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# How to transfer and manage a public resource ?

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Bulletin de l'APAD

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# How to transfer and manage a public resource ?<sup>1</sup>

Wiebe Nauta

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## NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

The author obtained his doctorate at de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in Development Sociology in 2001. See the references for the title of the dissertation.

### Introduction

- 1 In this paper I deal with the changing relationship between a land sector NGO, the Provincial Department of Land Affairs (DLA) and members of a landless community in Gasela, the Eastern Cape, South Africa. I try to explore why an experienced NGO depicted the Gasela community as a potentially thriving agri-village once they would secure full access to the land they had inhabited for decades. In doing so I show that an NGO is able to engage in what I have termed : *strategic translations*. I aim to show how an organization like the Monti Rural Association (MRA)<sup>2</sup>, quite pragmatically, adopted a political strategy in which it became necessary to depict the Gasela residents - with few agricultural skills, a lack of resources and a problematic history with managing a common resource - as potential commercial farmers. These rural dwellers - a rural proletariat ? - had to be portrayed as potential farmers in order to convince the Department of Land Affairs, which had adopted the idea of economic viability as the most important criterion in the late nineteen nineties, to transfer the land to the community.
- 2 In the process I show that I agree with an author like Nyamwaya (1997) who stated :  
“while in theory communities are supposed to play a leading role in the health-development process, the process is still largely controlled by government and NGO development “experts” who do not allow communities to play major roles” (p. 184).
- 3 In my opinion, such processes of control also take place in the land sector in South Africa. Through research, so-called participatory workshops and NGO reporting these

organizations are able to 'manipulate' images that are relayed between the actors involved.



Figure 1 : Gasela (Adapted from: Buckle, 1995)

#### Gasela : an 'abandoned' farm

- 4 On the road from East London to Johannesburg, eight kilometres before the town of Stutterheim - founded by German settlers - a large signpost to the left of the road points to the Gasela railway station. A bumpy dirt-road not only leads to this small rural train station but also to Gasela (See : Figure 1), a farm that was once called 'Mooifontein' (Pretty Fountain/Spring) and that is situated between the road and the railway. Significantly, this railway line was once, in the nineteen-eighties, not only a boundary between two parts of Mooifontein farm, but also the 'international border' between the Republic of South Africa and the Ciskei - a bantustan where the people were brutally oppressed (e.g. Manona, 1980).
- 5 One of the most remarkable features in the morning is the quiet. One hears the traffic on the road, but the entire farm seems deserted. The colonial-style red-roofed farmhouse is surrounded by a prison-like two and a half meter barbed wire fence. The gate is locked and the house looks abandoned. The roof over the braai<sup>3</sup>-area has fallen down and the garden is overgrown with high grasses and weeds. However, on closer inspection some activity can be observed in the yards of the thirty odd 'African' huts and mud houses that surround the farmhouse. A few women are hanging clothes to dry on fences, some are cooking, small children are playing in the dust. Men seem virtually absent. In the afternoons, however, Gasela seems to come to life. The many children have returned from school and usually the younger ones are playing soccer on a dusty patch in front of the barbed wire fence, while young men practice rugby on a relatively well-maintained rugby field next to the farmhouse.
- 6 What is surprising is the fact that few farming activities seem to take place. Yes, there are several small well-kept gardens with maize, beans and pumpkins - one should probably call them 'subsistence' plots - next to some of the huts. Furthermore, some cattle roam the farm during the day and a few people keep chickens and pigs. But there is no sign of intensive agriculture or stock-keeping. The fields lie fallow and are partly overgrown with bushes and young trees and the cow sheds near the farmhouse are empty and look

dilapidated. Moreover, apart from a broken-down tractor and an old diesel water pump, all farm implements seem to have vanished. No ploughs, harrows, not even shovels and hoes. Walking around one wonders whether this is the farm that the Monti Rural Association has described as a potentially thriving agri-village...

- 7 According to figures presented by the Monti Rural Association 218 people can be regarded as Gasela residents<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the Gasela settlement has 52 sites but only 30 of these sites are currently occupied (MRA, 1997 : p. 11). In its 1996 report, *Gasela Proposal to the Department of Land Affairs*, the Monti Rural Association (1996) is very clear about the agricultural potential of the land and the wishes of the community :

“...MRA proposes that Gasela be treated as a **pilot project for the establishment of an agricultural settlement** which aims to meet the food requirements of the community as well as provide a cash income which provides residents with a livelihood...” (p. 8).

- 8 and :

“...The Gasela community is a stable and cohesive community who want a rural lifestyle where their main source of income is agriculture...” (p.9).

- 9 While concluding :

“The Gasela community should be given ownership rights to the land on which they reside - Portion 1 of Mooifontein (89 ha)...” (p. 12).

- 10 However, the Department of Land Affairs seemed reluctant to transfer the land as it was not convinced by the arguments in the MRA report. Therefore, the department demanded follow-up research. This much more thorough research by the Monti Rural Association (1997) was presented in *the Report on Gasela November 1997*. Now it was also the MRA that critically queried the skills available :

“Although there are different interests in Gasela, the majority of respondents prioritise agricultural enterprise, both as a productive option and in terms of the settlement ramifications. Although there is some level of agricultural skill in the community, especially in vegetable production and soil preparation, it should be acknowledged that there is a shortage of the range of skills that is required for a successful commercial enterprise” (p. 14).

- 11 Nevertheless, the Monti Rural Association, still saw a good opportunity for farming as it expected that :

“...if 20 hectares is allocated to cabbages and 20 hectares to potatoes then the resulting estimated annual gross margin will be R320 974.00<sup>5</sup> per annum (...). It is clear that the transfer of agricultural land to the Gasela community will lead to a substantial improvement in their quality of life. In very hard, material term, if one divides the projected cash flow by the number of extended households, then each extended household will benefit by approximately R10 000 per annum...” (p. 25).

- 12 Thus, the organization still remained convinced, in its main recommendations, that :

“Gasela should be swiftly transferred to its residents” (p. 28).

- 13 As a social scientist and an agricultural scientist, I felt that this image of Gasela - a potentially thriving agricultural settlement for its income mainly dependent on agricultural production - was not consistent with what I encountered on the farm. This led me to seek answers to many questions. For example, what was the background of these people, what were their experiences, as ‘a community’, with communal activities and why were they not cultivating - or ‘ploughing’<sup>6</sup> as the people themselves would say -

the land on a larger scale? In order to answer some of these questions it is useful to go back a few years.

#### A Short History of the Mooifontein Farm

- 14 Mooifontein, or Gasela as it is referred to nowadays, was a typical white-owned farm in the sixties and seventies. The white farmer lived in the large 11-roomed house, while the black farm labourers, with their families, lived in a cluster of roundavels<sup>7</sup> and mud houses at a distance of about seventy-five meters from the main house on a rocky patch of land. The men worked as labourers while some of the women worked as a maid or a kitchen help in the main house. The baas<sup>8</sup> was omnipotent in those days and ruled over the workers twenty-four hours a day.
- 15 In April 1978 Ciskei Living Stock Board (CLSB) took over Mooifontein. In that period of roughly two years the CSLB expanded the territory of the farm as it was intended to be eventually incorporated into the Ciskei, the new homeland in the making. Nevertheless, in 1980, in preparation of Ciskei's independence<sup>9</sup>, it was decided that the railway line would become an 'international border'. The part of the farm that was situated on the other side of the railway track became part of the Republic of Ciskei, while the part between the main road and the railway remained in the Republic of South Africa. During this time quite a few Africans moved to the 'good side' of the farm in order to retain their South African citizenship.
- 16 In 1980 the apartheid government - by all respondents referred to as GG ('Gee Gee'), or General Government - took control over the South African part of the farm. One of the departments that arrived was 'het Departement van Ontwikkelingshulp'<sup>10</sup>. It was the start of a period of relative prosperity and an abundance of work for the Gasela dwellers, said Mr. Vuyo Yako, a Gasela resident :
- “...GG was very nice to us, they helped us with food and transport of sick people and the rugby team and they employed us with about 500 other people...”.
- 17 However, for many others in the surrounding areas it marked the onset of a period of great suffering as it was the time of homeland consolidation and forced removals. This meant that many areas were cleared of the superfluous 'blacks' to create 'all-white' areas. Those that were removed were consequently dumped in the bantustans. These new areas of high influx were then serviced from Gasela by the South African government. It used the farm as a base in the Republic of South Africa to 'aid and develop' these areas in the Ciskei - across the railway line. According to Mr. Vuyo Yako, this programme of assistance involved, amongst other things, the building of houses :
- “...the Department of Development Aid came to assist people that suffered without houses. If people's houses broke down, the government gave them tin houses...”.
- 18 It was all part of a political deal between homeland leader Lennox Sebe and the apartheid regime where the latter provided much of the infrastructure.
- 19 As mentioned above, this period of prosperity and an abundance of work on the farm and in the neighbouring areas led to a great influx of new labourers. Some of the new arrivals came to settle permanently as Mrs. Nomntu Stuurman described :
- “We came to Gasela and my husband received R. 300 per month, me 150 Rand. I was working in the house of the umlungu<sup>11</sup> (...) because I know the job of the kitchen (...). We built a house (...) and we started ploughing a garden”.
- 20 However, a large part of the 500 labourers, who were from different tribes like the amaXhosa, amaSotho, amaNdebele and amaZulu, did not reside on the farm permanently.

They stayed in a camp of tin shacks that was built under the gum trees, while others stayed on farms in the neighbouring areas. During this whole period the fertile farm was cultivated to provide the labour pool with food. Crops like maize, beans and potatoes were grown and the people who stayed on the farm were allowed to graze their cattle.

- 21 When, finally, in the beginning of the nineties, the winds of change began to sweep the country the General Government was no longer needed in Gasela as the era of the bantustans was clearly coming to an end. Thus the white personnel with some of the more skilled black staff, like truck and tractor drivers, were transferred to East London and the tin shack settlement was destroyed when the labourers were sacked. The original Gasela residents -and a few new arrivals that stayed- were left to their own devices and to make matters worse, the community itself came under threat of removal. In February 1993, when the last whites left, the remaining labourers were told to leave the farm within a month. However, one of the community leaders, Mr. Jim Dabani, who had lived and worked in Gasela since 1983 as the foreman of the watchmen, decided to take action. He went to the head office of the General Government in East London to complain about the impending removal :

“...I told the man who was in charge, Mr. Jung, that I had heard that he wanted to chase us off the farm. ‘Where must we go?’ I told him. ‘I know nothing about that’ he said. He then told me : ‘go back and count all the houses in Gasela and phone me how many houses there are. Stay there...even if the police come to chase you, tell them they must come to me’...”.

- 22 The community members also informed the local commissioner of police, as Mr. Vuyo Yako recounted during an interview :

“When GG left (...) Mr. Greef, the commissioner of police - with Jim Dabani’s help - came over and said : ‘don’t move, I’ll give you numbers until the government can do something for you’”.

- 23 Although the remaining Gasela residents now had oral permission to stay on the farm, it marked the beginning of a period of severe insecurity, complicated by the fact that most people were now unemployed.

- 24 In that same year, 1993, the Department of Agriculture took control of the farm and the situation became even more complex as this department leased the farm to a white farmer, a Mr. Steen. Instead of working together with the farm labourers, or properly employing them, this farmer abused people and threatened the community. According to community members he bossed people around, prohibited grazing on the farm, used the occasional violence and threatened them with eviction. As Mr. Dabani described in an interview

“Mr. Steen was bad. He threatened to shoot our cattle and bulldoze our houses...”.

- 25 During this initial period of threats and confusion several residents asked a white lady from Kei Road who came to Gasela regularly to sell ‘utywala’ (alcohol), for advice. She subsequently contacted the Monti Rural Association and passed on the request for help.

#### The Involvement of the Monti Rural Association

- 26 When MRA fieldworkers arrived in mid-1993, they encountered a tense situation. Although two community leaders were active, there seemed to be little sense of direction. Therefore, one of the first things MRA did was to advise the people to improve their standard of organization. Moreover, the NGO helped them to establish links with other structures to improve their capacity and strengthen their bargaining position. As a result, the Gasela Residents Association (GRA) was set up which was, subsequently, linked to the

sub-regional committee of SANCO<sup>12</sup> in Stutterheim. Furthermore, the Monti Rural Association attempted to mediate in the conflict between the lessee and the Gasela farm dwellers. However, MRA also formally complained to the Department of Land Affairs (DLA) about the continuous harassment of the community by the lessee.

- 27 Nevertheless, the process was slow and it took several years for the situation on the farm to reverse. One of the first victories was recorded in 1994 after Mr. Steen cut off the water supply to the residents of Gasela. When MRA was informed about the matter they took Derek Hanekom, the newly appointed Minister of Land Affairs, who was visiting the Eastern Cape in October 1994, to Gasela. Hanekom was appalled and assured the community that they would not be evicted. He also took action with regard to the water supply, that was reconnected shortly afterwards. For the members of the community this was quite a victory. Not only had the Minister of Land Affairs personally visited Gasela, his support also gave them a feeling that the balance of power was tipping. They felt that they might be able to defeat Mr. Steen. And indeed, the Department of Land Affairs eventually terminated the lease of Mr. Steen. Nevertheless, he was allowed to stay on the farm as 'care-taker' until the department removed him altogether in 1996.

#### The Fight for Land

- 28 Apart from assisting and facilitating the establishment of the Gasela Residents Association (GRA), the Monti Rural Association also informed the people about the possibilities of land acquisition. In a first attempt MRA helped the GRA to submit a land claim to the Advisory Commission on Land Allocation<sup>13</sup>. One of the main arguments in the claim, in the eyes of the community (and MRA), concerned the fact that :

“...the community has been settling on the farm since 1960...”,

- 29 and

“...they do not have any land to practice farming...”.

- 30 After a lengthy procedure, in the course of which the Advisory Commission on Land Allocation was succeeded by the Commission on Land Allocation and eventually by the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights and during which time several new laws and procedures evolved, the Gasela Residents Association received a negative response on April 10, 1996<sup>14</sup>. In short, the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights determined that the people of Gasela could not qualify for a restitution claim as it did not concern land that they had lost under racially discriminatory laws.
- 31 After the initial disappointment, MRA, in consultation with the Gasela Residents Association, decided to pursue another avenue. Instead of a restitution claim, it was now expected that the Land Redistribution Programme<sup>15</sup> (Department of Land Affairs, 1997) would yield the desired result. This programme was formulated to transfer white-owned land to the black majority on a *willing-buyer willing-seller*<sup>16</sup> basis. However, as the land was already owned by the state, and no white farmer had to be compensated, MRA argued that the people of Gasela should be granted the farm, so that they could use their settlement subsidy to purchase an additional portion of land. Therefore, in its 1996 report, *Gasela Proposal to the Department of Land Affairs*, that was quoted above, the Monti Rural Association (1996) concluded :

“In summary, in the interests of regional stability and in line with DLA’s stated priority of redistribution of state land, MRA proposes that Portion 1 of the farm Mooifontein be granted to the Gasela community and that settlement subsidies and the option of purchasing an additional portion of land be made available to them” (p. 8).

32 Following the submission of this proposal to the provincial Department of Land Affairs (DLA), it became clear that the department remained sceptical about the transfer of the land. Two major obstacles remained. First of all the director of the Provincial DLA, John Carver, who -until a few years earlier- had been the director of MRA, was still not convinced that the Gasela community had the actual will, the capacity, the skills, and the resources to farm the land successfully. In other words, he had doubts about the economic viability of the plan. Secondly, a Stutterheim District plan was to be formulated in order to investigate the settlement options for the wider region. In such a plan it would be investigated whether various black communities would have to be amalgamated into several large and well-serviced rural settlements. Therefore, it was not at all clear whether such a District Plan would leave room for small autonomous agri-villages like Gasela. Thus, in such a scenario, the Gasela residents might eventually have to leave the farm in order to be offered housing in township-type settlements in the area. During a meeting of Gasela stakeholders<sup>17</sup> in August 1997<sup>18</sup> Mr. Carver referred to both obstacles :

“We were not actually sure whether people would be actually interested in farming. Moreover, it is necessary to look at the area in relation to the surrounding areas...”.

33 Later on in the meeting he furthermore stated :

“My personal guess is that we might have to think about three satellite settlements in the area. In the end we might have to make some hard decisions...”.

34 Nevertheless, although the Department of Land Affairs was not at all convinced that the transfer of land to the Gasela residents was desirable, it postponed making a hard decision since work on the Stutterheim District Plan would take several years. Moreover, the Gasela residents had rights to stay on the land due to the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Acts<sup>19</sup>, that gave them short term tenure security. As the Monti Rural Association did not share the apprehension of DLA, in regard to capacity, skills and will of the community, the department -in the mean time- awarded MRA another research contract to prove the contrary. That research, which built on the research in 1996, yielded the *Report on Gasela November 1997*, that was quoted above and which, although more realistic in regard to problems around lack of agricultural skills, still argued in favour of land transfer.

35 As could be expected, the Department of Land Affairs did not fundamentally alter its position after it received the MRA 1997 follow-up report. However, the department did make clear that it would not object if the community started cultivating the land in order for them to prove that they could exploit the resources on the farm successfully. Over and above the land on which they resided, the people of Gasela were also granted permission to make use of another portion of the farm on the other side of the road. In this manner the Gasela residents could use the time, needed by the departments to sort out all the intricacies of the Stutterheim District plan, to demonstrate their eagerness and ability to farm in order to convince the government. Subsequently, in early November 1997 the Monti Rural Association informed the Gasela residents that they had permission to cultivate the land.

36 Consequently, rapid cultivation of the land became crucial for the people of Gasela and for MRA. Why was it then that almost a year later the land had not been cultivated ? Was it a question of lack of resources, did people indeed lack the skills, or were there community dynamics that the NGO might have overlooked ?

To Plough or Not to Plough...



- 37 In August 1998, when the author was last in Gasela, the farm's large fields yet had to be cultivated. Although, as in other years, nearly every household had cultivated a 'garden'<sup>20</sup>, not one of the larger fields had been ploughed, either communally or privately. Nevertheless, the 'ploughing' issue was an important issue that frequently cropped up in community meetings. Moreover, practically all the community members, who were active in one of the Gasela structures, mentioned it as a priority; not only in their conversations with outsiders. Then why was still no ploughing done ?
- 38 The most frequently heard explanations by the Gasela farm dwellers had to do with the difficulty of finding a tractor for a reasonable price. For their private gardens people usually hired a tractor from the neighbouring village as Mr. Xolani Dubeni explained in an interview :
- "Sometimes when we are going to plough, we ask a tractor to plough for us from Ndakana<sup>21</sup>. A garden costs 35 Rand to plough. I sow the seeds myself by hand..."
- 39 But according to Mr. Mbulelo Mfene this was not possible in November for the farm's large fields :
- "In November we didn't find a tractor, the Ndakana tractors were busy when MRA came to give us this place (...). We have no ox ploughs. If we have support, the government can borrow us a tractor. We did plough our gardens but that was also difficult. It took place in the evenings (...), and on Saturday and Sunday. Costs are 60 rand for a small garden. People are waiting for their pensions. Few people work here and there is too much weeds and grass to plough by hand..."
- 40 Subsequently, several community leaders went to a neighbouring white farmer who indicated that he would be willing to plough for them, as Mrs. Nomntu Stuurman recounted :
- "We were preparing to plough but we were asking the white man to plough. He wanted to charge 4700 rand, the second time we asked [it was] 5000 rand..."
- 41 This clearly was an amount of cash that could not be raised by the community since the main source of income is pensions and disability grants. In a last attempt - it was now already March 1998 - some of the men, who worked for the Döhne Agricultural Research Station, tried to borrow a tractor there as Mr. Mbulelo Mfene explained :
- "I am busy to get a tractor from Döhne. We are waiting for April, if the Döhne budget comes, they can plough for us..."
- 42 But also this attempt failed and, thus, most of the farm remained uncultivated.
- 43 When analyzing these answers it becomes clear that community members view the lack of access to a tractor as most problematic. However, several factors seem to be involved in this lack of access. First, there seems to be a shortage of available cash. Although the Ndakana tractors at face value seem much cheaper than the white farmer's tractor, that might actually prove to be an illusion. Sixty rand for one tenth of a hectare (the approximate size of a garden plot) also translates to 6000 rand for ten hectares. Such astronomical amounts of cash are very hard to cough up for a group of rural dwellers like the Gasela residents. Second, Mr. Mfene also suggested that time was a complicating factor. Not only were the available tractors busy on other fields during the ploughing season, the community members also lacked the time during the week. Work in the fields mainly had to be done in the weekend or in the evenings. This also suggests, as a third factor, problems around labour, especially during activity peaks. Additionally, the conversations I had with people about the ploughing issue and the meetings I attended suggested a 'culture of dependency'. These were people who primarily seemed to look for

help from outsiders when confronted with problems. In my view this was related to their history as farmworkers and the general oppressive machinery of the apartheid state that had marginalized them.

- 44 However, another factor also seemed to be at play here : the difficulty of managing a common resource. In Hardin's (1968) classical article *The Tragedy of the Commons*, he explains how herdsmen will keep as many cattle as possible on a common pasture. The damage done by adding an extra cow is shared amongst all herdsmen. The benefit, however, is mainly reaped by the individual. Eventually, according to Hardin, this will lead to a tragedy, an ecological disaster. Although the real world is much more complicated Hardin's model has helped to sensitize us to problems related to common resources. In Gasela another - but related - mechanism seems at play, which may remind us of the problems on the old Soviet collective farms : why invest privately - time, energy, money or other resources - in managing a common resource, while others -even those who invested less- will also reap the benefits.

#### The Women's Project

- 45 Indeed, after having been in Gasela for several days, I discovered that there was a history with managing a common resource in the community. My questions about the availability of seeds and fertilizer prompted community members to mention the 'women's project' which turned out to be an agricultural project located at the back of the main farm house. To my surprise, such a project had never been mentioned in any of the MRA reports about Gasela. It was a flat piece of land of about fifty metres long and twenty metres wide that had been neatly fenced off and was overgrown with weeds. Although it had obviously been a while ago, the land was once cleared of bushes. However, the seeds that were to be planted had not found their way into the soil but lay in a dark cupboard in the second kitchen of the farmhouse; that is - as was discovered later - most of the seeds. As a researcher I hoped that this project could provide some more clues for the failure to cultivate the large fields.
- 46 Several years ago, around 1995, a group of women from Gasela had been to a workshop in Stutterheim where they were encouraged to start an agricultural project. In my conversation with Mr. Nakase, a local councillor in the Transitional Rural Council (TRC) who represented Gasela in the Amatola District Council (ADC), he explained to me what the workshop had entailed. According to Nakase, the national and provincial ANC Women's League organized these workshops :
- “...advising women in the villages to start community gardens (...). We provided the women with seed, not from the council but from the Lutheran church in Stutterheim. We helped them distribute...”.
- 47 However, I could not discover any details about these workshops, nor could I find out whether the women had been coached after the workshop. I suspect, however, that the workshop had not entailed more than a stimulating speech about farming and the handing over of the seeds, as the project almost immediately ran aground.
- 48 During my fieldwork in Gasela the following conversation took place when I asked Mrs. Nomntu Stuurman, whether she was part of the women's project :
- “Yes, (laughing) we are ploughing a ‘useless plant’<sup>22</sup>, we found the implement of ploughing too late”.
- 49 For two years?
- “I don't know. The thing of many people is not right. Everyone has a different view so it ends up in conflict”.

50 What don't people agree about?

"First the TRC<sup>23</sup> gave us seeds, but the secretary of the women's league took the seeds for herself because we were not united".

51 What do you feel when you see the land unused ?

"I feel unhappy... if we can sit down together and have a resolution of the matter, then we can plough. I don't know... my main thing is that I want us to be united... All of us are involved, zonke<sup>24</sup>...".

52 Other women also complained about the project. Moreover, some said that the secretary of the ANC's women's league, Mrs. Nomphele Mbutana, had 'stolen' some of the seeds for her own use. According to some, this was one of the main reasons that led to the breakdown of the project.

53 However, in an interview with Mrs. Nomphele Mbutana herself, who seemed quite annoyed, she explained that they had ploughed this year in the women's project (which was not the case) :

"We didn't have money to buy seeds".

54 Why did you not use the seeds that are available ?

"We have a problem of the residential committee and we don't plant seeds because of the rain. There was too much and we were too busy with our gardens...".

55 For two years ?

[becoming quite angry] "I am asking you : your question is nice, but you can collect all of us and ask us why we do not plough. It is better when everyone is present. We started to collect ten rand of the people but not all of them wanted to contribute. They said they don't have".

56 What do you think is the solution ?

"I said earlier that we went home to home to collect ten rand to plant... We want to plough. But I promise you that this year we are going to plough...".

57 Clearly, even in this small version of a communal agricultural project in Gasela there were conflicts, irritations and misunderstandings around the use of resources. More specifically, there was the obvious tension between the private and the common domain that lead to distrust and tensions. The number one priority for every household is to get its own garden ploughed and planted and only when that has been achieved can people think about common agricultural goals. But even those goals are subordinate to private goals like sending children to school and clothing them. Undoubtedly, the ten rand contribution to the project was too much too ask of many of the Gasela women.

58 What does the women's project tell us with respect to the chance of success of an even larger scale agricultural project ? First, it can be predicted that raising more than one hundred rand per family, for ploughing alone, will be even more difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, if there are already problems around co-operation, between approximately twenty women in the women's project, would the participation of the whole community not lead to even greater problems ? Although several people are enthusiastic, they are somewhat reluctant to invest privately in what is seen as a common resource. This is explicitly illustrated by a statement by Mr. Vuyo Yako who explained why people would be hesitant to use their own cattle for ploughing. Apart from the fact that oxen are not kept anymore he stated that :

"People don't want to use animals to plough, because it makes the cattle weak and makes the meat not nice. That results in a low price. (...) I can't give the community my cow, if someone else uses it, they can hit it and push it so hard it can die".

59 Not only does the women's project illustrate the difficulties of private investments in a common resource, it also points to another set of problems in Gasela : weak committees and weak leadership.

#### Organization and Leadership

60 Although the list of community structures established from 1993 onwards, like the ANC youth league, the ANC Women's League, the ANC 'proper', the Gasela Residents Association (GRA), the Crèche Committee, the Water Committee and the Police Community Forum, seems impressive, most of these structures are rather ineffective. Moreover, the GRA and the ANC proper are one and the same and fraught with leadership struggles during the past few years.

61 A residents association, affiliated to SANCO, is ideal-typically a civic organization that unites people outside the sphere of party-politics. However, in Gasela there were no other political parties active besides the ANC. As Lindile Msukwini, secretary of the ANC and the Gasela Residents Association explained :

"The role of SANCO is to unite all organizations in the villages, but here we are only one. The [ANC] meetings are every week but sometimes it skips a week when the community needs to discuss something as SANCO. The ANC committee is the same as the SANCO committee".

62 He, furthermore, added :

"A village is no village without SANCO...".

63 Thus, the committee that was the ANC in one week was SANCO in the next. Nevertheless, although the committee seemed quite active and although there were no party political struggles in the community, it appeared that a lack of experience, combined with a lack of leadership left the community in a rather vulnerable position.

64 It appeared that a leadership vacuum existed since Mr. Jim Dabani, a vocal old man who was the first elected chairperson of the GRA, retired in 1996 because of a severe illness. His successor, Xolani Dubeni did not last long as Lindile Msukwini explained :

"...he was chair in 1997 after Jim Dabani, for about six to seven months. He was rude in his position and used abusive language to older people in many meetings, [saying things like :] 'I am the chair, so you must do a thing that I like' (...). In a well-attended meeting, of about 100 people, the people voted to take him out".

65 Subsequently, Mrs. Nolindili Bhatyi became the first woman chair, although her husband, who is a church minister, seemed to pull strings in the background. However, the committee seemed quite directionless and Mrs. Bhatyi was far from vocal on the important issues. Mr. Dabani, somewhat bitter and rarely attending meetings these days, felt that the GRA was rife with jealousy and that they are stupid and don't do their job. In fact, in an interview, he still saw himself as a leader :

"...when outsiders arrive, they still come to my place".

66 Having spent time in Gasela during my fieldwork gave me the opportunity to discover some of the reasons why people found it hard to start ploughing the fields. Lack of resources and management skills, a reluctance to invest private resources for the common good, organizational weaknesses and leadership struggles, all seemed to have contributed to the lack of progress. Why then was MRA still arguing in favour of establishing an agri-village in Gasela? The answer can be found in the changing relationship between MRA and the Department of Land Affairs.

Locked in a 'Market-Oriented' Embrace

67 In the early years of the transition to democracy, during the *freedom and consultation era*<sup>25</sup>, the new government and the NGO sector became very close and a new role for NGOs was envisaged. For example, according to the 1996 *Green Paper on South African Land Policy*, published by the Department of Land Affairs :

“The land reform programme emphasises the key role of the non-governmental sector in supporting rural and urban development and land reform policies. Organisations in this sector have established strong links with communities involved in land struggles and have been instrumental in enabling communities to articulate their demands for land” (p. 78).

68 It was clear that DLA acknowledged the important role of land sector NGOs. Thus, especially with small communities like Gasela, most communication between DLA and ‘the people’ took place through organizations like the Monti Rural Association. With many of the larger communities the department itself had direct and regular contact.

69 However, after the new government had become more firmly established -partly due to the brain drain in which the best qualified people had left the NGO sector to join the new government- it retreated in its original niche. Former comrades became government bureaucrats -more loyal to their new employer : the government. Moreover, a *new realism discourse*, inspired by the macro-economic strategy GEAR (Department of Finance (1998 (1996)) swept the country. By 1997, the feelings of expectation within the Monti Rural Association with regard to co-operation with government had been replaced by feelings of frustration. It seemed to them as if the Department of Land Affairs kept them on a string, especially since their 1996 report on Gasela had been received critically by DLA. Their level of frustration was especially high because of the fact that their former colleague and ex-MRA co-ordinator, John Carver, was now the director at DLA.

70 In the view of the new the MRA Director, Dudley Eastwood, there were macro-economic issues at stake here. In fact, in late 1997<sup>26</sup>, in a strategic planning meeting with his staff, he stated that :

“...the basic assumption of the Department of Land Affairs is that giving arable land to the poor leads to a waste of economic resources. Don’t be confused or idealistic about land reform in South Africa, you have got to go back to GEAR to understand why the department behaves like this...”.

71 Later on senior staff member Bongani Matsila remarked :

“For Gasela John (Carver) seems to push for a solution whereby people will be placed in settlements with services and gardens...”.

72 This was the greatest fear of many rural dwellers. They would be rounded up from the scattered patches of land where they lived, to be placed in rural townships where the government could provide housing, infrastructure, services like water and electricity and schools and clinics. However, Dudley Eastwood still saw a possibility to convince DLA to transfer the land :

“We’re going for a major showdown with the Department of Land Affairs around Gasela...”.

73 This ‘showdown’ would involve fighting the department on its own turf and in its own terms whereby ‘economic viability’ became the defining notion. Thus, through the Department of Land Affairs the ‘new realism discourse’ also penetrated the work of the Monti Rural Association. Subsequently, in this political game to convince DLA to transfer the land ‘hard science’ became the political instrument. In this battle with DLA, MRA would consciously move beyond the soft type of research they had conducted in the past -

social surveys, community skills assessment et cetera. The management team was convinced that only by adding hard facts - soil survey, labour requirements, predicted cash flows et cetera - they would be able to convince DLA. A fighting spirit took hold of the organization to ensure that they found the right arguments in facts about soils, rainfall and production figures, against the background of images of a community consisting of rural agricultural producers in Gasela. As a result the 'scientifically' argued *Report on Gasela November 1997* was produced. Thus, the Gasela case became a mix of a desire to regain lost prestige and respect of the Department of Land Affairs and a concern with the plight of these rural residents. In this political struggle the plight of the Gasela residents came to be reduced to a pragmatic and bare minimum : the transfer of the land. For the time being it suited MRA, politically, to ignore the 'social reality in the field'. The number one priority became securing the transfer of land.

- 74 In this political struggle to convince DLA, the Monti Rural Association had to make use of three 'tools of translation'.

The Tools Of Translation : How Did Mra Create. The Image Of Gasela As A Potentially Thriving Agri-Village ?

- 75 Intermediary organizations like the Monti Rural Association engage in what I have termed *strategic translations*. As a go-between NGOs can manipulate the images that it relays between the actors involved, in this case the people of Gasela and the Department of Land Affairs. Three instruments were of importance to an intermediary organization like the Monti Rural Association : 1. Their mode of research; 2. the method of interaction with the beneficiaries through workshops; and, 3. The reports that were produced. These instruments, or 'tools of translation' were used in the political process to attempt to convince DLA of the need to transfer the land.

The Research

- 76 First of all, let us look at the research methods employed by NGOs. It is clear that research in any context should be critically evaluated, more especially in contexts where the actors stand to gain from the results of the research. Many non-governmental organizations engage in research activities that are enveloped in the same 'objective' and 'scientific' formats and discourse as academic research projects. However, there are distinct differences. The main difference is that the research conducted by NGOs, frequently, has an activist purpose. The research is part of a political process and is usually conducted to prove a certain point. Although academic research may also be influenced by those that pay the grants - especially in these times dominated by 'market thinking'- academic institutions in most parts of the world still try to protect their positions of scientific independence. NGOs, however, are less concerned with issues of 'objectivity'. In fact, these organizations can be quite blunt about the way in which they conduct research. I came across a clear example in a discussion with the Director of MRA concerning another MRA research project, that I was involved with in an advisory capacity. In his view, I approached the topic too academically :

"We are setting a precedent with this rights enquiry<sup>27</sup>. MRA has political objectives, more than the Department of Land Affairs. Our research is not neutral research, we need particular types of information..."

- 77 This was also the case in Gasela.
- 78 The Monti Rural Association focused strategically on the economic and physical intricacies of the plan in order to be able to convince the Department of Land Affairs that was preoccupied by its own 'economic viability' discourse. This technocratic and (pseudo-



)scientific approach, stressing agricultural production factors, was enhanced by making use of images of the Gasela residents as rural agricultural producers. In much of Southern Africa such images are used by the development industry to justify agricultural development interventions. Rural residents with decades of experience in the cash economy and an urban outlook, are represented as 'traditional farmers'. The persistence of such images is related to a dominant and widespread belief that Africa is the one remaining continent where man is still close to nature and 'traditionalism' is prevalent.

79 In my conversations with Gasela residents a completely different image came to the fore. Most men and women had worked and lived all over South Africa in order to secure a cash income. From Cape Town, to KwaZulu-Natal to Johannesburg, people, whether young or old, had worked all over. These were no traditional farmers but a rurally based proletariat (Bank, 1997).

#### The Workshops

80 The workshops conducted by MRA in Gasela were also instrumental in the NGO strategy to create an image of Gasela as a possible thriving agri-village. As Pottier (1997) has argued :

“participatory workshops remain structured encounters marked by hidden agendas and strategic manoeuvres” (p.221).

81 In fact, standard interaction between NGOs and their beneficiaries frequently takes this form. Also in the case of Gasela interaction between MRA and Gasela community members mainly took place in this manner. It is usually a lively happening in which information is gathered and disseminated. In fact, it is possible to distinguish between two types of workshops :

- the information dissemination, or teaching, workshop ;
- the consultation and participation workshop.

82 In the first type of workshops community members are informed or taught about a diverse range of topics, ranging from information on what land reform entails to the way in which community meetings should be conducted, or the way in which votes should be cast during election times. The second type of workshop is the type whereby, under the banner of 'consultation' and 'participation', the community is asked to share 'its' opinion about a range of topics and participate in decisions. However, although both types make use of dynamic methods of interaction, the workshops leave much room for interpretation, errors and, what I call, 'strategic translation'.

83 The information dissemination workshops can be quite problematic, as it is usually the NGO that decides what type of information should be disseminated during these workshops. When very basic workshops are conducted about bookkeeping, or how to conduct meetings, problems rarely occur. However, in cases where the NGO briefs the community about important strategic issues, like for example around land, problems may arise. As it generally is the NGO that holds the trump cards, the organization can easily paint a picture of the situation that strategically suits them. Here we come to an important point. The intermediary status of NGOs, especially in countries or areas where 'the people at grassroots', and often even the government officials themselves, lack very basic knowledge, leaves room for these organizations to engage in, what I call : 'strategic translations'. In other words, as these NGOs are usually the link between 'the people at grassroots' and government officials, the organizations are able to reformulate -or

'translate'- the demands of 'the people' for the government departments they work with, and vice versa.

- 84 This 'power of translation' can be even more problematic in the other type of workshops : the consultation and participation workshops. In these workshops, where the NGO seeks the opinion of 'the people', the capability of 'strategic translation' by NGOs becomes even more tricky. This can be illustrated by the Gasela workshop of 20 November 1997. The NGO is able to use its discretion, to 'consult' the community about certain topics, while leaving other topics outside the consultation process. In this workshop -where the author was also present- the results of the Monti Rural Association research project in Gasela were discussed with members of the community. Furthermore, MRA's proposals regarding commercial vegetable production were 'workshopped', as it is called in NGO jargon. The workshop was attended by 53 people : 31 women and 22 men.
- 85 After presenting its research findings and tabling its land-use proposals the Monti Rural Association staff asked the community to break up into three groups, or commissions. The men, the women and the youth, then, proceeded to discuss the presented research findings and land-use options. The men showed preference for both crops and livestock farming, while preferring the crops with the highest returns : cabbages and potatoes. As to livestock, the men indicated that they preferred cattle only, which would be their responsibility. The women also showed a preference for both livestock and crop farming. However, they identified an additional cash crop : beans. Moreover, they showed an interest in a whole range of subsistence crops that they also deemed important : from maize, to sweet potatoes and spinach. The youth preferred only crop farming, especially cash crops like potatoes and cabbages and a few subsistence crops like maize and beans. Furthermore, they felt that livestock should not be regarded as an option.
- 86 At the end of the workshop Dwight Rover, the agricultural expert of the Monti Rural Association, in a concluding speech for the community stated :
- "...so, the option that we presented is all right. You've indicated that you want more crops, which I think is good. We'll incorporate your ideas into the final report, which will then be presented to DLA. If they like it and agree that you can farm, then we'll recommend to DLA that the land is transferred to the community (...). We'll let you know as soon as DLA gives us an answer".
- 87 Although Mr. Rover did indeed acknowledge the inputs made by the community members, and promised to incorporate them in the final report, he did not indicate in which manner that would be done. However, his overall conclusion seemed to be that the Gasela residents endorsed the plans presented by MRA. This '*strategic translation*' of the view of the community was even more simplified in the report about the workshop that was attached as an appendix to the 1997 report. In the conclusion the stance of the community members was rephrased as follows :
- "The whole community are in favour of MRA's research findings. Crop farming is the top priority as it will alleviate poverty in the area. In particular, crops such as cabbages and potatoes are seen as a realistic option..." (1997, p. 33).
- 88 In very clear terms this example shows how NGOs are able to strategically translate the position taken by members of the community in a manner which suited the political strategies of the organization. In this manner, two issues were left out of the conclusions : what to do with livestock and how to incorporate a larger diversity of crops.
- 89 Especially ignoring the livestock issue can cause major problems during the implementation of the project. When discussing the issue of livestock in Southern Africa,



one needs to be especially vigilant as cattle ownership means much more to Africans - and the Xhosa - than a narrowly defined economic value, as was shown in Chapter 4. Status, lobola (bride wealth), slaughtering for ceremonies, and a form of 'traditional' banking are some of the functions of cattle, besides the more direct values like milk, meat or draft power. In other words, livestock, and especially cattle, constitutes a significant part of the cultural fabric of society.

- 90 The Monti Rural Association plans did not acknowledge the livestock that was kept by the most influential community members in Gasela. If we limit this discussion to the 62 heads of cattle that were held on the farm, then there is no way that these could be kept on the land if 40 hectares of cabbage and potato production would be realized<sup>28</sup>. In its 1997 Report on Gasela MRA, therefore concluded that :

“...due to the lack of available area at Gasela extensive livestock production is not recommended although it can be practised (...). If the livestock option is pursued then it is recommended that cropping takes priority over livestock in terms of area and land suitability. Livestock can therefore be grazed on any areas not suitable for crop production...” (p. 22).

- 91 However, in the workshop on 20 November 1997, the organization chose to be rather vague about the livestock issue. At no stage did any MRA member make it crystal clear that a choice for commercial vegetable production would automatically imply doing away with most heads of cattle. However, only five days later, in a stakeholder meeting on 25 November 1997 -with possible supporting organizations and institutions like the Department of Land Affairs and the Department of Agriculture and without any community members present- the responsible MRA staff members explained that the people would not keep any livestock on the farm :

“people will not keep livestock, but it is not clear how they are going to get rid of the livestock that is present...”

- 92 Which caused Mrs. Mondli of the Amatola District Council to remark :

“don't force your view on the community !”

- 93 Which led to a significant answer by Bongani Matsila, a prominent MRA staff member :

“we won't, we believe in a participative process...”.

- 94 Then why was this fundamental issue of livestock keeping not thoroughly discussed with the people concerned during the workshop in Gasela, five days earlier ?

- 95 This example shows that non-governmental organizations are able to reinterpret, adapt and modify the information that travels 'upwards' from the field and 'downwards' from the government. More especially in situations where 'the people' lack the background, the knowledge, or the level of education, these consultation and participation workshops can be reduced to 'going through the motions'. In such instances, the so-called 'participative process' is like a play that is enacted, while having been carefully scripted in advance. The outcome is already known, or at least highly influenced by the script writers : the NGO staff. Thus, quite often, although 'participation' of 'the people' is high on the development agenda, these workshops are nothing more than seeking endorsement for intervention packages already outlined in an earlier stage by NGOs.

- 96 Another issue concerns the fact that the number of people who are present in the meetings and workshops is often not representative. At the crucial workshop of 20 November, where the above plans were discussed, only 53 people were present, whereby at least ten people were twenty years or younger. Considering the fact that 108 people who are said to live in Gasela are above twenty years old, not even half of that adult

population was represented at that meeting. On many occasions, during my fieldwork in South Africa, I have witnessed many problems with quorums -too few representatives present to make a democratic decision- at workshops. Consequently, so-called 'democratic decisions' are actually taken by a minority of the people concerned, frequently 'the elite'. This calls for a critical evaluation. Do intermediary NGOs actually work through democratic structures and are they the democratizing agents as is so often claimed ?

- 97 In order to inform the Department of Land Affairs about the workshop results the Gasela reports became crucial instruments.

#### The Reports

- 98 Not only the research and the workshops, but also the reports that are produced by NGOs should be considered as instruments in a political strategy. Especially in situations like Gasela, where the government institutions have little or no autonomous contact with communities, the reports prepared by an NGO can become a crucial tool. In fact, the reports to communicate with government agencies are what the workshops are in the efforts to communicate with 'the field'. A report is a locus of interaction in which NGOs have the possibility to present their version of 'reality'.
- 99 Especially in combination with the carefully scripted and translated results of workshops, these reports become important tools in political processes. Within certain limits, NGOs can use their intermediary position to 'strategically translate' both what is encountered at grassroots and in government circles. Thus, as was shown in the beginning of this paper, although MRA acknowledged the lack of skills and problems around management capacity, the NGO was able to stress the hard 'technical facts' about soils, crops and climate in order to convince DLA that a land transfer would be the responsible thing to do. Without these necessary strategic translation tools NGOs are bound to fail in their political battles.

#### Conclusion

- 100 A land sector NGO like the Monti Rural Association is an intermediary organization. Its position, mediating between 'the people at grassroots' and other institutions like government departments, ensures that its staff can engage in - what I have called - strategic translations. This paper has shown that the choice to portray Gasela as a potentially thriving agri-village was a political decision by MRA, an NGO that had become caught in the Department of Land Affairs' market-oriented embrace. In the process of translation the organization made use of three strategic tools : research, workshops and reports.
- 101 In the research conducted by the NGO it was consciously decided to focus on certain hard facts - climate, crop yields et cetera - and ignore others, like the livestock issue and social issues. Subsequently, the workshop proved to be an ideal instrument to communicate only partially with community members, whereby certain information could be disregarded. This shows that Pottier (1997) had a point when he argued that participatory workshops are structured encounters in which hidden agendas and strategic manoeuvres play a role. Moreover, it illustrates, as Nyamwaya (1997) has shown, that the participation of communities themselves in development processes, although frequently stressed by NGOs, may be minimal. Lastly, the reporting tool was used by the MRA to convey the desired message to the government. The MRA reports on Gasela were clearly employed to communicate certain facts to the Department of Land Affairs while ignoring other facts.

In this case, for example, the reports made sure that the government was insulated from certain contradictory data.

- 102 Possibly, the strategy employed by the Monti Rural Association may eventually result in a land transfer to the people of Gasela. However, NGOs must realize that the process leading to such a result produces the terms under which such a transfer will take place. In my view, it is these terms which will ultimately determine whether the land will become an asset or a liability...

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## NOTES

1. An ethnographic account of the changing relationship between a land sector NGO, a government department, and members of a landless community in the Eastern Cape of South Africa
2. The Monti Rural Association was established in the early eighties as an anti-apartheid organization, supporting communities that had been removed or were under the threat of forced removals. In later years this land sector NGO became more involved in rural development issues.
3. The South African word for barbecue, and a 'white' national pass-time.
4. Some of whom live in other places (like Johannesburg or Cape Town) for part of the year.
5. Approximately \$ 55 000.
6. The isiXhosa term 'Ukulima' is usually translated by Africans into English as 'to plough'. An English term which captures the meaning more fully is 'to cultivate'.
7. The round 'traditional' African mud huts with grass roofs.
8. Afrikaans for 'boss' or 'master'.
9. Although the apartheid regime recognized these homelands as independent states, they were never recognized as such by the international community
10. Department of Development Aid. In a generator shed the sign 'MOOIFONTEIN departement van ontwikkelingshulp' can still be found, used to patch up a hole in the wall of the shed.
11. IsiXhosa meaning white person.
12. South African National Civic Organization: the 'umbrella' organization of South African civics or residents organizations.
13. See MRA Gasela archive. Fax dated 28-10-1993.
14. See MRA Gasela archive. Letter ref: 6/2/2/d/63/0/0/6.
15. The South African Land Reform Programme consisted of three pillars: Restitution, Redistribution and Tenure Reform.
16. Africans could access land sold by 'white' commercial farmers, using a settlement subsidy of R. 1,500 per household. As a result many Communal Property Associations (CPAs) were formed as about 100 households pooled their subsidies to buy one commercial farm.
17. This was a so-called 'stakeholder meeting' in the offices of MRA. However, no Gasela residents were present. Only the institutions that in one way or another dealt with Gasela.
18. Meeting at the Monti Rural Association office on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, 1997.
19. Act 31 of 1996: this act protects people with informal rights to land from evictions during the period 1996-1998 when new legislation will be drafted and enacted.
20. Used in the meaning of small subsistence plot.

21. The neighbouring village.

22. Weeds.

23. Nakase's Transitional Rural Council.

24. IsiXhosa, meaning : "everybody".

25. In my view, the scheme 'apartheid' and 'post-apartheid' is not satisfactory when analyzing the role of the 'progressives' in recent South African history. Therefore, I propose to define three (partly overlapping) eras :

- **the struggle era** (1980s): the progressive forces like NGOs and underground operatives of banned political parties were engaged in a 'struggle' against the apartheid regime;

- **the freedom and consultation era** (1993 - 1996): the transition period when the progressive forces enter legitimate politics and a coalition was forged between state institutions and non-governmental organizations. It begins when the parties agree on an Interim Constitution in December 1993. The leading document during this period is The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), produced by the ANC and its progressive partners;

- **the new realism era** (post 1996): the Rainbow coalition falls apart as the National Party withdraws after it has accomplished negotiating the Constitution. Important element: the Property Clause. Does not want to be identified with progressive politics. Whites feel betrayed by the NP as they lose their advantaged position. The alliance realizes that the time of dreaming is over. Harsh confrontation with the global market. The alliance published a new macro-economic strategy as the harsh confrontation with the world market put the cabinet with its feet on the ground: the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme. It is criticized by the left as being South Africa's internal structural adjustment programme.

26. Strategic planning meeting of the Land Rights Unit, 03.11.1997.

27. This research project in the village of Mgwali would possibly become a 'tenure test case' through which the government would learn about the intricacies of tenure issues and overlapping land rights.

28. Only 21.7 hectares of forested and steep area would be available for cattle grazing

<b>TOTAL AREA</b>	89.24 ha
<b>SETTLED AREA</b>	10.2 ha
<b>FORESTED AREA</b>	12.7 ha
<b>STEEP AREA</b>	9.0 ha
<b>REMAINING AREA</b>	57.34 ha

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