Kaupapa Māori Theory: Indigenous Transforming of Education

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Preamble

This discussion reflects on aspects of Kaupapa Māori theory as a transforming praxis. Over the years, I have been reluctant to commit to writing too much about this concept given the need to critically build the theory through praxis and, therefore, to connect theory more authentically to organic, transformative outcomes. It is difficult to fully engage with Kaupapa Māori theory without understandings that emerge from within a critical praxis; theory is both made and remade within a dynamic process of organic enactment and critical reflection. This is the reason that, when people are speaking about Kaupapa Māori theory, I often challenge them: 'show me the blisters on your hands' – in other words, 'How is your theorising work linked to tangible outcomes that are transformative?'

I position this critical praxis within a wider politics. What I am alluding to here in respect of positionality is *not* just Paulo Freire's (1972, p. 68) idea of being able to 'speak a true word'. (As he put it: 'There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.') Nor am I reinforcing the claim that theory and practice are inextricably linked and stand in dialectal relation to one another (see G. H. Smith, 2015). Rather, I am raising a broader concern to position the idea of transformative praxis within the movement between the dialectic of individual conscience on the one hand and collective, social consciousness on the other.

Introduction

Kaupapa Māori theory evolved out of the long and arduous struggle for the revitalisation of Māori language and subsequent developments related to the forms of alternative education (Te Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori) that were established to enable this revitalisation. Many commentators have built this concept as a critical tool in the New Zealand and international indigenous contexts. At the forefront in more recent times has been

the work by Leonie Pihama (see Pihama, 2015), but the broadening of Kaupapa Māori ideas is found in the work of numerous Māori scholars such as Tuki Nepe, Linda Smith, Fiona Cram, Russell Bishop, Margie Hohepa, Te Kawehau Hoskins, Jenny Lee, Mera Penehira, Cherryl Waerea i te Rangi Smith, Mereana Taki, Kimai Tocker, and others who have advanced different understandings of the Kaupapa Māori struggle.

There is a need to be clear about what the real Kaupapa Māori revolution was in New Zealand in the 1980s. In my view, the revolution was not so much the stunning language revitalisation initiatives of Te Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori. These developments were the outward signs of a much more profound transformative outcome. The real revolution of the 1980s was a shift in the mindset of large numbers of Māori people away from waiting for things to be done to or for them to doing things for themselves; a shift away from reactive politics to an emphasis on being more proactive about self-development. This shift coincided with, and built on, a rise in the 1970s in Māori political consciousness centred on calls for sovereignty and tino rangatiratanga (self-development).

These shifts towards self-development moved us away from talking simplistically about de-colonisation (which often puts the coloniser at the centre of attention) to talking about 'conscientisation' or consciousness-raising (which puts Māori interests at the forefront of consideration). My preference for the latter is because it takes a more proactive and positive stance in the advancement of Māori aspirations and interests. The advent of Te Kōhanga Reo in 1981 marked the beginning of the education *self*-development revolution.

In the emergence of alternative Māori education and schooling initiatives, many lessons were learned. Key insights came from critical educators working in the international arena. Critical theory perspectives informed the development of Kaupapa Māori theory and practice on two broad fronts: first, critical perspectives provided the thinking tools to unpack the cultural and structural impediments in the schooling of Māori. Second, they provided innovative insights into how education and schooling might be reformed to give greater benefit for marginalised groups, including Māori learners. But the question had to be asked: 'Can traditional schooling be transformed to be more inclusive for all learners or do groups need to get outside the politics of distraction involved with changing the system and build alternative pathways?' In New Zealand, the main Kaupapa Maori approach at this point (in 2017) is to provide opportunities for alternatives outside what is still perceived as the 'mainstream'. However, the dominant cultural and power inequalities remain: the mainstream system is well-funded, and the alternative sites are relatively under-resourced and marginalised within state policy.

In becoming more critically aware, Māori have been conscientised to the fact that colonisation is not just an external force. Colonisation is also perpetrated by ourselves, against ourselves. This critical insight developed out of the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971). Amongst other things, Gramsci was intent on explaining how ordinary Italian citizens could follow the dictator Mussolini and 'buy-in' to thinking and behaviours that were not in their interests. He used the term 'hegemony' to describe this phenomenon. Hegemony occurs when marginalised groups take on dominant ideas as common sense, even though these ideas

may, in fact, contribute to their own oppression and exploitation. Hegemonic thinking acts as a very effective way to colonise when subordinated communities colonise themselves. The counter action to hegemony is for indigenous peoples to become critically conscientised and to develop counter-hegemonic thinking that prioritises their own needs, aspirations, and preferences. This counter-hegemonic movement requires a freeing-up of the indigenous imagination stifled by colonisation. A critical part of the Kaupapa Māori revolution within education is this counter-hegemonic movement, a struggle for greater control over our own minds. This freeing of the mind and reclaiming our ability to reimagine our futures is an important precondition of Kaupapa Māori theorising.

The centrality of education as a site of struggle

Education and schooling are important sites of struggle given they have traditionally been key agencies in promulgating the ongoing colonisation of Māori. Education and schooling have damaged the validity and practice of Māori language, knowledge, and culture. However, education and schooling are also locations to be struggled over as they have the potential to be reformed as sites that can deliver Māori aspirations. The transforming potential of schools and education was the hope that underpinned the 1980s revolution and the emergence of the Māori alternative educational models.

As well as the underlying 'thinking' revolution and the 'freeing of the Māori mind' to reimagine different ways of being, some other important educational concerns of Kaupapa Māori theory and praxis are:

- the revitalisation of Māori language, knowledge, and culture;
- the validity of Māori language, knowledge, and culture;
- the need to develop a buy-in by Māori communities to a shared vision;
- the need to develop critical understandings of how colonisation is reproduced;
- the need to be intentional about transforming social, cultural, and economic positioning;
- the need to support cultural values, practices, and pedagogies;
- the need to regenerate extended family values and practice.

This list might be read as a summary of the gaps in 'mainstream' options. But more positively, Māori want these concerns to be central to a reclaiming of education and schooling. The struggle to reclaim education and schooling is critical to a broader intention to transform the disproportionately high levels of social and economic under-development that have accrued to Māori. Given the levels of under-development, Māori will not have a sustainable social, cultural, and economic transformation without a simultaneous educational revolution. I am not just talking about *fitting into* the existing system and improving access, participation, and success, which is what most people measure as Māori 'progress'. Māori want an education system that fits their language, knowledge, and cultural aspirations rather

than one that educates Māori away from their heritage language, knowledge, and culture.

I am not suggesting the dismantling of the entire education system, but I am arguing it needs to be fundamentally reorganised or realigned to meaningfully include Māori cultural, social, and economic aspirations. This is not an either/or proposition between a 'Māori' or 'non-Māori' education. Most Māori parents have said they want an education system that equips their children for success in the world at large and that simultaneously allows their children to develop cultural skills and knowledge to equip them for their cultural responsibilities.

The case for the Māori cultural alignment of educational options in New Zealand is already well made, at least with regard to language. Māori language has been declared (in the Māori Language Act 1987) an official language of New Zealand. Māori learners are close to 20 percent of the total New Zealand school-age population. Māori are taxpayers and have a right to expect that public schooling will cater to their broader needs and aspirations, including language use.

It is important to acknowledge that Māori are not homogenous in their educational aspirations. Māori have a wide range of expectations. Some would like improved access and participation within the existing choices, but conventional schooling continues to reproduce a significant learning gap between Māori and non-Māori and, arguably, this gap is widening (Marriott & Sim, 2014). What is lacking is a range of viable, Māori-focused options. This is true even today, some thirty-six years after the inception of Te Kōhanga Reo in 1981.

While the argument for the inclusion of Māori cultural elements in the whole school system is relatively straightforward, policy and political considerations are needed to make the proper intellectual and political 'space' for these initiatives. This need was a motivating factor in the effort to build Kaupapa Māori theory that would advance a politics of validity in ways the system could tolerate and so be inclined to support Māori schooling models. Another part of Kaupapa Māori theory and praxis development was the need to constantly reflect with our communities over what was happening and why a theorisation of what we were doing in the alternative schools was important. There was also a need to give our communities a critically informed language that would allow them to formally express their ideas and aspirations in ways the system might more clearly understand, and therefore support. Given the widening social and economic gaps between Māori and non-Māori, our need to transform was, and still is, both vital and urgent. There is a need to move beyond simply being reactive to becoming more proactive in asserting what we want to accomplish.

A call to theory: Indigenous theorising

One of the key Māori initiatives that emerged out of the education struggle has been a strategic realignment of practice with theory. This exercise has involved understanding the history and politics of the academy more profoundly, given that this is where much of what is called 'theory' has been developed. The academy has been built around culturally selected constructions of what counts as theory. When Kaupapa Māori theory was conceptualised in

my PhD thesis in 1997 (G. H. Smith, 1997), the attachment of the word 'theory' to Kaupapa Māori was intentional. My view was that we needed to begin to theorise our struggle for the revitalisation of our language and for the alternative education approaches. 'Kaupapa Māori theory' was coined to open up that space to underpin the validity of our cultural ways of knowing and doing things. In addition, the co-option of the word 'theory' challenged the social constructed-ness and selected-ness of knowledge within the academy. Indigenous theorising is partly about winning space inside the academy. This is because the academy has validated and privileged some knowledges and marginalised others as being primitive, mythical, and unscientific. In asserting the notion of Kaupapa Māori theory, an immediate challenge was being made to the existing hierarchies of knowledge.

There are at least six elements that shape Kaupapa Māori theory, in the way I think about it. They are:

- a rationale for the linking of theory and practice (praxis);
- a rationale for putting emphasis on the transforming intention and outcomes;
- a critical challenge to the gate keeping of the academy in respect of the control of knowledge;
- a rationale that centralises the issues related to the validity and revitalisation of Māori language, knowledge, and culture;
- a rationale informed by a critical theory understanding;
- an accent on self-development.

Kaupapa Māori theory has evolved as a proactive initiative undertaken by Māori ourselves, recognising that the key answers to our transformation lie within ourselves (see G. H. Smith, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1997). A key change in the way we ought to be thinking about theorising is in the move to accentuate self-development. This has been an important part of the alternative education revolution – when Māori have come up with new ideas for transformation, there is more buy-in for the idea from the people for whom the change is intended.

Unfortunately, people sometimes read Kaupapa Māori literature and see it as a formula and forget that it is a *transforming praxis*. People need to be grounded in some action to make theory 'speak', rather than write about it descriptively from a distance and in the third person. That is the part that is so often missing from many who claim to be engaged in Kaupapa Māori theory and praxis.

Any transformative theory (including Kaupapa Māori theory) intended to benefit indigenous communities must have the following capacities:

- to be sustained in a context of unequal power relationships with the coloniser – because indigenous theorising often challenges the accepted ways of knowing, doing, and understanding in the education system;

- to be sustained in the face of challenge both from the colonising imperatives and from internal (indigenous) hegemonic forces;
- to be owned and to make sense to the indigenous communities themselves;
- to positively make a difference – to move indigenous people to a better existence;
- to be continuously reviewed and revised by those for whom the theory is intended to serve.

Kaupapa Māori theory

Kaupapa Māori theory is not so much a set of principles but a space where Māori can work in ways free of dominant cultural pressures and constraints. It is a space where Māori can grow their self-development and transforming ideas and actions. This is the space where my PhD research was situated. My intention in this work was to identify key intervention factors that emerged out of the Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori initiatives. This involved interviewing Māori parents and grandparents who had made a commitment to putting their children into Te Kōhanga Reo or Kura Kaupapa Māori. What I wanted to identify were the key factors that motivated Māori parents to take this action. From my interviews, I aggregated six responses that were most prevalent. Once I had identified these six elements, I argued that, if these elements were present, there was more likelihood of positive transforming outcomes.

The following six elements are the Kaupapa Māori factors that motivated Māori parents to opt out of the existing education system and take up the alternative, Māori education options. These factors are variously referred to in the literature as Kaupapa Māori (Māori philosophy, worldview, and cultural principles), Kaupapa Māori transformative praxis, and Kaupapa Māori theory. The key elements are now summarised.

The principle of self-determination or relative autonomy (tino rangatiratanga)

The issue here is the need for Māori to have increased control over our own lives and cultural well-being. Self-determination is reflected in the Kaupapa of Māori schools in that these schools are organised by Māori teachers and decision makers with greater autonomy over administration, curriculum, pedagogy, and Māori cultural aspirations. Because Māori people are in charge of the key decision making, they are able to make choices and decisions that reflect their cultural, political, economic, and social preferences. When Māori make decisions for themselves, the buy-in and commitment by Māori participants to making the ideas work is more assured.

The principle of validating and legitimating cultural aspirations and identity (ngā taonga tuku iho)

In Kura Kaupapa Māori, being Māori is taken for granted; there is little need to justify one's identity as is the case in most mainstream educational settings. In Kaupapa Māori educational settings, Māori language, knowledge, culture, and values are automatically validated and

legitimated – this is a given, a taken-for-granted base in these schools. Māori cultural aspirations are more assured in these settings, particularly in light of the struggle for Māori language and cultural survival. One of the faults of other schooling interventions (supposedly in Māori interests) has been the inadequate attention paid to the maintenance of Māori culture and identity. In incorporating these elements into an educational intervention, a strong emotional and spiritual factor is introduced that locks in the commitment of Māori to the intervention. Consequently, many Māori parents who were once put off schooling by their own negative experiences have now become re-committed by the emotional and cultural pull of the Kaupapa Māori approach.

The principle of incorporating culturally preferred pedagogies (akoranga Māori)

Kaupapa Māori teaching and learning settings and practices are able to effectively connect with the cultural backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances of Māori communities. Such teaching and learning choices are culturally preferred. Other pedagogies can also be utilised, including universal schooling methods and some cross-cultural borrowing, for example, the Japanese *Soroban* (abacus) maths programme and the learning of Japanese language. A move towards Pacific/Asian cultures and language is a logical development given some cultural similarities and commonalties of the Austronesian group of languages.

The principle of mediating socio-economic and home difficulties (kia piki ake i ngā raru o te kāinga)

The Kaupapa (philosophy) of Kura Kaupapa Māori is such a powerful and all-embracing force through its emotional (ngākau) and spiritual (wairua) elements that it commits Māori communities to view schooling as a positive experience, despite other social and economic impediments. It not only impacts at an ideological level, and is able to mediate unequal social power relations, it also makes schooling a priority for families despite debilitating social and economic circumstances. Within the collective cultural structures and practices of whānau (extended family), some alleviation of the impact of poor socio-economic circumstances can be obtained. Put another way, by drawing on the social capital of culturally collective practice, some mitigation of what might otherwise be debilitating socio-economic circumstances can be achieved.

The principle of incorporating collective rather than individual cultural structures (whānau/whakawhanaungatanga)

The extended family structure supports the ideological support gained under the previous principle. It does this by providing a shared support structure to alleviate and mitigate social and economic difficulties, parenting difficulties, health difficulties, and others. Such difficulties are not located in individual homes but in the total whānau (extended family structures and networks); the whānau takes collective responsibility to assist and intervene. While the whānau structure implies a support network for individual members, there is also a reciprocal obligation on individual members to invest in the whānau group. In this way,

parents are culturally contracted to support the education of all the children in the whānau. This is a major feature of the Kura Kaupapa Māori schooling intervention; it has committed parents to reinvest in education for their children.

*The principle of a shared, collective vision and philosophy (kaupapa)*

The Kura Kaupapa Māori have a collective vision that is written into a formal charter, called *Te Aho Matua*. This vision provides the guidelines for excellence, that is, what a good Māori education should entail. It also acknowledges the Pākehā culture and the skills required by Māori children to participate fully in New Zealand society. *Te Aho Matua* builds on the Kaupapa of Te Kōhanga Reo and provides the parameters for the uniqueness that is Kura Kaupapa Māori. Its power is in its ability to articulate and connect with Māori aspirations politically, socially, economically, and culturally. A powerful vision is able to provide impetus and direction to political and educational struggle.

Kaupapa Māori theory as transformative praxis

In summary, Kaupapa Māori theory is an intervention strategy that takes up Paulo Freire's (1972) notions of conscientisation, resistance, and transformative praxis. The Māori reconfiguration of these ideas rejects the notion that each of these concepts stand individually or that they are in a lineal progression from conscientisation to resistance and then to praxis. That is, I argue that one state is not necessarily a prerequisite to, or contingent on, the other states. The popular linear representation of transformative action, based on a predominantly western type of thinking, can be represented like this:

Figure 1

Conscientisation ⟶ Resistance ⟶ Transformation

The position implicit within Kaupapa Māori theorising and praxis, and which may have wider significance for other indigenous populations, is that all of the above components are important, but all need to be held simultaneously, standing in equal relation to one another. This representation might best be understood as a cycle:

Figure 2
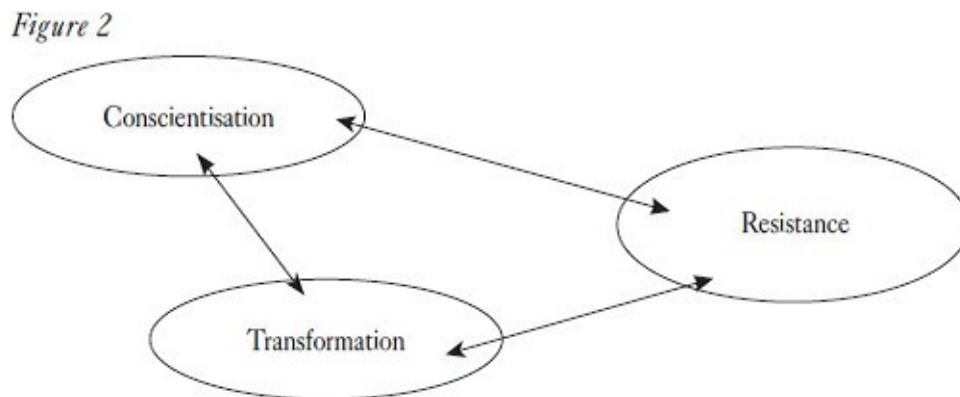
Individuals and groups enter the cycle from any position and do not necessar-ily (this insight reflects Māori experience within Kaupapa Māori interventions) start at the point of conscientisation. Individuals might become caught up in transformative action (praxis) unintentionally. For example, parents might take their children to Kōhanga Reo because it was the only early childhood education option in the town, and this later led to them becoming both conscious about the politics of language revitalisation and active participants in the resistance movement. Māori experience suggests that the elements of conscientisation, resistance, and transformative action may occur in any order and, indeed, may all occur simultaneously. It is important to note as well that the arrows in Figure 2 go in both directions, which reinforces the idea of simultaneous engagement with more than one element. The cycle diagram is an inclusive representation of struggle and moves beyond a hierarchical representation implied in a lineal model. In the cycle diagram, all Māori can be plotted somewhere on the circle (some are standing still and some are moving in one direction). The point is that every Māori is in the struggle whether they like it or not, and whether they know it or not.

Testing for the veracity of a Kaupapa Māori theory approach

In this section, I consider the question of how to determine the veracity of a Kaupapa Māori (Māori philosophy and practice) approach. I explore how to gauge the effectiveness of work that uses a Kaupapa Māori approach. These five 'tests' or elements might be used in two ways. First, the five elements provide a quick guide as to how one might more effectively undertake transforming work utilising a Kaupapa Māori theory approach. Second, the five elements provide a way of assessing one's contribution towards making effective change for Māori interests.

It is worth remembering that Kaupapa Māori as an approach must not be captured by academics working solely within academic institutions. Its transforming purpose must continue to be driven by a praxis dynamic that links back to the Māori community and iwi interests from which it has evolved; its broader application should reflect Māori and iwi interests and accountabilities. (Furthermore, such an approach needs to avoid being captured within the dominant institutional environment and its individualised academic behaviours such as meeting PBRF research outputs.)

Positionality

Where one speaks from is important; we need to locate ourselves in time and space. Why one speaks is important. Does the researcher or academic understand their own capacities and limitations? What is their transforming record that lends legitimacy to their work? What is my experience that supports the validity of my commentary? Who am I speaking to? How am I connected to the topic and to the audience? What and whose interests are served by my work? How do I engage with indigenous frameworks and theorising?

Criticality

Does the commentary or analysis adequately account for the politics of our history? There is need to build one's understanding of the critical context – the Māori political and historical context and the context of unequal power and social relations. Am I able to use these critical understandings and tools? More importantly, do we understand how our colonisation is being formed and reformed over the top of us? Do we have the critical understandings and knowledge to argue for the theoretical space for Māori language, knowledge, and interests? If we are unable to read the world critically, our transformations and interventions may come up short.

Structural and cultural considerations

There is need to work at both cultural and structural change. By cultural change, I mean those changes that people can influence via human agency. However, change is not just about changing people, as this can become deficit oriented if we see them as 'needing to be improved'. We must also challenge the structural impediments that constrain Māori cultural, social, and economic interests. Our struggle is not one struggle, but many struggles, often in multiple sites, in multiple shapes, and taking place simultaneously.

'Praxicality'

Praxis is an important element in a Kaupapa Māori approach. What are the practical and theoretical elements involved? Praxis requires us to constantly reflect on what we are doing (usually with our community of interest) and to make any adjustments that may be necessary. Praxis involves a continuous cycle of action, reflection, and reaction. There is a need to test our theorising against our practical enactments.

Transformability

There is a need to be transforming in our intent. What positive changes are there for Māori as a result of your engagement? Maintaining the status quo is insufficient when it perpetuates the existing situation of unequal power and social relations. It is important to focus on projects that do not simply describe our pathology but to move to enact the transforming of our condition. There is a need to move beyond the reproduction of the status quo and develop meaningful transformative outcomes.

Conclusion: 'Struggle without end'[1]

For most Māori and other indigenous communities, we survive in contexts where our colonisation persists. That is, within unequal power relations between dominant others and subordinated indigenous populations. In Aotearoa, colonisation has not been overthrown, nor has it gone away. It not only remains ever-present, it is also resilient, continually changing into new forms. Indigenous communities need to remain in a state of preparedness to resist these shifting forces.

Our struggle is not one-dimensional or singular. It is multiple struggles occurring in many places – often simultaneously. We must announce that selected and singular policy interventions are insufficient. There is no 'silver bullet', no 'magic pill', no 'single policy'. There is need to invest in change on a broad range of fronts – a 360 degree approach. Some of these changes we need to take responsibility for ourselves; others are situated in the public policy domain.

Our struggle is also with ourselves. It rests not just on the individual, but also on our families, on our communities, on our tribes, on our people as a whole. We must defend our cultural inclination towards collectivity and to revitalise and re-empower our cultural ways of knowing, being, and acting. We need to value and practise the collaborative power that resides in the collective. We should not shrink from our cultural responsibilities, knowledge, and practices. We must re-centre the values of reciprocity, sharing, respecting each other: as families, as tribes, as communities, as lifetime guardians of our environment. We must understand the tension that exists between individual rights on the one hand and communal responsibility on the other. It is not just about what *I* can do, but more about what *we* can do responsibly and collectively.

Our struggle must be positive and proactive. We must move beyond being negative and reactive. Our struggle must shift to accentuating our well-being. We cannot afford to remain trapped or debilitated by our historical discontent. While we should not forget our history, we must use it as a lever for building and transforming our futures. We must name our own world and futures; if we hesitate, others will do it for us.

Our struggle is to become more self-determining. We must move beyond the rhetoric of self-determination (an outcome) to being self-determining (a process). In other words, we must enact self-determination in our every-day, every-hour, every-minute practice, not just hold it as a utopian ideal. We must recognise the small victories along the way to our transformative vision. This is *not* a movement away from or against dominant cultures – it is a positive assertion about the need to *also make space* for minority cultures and to proactively protect languages and cultures that might be at risk. More often, it is also about protecting the original cultures and languages that belong in the soil and landscapes of countries that have been colonised.

Our struggle is also for our minds. There is a need to understand our own participation in forming our own domination, exploitation, and oppression. We need to educate ourselves out of false consciousness and to free our minds from hegemony. Education has been a major factor in embedding indigenous inferiority. We must reclaim the power of education to act in *our* interests. An important de-colonising act therefore, is to struggle over the *meaning* and *intention* of education and schooling. It needs to serve *all* peoples and not simply be a means to reproduce dominant cultural expectations at the expense of indigenous and Māori interests.

Note

1. This phrase is used by Ranginui Walker for the title of his book *Ka Whawhai Tonu M*ātou: *Struggle without End*.

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