
A View from the Periphery: A Historical Appraisal on Annang-Igbo Inter-Group Relations in Pre-Colonial Times

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Abstract

Inter-group relations in pre-colonial Africa have been severely undermined by the various erroneous reports from Eurocentric scholars who held the view that Africans lived in solitude prior to European intrusion into the African continent. This erroneous view was given impetus to by the postulation of Europeans who dismissed the African continent as having no historical importance to the world at large. Hence, an attempt to reconstruction a historical sketch of Annang-Igbo Relations in pre-colonial times becomes pertinent to further illustrate pre-colonial societies interacted with one another as this will further debunk the views held by Hegel, Trevor Roper, among others. Findings based upon this research showed that their (Annang-Igbo) relationship took numerous dimensions which included but not limited to commerce and trade; cultural exchanges; migration patterns; conflict and diplomacy, trade-religious activities, among others. The study also showed how intertwined both ethnic group have been long before the coming of the Europeans. The study concluded that inter-group relations is an age-long phenomenon and is still very much in existence. Also, it goes to show that the present ethnic rivalry Nigeria is experiencing is partly an attribute of colonial rule. The study maintained that, in spite of brief skirmishes in pre-colonial times, both groups lived in peace and harmony. Historical analysis was employed as the method for this research.

Keywords: *Annang; Igbo; Pre-colonial; Relations, Neighbours, and Inter-Group.*

Introduction

Inter-group relations is a very common trend across the African continent as there exist evidences pointing to the fact that various ethnic groups have interacted with one another in diverse ways even before the coming of the Whiteman. In Nigeria, there exist a plethora of literatures depicting the robust relationship that had transpired among various ethnic groups. These inter-group relationships took diverse forms such as war and diplomatic intercourse, marriages, migration patterns, trade and commerce, traditional and religious settings, among others. Whatever dimensions inter-group relations may have taken, it is important to uphold the truism that inter-group relations existed and is still in existence even in contemporary times as it cuts across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras.

While intergroup relations may be described as intercourse that transpired between two immediate neighbours, it is intrusive to note that it is not limited to only neighbours of immediate boundaries, as studies have shown that across the length and breadth of Nigeria, various ethnic groups have interacted even when they do not share immediate boundaries (Uya 1992). Against these erroneous claims by Euro-centric scholars that portrays African societies as non-interactive or in absolute isolation, studies such as those conducted by

Ratele, *Inter-group Relations: South African Perspective* ; Okpevra, *Dynamics of Inter-Group Relations in Pre-colonial Nigeria up to 1800: A Reappraisal of Lopsided Historiography* and Attah, *Nigerian Inter-Group Relations: Emerging Trends and Challenges* among others have all helped in debunking the views that Africa and African societies lived in abject isolation.

Given the foregone background, the task of this study is to carry out a holistic assessment of intergroup relations concerning two ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria. Specifically the groups to be examined are the Annang ethnic group in present Akwa Ibom (formerly Cross River) state and their Igbo neighbour. The Annang or “Anaang” is a cultural and semi-Bantu speaking ethnic group that live in the coastal southeast Nigeria also known as Southeastern Nigeria or former south eastern state of Nigeria (Ennang 1979). The Annang people, being the second largest ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State presently occupy eight out of the thirty-one local government areas namely: Ikot Ekpene, Obot Akara, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Oruk Anam, Ika and Ukanafun (Ineme & Udondata 2014).

Whereas, the Annang people are primarily situated within Akwa Ibom state which is within the South-South region, their Igbo neighbour is found to have occupied about five to seven states in Nigeria. These states include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, with a very minor fraction of them in Delta and Rivers states. Among the aforementioned states that the Igbo have been said to be found in, the immediate neighbours of the Annang are those groups of Igbo occupying lands in Abia state which shares immediate boundary with Akwa Ibom state. Those Igbo communities sharing boundaries with the Annang people would include but not limited to the Ikwuano, Onicha Ngwa, Abala, Ndoki, and several others. It becomes very important to consider their relation along the borderline since Igbo is a large ethnic group with many dialects and a variety of cultures. Moreover, the ingenuity and uniqueness of their interactions over time could be seen clearly with these Igbo communities than with the entire Igbo ethnic group (Ejiofor 1987). Nevertheless, there are certain challenges in the discussion of a research of this nature. Such challenges range from the issues of clashes on ethnic identity as most scholars have strongly posited that the Annang people are no different from the Ibibio group (Udo 1983:83). This position is still very much in debate as numerous scholars from Ibibio and Annang groups are striving to establish a more authentic account on if Annang is a component unit of Ibibio, or otherwise.

It is against this background that the study will attempt to elucidate on the various aspects that enabled both Annang and their Igbo neighbour to co-exist side-by-side during pre-colonial times.

Origin, Migration and Settlement Patterns of Annang People

Like has been observed in many other groups that have attempted to trace their origin, the problem has often remained the same. This is due to the fact that most of what constitute the history of most ethnic groups in Nigeria, only began to take form upon what the European were able to scribble on such societies. The problem is further accentuated by paucity in written documents. However, the introduction of Oral Tradition as History by Jan Vasina have helped to bridged whatever gap written documents may have created in pre-colonial African history. Therefore, tracing the origin and migration of Annang people have been onerous, given the fact that only faint legends and memories of very fragmented oral traditions remains among the people concerning their origin and the various waves of migrations to their present abode (Essien 2010).

In spite of the wanton challenges confronting the tracing of Annang origin, Jefferey in his 1933 *Notes on the Ibibio Languages*, espouses that Annang people have always been

where they are found today. By implication, the Annang people have never migrated from anywhere. However, applying the linguistic method, some scholars have differed from Jeffrey's position. Taking the view of Udo (1983) into consideration, Udo strongly assert that the Annang people are themselves a sub-group of the Ibibio who possesses the same culture and history of migration. Udo's position was predicated on the fact that the similarities that exist in every aspects is too much to be dismiss on grounds of long standing inter-group relationship. And that the notion of Annang as a different entity from the Ibibio was only for the aim of economic and political gains (Udo 1983). Contrary to both Jeffrey's and Udo's stands, Edet Ukpong offer another divergent view on the Annang origin. In his work *An Enquiry into Culture: Ibibio Names*, Ukpong affirms that the Ibibio, including the Annang all migrated from the Central Benue Valley through different routes to their different locations. This migratory proposition, accounts for the Annang's settlement in Abak, and Ibibio in Ikono, etc. (Ukpong 2007).

A totally divergent position from what have been noted above is that given by Ineme and Udondata in their book, *A Compendium of Annang Culture*. They trace the ancestry of Annang people to Bantu warrior and Zulu hunters in Central Africa. While the migratory patterns were totally different from that of the Igbo and Ibibio stocks. The position of Udondata and Ineme simply shows that the Annang people are totally different from the Ibibio people. Be that as it may, the foregone synopsis is to showcase the complexities in tracing the origin of any group in Nigeria (Ineme & Udondata 2014). This protracted debate on tracing one's origin and migration pattern is not just peculiar to the Annang people, but cuts across many other ethnic groups.

Geographically, the Annang territory lies between latitude 4.25° and 7° north and longitude 7.15° and 9.30° east. The landscape is generally flat and low-lying with no point rising to 300 feet above sea level (Ennang 1979). There are two main season: the wet and rainy season which starts from April to October and the dry season which starts from November to March. The typical rainfall pattern is bi-modal with a two week spell or break in August commonly referred to as "August Break" (Ennang 1979). The area is generally humid. The area occupied by Annang people lies within the rich forest zone which aids the growth of palm wine trees and huge lofty tropical vegetation (Ekong 1983). Today, the Annang people are bounded in the North by the Isogbo Igbo (Abia State), in the West by the Ngwa (Abia State) and Ndoki (Rivers State) and in the South, East and North East by the Ibibio (Ineme & Udondata 2014).

Origin, Migration and Settlement Patterns of Igbo People

Like in the case of Annang, the problems associated with tracing the origin of the Igbo people have been best described by Adiele Afigbo as trying to tie sand with ropes. These complexities are captured in his master piece, entitled *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* in which he describes among other things the encumbrances that militates against tracing the Igbo origin and migratory processes (Afigbo 1981). It should be noted that there is a huge number of literatures that seek to affirm the genuine origin and migration of the Igbo people. Among these literatures, there is the version that posits that the Igbo people have never migrated from anywhere but have existed where they found themselves since the creation of the world. While others points to the Orient, as a possible area of origin for the Igbo owing to certain similarities in cultural values. Whereas, other versions have linked Igbo origin from ancient Benin empire, and many others. Note that the study of Igbo origins began to gain greater momentum sequel to the Nigeria Civil War, particularly when the quest to establish the Igbo identity started to occupy a more central

vacuum in academic themes (Oriji 2011).

While attempting to trace the origin of the Igbo people, often more than not, some researchers tried exploring the etymology of the nomenclature “Igbo”, at least to offer some clues to their origin and cultural identity. For instance, M.D. Jeffereys, argues that “Igbo” denotes “forest dwellers”, while C. Ifemesia posits that the word is associated with the ancients (Ndi-gbo) who lived in the forest region (Oriji 2011). Whereas, in M. Onwuejeogwu view, the nomenclature “Igbo” means “a community of people” who possesses a shared cultural affinity (Oriji 2011). Nevertheless, other researchers, rather than define the term “Igbo,” have proffer divergent positions on the Igbo origin, migration and settlement patterns. Adiele Afigbo, for example, excogitated that the origin homeland of the Igbo was the Niger-benue confluence area, where the kwa speakers of the Niger-Congo phyla, associated with the Nok Complex (500 B.C -200 A.D..., the first iron-using culture of West Africa), and later expanded up to the territories they occupy till present (Afigbo 1981). Vincent Uchendu and Elizabeth Isichie were more concerned with differentiating between primary core areas of its hinterland where various groups lived before their migrations to the frontier including Nri-Akwa axes, the Isuama Orlu and the Owerri-Okigwe zone (Uchendu 1965 & Isichei 1976).

However, G.I. Jones posit that it was from the Ohaffia-Arochukwu ridge that an offshoot of the Eastern Isuama migrated to the eastern plains, forming the Northeastern Igbo (Jones 1964). However, G.I. Jones, P.A Talbot and H. Mulhall classified the Nri-Akwa as part of the broader Isuama-Orlu group (Forde & Jones 1950: 10; Talbot & Mulhall 1965). While H. Handerson’s study shows that the Isuama of Awka-Orlu uplands and other clans were already living in Onitsha before immigrations from the Benin Empire settled in the town during the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries (Henderson 1976). Oriji (1994), avers that Nri traditions claim that Isu (Isuama) constitutes the senior ward of the Agbaja (Ana-Edo) clan in Nnewi area. However, the Isuama traditions of origin and migration of the Igbo people, do not give a clue to the origins of all Igbo sub-groups, as the lands the Igbo occupy in present time has experienced several waves of movements from very ancient periods. Moreover, bringing to bear the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, whose work was published in 1789, Equiano repeatedly referred to his people as “Eboe” (Igbo), as there are no such evidences to suggest that he learnt the name from foreigners (Oriji 2011).

Considering the orient version of the Igbo origin and migration patterns, M. D. Jeffreys wrote extensively in the ethnography and ethno-history of the Igbo, and was of the view that ancient Egypt held the key to Igbo origin and history (Afigbo 1981). His position was based on the features of dual division in Igbo social structure, a phenomenon that corresponded to the division of ancient Egypt; either brought or learnt there by the Igbo people. Jeffreys, also attributed many aspects of Igbo traditional religion to Egyptian origin or impact (Afigbo 1981:6-7). Still on the Oriental belief, Basden (1983), advances the view that the Igbo are a branch of the Hebrew nation, or at least their culture history could satisfactorily be explained in terms of Jewish impact based on the similitudes that subsist on their ideas and practices of the Levitical Codes. Long before this time, Olaudah Equiano, based on ethnographic and cultural grounds hypothesized the Jewish origin for the Igbo (Afigbo 1981). Note that, the cromlech (i.e. a circle of monolith) of Igbo cultural attributes makes it easier for researchers to associate its origin with the Hebrews/Jews or “the lost tribe of Israel.” This claims have gained more popularity in recent times among non-professional historians, romanticists, and others who are incautiously concerned about the allege marginalization of the Igbo in Nigerian political landscape (Oriji 2011). Be that as it may, it is to be recalled that prior to the exodus of the Jews from Egypt around 2000 B.C, humans,

based on archeological and linguistic studies, have occupied and populated Sub-Saharan Africa between 500 B.C- 200 A.D (Oriji 2011). Thus, the autochthonous settlers of Igboland lived in their primary core areas, and as the population grew, they began to migrate in various streams and waves and at different chronological eras to settle in their present ecological axes (Oriji 2011). Whatever might have been the case, the early inhabitants of Igbo area never for once, lived in isolation.

Geographically, the homeland of Igbo people, who number over 35 million, lies in Southeastern Nigeria. It is located between latitude 5-7 degrees north and longitude 6-8 degrees east, and occupies a total landmass of about 15, 800 square miles. The area is a component unit of the larger tropical rain forest region of Southern Nigeria, extending about 200 kilometers from the coastal region to Idah in the North (Oriji 2011). It extends westward across the Niger to the Regions of Aniocha, Ndokwa, Ukwuani, and other parts in present day Delta State and also many parts of Edo State in Nigeria (Ekpuk 2015). Its eastern side is terminated by the Cross River, although micro communities exist over on the other side of the river; its northernmost point enters the Savannah climate around Nsukka (Ekpuk 2015).

In Nigeria today, Igboland is roughly made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and some parts of Delta and River States (Uche 2001). More than 30 million people inhabit Igboland and with a population density ranging from 1000 people per sq. mile in low density areas. Altogether Igboland has an area of some 15,800 to 16,000 square mile (Uchendu 1965).

Annang-Igbo Inter-Group Relations in Pre-Colonial Times: A Historical Discourse

There is no denying the fact that there is a huge paucity of literatures on the very nature of inter-group relations that could have existed between the Annang and their Igbo neighbours in pre-colonial times. A. E Afigbo lamented that whatsoever documentary evidence existing on the question of inter-group relations between the Igbo and their (Annang) neighbours in pre-European period is without doubt limited, and hinges more to contacts between the Igbo and their neighbours to the South and North,(Afigbo 1987) of which the Annang group is not really a part of. However, Afigbo's position is not in any way suggestive of the fact that there were no contacts between both groups under our discourse, as it would appear in his research that mention was made of the Ibibio, Ika-na-Annang, and Efik as component units that made up the Igbo neighbours. Nonetheless, Afigbo aver strongly that whatever form, or dynamic the Igbo and their neighbours interacted in pre-colonial times, such contacts can to a very large extent be explained in agricultural terms as agriculture dominated their economy and other sectors of their collective existence (Afigbo 1981).

Moreover, as Afigbo (1981) aptly noted, the interaction between the Igbo and their neighbours (i.e. Annang) was never a one-way traffic. It was very much characterized by mutual exchanges of people, goods, services, and ideas. Recapping the statements of Afigbo on the nature of inter-group relationship that transpired between the Igbo and their neighbours before the arrival of the Whiteman, Origi (2011), in a broader sense avers thus:

Igbo influences were noticeable in Bonny, Kalabari, and other city-states even before the genesis of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and some of their leading kings and chiefs bore Igbo names and married Igbo women. It is also noteworthy that borderland Igbo people living near the Ibibio, whom they call "Nmogho," are bilingual due to

intermarriages, long-standing commercial contacts, and periodic skirmishes over territorial boundaries. For similar reasons, the borderland Ibibio also speaks the Igbo language. The influence of the Aro oracle (*Ibini Ukpabi*) spread northwards to the Igala and Idoma areas, westwards to the Isoko-Urhobo, and southwards to the coastal Ijo communities. The Kamanu oracle was consulted by the Kalabari and other coastal city-states, and its offshoot, the Igwekala oracle of Umunoha, had a similar impact among the Southern Igbo and their neighbours. The Agbala of Awka of northern Igboland was popularized by its itinerant diviners, who, at times, traveled outside the Igbo area. The Onoja Oboni oracle of Ogurugu in the Nsukka axis played a key role in the installation of the Attah/King of the Igala. Igbo influence in the kingdom is further evidenced by the fact that Omeppa, said to be of Igbo ancestry, was appointed the prime minister (Achadu) of the Igala, and head of their kingmakers (the Igala Mela). It is also noteworthy that the borderland Nsukka-Igala communities are bilingual, having intermingled with each other for many millennia.

The point to note in the above quotation would be that the interaction among the Igbo and their neighbours had been a give and take process. As it has been established through archaeological and ethnography data that these groups borrowed and lent from one another. Secondly, the Ibibio group used in the quotation is inclusive of the Annang as we have seen from the thesis of Udo (*Who Are the Ibibio?*) that claiming itself (Annang) a distinct group from the Ibibio was an offshoot of economic and political gains.

Taking a panoramic view on the factor of migration as a possible contact between the Annang and their Igbo neighbours, it was asserted by Afigbo (1981) that four types of migrations brought and kept the Igbo in close contacts with the Annang neighbours during the period under discourse. Afigbo went further to expatiate on these migratory processes by indicating the classes of people that migrated in each of those processes. In line with Afigbo's submission on this issue of migration, Udo (1983) gave a lucid account that suggest similar trend among the Ibibio (Annang) when he remarked that "A study of present distribution of the Ibibio tribe suggests an early scattering of the Ibibio over an area extending from Arochukwu in the North, Ika in the West, and Oron in the South."

Another factor of contact between the Annang and their Igbo neighbours in pre-colonial times was the element of warfare. War during this period has often been misconstrued by many researchers as it is very common to perceive that wars were endemic not only within Igbo land, but also between them and their neighbours; and that it usually brought severe discontinuities in their inter-group relations (Afigbo 1987). Contrary to those assumptions, the nature of warfare in pre-colonial times among various groups were not endemic as most Eurocentric writers would have us believe. Take for instance, G.T Basden (1983) while describing the Igbo society he visited during the dawn of the early twentieth century remarked thus:

it was a rare thing for towns to remain at peace for a very long, and when quietness did happen to prevail for a time,

the spell was broken on the slightest pretext and hostilities began again forthwith...during the dry season, fighting was a sort of pastime, either between different quarters of the same town or between neighboring towns. [202]

War was an integral part of the Ibo life-style and forms a basis of their inter-group relation with their neighbour. Although, Basden could be given credit for pointing out that during pre-colonial times, warfare was only conducted during a particular time (dry season) in order to avoid famine and starvation across the land. This simply shows that the motive behind war was not that of annihilation or total destruction of one another. Contrary to the foregone position, Isichei (1976), in her work entitled *A History of the Igbo People* posits that in a typical pre-colonial Igbo society, wars between village groups were regulated by many conventions. And such wars were preceded by series of negotiations (diplomacy), which endeavoured to prevent conflict, and by a formal declaration of war. As any side could send a delegation made up of their priests of a cult, or an important personality, for a truce whenever the occasion called for it. Collaborating Isichei's point of view, Afigbo (1981) submits that war was simply a continuation of relations by other way than diplomatic means.

Based on oral tradition, the Annang people were said to have a reputation for fearlessness in terms of waging wars against a common enemy, which most time were with the Igbo over issues such as land disputes among other vital interest that might had challenged their very existence. Their bravery in terms of warfare has been attributed to their ability living so close to the *Aro* confederacy's center- with its famed oracle *Ibini-Ukpabi* (Adiaka 2015). Hence, Warfare among the Annang and Igbo groups became a medium of contact owing to how interlocked (to an inextricable degree) their lives and livelihoods were in pre-colonial times (Adiaka 2015). This they did since these interlocked (vital) interests were hardly sorted out to the merriment of everyone involved through other peaceful means. Whatever be the outcome, the most interesting aspect of their inter-group relations via war is that the relationship which preceded the wars, and which continued in one form or another during the war periods, survived each war. Though these war could had for a short while disrupted relations such as trade and inter-marriages, they often exacerbate other contacts such as mutual borrowing in dress and language during espionage and camouflage so necessary in warfare during pre-colonial times (Afigbo 1981).

Another element that aided contact between the Annang people and their Igbo neighbours was trade and commerce. This was indeed the most effective single factor that sustained inter-group relations among the Igbo and their neighbours in pre-colonial times of which the *Ibibio* (Annang) was a part of. The pattern of trade that flourished between both groups was basically hinged on long distance trade (Afigbo 1987). This factor of trade and commerce for the most part suggest that in spite of their numerous skirmishes, there was greater incidence of peace and harmony among both group as this aided the establishment of numerous markets across their lands. Moreover trade as a contact stemmed up from the fact that the Igbo society and Annang engaged in massive agricultural activities, thus producing variety of crops, which they exchanged their excesses for those they do not have. For instance, the Annang group of *Ikot Ekpene* area exchanged their raffia products for items such as yam with their Igbo neighbours, while those Annang group in *Usaka* village of *Obot Akara* Local Government Area, sharing boundary with their neighbour along *Ikwuano* Local Government Area of *Abia* state traded articles such as yam, earthenware, fish, cassava, palm oil, cocoyam, raffia palm produces, etc. (Adiaka 2015).

Moreover, religious and ritual factors also characterized the Annang-Igbo relations in pre-colonial time as it has been shown through evidence that the link provided by the *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle, also referred to as the long juju of the Aro was the most powerful and influential oracle in pre-colonial Africa; and its agent covered the entire region of Southeastern Nigeria of which the Annang land was a part of (Afigbo 1987). Apart from its agents that helped promoted inter-group relations, its clients equally contributed their own quota.

Also, marriage was another crucial contact for their inter-group relations. While commenting on this aspect as a contact between the Annang and Igbo, it has been reported that since they lived so close, both groups inter-married. The Igbo group of Ndoki in particular were said to have been fond of taking wives from among the Ika-na-Annang, whose women they claimed made excellent wives (Afigbo 2011). Further, it was reported that among these group, marriage was as a diplomatic instrument used in restoring peace after a conflict must have been resolved; it also served as a guarantee for a man who engaged in long distance trade as a form of security. Since, in most Southeastern societies, in-laws are never considered as preys in the places their married from.

Further, the Annang interacted with their Igbo neighbour on the aspect of language. As evidences points to the fact that communities situated on either side of each other of the frontiers of contact speak each dialects of their mother tongues with marked and peculiar features. Take for instance; the communities of Usaka-Annang (Annang) and Usaka-Oku (Igbo) tend to speak both the Annang and Igbo dialects as a result of their long-lasting relations. On the foregone bases, during pre-colonial times, the Igbo language exercised such absorptive power, that various frontier communities (i.e. Annang) bordering on the Igbo showed attributes of bilingualism (Afigbo 1987). Politically, both groups under discourse have shown to have influenced one another in pre-colonial times as the practice of age grade and secret societies such as Ekpe, Akang, Ekpo, among others as found in both ethnic groups is enough evidence on how they related (Afigbo 1987). Also, the Annang adopted the *Ibini Ukpabi* as the highest court of appeal and also as an important religious institution. What this portend for both groups was that both ethnic groups interacted using various institutions as their medium. However, it should be noted that prior to the advent of the British colonial government, both Annang and their Igbo neighbours operated what is today known as decentralized system of government and this facilitated the easy spread of their borrowing political culture amongst one another. As sometime, what was found to be present in some part of Annang land was not seen in other part. Likewise the Ekpe, and Ekpo societies had no influence among the Igbo group of Okigwe, Orlu or even Nsukka, rather it was the Igbo groups such as Ariam, Ndoki, Abam, Azumini among other that were influenced by these Annang societies.

Conclusion

The study is an academic contribution towards inter-group relations which existed among the various peopling of present Nigeria before the coming of the British colonial rule; with Annang-Igbo as its focal point. This became necessary owing to the fact that attention have not been given to how these groups interacted in pre-colonial times, as well as to help further debunk the erroneous views given by Euro-centric scholars that African existed in isolation.

Through secondary and primary sources, the paper has given a historical illustration on how both groups interacted. Some of the major factors of contact for them were marriage, trade and commerce, warfare and diplomacy, language, migration, as well as trado-religious institutions. It is important to note that while they had a robust relations, there were still

reports of skirmishes among them however, wars were never endemic but another means for their continuous relationship.

In sum then, the Annang-Igbo inter-group relations in pre-colonial times, is one example of the numerous relationships that existed among the various peopling that make up what is today Nigeria.

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