

# *The Search for Genuine Self in the Caribbean Cultural Horizon and Mesoamerican Civilization*

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## **Resumo**

De maneira geral, os povos que dão forma ao México e à América Central são imaginativos e profundamente místicos. Estudar a fundo o caminho dos artistas pré-colombianos que habitavam esses territórios faz muito sentido hoje em dia, não só porque nos permite esclarecer algumas das vertentes mais antigas do referidos componentes, mas também porque sua compreensão pertinente supõe um desafio epistêmico complexo que demanda esquemas flexíveis bem assentados, o concurso de diversas disciplinas e uma abordagem holística sui generis dos fenômenos históricos. Naquela civilização, o caminho do artista genuíno era um processo penoso, longo e com características iniciáticas. O indivíduo passava por múltiplos umbrais/degraus antes de metamorfosear-se em artista verdadeiro. Aquele que dialogava com Deus e com seu próprio coração até converter-se em mago, em xamã, um ser com poder suficiente para transmutar a palavra ou a matéria. Este legado complementa de modo inegável a riqueza cultural do universo caribenho, cujo passado remoto recebeu não só a influência e as contribuições de grupos nômades como os tainos e os caribes, ou as migrações de navegantes e guerreiros provenientes do sudoeste (margens do rio Orinoco), mas também do estabelecimento de portos e cidades insulares y continentais ao longo do poente caribenho (principalmente no México, Belize, Guatemala e Honduras), que fomentaram a navegação, o comércio e o contato humano desde antes da era cristã. Lugares cuja pulsão, presença e grandiosidade artística se explicam precisamente por esses fundamentos místico-estéticos. Uma profusão e diversidade de objetos culturais e vestígios arquitetônicos esplêndidos (entre outros Tulum, Xel-Há, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, Xcaret, Xcalak, Cerros, Laguna de On, Ka'k'Naab,

Naj, Tunich, Alta Verapaz, Quiriguá, Copán), comprovam esta outra linhagem do passado remoto do Caribe, que liga seus nutrientes com duas culturas impregnadas por aquele patrimônio estético, os maias e os nahuas. Uma dimensão que nos permite entrever ao mesmo tempo o peso e a importância que poderia chegar a representar o Caribe para a própria civilização originária da Mesoamérica.

**Palavras-chave:** misticismo, verdadero artista, proceso iniciático, transformación espiritual, flor y canto

## Resumen

En general, los pueblos que conforman a México y a Centroamérica son imaginativos y profundamente místicos. Estudiar a fondo el camino de los artistas precolombinos que habitaban su territorio resulta significativo hoy día no sólo porque nos permite esclarecer algunas de las vertientes más antiguas de dichos componentes, sino porque su comprensión pertinente, entraña un reto epistémico complejo que demanda esquemas flexibles bien cimentados, el concurso de diversas disciplinas y un acercamiento holístico sui generis a fenómenos históricos. El camino del artista genuino era entonces un proceso arduo, largo y de tintes iniciáticos. Atravesaba umbrales/peldaños múltiples antes de metamorfosearse en artista verdadero. Aquél que dialogaba con Dios y con su propio corazón hasta convertirse en mago, en chamán, en un ser con suficiente poder para transmutar la palabra o la materia. Este legado resulta innegable para complementar la riqueza cultural del universo caribeño, cuyo pasado remoto recibió no sólo el influjo y las aportaciones de grupos móviles como los *táines*, los *caribes* o las migraciones de navegantes y guerreros provenientes del sudeste (esto es, de las márgenes del río Orinoco), sino del establecimiento de puertos y ciudades insulares y continentales a todo lo largo del poniente caribeño (principalmente de México, Belice, Guatemala y Honduras), que fomentaron la navegación, el comercio y el contacto humano desde antes de la era cristiana. Sitios, cuya pulsión, presencia y grandeza artística se explican precisamente por esa cimentación místico-estética. Una profusión y diversidad de objetos culturales y vestigios arquitectónicos espléndidos (entre otros, Tulum, Xel-Há, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, Xcaret, Xcalak, Cerros, Laguna de On, Ka'k'Naab, Naj, Tunich, Alta Verapaz, Quiriguá, Copán), que comprueba la otra raigambre del pasado remoto del Caribe al ligar sus nutrientes con dos de las culturas que abrevan de esa herencia estética, los *mayas* y los *nahuas*. Una dimensión que nos permite entrever a su vez el peso y

la importancia que podría llegar a representar el Caribe para la propia civilización originaria de Mesoamérica.

**Palabras claves:** misticismo, verdadero artista, proceso iniciático, transformación espiritual, flor y canto

### **Abstract**

In general, Mexican and Central American peoples are deeply mystical. To study in depth the path of its pre-Columbian artists is significant not only because it allows us to clarify some of the earliest underpinnings of such mysticism, but because it demands also an epistemological complex challenge requiring flexible schemes firmly established, the meeting of various disciplines and an holistic special approach to historical phenomena. The way of the true artist was then a hard and long process, with dyes of an initiatic process. He ought to walk an extended distance in order to developing into an exceptional being that combined awareness of the Master, the world, nature and knowledge itself. Someone, who deals with and learn to discuss the legacy of the past, of his congeners and of things. Someone who goes through many thresholds / steps before metamorphosing into a genuine artist. One, capable of dialoguing with God and his own heart to become a magician, a shaman, a being powerful enough to transmute the word or matter. This legacy is undeniable to complement the Caribbean's cultural wealth, whose distant past received not only the influence and contributions of mobile groups such as Taínes, the Caribes and the movement of navigators and warriors from the southeast (that is, from Orinoco's riverbank), but the establishment of ports and insular and mainland cities throughout the Caribbean West (mainly Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras), which allowed navigation, trade and human contact before the Christian era. Sites, whose drive and artistic greatness is explained precisely for such mystical-aesthetic foundation. A profusion and diversity of cultural objects and splendid architectural remains (among others, Tulum, Xel-Há, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, Xcaret, Xcalak, Hills, Laguna de On, Ka'k'Naab, Naj Tunich, Alta Verapaz, Quirigua or Copan), which show the other root of the Caribbean distant past which links their nutrients to two cultures that drink from this aesthetic heritage: the Mayan and Nahuatl. A dimension that allows us to glimpse the weight and importance that could eventually have the Caribbean itself for the Mesoamerican native civilization.

**Key Words:** mysticism, true artist, rite of passage, spiritual transformation, flower and song.



Image of the word and poet Nezahualcoyotl, King of Texcoco as it appears in the Codex Xolotl



Trumpeter image accompanied by huéhuetl as shown in the Codex Becker



Chaac, the Mayan god of rain, lightning, and thunder, is shown here reproduced from the Dresden Codex, the oldest known book written in the Americas, from the 11th or 12th century CE.



A priest playing the teponaztli at night (Berdan and Anawalt, op. cit., folio 63)



Playing a small huéhuetl at the feast of Titiitl (Elizabeth Hill Boone, ed., The Codex Magliabechiano, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, facsimile volume, folio 72).



Huéhuetl and teponaztli players at a feast for a newborn child (Bernardino de Sahagún, Códice florentino, México: Gobierno de la Republica, 1979, Book 4, folio 70, vol. 1).



Dancing at a merchant's banquet (Bernardino de Sahagún, op.cit., Book 9, folio 30v, vol. 2).

### **Hermeneutical scaffolding**

The world of rational knowledge has undergone over the last few centuries a series of paradigm changes. One example is the excessive optimism of enlightened rationalism, which supplanted humility and caution in contemporary systematic science, where reasoning is applied not only in the approach to quantum physics but also to sociology and psychology as they study human beings and their dialectical relationship with the society to which they belong. The phenomenon of epistemological frontiers in the natural and humanistic sciences is therefore an integral part of the intellectual effort of high-level professionals, and it is a serious object of professional academic discourse in the context of today's interdisciplinary dialogue. In this context of thought it is only natural to call for a holistic approach to human beings, society, and the world. Consequently, discussions include intuition, creativity and artistic witness as equal partners with more rational and pragmatic approaches.

Reason is, on the one hand, the complexity of reality as such, which transcends the human person, and on the other, the reflective-descriptive character of human knowledge with regard to the object of study. Research into the area of historical phenomena represents a personal problem. Hermeneutic approaches in diachronic analysis, or, respectively, in synchronic analysis, do not offer and – as will be shown—will not be capable of offering exhaustive solutions to archeological discoveries or to

historically documented empires. A typical example can be found in the discoveries about the Olmec civilization, especially the gigantic basalt heads and helmets that some scholars of the last century linked to Africa (MELGAR and SERRANO, 1859; VAN SERTIMA 1979; GONZÁLEZ CALDERÓN, 1991; XU, 1996).

Is it possible, with total validity, to try to accommodate all the enigma of analogous historical vestiges under a single heading? Although the principle of coherence forms part of the serious indications that suggest that such an image exists, human beings cannot go beyond the limits set by the possibilities of their own knowledge, which is basically approximation. Current theories of hermeneutics have nothing to say about three-way dialectics: the author of the work, the object of study (text, artwork) and the observer (analyst).

As Porter and Robinson caution:

Focusing on one element over the others runs the risk of creating an imbalance or, at the very least, rendering an incomplete picture. For instance, emphasizing a search for an author's originally intended message will often mean that the circumstances that influence the reader's own perspectives on the text – that is, what the reader is likely to have “read into” the text, “between the lines” so to say – are potentially overlooked... We may never fully put ourselves into the shoes of another, so there will always be some uncertainty... [Thus] finding the “ideal” source of human understanding, attained through principles and rules of interpretation that offer methodologically sound and objectively reliable knowledge, is an impossible quest. Instead, what we should examine is our “way of being” in the world, for which method and objectivity have only minor roles to play at most (PORTER and ROBINSON, 2011, p. 4-5).

Different hermeneutical applications mark the path of an overall understanding of phenomena that are situated within the framework of the diverse boundaries of the scientific disciplines. Hermeneutics has by now carved out for itself a substantial place in each object of analysis within the context of the natural and humanistic sciences, including the social sciences. Hermeneutics

today does not represent a special philosophy or a method of analysis of past experiences; what it offers is a way for the world today to see humanity in its entirety, and in all the spheres of its consciousness, while historical phenomena represent the inseparable evolutionary dimension of their understanding in relation to the flow of time. In this way, hermeneutics opens up new challenges for the re-evaluation of our understanding of the world, civilization, culture, and above all, the function and meaning of the human person, while the religious dimension and mysticism occupy an irreplaceable position there. Reason is not the element of intuition and creativity that are the foundation of the mystical; it is the “blind spot” identified directly or indirectly by all epistemological concepts and methods.

### **Approximation and linking**

There are a good number of empty spaces that make it difficult to objectively appreciate the past of civilizations that emerged in regions such as Mexico and the rest of the American continent. The definition of Mesoamerica as a cultural region with limits and precise characteristics was first proposed by the German philosopher and anthropologist Paul Kirchhoff in 1943 (KIRCHHOFF, 2000), from the distribution of hundreds of cultural elements of diverse nature, some of which approximately half, were present exclusively in Mesoamerica. This is an area or region covering approximately from the Pánuco and Sinaloa rivers located north of Mexico and whose southern boundary runs from the mouth of the Motagua River in Honduras and reaches the Gulf of Nicoya in Costa Rica, crossing through the lake of Nicaragua in Nicaragua. A huge space that obviously includes the continental and island territories of the Caribbean Sea of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras). (BONFIL BATALLA, 1990, p.29).

The colonization processes that took place in these lands are remote in time (dating back to the 16th century), spanned long periods of history, involved the fragmentation of valuable vestiges, the destruction of the written language recorded in many codices, and the suppression of the wise men who knew how to

read their contents. What is worse, the documents available to the chroniclers who came after the Conquest dealt only with cultural manifestations that had vanished (HERNÁNDEZ TORRES, 2004).

In fact, the history that certain Spanish and native scholars tried to recover, with the help of the last survivors and of ancient manuscripts before they were destroyed, could go back no farther than the tenth century of our age, and encompassed only central Mexico. The reason for this was that history, as preserved by the group that dominated Mesoamerica in the 16th century, focused on the toils and troubles that the Aztecs underwent on their improbable journey to imperial supremacy, and the continuous jostling for political hegemony that took place uninterrupted among the newly arrived nomad tribes – the Aztecs being one of these – and the heirs of the ancient civilization (SEJOURNÉ, 1984, p. 2-3).

Nevertheless, as Laurette Sejourné pointed out, despite the onslaught of critics who called into question the historical validity of the written Nahua documents produced before and after the Conquest, archeological discoveries of the last 100 years, plus painstaking and impassioned studies by several generations of researchers in the fields of anthropology, astronomy, archeology, epigraphy, iconography, morphology and symbology, have overcome the obstacles that stood in the way of a credible approximation to the Nahua writings and the archeological relics of Mesoamerica. Once the chasm of time that separated them was bridged, the two types of evidence bore witness to an astonishing vitality. In this way, illuminated by the venerable myths, the old stones glimmer once again with all their signs, while the songs, chronicles and codices, together with the advances in the deciphering of Mayan glyphs, help to extract the texts from the realm of enigma, and they begin to give voice to a compelling fullness of thought (*pdf*: SÉJOURNÉ, 1984, p.6).

With the opening of the window to this world we can see, and affirm with confidence, that ancient Mesoamerican world assigned capital importance to the divine (before and after the first millennium). It was a world where the march of the Cosmos



governed people's spiritual quest. "A land where intimacy with the heavens had banished the profane. Populations with their gaze fixed on the infinite, routinely breathing the rarefied air of the sacred..." (SÉJOURNÉ 1984, p.6). This should come as no surprise, as the path of the pre-Columbian artist was also marked by a profound mysticism. The belief was that artists were born, not made. As Miguel León-Portilla explains, "those born on those dates [Ce Xóchitl: 1-Flower...], be they of noble or common birth, would grow up to be lovers of song, entertainers, comedians, artists. They took this into account, made it their livelihood and their delight, lived joyously, were happy as long as they remained faithful to their destiny, that is, as long as they were demanding of themselves and proved worthy of their gift." (LEÓN-PORTILLA, 1983, p.169).

But those who do not realize this, who disregard it, who belittle their destiny, as they say, even when they are singers or artists, crafters of things, end up ruining their happiness; it is lost to them. [They proved undeserving of it.] They put themselves above the others' faces; they squander their destiny entirely. In short, their heads grow big, they become conceited. They mock others' faces, their own face and heart grow willful and depraved, along with their song and their thinking (LEÓN-PORTILLA 1983, p.169).

The true artist would undertake a long and steep path involving an arduous process that to a certain extent was rite of passage: the artist was expected to acquire in-depth knowledge of his natural surroundings, his social and family background, his historical context (his ancestors, his roots), and himself. The artist became more than simply a witness of his times; he was also an interpreter and a reformer. The artist had contact with all the spheres of life that were accessible, dug beneath the surface appearance of observed reality, looked for the relationship between the reality of life and his own life as a way of making his own perspective, expression, feeling and understanding available to society at large. His oracle had a decided impact on others, even after his death. Artistic work distilled the synchronic and cultural currents of the time, while offering valuable insights into

the diachronic social movements of the geo-political space in which the artist moved. As León-Portilla himself put it:

Art's predestination implied a certain innate capacity, but he who would emulate the Toltecs [...] was obliged to attend the centers of Nahuatl education, particularly the *cuicacalli* or "houses of song" that were expressly dedicated to training artists. Thanks to this education, the budding artist was able to delve into the myths and traditions of the old culture. He learned about the ancient ideals, and took inspiration from them. With firm roots in this culture, his future works would take on full meaning within it; they would resonate with the Nahuatl people.

The artist's twofold formation— as knower of the Nahuatl cultural legacy and as skilled craftsman— enabled him to "converse with his own heart": *moyolnonotzani*, as almost all the texts put it. Looking inward insistently and calling on his own "mobility," on his heart (*yóllotl*), custodian of the great teachings of religion and ancient philosophy, he would not rest until he found his own symbols and metaphors, "the flowers and songs" that formed the foundation of his life and imprinted their form on inert matter, taking shape so that ordinary people could also perceive the message (LEÓN-PORTILLA, 1983, p. 169-170).

## Mystical dimension

After conversing with his heart, the artist continues the conversation with the gods, undergoing an even higher spiritual transformation that enables him to make things lie, that is, to transform words into poetry and physical matter into paintings, sculptures or cities that can then convey wisdom to the hearts of others.

As a result of the dialogue sustained with his own heart, which has mused, as it were, on the spiritual legacy of the Nahuatl world, the artist begins to become a *yoltéotl*, a "god-like heart," or to put it another way, human mobility and dynamism imbued with a kind of divine inspiration. He will then experience moments of anxiety and longing. He will be a kind of "thief of flowers and songs."

The artist, described as a beggar, will finally find in the ancient wisdom the seed of the “flower and song” he longs for. Then, as the text describing the painter puts it, he becomes a *tlayoltehuiani*, “one who introduces divine symbolism into things.” “He will then teach how to lie,” as it is said in the description of the ceramicist, and it is not only the clay that is taught to lie, but also quetzal feathers, words themselves, stones and metals, embedding symbols in the world that had no soul before. In this, the texts repeatedly insist, he will work calmly, tentatively, with delight. Like a Toltec, he will take pleasure in what he does.

As a man of integrity, “owner of a face, owner of a heart,” as the text describes the *amantécatl* or feather artist, he will shun everything that might demean him to a lower category. He will certainly not disappoint people, or run roughshod over the face of things, or try to deceive, or bring about the death of his art, or try to spirit things in by night.

The result of his action, which we shall call “godly and skilled,” will be to imbue matter with flowers and song, the symbols that will help people to find the truth, their root, here on earth. [...] What today might be called “reproductions in a naturalist style” will have meaning in his art, as a complement that makes it possible to describe or “read” the swarming metaphors incorporated into his creations. This kind of naturalism is often said to “imitate living things” (LEÓN-PORTILLA 1983, p. 170-171).

This same process of passage and artistic development was present in the Mayan culture, as Alberto Morales Damián explains.

On the basis of the analysis of the *Popul Vuh*, *The Ritual of the Bacabes*, the *Chilam Balam*, the *Madrid Codex* and Landa’s text, as well as dictionaries of Yucatan Mayan, research is being done to define more precisely the semantic field where Mayan culture situated the term translated as “art” in European languages. The conclusion has been that for the Mayans, art is a creative activity in the sense of an activity that produces life. It is a traditional profession, which means it follows a sacred

model established by the gods, and in order to work in this profession one must be predestined to it. The sculptor or painter must know the religious traditions, the secrets of the gods who shared their divine generating force. Their attitude must be humble and wise in order to use their technical skills to represent transcendence. Art combines aesthetic pleasure and a religious message (MORALES, 2001/2002, p. 111).

This generalized path of formation for the pre-Columbian artist suggests not only the tremendous responsibility that these individuals undertook for their fellows, but also the transcendence of the mystical underpinnings of the ancient inhabitants of Mesoamerica's aesthetic vision and creativity. As Ángel María Garibay points out, if human beings, in the Nahuatl worldview, were inseparably connected to the Cosmos (*Cfr.* GARIBAY, 1965), and if an active principle of the cosmos was improvement, then this principle must be present in human beings as a godly thing. Human life is a precious asset, like fine stones or beautiful feathers, common themes in Nahuatl poetry and in the *huehuetlatolli* or Nahuatl moral wisdom. Precious stones and feathers symbolize the fragility of existence, but also improvement: precious stones are carefully polished, while feathers, arranged painstakingly by the *amantécalt*, become beautiful images. Garibay, like Sahagún and Olmos, marveled at this: human beings are god-given assets and as such have the responsibility to cultivate themselves, polish themselves, attain their most elevated form.

The upper part is endowed with the functions associated with the divine: vision, word and heart, the seat of thought, while the lower part, earth-bound, has functions such as fertility and the expulsion of dead or useless matter. Human beings are thus a reflection of the cosmos and participate in each one of the divine powers. As a reflection of the cosmos they also tend toward improvement, toward self-enhancement.

As Mircea Eliade would say with regard to the presence of a figure like Quetzalcóatl on the horizon of Mesoamerican civilization: "the iconography represents a symbolic language; for this reason archeological pieces lend themselves to 'reading'

just as the codices and chronicles are read [...] Thanks to these rigorous and careful readings, the researcher gives us a glimpse of the grandeur and nobility of this ancient, extinct culture...” (ELIADE 1984, p. IX-X).

If we read the teachings of the mystics carefully, we will see that they rise above all religions; they free us from the shackles of religion and lead us to eternal happiness... The royal road on which they lead their disciples transcends all written and spoken words. “As Guru Nanak says in the sacred Granth: after recognizing the current of sound, one sees without eyes, hears without ears, walks without legs, works without hands... Reality is not to be seen with these material eyes, cannot be heard with these material ears, and cannot be explained with this material tongue. It cannot be described” (MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH, 2001, p. XX)<sup>1</sup>.

In Hebrew culture and the tradition of thought set down in the Talmud we find similar conceptual approximations around the year 1000 B.C., which harken back to ancient Sumerian culture and echo Eastern wisdom. Here the human heart is the metaphoric core of being, the place where thoughts, words and acts are born with not only a horizontal dimension, but also a vertical, transcendent one. In the book of Ecclesiastes 3:11 the author makes this point in an especially eloquent and artistic way: “All that he does is apt for its time; but though he has permitted man to consider time in its wholeness, man cannot comprehend the work of God from beginning to end.” Mystics try to “portray” the reality of being, the flow of time and the complexity of social and cultural relations, but they do not *portray* the truth in its fullness.

In no way does this lead to the fatalism of passivity on the part of the artist. On the contrary! The message of the book of Ecclesiastes bears witness to the inexorable activism of the human person who seeks truth and beauty, the unity of the practical and the aesthetic, the dynamic balance between

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to the book *Spiritual Letters*, Baba Jaimal Sing Ji, Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Málaga, 2001, p. XX.

description and prescription in utilitarian art, and the mystical effort to make material what cannot be materialized.

The archeological vestiges of the pre-Columbian age leave no room for doubt that the people who took inspiration from the different cultures that flourished in Mesoamerica were true creators. From the artist of the midlands of Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula, to the artist that was capable to designing utensils, cities and ports in the West Caribbean (such as Tulum, Xel Ha, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, Xcaret, Xcalak, Hills, Laguna de On, Ka'k'Naab, Naj Tunich, Alta Verapaz, Quirigua, Copan, etc.). Sites that fostered navigation and the exchange of goods and ideas among islands and continental lands of Quintana Roo, México, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras (ZÚÑIGA CARRASCO, 2014), and that bear witness of high level of culture and social organization achieved by these ancient Caribbean inhabitants. The language of the symbols and the unparalleled architecture of those places from long ago continue to astonish people today and inspire them with their purity and depth.

## Conclusion

Pre-Columbian thought is like a window: it enables us to corroborate the mystical motif, the complexity of Mexica, Mayan and West Caribbean artists, as well as the limitations to their freedom. It also allows us to appreciate the communication vessels, aesthetic grandeur and fertility achieved by these cultures, together with the most essential aspects of human thought, present to the same degree. At the same time, it serves as an indicator of our own self-reflection, not only at an individual level but also at a social and continental level. Looking at others through the *window* means in a certain sense looking at myself: I see and perceive that which I am capable of attaining, that for which I am prepared.

Furthermore, the ability to *see* reality and to *read* the language of symbols and metaphors, the language of the mystic or the artist has its analogy in other models that natural scientists use to express what they discover about the world. Neither is capable of *portraying* truth in its entirety; nevertheless, the effort

is not in vain. For this same reason true artists are never satisfied with their own work. Philosophers feel an existential tension between the present and the atemporal, between the actual and the potential. Mystics realize in their heart that there is a chasm between the eternal and the temporal, between the divine and the human.

The pre-Columbian traversed the path of knowledge as a *tlatinamine* (a wise person or philosopher in the Nahuatl language) and at the same time, walked the path of life as a mystical pilgrim striving amid pain to find the joyful flowers of knowledge and the artistic representation of their reflections. The results of this striving tend to be both useful and valuable. This lends itself to generalization: the effort to understand and portray reality is often painful and joyful at the same time. So is life. Any culture that does not make an effort to understand its neighbors, that is incapable of rejoicing in the differences of others, is a culture of death.

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