

PERFORMING THE SACRED IN SECULAR SPACES: AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL STUDY OF RITUAL MUSIC AND SPIRITUAL TRANCE

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Abstract

This study explores sacred rituals and their performance aspect in relation to formal academic space. Specifically, it focuses on an African music ensemble examination in a Nigerian university as an example of ritual music being brought into an academic setting and analyzed within an ethnomusicology framework. Data for this study were collected through participant observation to examine the extent to which the musical performance constituted merely a theatrical representation or, conversely, a transcendental spiritual experience rooted in Osun ritual music. The writers concentrated on several points such as ritual authenticity, spiritual embodiment, gendered ritual roles, and trance phenomena which they observed during the performance. For example, a devotee who was ritually initiated became the lead priestess and shortly afterwards, an Arugba (ritual votary) went into a trance. This points to unexpected intersections between performance, belief, and spiritual reality encountered in the African Traditional Religion (ATR) context that merit further discussion. This study posits that religious knowledge systems rooted in local cultural contexts are so closely intertwined with performance practices that, even young people who have received a formal education are unable to separate the two, thereby showing the continued existence of ATR in the face of such external forces as globalization, modernization, and the main religions Christianity and Islam. Taking this incident as a case study and raising it to the level of performance theory, embodiment, and indigenous knowledge systems, this paper adds to the existing, though still limited, body of work on African ritual music, religion, and the survival of traditional cosmologies in modern institutional settings. The study notes that African ritual performances cannot always be considered only as aesthetic displays since they serve purposes as locations of spiritual experiences, the expression of identity, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion; Ethnomusicology; Spiritual Trance; Ọṣun Worship

Introduction

Music sits at the heart of African cultural life and is especially significant within the framework of African Traditional Religion (ATR) where it is considered not only as a source of entertainment but also as a means of communication between the tangible and spiritual worlds (Mbiti, 1969; Merriam, 1964). In fact, the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria consider ritual music as a major means through which indigenous religious knowledge is preserved, transmitted, and enacted.

More so, these musical pieces integrate elements of cognition, metaphors, and performance practice that represent the philosophical backbones of Yoruba religious traditions (Idowu, 1973; Abimbola, 1976). However, ethnomusicologists have long noted music and religious/social functions in African societies are closely intertwined as the setting of the performance largely decides the meaning and structure of the music (Nketia, 1974; Blacking, 1976). Moreover, in Yoruba religion, deities like Ọṣun, Sango, Yemoja, Ọṣara and Obatala are linked to their own musical traditions, style of performance, and rituals. Typically, these performances will include drumming, singing, dancing and dress codes using symbols, and ritual hierarchies that specify the roles of priestesses, devotees, and ritual carriers. Furthermore, these sacred performances are generally confined to ritual locations such as shrines, festivals, and religious ceremonies of the community where spiritual power and ritual genuineness are kept with care. (Drewal, 1992; Adegbite, 1987).

Yet, new developments in Nigerian higher education have paved way for the presentation of indigenous music traditions in new ways. Music, theatre arts, and cultural studies departments are increasingly including performances of traditional ensembles as one of ways of teaching and preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural education. In fact, this method of teaching frequently entails the recreation of ritual performances in academic settings such as classrooms, examination halls, and concert stages. Although such performances are mainly for educational demonstration, they sometimes lead to the comparison between representation and reality especially when the performers are already spiritually affiliated with the traditions they are performing (Schechner, 2002). In line with this, this paper investigates a peculiar incident of a staged performance of Ọṣun ritual music during an African music ensemble examination in a Nigerian university that the participants interpreted to be spiritually significant. This incident potently illustrates the presence of indigenous religious consciousness in modern institutional environments which are generally considered to be secular and rational.

Gap in Literature

Significant work has been done on Yoruba ritual music, African religious performances, and ethnomusicological investigations of sacred traditions. However, very little has been said about the spiritual impacts that may happen without intention when one performs sacred traditions in formal education settings. Most research focuses only on either festival times, shrine rituals, or community practices. Not much consideration is given to the functioning of these traditions when they are moved to institutionally-based educational settings (Eluwole, 2023).

Another thing is that a number of authors have looked at trance, possession, and embodiment in African religious contexts (Drewal, 1992; Mbiti, 1969), but very few have considered how such states could be induced even within academic settings like during exams or task demonstrations in classroom. Besides that, the resulting effects of those incidents on our comprehension of the survival of indigenous belief systems among educated young people haven't been looked at much either. So, this article tries to fill this opening by mapping the ritual performance that seemed to go beyond the educational purpose and so it also adds to the conversation that's starting about the strength of indigenous knowledge, authenticity in performance, and the meeting point of traditional spirituality and modern schooling.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways does the Yoruba ritual music performance in an academic setting show the aspects of continuity in African Traditional Religion?
2. How far can sacred ritual performances be detached from their spiritual significances when they are presented for education?
3. How do ritual initiation, identity, and religious affiliation impact the genuineness of the performed ritual dances?
4. What does trance experience mean in an academic performative context with regards to the persistence of indigenous belief system?
5. How does this phenomenon affect our perception of the link between indigenous spirituality and modern education in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Music as Spiritual Technology: Invocation, Trance, and Embodiment

A significant part of the discussion in the literature revolves around music's function in facilitating spiritual appearance and trance sessions. Researchers in African religion usually point out that certain musical arrangements, rhythms, and chants have the quality of attracting spirits. Vidal (2012) says that besides merely symbolizing spiritual forces, ritual music can also be a means of physically inviting spirits into the ritual environment. Mbiti (1969) adds that spiritual manifestations in African religious traditions could happen through dreaming, engaging in rituals or performances, especially among religious leaders, seers, and committed followers. Such manifestations uphold the view that spiritual existence is not something of the past but is a continuing presence in the life of the community. That notion goes hand in hand with Drewal's (1992) studies on Yoruba ritual performance, which provides evidence that possession and trance are merely the physical side of the spiritual experiences which are made possible through performance features like rhythm, dance, and singing. With this approach, trance is considered not as a mental disorder but as culturally understood proof of communication with the spiritual. In the same vein, Barber (1991) contends that Yoruba traditions of performance are living examples of culture changes in which meanings are created by doing rather than by looking. It implies that, even if ritual performances are done again in non-traditional settings, their symbols and meanings will be alive and meaningfully interpreted only by those who still believe in and follow that tradition.

Ritual Performance in Modern Institutional Contexts

Although a lot has been written about Yoruba ritual music and ATR practices, not many researchers have really paid attention to how sacred traditions are performed in formal academic settings. Most of the previous work has been concentrating on shrines, festivals and community rituals, without much discussion about how ritual meanings could be maintained when these traditions are performed for teaching purposes. Performance studies scholars like Schechner (2002), for example, consider that rituals and theater lie on a continuum, which means that even if a performance is carefully staged, it might still have the power of a ritual if the performers believe in it and the audience is receptive. This line of thinking offers a very useful tool for analyzing how a performance in a class can accidentally reproduce some of the elements of the ritual experience.

Theoretical Framework

Three interconnected theoretical views serve as the basis of this research: Performance Theory, Embodiment Theory, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory. These theoretical frameworks establish a cross-disciplinary backdrop for exploring how ritual music performance might acquire

another dimension apart from mere representation. It may be a place/locality of experiencing religion, expressing identity, and transferring knowledge.

Performance Theory

Performance Theory offers a fascinating lens to see how ritual, theater, and cultural enactment are intertwined. Schechner (2002) views performance as something that can be charted on a scale from ritual to theatre and from sacred enactment to secular representation. By this view, performances are not just nice-looking things but the restored patterns of behaviour, action that are learned in the culture and repeated so as to keep their meaning for future generations. From this perspective, ritual performances that are carried out in academic environments should not simply be seen as what ifs because a performance itself can create social and symbolic realities again. Schechner (2002) states that performances may thus often have twice-behaved behaviour i.e. even if the same actions are performed in a context different from the original one, there are chances that they will still carry some of the original meanings.

This line of thinking is highly applicable to African ritual performances that indicate the point where performance and religious enactment are linked. Drewal (1992) similarly posits that Yoruba ritual performances should not be considered as mere, unchanging representations but as multifaceted, living processes that involve agency participation transformation. In other words, ritual performance is not only symbolical but also a matter of experience. Shedding light on the present research, the musical performance of Òṣun rituals at a university examination setting can be seen as a performative restoration of spiritual wisdom rather than merely a dramatic presentation. In cases where performers have ritual ties or faith connections, the ritual may even transcend having been a mere representation and become a full-fledged participation. This, in turn, clarifies how ritual responses such as trance which is so characteristic of the religious domain, may very well be happening in the academic milieu.

Embodiment Theory

Embodiment Theory offers a further understanding of how ritual performance may bring about physical as well as psychological experiences among participants. Csordas (1990) describes embodiment as the very existence of culture, stating that cultural meanings are not only comprehended mentally but are also physically felt through the body. In African religious traditions, the body frequently serves as a channel for the expression of spiritual presence. Mbiti (1969) points out that spirit possession and trance experiences are understood in the culture as ways of exchange between the visible and invisible worlds. In the same way, Drewal (1992) explains that movement rhythm costume, and sounds in Yoruba ritual settings are combined to set the stage for spiritual embodiment.

Ritual music has a very special place in this as rhythm and chants are usually what elicit bodily movements. Research in African ethnomusicology reveals that repetitive rhythmic patterns and call-and-response structures can arouse emotional and psychological states that encourage collective participation (Nketia, 1974; Merriam, 1964). This perspective is even more reinforced by studies demonstrating that music in Yoruba festivals carries out both invocation and evocation functions, i.e. through certain sound performances, it can call onto the spiritual presence (Eluwole, 2023). From the viewpoint of embodiment, trance thus is not to be considered just a freak occurrence but rather a culturally reasonable reaction that is embedded in the systems of meanings shared by the members of the culture. In relation to this research, the trance

phenomenon that took place during the exam performance could be seen as an embodied expression resulting from the ritual knowledge, belief systems, and performance immersion.

Theoretical Relevance to the Study

The three aforementioned theoretical frameworks, when combined, bring a consistent theoretical lens for understanding the incident that has been the focus of this research. For instance, Performance Theory elucidates the mechanism behind how ritual performances can still communicate their messages even when they are staged in academic venues. On the other hand, Embodiment Theory sheds light on how the ritual participants can be physically attuned to the conveyed ritual meaning as a result of their acts. Lastly, Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory provides insight into how traditional cultural frameworks manage to survive in contemporary institutional settings. Therefore, the combination of these theories authorizes this research to identify the trance manifestation that was witnessed not merely as a singular event but as a phenomenon located at the intersection of performance belief identity, and indigenous ways of knowing.

Methodology

Research Design

The case study method is a natural choice here as it provides a way to deeply study a particular cultural event in its very life setting (Yin, 2018). The Incident during the African music ensemble examination is considered a bounded case through which broader themes of ritual performance, indigenous spirituality, and educational space may be discussed. In addition, the research is informed by ethnomusicological perspectives which focus on the relation of music to culture and society instead of analyzing isolated sound structures (Merriam, 1964). Hence, this method permits the study of the music performance as well as the cultural connotations given to it by the people involved.

Sources of Data

The research is based on direct observation and narrative documentation of the examination performance as its main data. It is the researcher's direct involvement in a musical examination where students were given different Yoruba traditional ensembles such as Egungun, Sango, Yemoja, Obatala, and Ọṣun that served as the main data source. Also, some informal post-performance chats with a few members of the participants were a secondary source of data, especially those directly involved in the Ọṣun ensemble performance. These talks gave background information about issues such as the ritual context, the identity of the performers, and the interpretations of the trance experience.

Narrative and Observational Method

This research uses participant observation and narrative ethnography mainly. Participant observation is still one of the most popular methods in ethnomusicology because it offers researchers a way to record performance practices as they happen within their social contexts (Nettl, 2005). The author became a non-interfering spectator for the study, very carefully recording alongside the performance a number of things including the order of the performances, the roles of the performers, the musical structure, and the reactions of the audience. Due to the unprecedented nature of Osun performance, extra focus was given to the Ọṣun ensemble. Since narratives actually convey how individuals interpret and give cultural meaning to events, narrative inquiry was first and foremost the preferred method of this study as it was aimed at interpreting the lived experience as told by the participants. Such a method has great bearing especially in

recognizing participants' views of trance not just as a medical or psychological state but as a culturally significant event. This way of seeing things goes well with the ethnographic tradition which a culture seeing the world through the eyes of the people and giving them full descriptive voices (Geertz, 1973).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were the overriding concern throughout the conduct of this study. For example, as human beings were included in the research, special measures were taken regarding confidentiality, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity. In a qualitative research setting, commonly names and other hints of identity have been left out to protect the individuals without carrying their names and institutional identities. Participants are hence only mentioned based on their ritual/performance roles. This is in line with the traditional qualitative research ethics which advocates the safeguard of participants' identity (Creswell, 2014).

Analytical Approach

Data collected for this study were analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method that is used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Considering that the research aims to find the important themes arising from the performance experience, this method seemed quite suitable.

The analysis was conducted mainly by thematic categories:

- i. Ritual authenticity and performer identity
- ii. Music as a medium of spiritual invocation
- iii. Embodiment and trance experience
- iv. The interaction between sacred practice and academic space
- v. Persistence of indigenous belief systems.

These themes were analyzed through the theoretical perspectives of performance theory, embodiment theory, and indigenous knowledge systems as earlier explained. This theoretical triangulation provided a way of analytical profundity and conceptual consistency. Besides, interpretative analysis was used to link the observed experience with wider discussions of African ritual performance. Interpretive approaches are very useful in cultural studies because they enable researchers to relate individual events to broader cultural patterns (Geertz, 1973).

Results and Discussion

Ritual Authenticity and the Question of Performed Versus Lived Religion

Results of the research showed that what was originally planned as an academic performance gradually took on the features of an authentic ritual experience, especially when the *Ọṣun*ensemble was being presented. Even though the performance was intended as a part of an examination in African music, some features indicated the transition from the theatrical representation to the spiritual enactment which the participants considered to be real. One significant reason for this perception was the ritual involvement of some of the performers. The main vocalist who played the role of the priestess was not only performing the role but she was an initiated worshiper of *Ọṣun*, who was called *omoomi* (a person spiritually dedicated to the water deity from birth). As reported during the data collecting, the initiation of this singer had included family rituals and sacrifices for water spirits. Such documents are in line with the argument that the authority deriving from ritual in the case of the Yoruba religious practice is most of the time

connected to lineage, initiation, and spiritual calling apart from ones skill as a performer (Drewal, 1992; Abimbola, 1976).

This result backs up the point made by Performance Theory that ritual actions can keep their symbolic and experiential meaning even when they are changed into new contexts (Schechner, 2002). So, having the initiated participants around may have helped people think that the show was a real religious experience rather than just a representation. Besides, singing the so-called authentic ritual songs, as participants put it, instead of the basic classroom versions might have made the entire performance seem more like a real ritual in a serious way. Studies have revealed that music used in rituals in the Yoruba religious setting not only serves as a form of artistic manifestation but also a vehicle for the invocation of the divine (Adegbite, 1987; Eluwole, 2023).

Gender Symbolism and Ritual Qualification in Performance Practice

Another major finding is related to the reproduction of ritual gender roles through academic performance. The student who took up the role of Arugba (the ritual votary whose responsibility is the carrying of sacrificial offerings) was said to be a virgin, meeting the traditional criterion for the role that is in fact virginity, which is in turn symbolically linked to ritual purity in Òṣun worship traditions. The significance of this information is that it shows that even in a staged act, the performers were trying to preserve the ritual authenticity by imitating the traditional role requirements. The implication of this is that the students' concerns were not only limited to musical accuracy but also extended to cultural and spiritual legitimacy.

This discovery adds weight to the claims of Indigenous Knowledge Systems theoretical framework that the knowledge systems of the past still continue to have a strong impact even in the modern educational settings (Dei, 2000). It corroborates also the previous studies that Yoruba ritual music is a means of the transmission of the cultural norms and values including the moral expectations that are part of the ritual roles (Eluwole, 2024). Looking at it from a different angle, it means that the academic environment did not completely remove the ritual performance from the sphere of religion and spirituality. Rather, it was the setting in which religious performance and educational instructions were brought together.

Trance Experience as Embodied Religious Expression

The most significant observation in this study was the trance-like state that the student who played Arugba was believed to have gone into. It is said that during the play the girl dived into the unconscious state, fainted several times and the reaction of the participants was similar to a possession of the spirit. This change in the course of the play is said to have led to the closing down of the examination. From the point of view of Embodiment Theory, these kinds of happenings can be recognized as cultural responses through physical reactions which are influenced by belief systems and ritual settings (Csordas, 1990). By the standards of Yoruba religious belief, trance and spirit possession are hardly ever seen as a sign of illness but rather as spiritually significant experiences which are underpinned by cultural knowledge (Mbiti, 1969; Drewal, 1992).

The individuals involved in the production also saw the event in line with this cultural context. Some performers even went as far as saying that the experience was a proof of presence of the spirit of Òṣun while others even talked about different kinds of possession occurring in water divinities. Even though, the participants stated that some possession of the spirit of Osun is even signaled by the moves of the legs while possession of Yemoja may be linked to the motion of the

hands. Such explanations, although not being provable with scientific methods, are however still very meaningful culturally in ATR cosmology. In line with this, various studies support that ritual music through its invocative functions can enact psychological and emotional states typically associated with trance experiences (Vidal, 2012; Eluwole, 2023). If we look at it through the lens of performance studies, this example may very well show us how getting totally engrossed in a performative act can lead to the performers losing track of whether they are just acting or actually experiencing, especially if it's a ritual tradition that they really believe in.

Indigenous Spirituality and the Resilience of African Traditional Religion

A further major discovery from this research is the message the current use of African Traditional Religion still among Christian and Muslim students, particularly educated young people. The event is proof that the religious beliefs of the ancestors of today's cultural communities have continued to influence African youths' ways of interpreting change despite the big impact of modernization globalization Christianity, or Islam. This resonates with Mbiti's (1969) view that deeply, the African religious consciousness is anchored in cultural identity even where there is very rapid social change. Also similar is, the point made by scholars on indigenous knowledge systems, that traditional belief systems are retained not necessarily in resistance to modernity, but in accommodating it in hybrid cultural forms (Dei, 2000).

Therefore, the event is indeed a compelling demonstration call to the fact that educational formalization does not necessarily have to be blamed for the downfall of indigenous belief systems. Instead, it reveals that academic institutions may even be key places for negotiating and reinterpreting traditional knowledge. This result also validates previous studies indicating that Yoruba ritual music still acts as a channel for cultural continuity and identity formation even in the modern world (Eluwole, 2024).

Sacred Performance in Secular Institutional Spaces

Another significant issue which emerged from this research is how academic spaces are transformed during a performance. Although the examination hall was designed as a secular educational facility, the situation at the event changed the place to have some features of a space used for rituals through the performance. This is a confirmation of Schechner's (2002) thesis that performance through collective participation and common belief can transform the normal spaces into symbolic ones. Here, it is the ritual music costume the chants, and the belief of the participants that likely have had made the academic environment be made holy temporarily. What is interesting about this is that it points out how the holy meaning is not just determined by a place but also can come out of the performance actions. Besides that, it also further supports the view that African ritual systems often do not firmly separate the sacred and the secular domains (Mbiti, 1969).

Theoretical Implications

This paper adds to the theoretical debates of ethnomusicology, religious studies, and performance studies by proving that even today, performance theory is a great tool in analyzing African ritual practices. If we examine how ritual performances are staged for the public, we may find out that these performances still have some aspects of the sacred. This idea is in line with the point that performance is not just a depiction but is also a direct experience (Schechner, 2002). It also points to how the body is involved in expressing cultural and religious meanings by highlighting the role of ritual music in inducing trance or altered states of consciousness that participants find deeply meaningful. Hence, the observed trance was further evidence in favor of the proposition that the

body is a vehicle through which cultural and religious significances manifest (Csordas, 1990). On a similar note, this paper advances the study of Indigenous Knowledge Systems by showing that the argument in which indigenous epistemologies are said to be displaced by modern knowledge systems is not true (Dei, 2000). For African scholars, this result is very relevant as it shows the way to repositioning indigenous knowledge in modern academic discourse.

Practical Implications

The results of this research have practical implications for music pedagogy, cultural studies and university curricula. Firstly, the research indicates that teachers need to be culturally sensitive when using sacred musical heritage in academic performance. As some students may have a spiritual attachment to the performed traditions, teachers may need to make a clear difference between cultural display and ritual performance. Secondly, the research brings out the need for a contextual approach in African traditional music instruction. Students should be well taught about the cultural and religious significances of ritual performances so that there are no misconceptions or unintended spiritual consequences.

Thirdly, the research points to the necessity for institutional ethically based rules for the performance of sacred traditions in educational settings. Such rules can facilitate universities in harmonizing the aims of cultural preservation and the respect for indigenous religious practices. Finally, the research adds its voice to the current debates on the recognition of African Traditional Religion as a valid academic discipline. By highlighting the present-day significance of ATR, the research reinforces the arguments for the wider use of indigenous knowledge in African higher education curricula.

Limitations of the Study

Although this paper has its merits, it also suffers from some weaknesses and needs to be seen in the context of its limitations. First and foremost, this study presents itself as a single case study. Hence, the findings are not very representative of ritual music performance in general. Researchers could conduct comparative studies involving different institutions or different scenes of musical performance. The second limitation of the study is that it is based mainly on observational and narrative records rather than extensive interviews. Nonetheless, the study remains highly interpretive and does not lose its value due to the lack of interview data. Third, the study does not make an attempt to authenticate metaphysical claims of the trance state. This is so because the main interest of the study is in cultural understanding, not theological validation. Hence, the study is ethnographic and cultural analysis-based.

Conclusion

The major contribution of this research is that ritual music performances in academic contexts may be working at multiple levels simultaneously as pedagogical exercises, cultural demonstrations, and places for spiritual meaning. This study shows that the identity of the performer, knowledge of the ritual, and belief systems could very well dictate the ways in which the performances are carried out and how they are perceived. It is in this way that the study advances the existing body of literature by illustrating that African ritual performances should not always be seen merely as aesthetic occasions but can also be viewed as manifestations of indigenous spirituality. Thus, the findings highlight the urgency of further research into the intricate relationship between performance, belief, and educational practice in African settings

Contribution to Knowledge

This research work has a broad impact on ethnomusicology, African religious studies, performance studies as well as other fields. Firstly, it reveals through the study of actual cases that ritual music performances, which are part of the academic environment, can still preserve their sacred meanings besides their teaching goals. While earlier research focused mostly on ritual music in traditional festival and shrine settings, this paper takes the matter further by looking at how such performances can be carried out in modern institutional spaces.

Secondly, the article offers a fresh perspective by showing that the identity of the performer and the process of ritual initiation may affect the perceived authenticity and the impact of cultural performances staged for entertainment. The study went one step further and looked at how a participant's ritual background influenced the nature of an academic performance, thereby throwing light on how indigenous religious identities are still active in today's educational settings.

Thirdly, this paper pushes forward theoretical debates about the connection between performance and spirituality by unveiling that ritual performances staged for the purposes of academia could be the places where the body and religious experience co-exist. In this way, it adds to the increasing number of studies that advocate for more fluid boundaries between the concepts of performance and ritual.

Fourthly, the article adds to the Indigenous Knowledge literature by revealing the persistence of African Traditional Religion in present day situations which are generally regarded to be governed by Western epistemologies. It exhibits that, even among the educated youth, who are the carriers of new knowledge/discourses, indigenous belief systems are still an integral part of their meaning-making processes. Hence, it is a testimony that ATR is still a living and breathing culture through which Africans can understand their realities.

Lastly, the research adds methodological value by highlighting the potential of narrative ethnography and performance observation in exploring sensitive cultural experiences which may not be effectively revealed through quantitative research methods. This way, it also stresses the ongoing importance of qualitative cultural research within African scholarship.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies may explore:

- i. Comparative analysis of ritual performances across Nigerian universities
- ii. The psychological dimensions of trance in African performance contexts
- iii. The role of indigenous spirituality in contemporary African education
- iv. Ethical considerations in teaching sacred cultural materials

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