**Abdelkader’s Legacy: Empathy and Forgiveness in Governance.**

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A Fetzer Institute White Paper[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction**

I owe my interest in Emir Abdelkader to a community of French Trappist monks living in the Atlas Mountains, south of Algiers. The story of their kidnapping in 1996 and eventual death became the subject of a book, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love and Terror in Algeria.* The book was well received in France, winning the Siloe Prize in 2006 for the best book on a humanitarian subject. Four years later, an award- winning French film, *Of Men and Gods,* was made based in large measure on the book*.* Brought to the more God-fearing United States by Sony Classics, it became *Of Gods and Men.* Historically preceding the monks, *Commander of the Faithful: Life and Times of Emir Abdelkader (1808-1883)* is a spiritual sequel.

By a coincidence of history, the monastery of Notre Dame of the Atlas was located below a cliff face called Abdelkader Rock. Curious about the name, I learned from the monks that Abdelkader had once directed a battle against the French from the top of the cliff and is considered by Algerians to be their version of George Washington. Indeed, Abdelkader was the first Arab leader to unify tribes, however briefly, into a proto-Arab state to resist a French occupation that began in 1830 with the sack of Algiers. The Emir’s struggle was but the first phase of a “long war” for independence and dignity, one that lasted until 1962.

As I read more about him, I also noted his resemblance to other Americans—Robert E. Lee and John Winthrop. Like Lee, he was deeply religious, gracious, unwilling to prolong senseless suffering and in defeat, promoted reconciliation. Like Winthrop, Abdelkader believed that good governance required submission to Divine Law: God’s wisdom as revealed through the prophets in the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Koran—integrated and interpreted through the actions and sayings of the prophet Mohammad (*sunna*).

A devout practitioner of his faith, Abdelkader learned from his mother that ritual purification is but half of faith, and a reminder of the harder half—to purify one’s inner self of unruly passions and egotistical desire. From his scholarly father, he learned the complexities of interpreting God’s word, the importance of context, the different levels of understanding, and different forms of behavior that are also righteous. As the favored son of Muhi al Din, Abdelkader acquired his sense of mission to renew an Islamic culture degraded by years of greed and misrule by the provincial *beys*. His tools were deep knowledge and curiosity, keen intellect, chivalrous behavior, genuine piety, and moral courage.

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One day while visiting the Catholic cultural center in Algiers, a Benedictine sister sought me out. She had learned of my book project about Abdelkader and excitedly gave me a copy of an excerpt from the Emir’s spiritual writings. It was something she kept handy in her office and seemed to regard as spiritual treasure. His words resonated with me.

*If you think God is what the different communities believe—the Muslims, the Christians, the Jews, Zoroastrians, polytheists and others—he is that, but also more. . . . None of His creatures worships Him in his entirety. No one is an infidel in all the ways relating to God. No one knows all God’s facets. Each of His creatures worships and knows Him in a certain way and is ignorant of Him in others. Error does not exist in this world except in a relative manner.*

No wonder this Catholic sister admired him. Abdelkader had enunciated the spirit of Vatican II one hundred years before Pope John the XXIII wrestled revolutionary declarations from the leaders of the Church: The kingdom of God is bigger than the Church; salvation is ultimately a mystery. No religion owned God. The finite can’t grasp the infinite.

Abdelkader’s way of thinking inspired me. It was rational, inclusive, humble. I saw that the superior of the monks, Christian de Chergé, and Abdelkader shared similar big tent views of their faiths, followed similar rituals and even dressed alike. Like the writings of Christian, the Emir’s words also spoke to me. I wanted to learn more about this Arab warrior-scholar-saint who had been honored and admired from Missouri to Moscow to Mecca: First as a wily and resilient warrior-statesman opposing the French occupiers and their native allies (1832-1847); later as an unbending and stoic prisoner in France (1848-1852), and finally in honorable exile (1852-1883) where he reached the summit of his fame after rescuing thousands of Christians during a rampage in Damascus.

The Emir’s story is about many things, but mainly it is about struggle. He struggled against French invaders, struggled with betrayal, humiliation and depression in France, and struggled to live as a good Muslim throughout his tribulations by not allowing the destructive passions of despair, anger or revenge to dominate his emotions. I thought I could learn something from his life, and if I could, perhaps others could too. The qualities that made him admired by both ordinary people and leaders of nations are in short supply today: Subtle, searching intellect, self-control, moral courage, excellent manners and spirit of reconciliation towards all. He never burnt his bridges. Rather than demonize, he would shame his enemies.

**“What is this Thing Called Love?”**

Crooner Cole Porter’s meaning of the love he found so perplexing was an emotion, a sentiment, a feeling. As unpredictable as a bird, it flies in and then flies out. Such love has nothing to do with Christian love I found out years ago from a French priest who tutored a rather secular John Kiser in understanding scripture during a year spent on the Cote d’ Azur. Father Costa was the doyen of six parishes and noted for having one of the few churches in France that was full every Sunday.

Why should I “love” my neighbor? I asked him one day. That seemed much too strong a word, given the difficulty I often had of loving properly the people I am supposed to love—spouse, children, close friends. That’s when I realized I had been “Hollywoodized.”

“Love thy neighbor,” he explained, is not about a sentiment, rather respecting the dignity of another person, good will, justice, patience, self control, empathy. Among these overlapping attributes of love, I rank empathy the highest in the case of Abdelkader—his ability and willingness to imagine himself in the shoes of others; treating others as he would have wanted to be treated. Love is Matthew 25—being compassionate toward the hungry, the poor, the sick and even the stranger. Or, according to a hadith, “ No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.”

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The Lord’s Prayer tells us we will be forgiven in the same measure as we forgive others. Goethe tells us that to understand is to forgive. Forgiveness is aided by humility, and by love, when love seeks understanding and asks, “What if I had been in a similar situation?” I would propose, however, that forgiveness is more about self cleansing, healing wounds, moving on. Without forgiveness we can poison ourselves with prolonged emotions of anger, hatred and revenge—powerful toxins that may activate great exertion, but not likely to be righteous exertion. Despite the horrors of war, and betrayals by Arabs and French alike, the Emir controlled these demons, giving him a weapon for which the French generals had no counter: his humanity. As a believer, the Emir liked to say that all genuine religions share the same mandate: To love God and be compassionate toward His creatures -–including French prisoners.

Justice, empathy, forgiveness and courage marked Abdelkader as a leader. These qualities reflected a character molded by learned, demanding, and caring parents as well as a tribal culture that expected from their leaders wisdom, generosity and patience—traits reinforced by a well of religious teachings and morality that was thoroughly internalized under his parents’ guidance.

**Abdelkader And The Art Governance**

Abdelkader’s “governance” took two forms: creating a caliphate by federating independent-minded tribes under the Law, and governing his “community” of over one hundred family and loyal followers while in prison for five years. His ability to command respect was ultimately rooted in a third form of governance—his “self-governance,” or self mastery, composed of a powerful intellect, a clear moral compass and an attitude of servantship.

When asked in prison by Col. Eugene Daumas, his minder from the War Ministry, for advice he had for the French on how best to govern the Arabs, the Emir held up the Koran. It was his constitution. Unlike many of today’s professed theocrats, the Emir’s knowledge of his “constitution” was both broad and deep, and guided by a spirit of humility and always subject to the higher wisdom of the *ulema*. Above all, he would have honored the Koranic teaching that warns: “There shall be no compulsion in religion” (S 2:256).

Abdelkader grew up in a Sufi and tribal world. From his Sufi tradition, the writings of Ibn Arabi that celebrated the spirit of universal love loomed large in his thinking. To acquire the religious authority that his father knew his son needed in order to tame the tribes, Abdelkader learned to recite the Koran perfectly to mimic the spirit that God breathed into man and capture the divine energy that organized the chaos. The human spirit was like an army in battle, his father taught, and constantly exposed to disorganizing forces that are countered only by the discipline of good order and rituals rightly performed.

From his tribal world, he learned a sense of hierarchy, obedience to higher authority, beginning with God, and then to each other according to rank. Tribal chieftains were chosen by the elders for their generosity, patience and ability to render justice and give wise counsel to petitioners. It is a world that emphasizes social cohesion and harmony within the tribe, lubricated with an encompassing etiquette (*adab*) governing relations between people.

In the Emir’s Bedouin tradition, society is a living organism knit together by structured relationships. Man is a social animal who survives by cooperating with others. If those relationships are good, the parts work together in harmony. If the relationships are bad, the parts war with each other. Politics is the art of leading people to live in harmony. No knowledge is more important than that needed for understanding the elements of healthy community life and guiding human behavior in a just and righteous way. For this to occur, politicsshould be governed not by ambition and love of power, but by generosity and care—the hormones that build unity and closeness. And where does that knowledge come from?

Higher knowledge requires a healthy mind and spirit (*aql*) that is attuned to nature and the Divine wisdom revealed by His prophets. The Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Koran are all repositories of prophetic knowledge. But knowing the Law is not enough.

Only through obedience to Divine Will can moral progress be attained. But obedience alone is not enough. It requires four virtues, known in the Christian tradition as the “cardinal virtues”: *intellect*, which includes common sense, good judgment, the ability to make fine distinctions, discernment, and memory; *courage,* a quality of the spirit that directs or restrains anger in order to do what is right, and has the companion qualities of generosity, endurance, firmness, compassion, and spirit of sacrifice; *self restraint,* the requirement to hold in check unruly passions that lead us astray; and finally *justice* or equitable behavior which must be free from unruly passions such as anger, envy, greed, and impatience.

**Empathy (Love) and Forgiveness**

Robert McNamara, in the self-revealing documentary film, *The Fog of War,* was asked the most important lesson he learned from Vietnam, answered: “Empathize with the enemy.” He could not imagine the strength of North Vietnamese will to resist and willingness to absorb pain in order to achieve unification. Further, he lamented in his book *In Retrospect*, “Our misjudgment of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture and politics of the people in the area.”

Empathy can help counter ignorance. By simply asking ourselves when America wields the hammer of military or economic power, “How would Americans react if the same was done to us by a foreign power?” Ron Paul was the only presidential candidate who had the courage to empathize with Iraqi resistance to the American presence by asking his audiences how Americans would react to an occupying power that was destroying homes, killing people and disrupting life. For such empathy, he was roundly booed. In an earlier age, John Kennedy make news when he declared that Russians, like Americans, love their children and parents, have hopes and dreams and aren’t interested in nuclear suicide.

Looking empathetically at the outside world and other nations, especially those we regard as “enemy” is not a habit Americans engage in often. Yet it is the oldest form of wisdom, honored (but rarely followed) in all military history courses by the obligatory study of the centuries-old wisdom of Sun Tzu—get inside the enemy’s head. Know your enemy, and know yourself. If Americans did this more often, we might be better able to predict the consequences of our adventures abroad. What if “Do unto others …” became a foreign policy guideline, an item on the checklist—whether out of moral conviction (not likely) or as a calculation for anticipating consequences? When pressuring Pakistan to be more aggressive against its own Taliban, they resist. How would American soldiers react in an analogous situation?

The Emir’s life is full of examples showing how his ability to empathize, or act justly under trying conditions, led to wise decisions. Yet, these actions are connected to a character that sought always to act honorably, intelligently and in accordance with the moral teaching of the Law.

*Forgiveness vs. Empathy*

--1830. When the *bey*, Hassan of Oran, loses the protection of powerful tribes because of his failure to put up resistance to the French, he asks Abdelkader’s much-respected father, Muhi al-Din, head of the Hachem tribe, for his *aman,* or protection. Once a tribe pledges its *aman*, there is a sacred obligation to not allow that person to be harmed. The young twenty-three-year-old Abdelkader sits in as a junior, and by custom, a silent member of his father’s council when they discuss the request of the *bey*.

Muhi al Din presents his case for granting the *aman* to his council. He acknowledges that Hassan had been an oppressive ruler, had shown no compassion toward overtaxed tribes in the *beylik*, held him and his son under house arrest for a year for suspected treason, and was widely hated. Nevertheless, he counsels they should show forgiveness. It was better to return evil with good; showing hospitality is an obligation of the faith and Hassan was a fellow Muslim. This might also enhance the tribe’s prestige by demonstrating it devotion to hospitality, but for the *bey* it would be humiliating. To not show hospitality might be a stain on his tribe’s reputation.

After the other members of the tribe indicate their agreement, a twenty -two year old Abdelkader apologetically speaks up. He asks his father’s forgiveness, but he must disagree. He reminds the council that there is anarchy in the land and hatred of the *bey* is widespread. There is a high risk that he will be attacked or insulted. This will only bring dishonor on those who have promised his protection and shown themselves incapable of doing so. Finally, Abdelkader argues that such a gesture will be regarded as a tacit pardon by those tribes who have been badly treated by Hassan and risks making themselves enemies of all the other tribes in the *beylik*. After a long silence, the father and elders acknowledge the wisdom of the son’s argument. They refuse granting their *aman* to the *bey*.

Empathy for those who have been badly treated and the Emir’s hardheaded reasoning overcome an excess of compassion tinged with his father’s pride in being a “good Muslim.” Polite and humble in speech, Abdelkader’s argument is accepted by the elders.

*Compassion and Empathy as a Weapon*

--1842. Total war has been declared by General Bugeaud. He has persuaded the French parliament that they can’t go on waging “demi-war.” Total war is the new policy. Only through occupation of the entire country (no exit strategy) and scorched earth tactics against tribes that side with the enemy, can France win. In the midst of this, the bishop of Algiers, Antoine Adolph Dupuch sends his vicar to the Emir’s camp. His mission is to intercede on behalf of a woman with a young infant who had beseeched the bishop’s help in getting her husband released from captivity. After receiving Dupuch’s request, the Emir asks the vicar why the bishop asks that only one of the French prisoners be released. Why not all of them? And in return, release the Arab prisoners held by the French?

Dupuch is amazed and happy. A hero. The local population is delirious with joy, and Bugeaud is caught unawares. He is upset with the bishop for initiating these humanitarian actions without his knowledge and is embarrassed by the Emir’s graciousness and humanity. The Emir thanks the bishop by sending him a flock of sheep. More dangerous are the reports from the French prisoners that the Emir treated them very well and very respectfully. Prisoners’ rations were no different from his regular troops. This is dangerous information the generals must control, for the troops fight believing that captivity will be worse than death.

Abdelkader decrees an unpopular code of conduct forbidding taking the heads of captured prisoners (which was permitted in battle)—an age-old custom that governs the share of the booty that goes with victory. In the face of strenuous protests, he gets affirmation from the *ulema* in Morocco that this is correct according to Islam. He then offers a monetary bounty to his fighters for each prisoner brought in unharmed, but a severe punishment (beatings on the soles of their feet) of those who are reported for mistreatment.

When the Emir was held a prisoner in France, his former French prisoners were among his most ardent lobbyists for his release. Dupuch submits a brief to Emperor Louis Napoleon testifying to the Emir’s good character and trustworthiness despite the popular view that he was a barbarian, propagated by the press and the need to demonize their enemy.

*Surrender: Empathy and Divine Will Converge*

--1847. For fifteen years, the Emir has been rallying and exhorting the tribes to stay in the fight. Every victory on the battlefield had seen tribes flock to him, every defeat brought defections. After 1842, the defeats became more frequent and victories fewer. The Emir’s ability to protect tribes that were loyal became impossible as Bugeaud adopted tactics that mimicked the Arabs’—tactics of mobility and constant harassment in the field, without fixed locations and heavy baggage trains. Speed above all. Live from the land. By the end of 1847, all but a few tribes in the Sahara had gone over to the French and his ability to punish the defectors was nil.

Facing a choice of fleeing into the desert or voluntarily laying down arms to General Lamoricière, whose reputation with Arabs for fairness and firmness made him a trustworthy negotiating partner, Abdelkader reviews the situation with his lieutenants. Lamoricière has 3000 cavalry twelve hours away. Remaining in the Emir’s camp are 1200 cavalry and 200 hardened infantry. All the Emir’s caliphs have submitted to France. His mobile camp (*deira*) contains their families and the wounded. The animals are starving and the wives and children are suffering from fatigue, hunger and sickness. Nevertheless, several of his most aggressive lieutenants want to attack. They could get past Lamoricière and reach the desert where the friendly tribes would welcome them. They could continue resisting and make trouble. Never give up, they argued, even if it means sacrificing family. Surrender is dishonorable.

The Emir thinks otherwise. He reviews the mutual vows they made eight years earlier, after the Tafna treaty was violated—to struggle and endure no matter how great the suffering and danger. Had he not honored that vow? No one disagreed. The Emir points out that his own brothers had submitted to France. Muslims were now killing each other. The situation was hopeless. The Moroccan Sultan had betrayed them and massacred their ally, the Beni Amer tribe. His caliph, Ben Salem, had surrendered voluntarily in return for exile in a Muslim country, and the French kept their word and sent him to Egypt. To continue to fight would only create useless suffering. We must now accept the judgment of God who in His infinite wisdom wants the land to be ruled by Christians. Are we to oppose His will?

After negotiating with Gen. Lamoricière, the Emir and his remaining troops lay down their arms, giving his word to never return to Algeria. They know the Emir’s word is good. In return, Lamoricière and the Duke d’Aumale (King Louis Philippe’s son and governor general) agree to assure that the Emir, his family and followers will be taken by boat to the Middle East. However, the promise must be ratified in Paris by the parliament.

Facts on the ground, the Emir’s aversion to futile suffering, and compassion for the families that would suffer most combines with a sense that God has another plan for him, and for Algeria. The respect held for him by others is sufficient to overcome his lieutenants’ desire to die with their boots on. God does have a new role for him, though Abdelkader doesn’t know it.

*Forgiveness and Unity*

--1848-1852. The Emir’s surrender takes France and the world by surprise. There are no preparations in Paris for fulfilling the agreement made with Lamoricière. The French have to find out if the Sultan or Khedive of Egypt will take him. Shortly after the deal is struck and the Louis-Philippe’s government is seeking a destination for the Emir, the popular revolution of February 1848 breaks out.

The king abdicates, a new republican governing committee can’t decide whether to honor the agreement made by the monarchy. Emir Abdelkader’s family and his followers’ families number over one hundred. For five years they languish in royal prisons—Chateau Pau and Chateau Amboise waiting for the political stars to get properly aligned for his liberation.

The French public at large holds the Emir responsible for the killing of three hundred French prisoners in 1846, when his situation had become desperate. The act had occurred when the prisoners were under the charge of Ben Thami, his brother-in- law, even though he was hundreds of miles away making his last futile effort to reignite the spirit of *jihad* in the tribes. There was little food for prisoners and troops alike, as well as the threat of an attack by the Moroccans whom the French had pressured into turning against Abdelkader. French propaganda declared that the massacre was the Emir’s responsibility. Weak interim French governments were not willing to risk public wrath by freeing the man it considered a barbarian and murderer.

Yet, the Emir’s handler, Col Daumas, writes to Bishop Dupuch on the eve of a fraternal visit to the Emir in Pau:

*So, you are going to see our illustrious prisoner in Pau. You will certainly not regret taking such a trip. You knew Abd el-Kader in prosperity, when practically all Algeria recognized his authority and now you will find him even greater in adversity than prosperity. . . . You will find him friendly, simple, affectionate, modest and stoically resigned. He never complains for himself, though he is determined to hold France to its word. He forgives his enemies, even those who can still make him suffer and he will not allow anyone to speak ill of them in his presence. Whether they are Muslims or Christians who are the subject of his complaints, he has forgiven them. As to the former, he excuses their treachery by the force of circumstances. As to the latter, their conduct is explained by the flag under which they fought, for its safety and honor—though he considers nationalism yet another false idol. By going to comfort this noble character, you will be adding another charitable act to all the others that have already distinguished your life.*

During the Emir’s years in Pau and Amboise, he maintained a regular routine with his extended family of over one hundred men, women, and children. Like the *zawyiya* of his youth, his daily rhythms were structured around the five times for prayer, reading and study, greeting numerous visitors, meals and spending time with his family. He read voraciously, engaged in lively conversation with a steady stream of visitors who wanted to meet this Arab Tecumsah, noble opponent of France. He was curious about everything: French agricultural methods, Napoleon (to whom he was often compared by admirers,) mathematics, theology, French politics. And by reading the Old and New Testament, he became reacquainted with Abraham—the Beloved of God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Plagued by sickness, depression and the deaths of twenty-five members of his family, the Emir railed in private to his handlers but continued to address himself to the good and honorable instincts of France. He witnessed the love and care of the Dominican sisters who cared for the sick, the good will of hundreds of Frenchmen who became ultimately a powerful lobby of clerics, military men, especially Daumas and Dupuch. He would shame France into keeping its word as Europe watched. Yet he came to understand that France was a house on fire in the 1840s, deeply divided over the role of God and religion in society, and had bigger problems to worry about than the fate of a former Arab enemy.

In Amboise, Abdelkader has a vision of Abraham and of himself as one of his children. He calls this his “blessing of Abraham.” This blessing gives him a mission—to be a sign of the oneness of God, and the oneness of His creation. Neither Jew nor Christian, Abraham was a true believer who submitted to God, the first *muslim* (one who submits).

Years later, in the fall of 1861 an exiled Abdelkader had been honored around the world for his rescue of thousands of Christians during a politically inspired rampage in Damascus. Asked by a French journalist why he risked his life to save Christians, the Emir replied, “ I was simply an instrument. Sing your praises to him who directed me—your Sultan as well as mine.” He was doing God’s will, he elaborated, by saving innocents, and his humanity demanded it.

**Relevance Today**

Abdelkader’s relevance arises precisely because he’s the kind of Muslim our secular, foreign policy establishment should be engaging, conservative, committed to his faith, not perceived as “Westernized,” respected by his own for his religious authority and intellect. Sadly, today Abdelkader would likely be dismissed in the West as a dangerous Islamist if he were opposing America in Afghanistan or elsewhere. (Yet, it was English and French admirers who have been most instrumental in preserving the story of his extraordinary life—so extraordinary that a frontier lawyer from Dubuque named a new settlement after him in 1846. He called it Elkader, and later it became the county seat of Clayton County, Iowa.)

He was a unifier, not a divider. He believed no religion “gets” God. No one is an infidel in all the ways of God. God is greater than whatever his finite creatures can grasp. All creation is sacred. Yet, we all live in a perceptual bubble that inhibits our seeing other people or cultures accurately. The Emir’s cultural bubble made it difficult to imagine that an agreement signed by the son of the king of France would not be honored, or that the powerful French monarchy that he had fought against would disappear overnight.

He was “local” and “universal” at the same time. Deeply and authentically Muslim, his faith was not a safety belt for holding his identity together. Rather, it was a platform for seeking the oneness of God in the diversity of his creation. Today as a believer and humanist, Abdelkader’s example offers a potential bridge between the secular and religious communities around the world.

Finally, Abdelkader was a modernist. He saw no conflict between religion, politics and science. All should work together to serve the same end of glorifying God. He embraced modernity and technology if it made life better for people, provided that that modernity, be it in the form of “ technology,” “democracy” or “capitalism,” not be transformed into idols and demanding loyalty from cultures that choose to be different.

**Conclusion**

I see Emir Abdelkader as a prophetic figure in the same lineage as Thomas Merton, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Sayyid Qtub, and Joel Salatin today.[[3]](#footnote-3) Each in their own way was saying the same thing: materialistic, self indulgent, technology-worshipping consumerism is a dead end if divorced from Higher Wisdom. We are destroying nature, other cultures, and ourselves—spiritually and physically—in a world where everything and everybody is interconnected, but trapped in an economic system driven by inducing (where it still doesn’t exist) a constant lust for more “things” . . . which provide, ultimately, no lasting satisfaction. Bhutan anyone?

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1. The author wishes to acknowledge the Fetzer Institute for support of this white paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the Emir’s lexicon, Abraham is the Beloved of God, Moses the Interpreter, Jesus the Goodness of God, and Mohammad the Unity of God. All the prophets are equal and authentic channels of divine wisdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Seechapter 15 (one of five chapters contributed by J. Kiser) of *Religion, Terror and Error, US Foreign Policy and the Challenge of Spiritual Engagement,* by Douglas M Johnston, Praeger 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)