

CRACKS IN THE EDIFICE OF WESTERN GLOBALIZATION – THE SPECTRUM OF UBUNTU AND AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

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Abstract

Achille Mbembe noted that “...history and all things flow toward us now. Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world”. He recognized “the becoming black of the world”. The “broken promises” of globalization and “its discontents” are clearly evident. Widespread inequities, and what Felwine Sarr refers to as “envelopment” have been trailing globalization. The “envelopment” is the enclosure of non-western societies in modes of being and organizing themselves which disqualify who they are and what they value. The disqualification attempts have been unmatched by globalization’s claims of improving lives. The ensuing disillusionment have reawakened indigenous modes of being and interacting that are proving to be more integral and fulfilling - individually and collectively. The awareness is increasing that the survival of human society globally in this century will largely depend on the rediscovery of the power of human community and solidarity known in Africa as Ubuntu. Globally, there is a craving for a world with a more human face. Indigenous spiritual philosophies such as Ubuntu propose this desired world, where conviviality, fluidity between sacred-profane and consubstantiality of life would epitomize human interactions. It is a world which operates with the insight that we cannot exist without one another. It is a world where a sense of a shared existence, destiny and humanity is valued. The mainstreaming of this spiritual philosophy in Africa has the potential to trigger African Renaissance. In this case, globalization in the African sense would be about inclusivity and mutuality, positive-sum game, as opposed to the advancement of global partisan capital interest and agenda. The paper proposes to look through some of the cracks in the edifice of Western globalization and opens up to the new dawn of the Ubuntu humanizing model.

Keywords: *Ubuntu, African spirituality, African renaissance, globalization, universe.*

Introduction

Forms of Western globalization have been imperialism, slavery, racial capitalism, colonialism and neo-colonialism (Mbembe, 2017). They are all fruits of Western expansionist ideologies and ambitions. Though the use of the term globalization is fairly recent and linked to the global proliferation of technology (Taylor, 2012), its drive to surpass human boundaries is ancient. In its simple assertion, globalisation refers to the worldwide interaction of human beings, the ease of changing locations and exchanging goods, cultural values and artefacts. The current tempo of globalization is driven by technological advancements in transport and communication. Globalization has meant that people across the globe can hold the same conversation almost simultaneously. However, the issue with globalization is the drive of conquest and imperialistic tendencies that have characterised its Western form in the last two millennia. This paper would like to pay special attention to the new energy of globalisation that is grave for a world with a more human face, as epitomised in the concept of *Ubuntu* and indigenous communitarian spiritual worldviews.

Throughout the world today, there is a real social exasperation about the Western model of globalization. The sentiments of domination, exploitation by invisible global forces and the urge to get out of the grip of this system are quickly spreading, hence “the becoming black of the world” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 1). The “broken promises” of the expiring model globalization and “its discontents” (Stiglitz, 2002) have left a trail of widespread inequities and what Felwine Sarr (2016, pp. 21-28) referred to as “envelopment”. The “envelopment” is the enclosure of non-western societies in modes of being, organizing and becoming themselves, which disqualify who they are and what they value. The disqualification attempts have been unmatched by globalization’s claims of improving lives. The ensuing disillusionment has reawakened indigenous modes of being and interacting. The latter are getting out of the informal spaces where they used to be relegated for centuries. These modes of being and interacting are also proving to be more integral, convivial and fulfilling, individually and collectively.

The awareness is increasing that the survival of human society globally in this century will largely depend on the rediscovery of the power of human community and solidarity. This is the power that *Ubuntu* brings as a civilizational model. The *Ubuntu* civilizational model matches the global craving of humanity for a convivial, fluid and inclusive world. It is a world where there is an increasing awareness that we cannot exist without one another. It is a world where a sense of a shared existence is valued. Thus, the spiritual philosophy that African indigenous communities have been cherishing and nurturing for centuries is resurfacing as the most viable way of life globally. It is what this paper refers to as the spectrum of *Ubuntu* and African Renaissance in the dying bed of Western globalization. The paper looks through some of the cracks in the edifice of Western globalization and

examines what could be the new dawn for humanity if the *Ubuntu* civilizational model is considered.

Observing Cracks in the Edifice of Western Globalization

The convoluted history of humankind seems to have reached a turning-point necessitating finding new ways of living together. Though capital still largely dominates such pursuit, important cracks are appearing in the edifice of Western globalization. Defining characteristics of the Western model of globalization include the impoverishment of the majority of people on the planet by dispossessing them from their lands, weakening their ability to feed themselves, heightening the cost of living and turning the people into a mass of desperate labourers. Enslaved is what the majority of the people have become, to the minority of the people who control the supply of money. This system attempts to keep all the people on their toes. In the name of profit, the majority are robbed of their freedoms, their livelihoods, their dignity and their cultures.

The most self-cannibalising characteristic of the Western globalisation model is the displacement of the innate value of human beings by making them mere instruments at the service of capital. As a consequence, material possessions become more important than people, thus leading to the threats of a crumbled society. Another defining characteristic of this system is exclusionist, whereby families and communities are excluded, by the mighty, from accessing vital resources as per their natural right or contribution to the production of these resources (Brotons, 2021; Koot, 2020). However, this system was normalized, as if by divine order; the continuous suffering that it imposed on the majority of the world population could not leave it unquestioned. Precolonial Africa and other indigenous communities offered a counterexample to the Western way of handling resources. It appeared that it was possible to avoid huge disparities and unhealthy competition for resources in society. The trail of misery, violence and hostilities caused by the unequal distribution of resources in the society was not, therefore, natural but manmade.

The globalisation that is fashion in Western imperialism tended to establish one uniform world with similar political and economic systems under the control of the magnate of finance. This system opposes and undermines a world based on self-determining communities, even though the rhetoric of freedom is part of the camouflage of the system's exploitative machinery. Despite the control mechanism of this establishment, cracks are developing therein, and a shift is taking place. People and their human habitat are increasingly taking centre stage again instead of money. The importance of social units of solidarity is increasing in the rejection of large and anonymous structures and organizations at state or interstate levels. There is a rise in the consciousness that it is because we are that I am also (Mbiti, 1969). Interdependence, interconnection, collaboration and cooperation are emphasized. Human beings' ways of living do not have to be at war with each other and nature. Instead, it should they should inspire each other and be inspired by nature and the

harmonious interactions therein. The battle to reinstate the free flow of persons, goods and shared value, characteristic of the natural way of living, is resolutely engaged by the people against systems of confinement. This was evident when people worldwide fought against the politics of confinement imposed during the Covid 19 years. An indoctrinating school system that offers no livelihood for youth is also questioned in place of nurturing natural talents and putting them at the service of the community.

Globally, people are moving away from the superficial divide based on race imposed by a system of divide and rule. They are awakening to the innate and most ancient indwelling conviction that we are one human species and children of the same natural habitat, the earth. For millennia, cooperation, not cut-throat competition, has ensured the survival of the bigger majority of the people in the terrestrial globe. The same could be said about the connection and positive human interactions with nature. Without them, the inhabitant of the earth would not have survived. Feeling and living in harmony with nature and other forms of beings have been the path of and to life, not the addiction to divide, conquer, subdue, exploit and possess. Living in close but open communities has also nurtured meaningful life and the joy of living instead of being forced into anonymous, faceless and life-sucking states and corporations with their taxation systems.

Witnessing a New Dawn - the *Ubuntu* Humanizing Model and African Renaissance

African indigenous communities have always been preoccupied with a unifying principle that presides over the material and the spiritual world (Bisseck, 1999). *Ubuntu* is such a principle which brings forth a humanizing model of society. Unearthing this principle, aligning policy and vital choices on this principle, signals the beginning of a new epoch for Africa – the African rebirth referred to here as the African Renaissance. More than a concept or what van Binsbergen calls a semantic complex, *Ubuntu* is a living praxis that has characterized generations of indigenous Africans (Stuit, 2016). Though it originates from the Nguni language in South Africa, it finds its equivalence in all Bantu and even non-Bantu languages in Africa. The reference to *Ubuntu* meant placing the human being and life at the centre of any endeavour. This principle rehabilitates human aspiration towards transcendence as the primary cause of achieving well-being, justice, peace, goodness and fairness in society (Bisseck, 1999). It leads to the recognition of the relational, emotional, and affective values, alongside dry reason, as provisions of nature to the human being to contribute to a functional and better-performing society (Bisseck, 1999). It places the shared search for value (not profit) as what holds the world together. Value-inspired and oriented action is fundamental to achieving excellence (Bisseck, 1999). Achieving excellence through *Ubuntu* is part of the African Renaissance. *Ubuntu* illustrates a worldview that is built around interactive or reciprocal activities between the individual and the community, the particular and the universal (Mabingo, 2020). The meaning of *Ubuntu*-related activities in the past, present, and future is weaved in altruistic and interpersonal processes of connecting people, things and epochs. It is through various interactions, like storytelling,

farming, wedding, dancing and other activities, that the communities and individuals organize and express their interwoven existence that permits the sustainability and flourishing of life. These interactions tend to stimulate and nurture a humanistic experience that enriches the individual and the community (Mabingo, 2020).

Many indigenous cultures in the world have developed systems and philosophies of living together, which could inspire the search for mutually beneficial global interactions. In Africa, the *Ubuntu* philosophy recalibrates the human pursuit of collective survival. It is critical to note the centrality of the human person in this pursuit. Second to the human person's importance in the concept of *Ubuntu* is the connection with the soil, the land, the farm, agriculture and the feeding system, which require mutually beneficial actions. The mutually beneficial actions that the *Ubuntu* principle drives emphasize the strengthening of small units, specific communities and villages. Mainstreaming this principle would eventually lead to more inclusivity in bigger socio-political units at the metropolis or megapolis levels. Neatly tight small units thus feed bigger units that are integrated and rooted. An African Renaissance that is an offshoot of this evolution sees a reconnection with the earth, which results in more unity and abundance for all, as well as more sustainable living and self-reliant communities. Surpluses that emanate from this sustainable living and self-reliance are mutually exchangeable. Reconnecting with the earth and sustainable living also means that people have more time on their hands to socialize, innovate, create, empathize and build harmonious communities. In this case, diversification from agriculture occurs naturally since all skills and talents are required to build thriving communities. Skills in medicine, science, technology, trade, art and architecture also develop naturally, as every member of the community is encouraged to deploy their passion for the good of the community.

The atmosphere that *Ubuntu* creates allows for a flow of constructive energies between people, which could lead to mutual human progress (Mabingo, 2020). Participating in communal activities, sharing what is available and cultivating a sense of belonging are some of the humanizing pedagogies that underpin an interwoven existence and strengthen a constructive flow of energies between people. African indigenous communities have thus successfully put in place a system that emphasizes fostering collaboration and inclusion between people, which could be referred to as '*ubuntuesque*' lifestyle (Wright, 2002, Mabingo, 2020). This lifestyle evokes all forms of mutual and inclusive engagements that exemplify interdependent, intercultural, interracial, interhuman and intercontinental initiatives. Through *Ubuntu*, like the Ma'at in Ancient Egypt, Africa proposes to the world, again, a principle of life, truth, justice and reconciliation that encompasses everything visible and invisible. This principle carries one of the noblest human aspirations for a better world for all. It advocates for progress that is harmonious and serves all parts of our ecosystem (Bisseck, 1999). It offers an excellent response to a world threatened with runaway progress that is endangering all forms of life and fuelling enmity between the inhabitants of the earth.

The *Ubuntu* principle supports negentropy as an environment where harmony and balance prevail and where life flourishes. The contrary - entropy, reflects a situation where the rule of might, enmity and arbitrariness prevail. The latter is a situation where the current self-cannibalized globalisation process has led us (Bisseck, 1999). Even in the field of science, especially in quantum physics, enmity or antagonism is seen as anti-life and contra-nature as opposed to cooperation or harmony. This is what the African indigenous universalistic thought system expresses in a concept like *Ubuntu*. It is a deep-seated intuition of a unified and interrelated reality (Bisseck, 1999). In this thought system, artificially erected borders between countries do not make sense because they spread the politics of enmity. Some African thinkers have advanced that the best and most effective way to inhabit our world is to allow a free circulation of people, goods and services (Sarr, 2016, Mbembe, 2017). Such a way of thinking requires that we transcend the irrational and imaginary fears created by the capitalist mindset. This mindset is haunted by the crimes of its raids and the self-appropriation of the common heritage of the world. Instead, the African way of thinking aligned with *Ubuntu* is what allows life to flourish. The Bassa of Cameroon expresses the same idea in the concept of '*Mbog*', which means the Universe is an organic unity of complementary elements. It is the Universe as an order of reality that is rhythmic and gives a chance to all things to blossom now and in the future in an autoregulated manner.

From lower antiquity, ancient African myths of origin like the Theban and Heliopolitan cosmogonies evoke a unique and universal entity out of which all things and beings come through a process of differentiation (Diop, 1981). A single origin, from the African perspective, is not antithetical to plurality. The latter is constituted by the multiple manifestations of the Unique and Universal entity, which does not oppose or limit the various manifestations. The various manifestations are autoregulated enough to keep the necessary rhythmic order that keeps their origin significant as a source of their strength. Though seemingly apart, the fact that the multiple manifestations are all under the same natural law and rhythm of life and death and harmony of the opposite is bound to unify them further. The concept of unity in diversity as quintessential to *Ubuntu*, finds its source in this thought system and could inspire another approach to globalization.

Viewing globalization from the African thought system perspective permits a mind shift from conceptualizing the world as a totality of separated and unrelated elements to conceptualizing it as a totality made of diverse but interconnected and integrated parts. The African conception of the world is grounded on a very diverse continent that could produce an approach to globalization at the service of all people. Africa is the host of and used to a diversity of people, cultures, climates, languages, skin colours, religions and ideologies. It is open and gives room to a variety of contributions of each and all people, be they indigenous or foreign.

The African system of thought is essentially constructively pluralistic and all-encompassing (Vernicos, 2002; Ebale, 2019). All the principles of a plural society advanced, if not

imposed by Western powers, have already been in operation in the ‘*Ubuntuesque*’ lifestyle. The principles of equal participation or representation of respect for fundamental rights of shelter, food, education, association and protection have been golden rules in the African indigenous lifestyle. This lifestyle is, however, being threatened by the Western style of urbanization and allocation of resources. Incidences of xenophobia in South Africa, ethnic and armed violence, genocide, terrorism and blatant theft of national resources in other parts of Africa are clear signals of mental and behavioural alterations. These incidences demonstrate and warn sufficiently that they may not be such a thing as a “petrified African psychological nature” (Anta Diop, 1981, p. 362). Indeed, “the sense of solidarity so dear to the African could very well give way to an individualistic, egocentric behaviour of the Western type if conditions were modified” (Anta Diop, 1981, p. 362). But the warmth of Africa's social fabric is still strong enough to avert scourges of Western individualism. The latter is not geared towards solidarity. It is not wired to take others into account and build structures that can cater for togetherness, common good and common interests. Its concept of globalization can only serve partisan interests. On the contrary, the African systemic worldview, be it in *Ubuntu* or the *Mbog*, allows for the creation of nests of solidarity that could culminate in a world as a big nest or web of human warmth and solidarity.

In the African systemic worldview, the Universe - Nature constitutes a perfect model for human organizations - socially, economically and politically (Ebale, 2019). It is from the Universe or Nature that African indigenous learnt that nothing can operate optimally in an isolated manner. All things and beings are parts of a complex and complementary web of interactions and interrelatedness that sustains life (Ebale, 2019). This observation calls for a moral imperative of mutuality, humaneness, care, and socio-economic and socio-political responsibility on every person towards every person and everything that exists (Ebale, 2019). The moral imperative of care is fundamental because everything that exists is a component of the One Essence. Anything done or undertaken by one of the components affects positively or negatively the whole structure of the existing—human, non-human and Nature’s layers of reality. Pollution in one corner of the planet equals pollution in all corners of the planet, no matter what the trades in carbon units are. Similarly, single acts of conservation and protection of the resources of our planet in any of its corners benefit the whole planet, at all corners.

From the *Ubuntuistic* perspective, a just and cohesive social, economic and political order, modelled on the Universe or Nature, is an act of an ethically sound human being referred to as the *MuNtu*. The latter is a product of an initiatic learning process that awakens the sense of a human being’s responsibility as part of the community or the whole. He or she is prepared to move from his/her undifferentiated to his/her differentiated state. He/she is made aware of his/her individually as an “I am”-*MuNtu*, but in connection with the “we are”, the community or the essence of the totality –the *Ntu*. The *MuNtu* is thus a wise human being, fully reconciled with himself and with nature or the infinite expanse of existence (Diop, 1981). It is a human being who has developed an elastic reason, a reasoning reason

that accommodates the excluded third (the Invisible) and is capable of completely opening up to the unsurpassable order of the Universe (Bassong, 2007). It is a human being who broke through the prison of ‘organized reason’ with its logic and grammar of all forms of exclusions that categorize what is unfamiliar as alien and treat it as non-existent (Diop, 1981). It is a human being whose reason and actions are determined by what is good and beneficial to the whole species. It is a human being who understands the importance of goodness, fairness, cooperation, and human and communitarian solidarity for the advent of an ethical world. The *MuNtu* understands the importance of *Ubuntu* Economics or *Ubuntonomics* as a system of organizing and managing resources for the service of the people instead of their enslavement to the mainstream economy (Edozie, 2017). He or she understands the need of conceptualizing and conceiving a global world which is a collective advancement of humanity.

The Globalization of *Ubuntu* Values

Ubuntu stands for a world with an enhanced sense of responsibility and solidarity with fellow human beings. Contrary to a world dominated by exacerbated drive for profit, political partisan interests, religious separatism, and runaway industrialization, *Ubuntu* proposes a world where sensitivity to humanity and genuine communication is taken seriously (Jolley, 2011). A world where *Ubuntu* prevails has the responsibility to enhance the development of human-based life coping skills embedded in African values (Broodryk, 2006). Some of these life skills are: facilitating togetherness, endorsing sharing, expressing sympathy, practising empathy, honouring compassion, maintaining respect, allowing tolerance, saluting humanness, propagating harmony, as well as living happily (Broodryk, 2006). If mainstream, these human-based life skills could influence the global governance system in a way that would not cater only for the needs of a few privileged people but for those of the majority of disadvantaged people (Broodryk, 2006; Jolley, 2011). The current global governance system has produced extreme stress, material greed, power lust, threat of mass destruction, political, economic and religious exclusion and violence around the world.

Contrary to such a system, *Ubuntu* could inspire improved global communication qualified as humane. And, as a central point of African spiritual philosophy, with a deep concern for morality and humaneness, *Ubuntu* could also inspire relations among nations as opposed to the current global paradigm of international relations, which dismisses the possibility of morality among nations (Jolley, 2011). In the currently dominant paradigm of international relations, the recourse to inflicting pain and punishment in handling conflicts and disagreement is influenced by “the politics of enmity” (Meka et al., 2018). There is very little effort to consensually seek to transform conflicts through recourse to a humanizing process, as would prescribe an *Ubuntu* perspective (Nabudere, 2005). From the *Ubuntu* perspective, the world could “transition from a culture based on force and

imposition towards a culture of peace, dialogue, justice, equity and solidarity” (Shumba, 2011, p. 89).

The human-based life skills proposed by *Ubuntu* flow from deeply felt connections and have the potential to re-create a world that works for all (Nussbaum, 2003). In such a world, people may have to re-learn how to live together with respect and dignity and re-organize their resources accordingly (Nussbaum, 2003). In the African context itself, the *Ubuntu* perspective on global affairs may be understood and its values reclaimed. However, its conscious and purposeful application may still be wanting. The translation of the *Ubuntu* perspective into policies that run African nations could be an important path towards African Renaissance. It is not enough for a system of values like *Ubuntu* to be an innate, unconscious and intrinsic character of Africans. If it is not mainstreamed in the political and economic life of nations, this value system runs the risk of erosion. African peoples and nations themselves need to upscale to *Ubuntu* through the way they interact among themselves and make it a basis for interacting with the rest of the world. This may increase the chances for Africans to contribute to the change of heart needed in the world. For Africa to renew her worldview, an ethical regeneration is needed in the public sphere, especially in the area of social justice. This may increase the global relevance of the *Ubuntu* value system. The social philosophy of *Ubuntu*, especially its emphasis on our common humanity and the need for solidarity among all human beings for collective improvement, are some of the key ideas which could inform a social justice discourse and the hope for the African Renaissance.

Ubuntu, Social Justice and African Renaissance

Based on the *Ubuntu* worldview, the White Paper on South Africa’s Foreign Policy (2011) states the willingness of South Africa “to contribute towards the transformation of the global system from power-based to the rules-based system in a just and equitable global order” (p. 7). To make this contribution, South Africa, or any African nation, would need to internally exemplify *Ubuntu*-inspired policy choices (Thomas, 2008). South Africa, like many other African countries aligned to *Ubuntu*, would need to shift its policy choices from a neo-liberal economic policy framework to policy choices in favour of the less fortunate (Thomas, 2008). *Ubuntu*-inspired policy choices could lead to a greater realization of constitutional rights for all (Thomas, 2008). This is possible because *Ubuntu* emphasizes fairness, humane-ness and social justice while liberalism emphasizes private interests, profits, and individual rights.

The *Ubuntu* paradigm reintroduces the importance of practising politics with principles, which are respect for human dignity, fairness and inclusivity (Murithi, 2006). For instance, the *Ubuntu* perspective on Human Rights can contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the Universal Declaration of human rights (UDHR) (Murithi, 2007). The promotion of human rights can thus be based on the principles of inclusivity, reciprocity and

a sense of shared destiny between people (Murithi, 2007). Africans have an opportunity, in the *Ubuntu* paradigm, to articulate, develop and codify ethical frameworks that can inform institutions that govern them and constitute the basis for the African Renaissance. These ethical frameworks contain key elements that could promote community development work and social welfare, social capital and collective advancement (Hailey, 2008).

One of the challenges in the institutionalization of the values of *Ubuntu* for social welfare and the African Renaissance is that the concept of *Ubuntu* has been appropriated by pro-market interest groups, especially in South Africa (McDonald, 2010). These groups include proponents of *Ubuntu* capitalism and good governance initiatives. They advocate for the development of a home-grown corporate management culture that would be people-centred, participative and that would combine social and economic justice with improved profits (McDonald, 2010). However, such initiatives have served to diffuse opposition to the underlying neoliberal agenda on the enhancement of market opportunities.

Instead, an effective and progressive revival of *the Ubuntu* worldview would require a serious analysis of how market forces operate and how *Ubuntu* economic structures can be constructed that will collectively empower the people as a counter-weight to these market forces (McDonald, 2010). This goes beyond simple rhetoric on *Ubuntu* or simply relying on people's willingness to opt for *Ubuntu* ideals. Advocating for *Ubuntu's* economic structures also goes beyond prevailing management theories, which hold that market forces should operate to maximize owners' and stakeholders' wealth (Lutz, 2009). The emphasis of *Ubuntu's* economic ideals is on sharing, a sustainable lifestyle, and the common good as the good of the community and each of its members (Karsten and Illa, 2001; Lutz, 2009; Shumba, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to look into the broken promises of Western's globalization against a world proposed by the *Ubuntu* principle and paradigm. Western globalization has left trails of unsurmountable disparities between the haves and the have-nots. It has lowered barriers between countries only for the interest of capital and facilitated the continuous exploitation of the resources of the earth for the profit of a certain category of people whose appetite is insatiable. The Eurocentric globalization model has entrenched the privileges of a few wealthy people and impoverished the majority of the inhabitant of the earth. Situations of inequities resulting from these disparities have led to heightened violence in the world and threats of a self-inflicted holocaust. A world proposed by the *Ubuntu* principle intends to bridge the gaps between peoples and increase a sense of one humanity, where everyone is supported in their efforts to secure a decent life. People's aspirations worldwide to inhabit a friendlier world resonates with *Ubuntu's* humanizing model and indigenous convivial philosophies, thus announcing the African Renaissance. A world with a more humane face

would enhance sustainable living. The latter is increasingly perceived as an imperative if mutual survival is to be guaranteed.

With the booming and energetic youthful African population and the traction that African ways of being are having, African Renaissance will be actualized in the foreseeable future. The international social, political, economic and cultural balances seem to be shifting in favour of Africa. However, the advent of the African Renaissance would depend a lot on how strongly African present themselves as Africans and their humanistic traditions to articulate autonomous thoughts and praxis on Africa and her chosen destiny. This destiny would be a project of a new civilization where human beings and their connection to reality as a whole (visible and invisible) regain the central place in all political, economic and social endeavours.

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