ecological conflicts. Hence, the study concludes that social movements involved in ecological conflicts with

global corporations can learn from the Namibian case by incorporating its tactical guidelines into their strategies: Since corporations often operate on a global scale, activists' strategies must reflect this structure. Through multi-level activism that considers national dimensions, such as engaging in administrative processes, as well as inter-/transnational dimensions, like transnational networking, social movements could target global companies at multiple pressure points, thus effectively exerting democratic and civil-societal power.

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