

# Traveller Voices



FAQs on the Cultural Identity and  
Health Needs of Gypsy Travellers

*"It's interesting how people can change their point of  
view if they're given enough information".*

Christine - Irish Traveller



**MARY SEACOLE**  
1805-1881

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Mary Seacole Development Award 2009

## Foreword

As the Chief Executive of NHS City and Hackney, I am delighted to have been asked to contribute a foreword to this informative and innovative booklet 'Traveller Voices'.

This is a pioneering piece of literature as it provides an authentic voice and genuine insight into the lifestyle and culture of the Traveller and Gypsy Community. It has been thoughtfully compiled to answer questions that have been raised about the community by a variety of healthcare professionals and the responses provided have been taken directly from members of that community to bring their personal experiences to life.

Breaking down barriers between service users and service providers is integral to improving access to services and will, in the long term, provide a significant contribution to the reduction of health inequalities overall.

This booklet will provide healthcare professionals with a better understanding of what it means to be a member of the Traveller and Gypsy Community within the UK today. I know that it will be widely-read and become a key tool for all staff in understanding the healthcare needs of members of this community. I would like to congratulate the author, Gill Francis, on her considerable achievement.



Jacqui Harvey  
Chief Executive  
NHS City and Hackney



## **Mary Seacole Development Award Project**

The Mary Seacole Development Awards provide the opportunity to undertake a project, or other educational/development activity, that benefits the health needs of people from black and minority ethnic communities. This booklet came about as one the outputs of an award project entitled "Developing the cultural competence of health professionals working with Gypsy Travellers".

Gypsy Travellers are officially recognised as ethnic minorities, and research suggests that they suffer poorer health outcomes than any other English speaking ethnic minority group in England (Van Cleemput et al, 2004). These disparities are associated with poor access to health services, poor accommodation, discrimination, and poor health literacy. One other issue is the lack of understanding about the cultural identity, health and social needs of Gypsy Travellers by health professionals. Understanding culture and how it relates to service delivery and development is said to increase access to services as well as improve the quality of the service outcomes. With this in mind this booklet was developed as part of a project supporting the development of cultural competence in health staff. It was designed for use by individuals with a limited understanding of the cultural identity and health needs of Gypsy Travellers. Following consultation, which explored the knowledge, attitudes and questions health staff had about the Gypsy Traveller community, their frequently asked questions were themed and formed the basis of this booklet. Travellers of Irish heritage in this instance only contributed to the content by sharing their life experiences and answering the questions articulated by staff.

It is acknowledged that the scope of this booklet is limited both by the depth and range of topics covered. Readers are advised that the views expressed are not necessarily representative of all views on the various subjects. However, it is hoped that providing a small insight into the lives of Gypsy Travellers will enable staff to gain a better understanding of the issues faced by the community and develop their cultural competence in respect of the Gypsy Traveller community. It is also hoped that this resource will add to the work of challenging negative stereotypes that stubbornly persist about this community.

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# 1. Definitions

In the United Kingdom the umbrella term “Gypsy Traveller” consists of Welsh and English Romanichal or Romany Gypsies, Scottish and Irish Travellers and more recently, European Roma. Other travelling communities include Fairground , Circus or Showmen, New Travellers and Bargees (also known as Water Gypsies). The term Traveller is said to describe a member of any of the native European ethnic groups whose culture is characterised by nomadism, occupational fluidity and self-employment.

Gypsy Travellers are persons of nomadic habit of life, whatever their race or origin, including those who on grounds only of their own or their family's or dependants' educational or health needs or old age have ceased to travel temporarily or permanently, and all other persons with a cultural tradition of nomadism and/or caravan dwelling (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2006).

Gypsies are defined as ethnic groups who were formed as commercial, nomadic and other groups travelling away from India from the tenth century and mixing with European and other groups (Liegeois and Gheorghe 1995).

Despite the fact that many Gypsy Travellers have either been forced or chosen to live in houses for all or part of the time, they consider themselves to be Travellers, whether “travelling” or not. Nomadism is embedded in the culture and heritage and is not purely about moving from place to place but a way of looking at life and the world (McDonagh, 1994). It must also be noted that although Gypsies and Travellers share some cultural values they remain distinct ethnic groups.

## Why are you called Travellers?

*“We’ve been called Travellers for years, and we’re still Travellers even if we’re settled”.*

*“Traveller’s nothing to do with whether you’re living in a house or a trailer, it’s to do with your blood. It comes from our ancestors so it doesn’t make a difference where we live or where we stay. We have Traveller’s blood”.*

*“It goes back hundreds of years...it’s our tradition”.*





## 2. Culture

Within Gypsy Traveller communities a key aspect of cultural identity is the importance of maintaining close family bonds, and the passing on of cultural customs and practice to the next generation. The importance of community gatherings such as weddings, christenings and funerals cannot be overstated. For Irish Travellers their Catholic religion and the rituals that are connected to this, such as attending a Mass for particular occasions such as the anniversary of a death, holy communions and confirmations, and visits to 'Holy Places' such as Lourdes, hold particular significance. Traditions and beliefs around marriage are of key importance and influences attitudes to how teenagers are allowed to behave and the expectation that they will marry at a young age.

### **What are Travellers most proud of about their culture?**

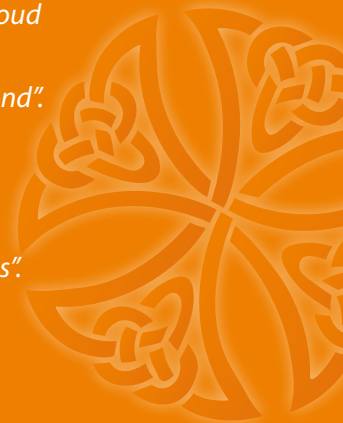
*"Everything about it I suppose. Being close to the family, the rules...the way we bring up the children and pass that on through the generations...we're proud of our heritage".*

*"Closeness...we're proud to be Travellers. Everyone has a close bond".*

### **What's it like to be a Traveller?**

*"I don't know what to say...I've never been anything else, I don't know any different. I'm just happy to be one".*

*"It's hard sometimes...the settled community don't understand us".*



## What are your traditions?

*One generation after another does exactly the same thing...get married, have kids. They rear their kids up the best way they can in the Traveller rules".*

*"Travelling around, Irish dancing, fairs, things like that".*

*"The main thing is to be prepared to bring up the family, the family is the most important thing. Girls have to know how to cook, feed and clean and boys have to provide".*

## What are the main values of the Traveller community?

*"Having the family married young and settled...respecting the elders, listening to them for guidance".*

*"Respect...you marry young, you don't go out before you're married".*

*"Being strict with the children. Making sure they marry within the community, but not necessarily...some do marry outside of the community. Passing on the traditions to the next generation...what was taught to me".*

## Why don't you mix with those outside of your community?

*"I do mix...when I go to pick my kids up I talk with all the parents up there...if there's any parties going on we all mix. I go over to the square there...stop and talk to people".*

*"We do mix...if we get close to a friend. It's not easy because they don't understand the culture, but we like mixing with people who understand us".*

*"Oh I do, my children do, one of them is doing a social health and development diploma. I mix with every neighbour round here, I know everyone on my estate...if I lived on a site that wouldn't change for me, so I think Travellers do mix with the settled community".*

Amongst some Travellers where there is resistance to mix this is often due to past negative encounters with the wider community and also a wish to preserve cultural identity and reduce cultural erosion. Amongst the settled community there is also sometimes a fear of mixing with Gypsy Travellers because of perpetuated negative stereotypes.





## How do you bring up children?

*"Although there's rules for the children we like them to have freedom, to be out in the fresh air...they get together and there's so much noise".*

*"If I was living on a site even though my husband's not there they'd be someone else to put manners on them... they'll be listened to 'cause they're highly respected, that elder person".*

*"Teach them your values, traditions...try to get them settled".*

## 3. Nomadism

Nomadism or the tradition of moving from place to place has been a key feature of Gypsy Traveller life. The ability to travel around and the sense of freedom this engenders is in stark contrast to how the experience of living in a house is described by many Gypsy Travellers. For many, living in a house is associated with a sense of imprisonment, isolation, poor mental health and well being, and poorer health outcomes.

The Caravan Sites Act 1968 resulted in the provision of council caravan sites in the UK, supporting the ability to live in a traditional way. However, with the enactment of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 the statutory duty on local authorities to provide sites and stopping places was removed, and the act endowed councils with increased powers to swiftly evict families from unauthorised encampments, criminalising the nomadic way of life. Because of a reduction in the number of traditional stopping places and authorised sites it has become increasingly difficult to maintain a travelling lifestyle, with increased numbers of families forced to live in houses.





## **Do you prefer to travel rather than have a stable base?**

*"No because we're settled now. We had to move around before because we had no official site".*

*"You like to be travelling around but it's hard, there's no clean water, we used to have to go the garage to get water".*

*"I like to be stable for school reasons but I would love travelling as well, so we'll probably travel in the school holidays".*

*"I'd love to travel but my mum's unwell...I'd love to show my children that life and everything I've learnt. They only get that when they go back to Ireland, that's when they see the travelling life...it could be for a wedding or funeral but they're living the travelling life then. I miss that and they miss that".*

*"I used to when I was younger but now, because of health issues, I prefer to have a stable base".*

*"It's hard to go travelling now because you're getting ran from pillar to post".*

## **How do you manage, living on sites and moving around?**

*"Me and me husband, we travelled round when the children were small but it became very difficult, everything was criminal. If you parked by the side of the road it was criminal, everything you did was wrong...so more or less we were shoved into a house".*

*"It was very difficult because you had no washing machines or stuff you needed".*

*"When I travel now we don't really pull up on the road, there's places we'll stop in like holiday camps. Years ago we'd pull on the side of the road and you'd have to manage".*

*"Some holiday camps, if they find out you're Travellers they don't want you there".*

## 4. Discrimination

Gypsy Travellers continue to experience overt discrimination. “No blacks, no Irish, no dogs” signs disappeared many years ago, but “No Travellers” signs persist. Despite legal protection under race equality legislation, many Gypsy Travellers report having experienced some form of racism, leading the Commission for Racial Equality (2006) to conclude that discrimination against Travellers was the last “respectable” form of racism.

### Do you feel discriminated against?

*“Yes. Like going to pubs you see the sign “No Travellers”, if you’re having a wedding they won’t give you a function room if they find out you’re a Traveller. When you’re walking on the street sometimes you get racist remarks”.*

*“Sometimes. Like the other day my children were being called trailer trash, but what’s interesting to me was the week after the programme on Traveller’s weddings on television they got some status in school. It’s interesting how people can change their point of view if they’re given enough information”.*

*“Sometimes. I suppose it’s like every group, some people do look down on you. When you have to tick the box I used to put “other” and then write Traveller in but it’s good to see they’ve got a “Traveller” box now, I always tick that... I have to make a point of ticking it ‘cause that’s who I am”.*

*“Yes and no... sometimes when you read the papers it puts you down so low... it’s hard ... but in Hackney in my day to day life no I don’t”.*

*“Some place will have “Travellers By Appointment”, so they cover their own backs without saying “No Travellers”.*

### You often seem hostile, why is this?

*“I don’t know, I’m not hostile, maybe some Travellers are and have a reason to be but I’m not”.*

Some Gypsy Travellers, having had negative experiences when encountering the wider community, may have an expectation of poor treatment or reception. It is possible that this can inform a defensive approach taken by some Gypsy Travellers, and subsequently lead to a self-fulfilling negative encounter. This is not to dismiss the very real discriminatory behaviours and practices encountered by Gypsy Travellers.

## 5. Exclusion

Gypsy Travellers are one of the most socially excluded groups in the United Kingdom. This is manifested in a lack of appropriate accommodation, overt racism, lack of provision by health and education services for nomadic people, and poor outcomes in education and health.

### **Do you find it difficult to mix with settled people?**

*"No, not if I get to know them".*

*"Sometimes you might feel that it's easier to be with people who understand you...it can be hard mixing...and then you still see signs saying "No Travellers"..that's hard sometimes".*

*"We were brought up to mix with our own but more people are mixing with the settled community now".*

*"We let the kids mix but to a limit...we're more afraid the settled community will turn on them".*

### **Do you feel isolated?**

*"No, because we have that many Travellers with us, we don't feel isolated".*

*"I feel very isolated, not just me but my children...they're lost. My daughter's got a Facebook page for her English friends and another for her Traveller friends and family...she more or less has two identities...I think psychologically somewhere down the line there's problems with things like that. That's why I make a conscious effort to show her more of the Traveller's way of life".*



## How can we involve you in the community more?

*"My kids go to a local club because the man came over and told us that the kids were very welcome, they made us feel welcome, we were nervous at first but we feel happy now. He made the effort to come to us but I would have found out too".*

## What is your involvement with the outside world?

*"I'm involved in the tenant's association...I try to get involved in local things, the school is asking me to do a talk on Travellers for Traveller history month. I go on trips with the club on the estate...coach trips. I mix with everyone round here".*

*"I go to the meetings about the new sites...say my bit, what I think about things".*



## What's the most important thing to know about Travellers?

*"That there's all sorts and all kinds...don't paint us all with the one brush basically, there's good, bad and there's ugly...that's what I put it down to. Some are tidy, some aren't tidy, even like settled people. Some are bad mannered, some are normal social people. I find because they've had a bad experience with the one they just brush everyone with the one brush".*

*"That we're just like them, everyone is the same...just get to know us and you'll understand us a bit better".*

*"We're not dirty, we're clean, Travellers get put down very bad and we're not like that".*

*"That we're not scary people, we're not frightening, we're not criminals. We're not them problem people by the side of the road. In some ways people still believe that and that's not a nice label to have on you".*

## 6. Accommodation

Because of a reduction in the number of authorised sites more Gypsy Travellers now live in “bricks and mortar” accommodation, this is often associated with increased isolation and loss of cultural identity.

The Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment, completed in 2008 by local authorities across the country, made recommendations on the minimum and maximum number of pitches required to meet the accommodation needs of the Gypsy Traveller community. These are yet to be implemented and may be affected by changes in policy direction and financial constraints. The borough of Hackney manages five Traveller sites, with a total of 27 pitches, on which residents pay for utilities, rent and council tax.

### **If you’ve settled down, is this by choice or circumstance?**

*“It’s circumstance, I think the travelling way is over...it’s hard going from place to place being moved on all the time”.*

*“It’s by circumstance. You try to find places to stop, sites and pitches but you more or less get pushed into houses”.*

### **Given the choice, how would you prefer to live?**

*“How I’m living now, not travelling around but on an official site with all my family around me”.*

*“In our day we couldn’t read and write because we were travelling but now we’re on a site beside schools, the kids can go to school...that’s the future”.*

*“I’d love to live on a site but I’d love to travel as well...in the summer”.*

*“The law’s making it extremely difficult...they’re trying to force us all into being settled”.*



## 7. Accessing Services

For Gypsy Travellers moving around, registering with a GP proves difficult as they are unable to provide proof of address, now required by most surgeries. This leads to an overuse of A&E and poor follow up. For Gypsy Travellers who manage to register as temporary patients, the full range of GP services is not available, subsequently community members who are fully registered with a GP in a particular area may travel vast distances to access a service they have come to trust.

### **If you're on the move what happens about hospital or doctor's appointments?**

*"I'm settled now for a long while so that's not a problem but when you're on an unofficial site you could be moved off at any time so you can't keep appointments...you go to A&E but then there's not any follow up".*

### **What can we do to make services more appealing to you?**

*"I feel if they told us more about the services, if they came and talked we'd understand a bit more about them".*

*"With men that's difficult, they've got to be dying before they'll go to A&E but with women it's different, it's lack of knowledge or lack of understanding 'cause if you can't read or write or people say something you say "oh yeah, yeah" but you're not clear what they're on about".*

*"You want to go somewhere where you feel you're gonna be listened to...you're not gonna be judged".*

*"We don't know enough about what's out there, we need to know more".*



## 8. Health

Gypsy Travellers suffer poorer health outcomes than any other English speaking ethnic minority group in England (Parry et al, 2004). Comparable data in Britain suggests that life expectancy in the Gypsy Traveller community is less than the general population (Cemlyn et al, 2009). Within the community there are higher rates of stillbirth, infant mortality and maternal death (Royal College of Gynaecologists, 2001). These disparities are associated with poor access to health services, poor accommodation, discrimination, and poor health literacy. Other reasons are thought to be a lack of understanding about the cultural identity, health and social needs of Gypsy Travellers by health professionals.

### What specific health issues do Travellers have?

*"There's loads of Travellers who's depressed, too much stress, too many problems...and they won't get help, or maybe they'll get depression tablets from the doctor but they won't see anyone else cause if anyone finds out you'll be black listed...they'll think you're a nutter".*

*"I don't know if we're different from other people...maybe we take a while to go to the doctor, sometimes you've got many things to be seeing to, you leave things to the last minute...when it's really bad".*

*"I think there's a lot of heart trouble, high blood pressure and chest problems...but we like to think we're very healthy".*

*"I've heard of Travellers with the cancer, no one talks about it...you wouldn't go for a test though, you'd rather not know".*





## **When people are very ill or dying do you prefer them to be in hospital or looked after at home?**

*"If it was their wishes I'd respect that but I would prefer them to be in hospital, I don't like the idea of coffins coming into the premises. If they died in the home I'd have to get rid of everything, we'd have to set fire to everything...that's a Traveller way".*

Amongst many Gypsy Traveller communities the custom of burning the property of a deceased person was once a traditional cultural practice, however this is no longer widespread.

*"When Traveller people die you've got to be buried within 3 days and if someone died at home there might need to be an inquest or something, if they're in hospital they've got reports already so that wouldn't be a problem".*

## **Why do so many people come to visit when someone's in hospital?**

The large numbers of visitors on hospital wards may sometimes seem problematic to ward staff wishing to implement a strict visiting policy, however here Travellers give their reasons for this.

*"Because they want to show respect to that person and their family...in case something happens...God forbid".*

*"They believe it's...it's respect. If that person gets better or dies they'll be saying "such and such person came from here or there...that was good of them" it's about respect".*

*"We have that many aunts, uncles and they might have 10 or 12 children, there's that much of a community, everyone knows everyone and everyone's related...so everyone comes to show that respect, showing respect is a big thing with the Travellers. If someone didn't go questions would be asked, it's like a disrespect. It's like that with the funerals as well, there could be thousands there but you'd still miss that one face".*

*"It's Travellers again...they always stick together, the good times, the bad times and the sad times...and we wouldn't have it any other way".*

## **What's the most important thing health professionals should know about Travellers?**

*"Sometimes Travellers need things explained. You'll be dying of shame and you won't say you didn't understand. We need things put simply...not so many big words...you think you're breaking it down for us but you're not".*

*"A lot of us are ignorant of things...we won't get ourselves checked out, we're afraid...we don't go unless we really really have to".*

*"To try and understand us...sometimes we might not catch the meaning of something...explain it in a better way. You feel embarrassed but you won't say and you'll pretend you know".*

## **What fears do you have about antenatal care?**

*"Any Traveller woman will always bring someone in...a lot of Traveller women over the years were left by themselves in labour by midwives and they're scared problems would occur".*

## **What worries you about immunisations?**

*"We still have worries over the MMR, but with the measles outbreak a lot more are getting the needles...but when the babies are a bit older".*



## 9. Education

Travellers have historically been excluded from education. Although now most Traveller children attend school and a small but growing minority are going on to tertiary education, Ofsted maintains that Traveller children are a group most at risk of under achievement in the education system. There are also tensions that sometimes exist for Travellers between engagement in formal education, whilst preserving the value of informal education and the importance of involvement in cultural life. Often attendance at large family gatherings such as weddings, funerals and christenings may take priority over school attendance.

### How important is education to you?

*"Education is important to me but I'd like the children to have a choice if they didn't want to continue with the education".*

*"Very important. I like my kids attending school everyday 'cept they're sick. When I was younger my mum was the same, she used to send us to school but I never took anything in. I always wanted to be at home. I'd be in the classroom but I'd be hundreds of miles away so I never got a good education...but if I had it back again I would, so I want my kids to".*

*"Oh it's very important, very important. I wish I had more education. Back in my day I wish my mum had pushed me harder to go to school. I want my children to achieve and I let them know that they can achieve".*



## **Why do Traveller kids seem to miss out on a lot of school?**

*"They don't miss out on school but after a certain age we don't continue on with school, we do our own trade".*

*"Sometimes they get moved off from site to site if they don't have a permanent site and it's hard for the children to stay in school".*

*"Traveller boys, when they're 14 or 15, they want to do what their fathers is doing, so they wanna start working for their living...because some of them be married at 16, some at 17 or 19. They more or less take up in their father's footsteps. They learn at a young age at 14 and 15 so they have a trade when they get married, that's why Traveller children, boys, doesn't continue school... and girls don't continue school because they've got to work the way Traveller women work, they have to learn to cook, clean and provide".*

*"It depends, if you're living on a site and you've got family around you and they're going travelling then obviously you're gonna be involved in that".*

*"We go to Appleby fair, Stow...places like that. Apart from that we've got big families, for instance my daughter went to two funerals in Ireland this year, we all couldn't go but someone had to represent...she went along with her grandparents".*

*"My daughter's at school and I want her to do well but it's important for her to see the other side of life as well...here she doesn't know who she is, she's losing her identity".*

## 10. Employment

Traditionally men are the main providers and women the main carers and homemakers. Within some families young women have accessed training in hair dressing, floristry and dress making in order to support the income of the family. This is only possible where individuals are living in secure accommodation without the risk of eviction.

### **Do Travellers have or hold down full time jobs?**

*"Of course, loads of Travellers work...the men likes to work for themselves though".*

*"Some of them has and some of them hasn't".*

*"There's masses of Travellers that have great big building companies, roofing companies, tarmac companies. I've a cousin whose got booklets with the work he's done, buildings he's built...and if you live on a site that sort of thing gets passed down from the elders to the younger boys...they get educated, they learn and the business is passed on to them but unfortunately when you're in house the elders are not there...you miss out on that".*

### **What jobs do Travellers like doing?**

*"We like to work for ourselves...the men will work tarmac, sell carpets, rugs, sell sofas...going to markets or selling them door to door. They might buy and sell cars".*

*"Some of them like fitting carpet, painting stuff, DIY...something like that".*

*"Some do brick laying, selling carpets, mechanics".*

*"Most Traveller women don't go out to work, they work in the home and look after the family, cleaning...Traveller women clean".*



## 11. Aspirations

The majority of Gypsy Travellers want to continue living their traditional way of life, living on a site with their extended family. This is a far off dream for many who cannot get a pitch on a site and have been forced to live in housing or on unauthorised sites. For Traveller families both in houses and on sites, keeping their culture and close connection with the extended family, self reliance and providing for their family are all important aspirations.

### What dreams or goals do you have for your children?

*"To grow up having healthy happy lives...get married and just be happy".*

*"To have a good education, get married and settle down and be on a nice site".*

*"I'd want them to follow in our footsteps, but that'd be their decision, I can't make that decision for them".*

*"My dreams are their dreams really, there are certain rules for me and certain things I wouldn't accept them doing but if they choose to work and have a life before they settle down then I'm happy for them to do that".*

*"My son, he's really into football, he's good at it but I've made him aware that that's not always going to be the case and he's got to have a backup plan...he wants to look into being a mechanic and I think that's a really good way for him to start something for his generation".*

*"We're on a waiting list for a place on a site but we may never see that but I thought that maybe one of the younger children will grow up that way and they'll get to continue that way of life."*



## What does the future hold for Travellers?

*"God only knows...I can't see that far ahead. A lot worries about the children and where they're gonna go".*

*"I think we're gonna become extinct, that's exactly my thoughts. It's ok having four or five sites but there's loads of Travellers out there and they're disappearing...the law's making things hard".*

*"The way of life as it was known is not gonna continue. Looking ahead life moves on for everyone and things change as we go on".*

*"I don't really know...well we never think about the future, we just think from day to day".*

*"I don't think about the future much really, I don't, I don't really get time...to be honest...I just hope for the future that everyone's happy and there's no tragedy".*





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## Useful Websites:

Romany culture and history  
[www.reocities.com/Paris/5121/patrin.htm](http://www.reocities.com/Paris/5121/patrin.htm)

Working towards social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights  
[www.paveepoint.ie](http://www.paveepoint.ie)

Supporting Travellers and Gypsies living in London  
[www.lgtu.org.uk](http://www.lgtu.org.uk)

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