

# Recording Orality: Vocalization as Ephemerality, Materialization and Meaning

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## ABSTRACT

In my paper, I aim at exploring specific materializations of ephemerality and meaning through the recording of vocal expression. A case study is supplied by *joik* and *joiking*, a traditional form of singing by the Sami people of northern Scandinavia and Kola Peninsula. Believed to be one of the oldest music traditions of Europe, *joik* is not so much a way of “singing about” as it is rather the form of embodying a landscape, a person or an animal through vocally evoking their most specific characteristics thus binding the performer and his/her environment (both in terms of that which particular song is referring to and the immediate situation of the performance where the *joiker* relies on the ability of the audience to decipher the meaning). A focus on the particular *joik*, *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie* (Reindeers from Oulavuolie) by Nils Mattias Andersson shows the specificity of recorded vocalization as the practice of ambivalent materialization of meaning — elusive yet tangible enough to let the audience grasp the sense of place.

## KEYWORDS

sound studies; genealogies of e-literature; new materialism; ephemerality; *joik*.

## RESUMO

Neste artigo, pretendo explorar materializações específicas de efemeridade e de sentido através da gravação da expressão vocal. O estudo de caso é fornecido por *joik* e *joiking*, uma forma tradicional de canto do povo sami do norte da Escandinávia e da península de Kola. Considerado uma das mais antigas tradições musicais da Europa, o *joik* não é tanto uma maneira de “cantar sobre” como é uma forma de personificar uma paisagem, uma pessoa ou um animal evocando vocalmente as suas características específicas, unindo deste modo o intérprete e o seu ambiente (tanto em termos daquilo que uma música em particular refere quanto na situação imediata da performance na qual o *joiker* confia na capacidade do público de decifrar o sentido). Uma análise do *joik Renhjorden på Oulavuolie* (Renas de Oulavuolie), de Nils Mattias Andersson, mostra a especificidade da vocalização gravada como uma prática de materialização ambivalente de sentido — elusiva, mas tangível o suficiente para permitir que o público apreenda o sentido do lugar.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

estudos sonoros; genealogias da literatura eletrônica; novo materialismo; efemeridade; *joik*.

**E**-literature (denoting mostly born-digital cultural forms building on previous media practices) has many possible genealogies. The *Call for Contributions* announcing the ELO Conference in 2015 read: “Electronic literature is situated as an intermedial field of practice, between literature, computation, visual and performance art.” (Electronic Literature Organization, 2015). Each of the fields enumerated above brings its own share of cultural practices and histories, not to mention the rich processes of cross-pollination and hybridization happening in the often-elusive in-betweens. Yet the sound phenomena, orality and audio culture seem to be relatively rarely frequented areas in the otherwise robust, vibrant and plentiful research on e-literature — as based on the browsing through the resources at hand (ELMCIP and ELO conferences programs and books of abstracts). Granted, looking for the possible genealogies of the digital forms in the orality would not be particularly original in itself. Both Marshall McLuhan’s framing of the media culture as retribalization typical for the new “global village” and the Ongian idea of secondary orality have already been a steady theme in media studies for years, resurfacing again recently regarding the practices of social media’s users (McLuhan, 1962; McLuhan, 1964; Ong, 1982). Reaching out to orality while theorizing the contemporary e-lit reception practices can, however, be more specific as when Dene Grigar refers to the very beginnings of the written culture searching for ways “to rethink reading and literacy” (Grigar, 2008: 139) and draws upon the practices of pre-Homeric Greece, proposing the idea of rhapsodic reading (Grigar, 2017).

In my article, I would like to reflect on the possible genealogies of e-literature’s concern with the materiality and spatiality of media text from the perspective of sound studies, especially from the vantage point provided by the histories of early sound recordings. My case study is limited to the history of a particular Swedish Sami yoik, Nils Mattias Andersson’s *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie* (Reindeers from Oulavuolie). The remarks and stories from the recording engineers, ethnographers and a yoiker himself — otherwise relegated to the margins of theory as anecdotal — reveal the rich story vibrating with senses uncovering the potent theoretical threads concerning the ephemerality, media representation and the materialization of meaning through the very process of sound recording. Claire Colebrook in her essay on the feminist materialist theorizing, advocating against the stance of philosophical vitalism and defending the radical difference offered by the concept of inert and unproductive matter underlines the fact that “language itself is materiality” (Colebrook, 2008: 71) and states in-

sightfully: “Literature does not create concepts — the ideal or material orientation or problem that must be expressed through some material language — for literature, like all art, allows matter to stand alone or vibrate.” (Colebrook, 2008: 76). It is precisely such process I want to illustrate with my example — how the matter (of language, human being and landscape treated as continuous sphere) is made to vibrate through the practice of composition and audio recording of the piece of poetry belonging to the ancient oral Sami culture. I hope to reveal the way of materializing the meaning which does not conform to the idea of media representation, eagerly employed while analyzing any ethnographic audio field recordings (also present when the oral practice’s transfer to the realm of written culture is brought forward). For the *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie*’s very coming to being can be seen as the outcome of the complex process, where the act of capturing the voice of a poet cannot be limited to the instance of barely recording the cultural artefact existing prior to the act of recording in a supposedly original, stable and unchanged form.

#### I.YOIK AS CULTURAL FORM AND PRACTICE

Yoik and yoiking belong to one of the oldest musical traditions of the world and constitute the crucial practices of the oral culture of Sápmi, the area inhabited by Sami people (that once used to be called Lapland, the name widely criticized for its colonial undertones) of the Scandinavian and Kola peninsula. It stretches across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The overall Sami population is estimated at 70,000, of which approximately 30,000 live in Sweden. As indigenous people with social organization and culture revolving mostly around traditional nomadic reindeer husbandry, communal ownership of the land, extended family and clan structure, the traces of shamanic and animist beliefs as well as oral culture, Sami people have been experiencing the long history of discrimination by the modern national states which have gradually developed on the Scandinavian Peninsula during the last 400 years (a history that has still not ended although currently the political representation of Sami people includes local NGOs and various agendas of the respective Sami Parliaments in every Nordic country) (Solbakk, 2006; Lehtola, 2004). Such discrimination involved practices of infamous Nordic eugenic policies carried out well into 70s of twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> In Sweden Sami have been recognized as indigenous people as late as 1977.

The popular definitions describe yoik as the traditional way of singing or the form of songs typical for Sami people.<sup>2</sup> The canonic contemporary yoikers’

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1 The exhibition on Sami history and culture, “Sapmi. On Being Sami in Sweden,” displayed at Stockholm’s Nordiska Museet includes the items documenting the racist research and policies of infamous Swedish Institute of Racial Biology (since 1958 known as the State Institute for Human Genetics) directed towards Sami people of Sweden. The scope of eugenic policy of compulsory sterilisation became revealed to Swedish society only after the series of articles by a journalist of Polish origin, Maciej Zaremba Bielawski, published in 1997 by the leading Swedish daily, *Dagens Nyheter* (Zaremba 1999; Zaremba-Bielawski 2011).

2 The yoik and practice of yoiking has been a steady subject of scholarly research – its scope and depth (as cultural phenomenon) far exceeds the framework of my article. The full account of yoik

names are familiar to the fans of world and folk music. Among them Mari Boine, Nils Aslak Valkeapää, Wimme Saari are probably the best known as singers who define yoik as musical genre, although their art often crosses the established boundaries (with the most notable example of Nils Aslak Valkeapää, a poet, multimedia artist and somewhat of an institution promoting Sami culture far and wide). The yoik's name in different Sami dialects (luohti, vuolle, leu'dd or juoiggus) sometimes also delimits its different types depending on whether it takes up the form of a song with lyrics or whether it is a wordless vocalization. There is even the series of songs which describe the story of Sami origins and their history, known as *Sámeeatnan álgoolmbuid birra* (On the first inhabitants of Sápmi) documented in 1830 by Jacob Feldman. However, even the very definition of yoik provides the interesting point of departure for further analysis, especially comparing the *Wikipedia's* popular explication with two examples of self-definition originating in the context of Sami culture. The basic Wikipedia description of yoik follows the rules of the encyclopedic discourse and clarifies it in the familiar terms of “ethnic,” “traditional” music culture:

A joik (also spelled yoik), luohti, vuolle, leu'dd, or juoiggus is a traditional form of song of the Sami people of the Nordic countries and Kola peninsula of Russia. Originally, *joik* referred to only one of several Sami singing styles, but in English the word is often used to refer to all types of traditional Sami singing. As an art form, each joik is meant to reflect or evoke a person, animal, or place. (*Wikipedia*, 2017).

What pops up as the last element of the basic definition is, however, recognized as a central and crucial feature of yoiking in the explanation provided by a Finnish Sami yoiker, Ursula Länsman of the Angelit group, published in the popular music magazine *FolkWorld*:

A yoik is not merely a description; it attempts to capture its subject in its entirety: it's like a holographic, multi-dimensional living image, a replica, not just a flat photograph or simple visual memory. It is not about something, it is that something. It does not begin and it does not end. A yoik does not need to have words — its narrative is in its power, it can tell a life story in song. The singer can tell the story through words, melody, rhythm, expressions or gestures. (Länsman, 1999).

This elucidation echoes in another interpretation, given by the researcher with Sami roots, who states that “one does not yoik about somebody or something, there is a direct connection; one yoiks something or someone.” (Gaski, 1999: 5). Harald Gaski opens his article on the yoik's interpretation with yet another definition, once again switching the meaning of this cultural form and underlining its integral connection with personal and shared memory (and referring to *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie*):

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as sound artifact and cultural practice can be found in the extensive literature (Jones-Bamman 1993; Gaski 1999; Lundberg, Terhag 2011; Hilder 2015).

The yoik is a way of remembering — it connects a person with innermost feelings of the theme of the yoik, and may thus communicate between times, persons, and landscapes — like in the old, long yoik which Nils Mattias Andersson from Tårnaby, Sweden, yoiked for the Swedish national radio company when they travelled around and collected yoiks from different regions of Sapmi. (Gaski, 1999: 3).

There are many other definitions, ranging from the classic one provided by an early documentalist, Karl Tiren, a Swedish ethnographer-amateur for whom yoik recording was a life-long hobby (to him yoik followed the idea of Wagnerian *Tonmalerei*) to the semiotic definition by Norwegian researcher Ola Graff (yoik as arbitrary signifier). For Krister Stoor, yoik is a storytelling performance, oral history and oral art form at the same time (Hilder, 2015). Definitions abound but one recursive and distinctive element is the idea of yoik as opposed to the basics of Western aesthetics of mimetic presentation: the researchers and practitioners talk about yoik as the way of *presencing* the object (instead of referring to it or describing it or re/presenting it).

In the insightful article on the literary interpretation of yoik, Gaski underlines at least two important features of yoiking: the first one is the fact that it expresses the culture which prefers collectivity over individualism, or rather seeks to strike the fine balance between both, which is related to the fact “that a perceived solidarity is what actually holds the culture together.” (Gaski, 1999: 5). Yet it also links individual identity with the community’s bigger whole (as when an adolescent is given a yoik which means he/she has been recognized as an independent person, a member of the collective). Such cultural attribute is fully understandable considering both the Sami history filled with many instances of discrimination, including the urge to entirely banish yoiking from the everyday life and the harsh environmental circumstances of Sapmi, where relying on the community one belongs to was often a matter of life and death. The negative attitude towards yoiking (sometimes widespread also among Sami people themselves) comes from many sources. It might be the connotation of Sami culture with the alleged social backwardness for which it was often publicly ridiculed but also the fact that yoiking was considered sinful by Christian missionaries and groups, especially from the perspective of laestadianism, imposing very strict rules of conduct upon Sami Christians and banishing yoiking altogether.<sup>3</sup> One storyline often heard from practicing contemporary yoikers com-

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3 Laestadianism is a conservative and strict Lutheran movement, initiated in mid-nineteenth century by Lars Laevi Laestadius – a very interesting figure himself. A missionary and activist of Sami origins (he was speaking Lule samisk, a northern Sami dialect which helped him to effectively convert to Christianity a significant community of Sami people and the movement continues to have strong influence in Sapmi also today). As a preacher and missionary educated at the University of Uppsala, Laestadius worked in Arjeplog, Karesuando and Pajala. He is also known as botanist and ethnographer, and his book, *Fragments of Lappish Mythology*, was considered lost for more than 200 years and was published in Sweden only as recently as 1997. His missionary efforts can be seen as strategic – he was convinced that converting to Christianity was for the Sami people a matter of life and death in the quickly modernizing world of the second half of nineteenth century. Christianization of Sami people can be seen as ambivalent and such ambivalence echoes through the well-known Norwegian movie, *Kautokeino Rebellion* (Kautokeino-opprøret, 2008), directed by Nils Gaup – a Sami writer, yoiker, filmmaker and contemporary noaide from Norway.

prises the memories of the elderly family members yoiking in secret so that nobody can overhear them, often fearing the closest ones who were followers of the Laestedian order (Moisala, 2011). During the times of particularly harsh persecution of traditional beliefs and customs by Christian missionaries, yoiking could earn a yoiker the death penalty (Beach, 1993).

Another important feature that according to Gaski needs to be acknowledged by any reading of yoik as a cultural practice is the fact of its quality which could be described in more media-oriented terms as intermodal: “not merely text, nor just music but both of them and even more than just the sum of lyrics and melody.” (Gaski, 1999: 5). This is also precisely why the traditional literary and/or ethnomusicological analysis is not only insufficient but the fact that it compartmentalizes and dissects the complex cultural practice into respective fields of inquiry may cause major misreading and “commit violence to the tradition” (Gaski, 1999: 6). In my analysis, focused first and foremost on the recorded performance of one particular yoik, I am hence partly following the proposition of Richard Jones-Bamman who warns that the meaning of yoik is not fully comprehensible “unless we also focus our attention on the specific ‘yoik milieu’ wherein composition and performance occurs” (Jones-Bamman, 1993: 139). Both Gaski and Jones-Bamman advocate the necessity to strive for capturing the whole context of yoik, including textual and musical components as well as the situation of composition and particular performance. The reason for such diligence has also much in common with the question of very particular understanding of authorship/ownership: according to Gaski the owner of the yoik is that which is yoiked, not only a person who composes it (in traditional aesthetic categories it would be considered the object of yoik but such categories seem inadequate regarding the rich meanings of yoiking as cultural practice). I argue that the process of recording *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie* plays an important part in the emergence of yoik as complex ‘milieu’, where the object of the yoik (to use the traditional category), its performer and the situation of performance co-evolve, mutually influencing each other during the act of creating.

My own interest in yoik and yoiking has developed through meetings with Sami yoikers in Sweden. In February 2010 during Jokkmokks Marknad<sup>4</sup> I have attended a workshop run by Per Niila Stålka, a Sami yoiker and entrepreneur based in Jokkmokk, where together with his wife, Lotta Wilborg Stoor, he runs Stoorstålka, a small company specializing in the traditional and modern Sami design. It is through such encounters with living tradition, followed soon by a few research sessions at Ája Sami Archive & Library affiliated by the Ájtte Sami Museum in Jokkmokk, visiting other Sami museums and collections in the area, organizing a few concerts and workshops of Sami crafts for Per Niila and Lotta

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4 Jokkmokks Marknad is a traditional Sami market organized in small town of Jokkmokk “since time immemorial” (according to organizers’ description of the event), where also Sami National Day is celebrated every year on 6th of February <http://www.jokkmokksmarknad.se/home/>. Accessed: 4.08.2017.

in Poland as well as intensive hiking in Stora Sjöfallet, Padjelanta and Sarek National Parks that I gradually gained firsthand my own (even if limited) experience of yoiking. Per Niila sparked my research interests saying during the workshop that yoik is not actually composed, it is “given” to a yoiker who spends considerable amount of time in nature (hence the notion of the “object” of yoik seems so limited and inadequate). One is not supposed to “compose” it deliberately, one is rather to hear it all at once while in the outdoors.

## II. REINDEERS FROM OULAVUOLIE - AURATIC SOUND RECORDING

During one of the first research trips while preparing the grounds for the major Swedish National Radio’s project of yoik’s documentation in 1953 and 1954, Mats Arnberg, Håkan Unsgaard, and Israel Ruong (who was Sami himself) remarked that yoiking became practically extinct and if there is anything left from this tradition, it is almost impossible to find, let alone record. However, their skillful work and diligence eventually bestowed the monumental edition of 7 LPs published by the Sveriges Radio in 1969 (along with the book in Swedish and English, which was at the time the first major account of the practice of yoiking of this scale and quality) (Arnberg, Unsgaard, Ruong, 1969). It was through this project that Arnberg, Ruong and Unsgaard met Nils Mattias Andersson (1882-1974). The son of reindeer herder from Wihelmina, Andersson moved in 1907 to Tärnaby, where he got allotted the reindeer pasture and became a herder himself. The pasture included a small glacier called Oulavuolie, where Andersson spent many happy summers with his animals, soon accompanied by his wife, Anna. Eventually he had to give up reindeer husbandry due to illness and the couple started a small-scale farming — also stopped soon afterwards because of their poor health. When the Sveriges Radio’s team met Andersson in the beginning of 1960s, his health was still ailing (while his wife became completely paralyzed). Ruong recalls the day spent with Andersson: “Nils Mattias entertained us magnificently the whole day. He proved to be a splendid storyteller with a lively temperament and great dramatic talent.” (Arnsberg, Ruon, Unsgaard, 1969: 123). But only in the evening he proved ready to yoik, after the members of the team had asked him hesitantly whether he would have any yoiks for them. When they sat by the fireplace, Nils Mattias — encouraged by the recording equipment in place and ready to work — started yoiking. Ruong vividly recalls this humble beginning as a moment when it immediately became obvious that the situation was very special. The elderly man started singing the story of his life with reindeers at Oulavuolie and it seemed he was performing it more for himself than for the small audience. It was apparently the work of an individual memory, seeking the most effective paths to revive the already experienced events, the particular place at the particular moments in time (mostly in summer), the reindeers and the rich relationship with them.

According to Unsgaard who witnessed the emergence of *på Oulavuolie*: “...Nils Mattias was able to convey the atmosphere of the yoik even to those of us who understood not a word of the language. It was only when we received Israel Ruong’s masterly interpretation in Swedish, however, that we realised we had witnessed the birth of the remarkable piece of Lapp poetry.” (Arnsberg, Ruong, Unsgaard, 1969). The same yoik was registered when the team of Sveriges Radio came to make a documentary film featuring Nils Mattias in 1965. His wife had passed away in the meantime but 83-year-old yoiker apparently was enjoying better health and his mood was good enough to accompany the film crew to the Oulavuolie, for the first time since he had given up his reindeers and their summer pasture. During the trip, Nils Mattias revealed that he performed *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie* only once – when it was recorded for the first (and the last) time. Ruong has noted his words: “It is so strange with that yoik. I just thought it existed, it just came... and sometimes it was with happiness and sometimes with sorrow, and then a melody appeared which was only temporary.” (Arnsberg, Ruong, and Unsgaard, 1969: 124). This fragment supports the notion of yoik as rather unstable, fluid cultural object – prone to emergency, temporariness, contingency of the context which includes the embodied relationship with landscape and non-human entities. It is memory in flux, constantly refreshed and updated yet preserving something of the initial moment of encounter with a singular object (be it place, animal or person). It is also because yoik, according to another researcher with Sami roots, does not conform to the ideas of linear development, it has no beginning and no end (Somby, 1995). It is significant in this regard what the witnesses say about Nils Mattias’ second attempt at yoiking reindeers from Oulavuolie, undertaken when he found the stones from his old hearth, precisely where he had left it:

When he had lit a fire and got the coffee going and knelt there almost completely enveloped in smoke, it was as though he was completely overwhelmed by his memories. Half-yoiking, half-reciting, he returned to the theme of the beginning and the end of the great yoik about the reindeer of Oulavuolie. He did not do it for us. None of us understood a word of the language. [(Arnsberg, Ruong, Unsgaard, 1969: 124)].

Arnsberg, Ruong and Unsgaard’s audio recordings belong to the long tradition of the examples of significant ethnographic attention that yoik has drawn over centuries. The first documentation attempts were carried out with standard musical notation as early as in the seventeenth century. The first phonograph recording was made in Finnish Torne valley by Väinö Salminen at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries. Other significant documenting projects include Karl Tiren’s lifelong activity which in 1942 bestowed “Die Lappische Volksmusik” comprising the notations of 563 yoiks and his phonograph recordings containing 270 cylinders. However, the relationship between sound recording technology and that which it was meant to record is much more complex than the standard definition of media and mediation can render. Mark Katz argues convincingly in



his book on the “phonograph effect” that the audio recording does not follow the rules of mimetic representation – it co-creates the recorded phenomena rather than “just” register them (the assertion supported by many anecdotal stories surrounding the early instances of phonograph practices in ethnography and ethnomusicology (Brady, 1999; Katz, 2004). *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie* could easily constitute the case of auratic sound recording – as opposed to the often-oversimplified theoretical thread of Benjaminian provenience, where the act of mechanical registration is perceived in terms of industrial and mechanical processes which deprive the artwork of its unique aura. Nils Mattias Andersson’s performance includes the very act of sound and film recording which is not posited as “outer” to the act of yoiking but as its necessary element. It is also important to remember in this context that the particular yoik came into existence because of the two consecutive acts of recording and did not exist prior to or apart from them.

### III. CONCLUSIONS - TOWARDS TRANSPERCEPTIONAL MODE OF EXISTENCE

Through focusing on the recording of Nils Mattias Andersson’s *Renhjorden på Oulavuolie* I attempted to illustrate the ambivalent materiality of the cultural artefact which is known to us only as an audio recording in two versions: one taken as a sound documentation and another as the soundtrack for a documentary made in 1965 by the same crew who had recorded the first version. According to accounts by Andersson himself and the members of the team, these are rather two distinct versions than the repetition of the previously composed yoik. The process of its composition – with all the above mentioned doubts as to whether its creative process conforms to such category – could be described as emergent, contingent (depending on the particular event of recording) and open-ended. The borders between public performance (imbued with the notion of the spectacle), intimate poetic expression and technical registration became blurred and uncertain. What we encounter is the specific instance of artwork’s materiality, spread between tangibility of sound recording and ephemerality of unique performance incorporating a human being forging anew the relationships between himself, his memory, concrete landscape and place, animals (mostly reindeers) and plants. With sound recording Nils Mattias Andersson’s two yoik performances get amplified through time and space, reaching out towards the audience placed in entirely different times, contexts and places. Such energetic characteristics of the sounds belonging to the class of long sounds (often beyond human audibility) have been analyzed by Douglas Kahn who – in order to better describe the way of propagation of such sounds through the environment – proposed the notion of transperception. It was meant to underline the quality which allows for inclusion into the aural spectrum of that which has been traversed during the soundwave’s propagation, acoustically or electromagnetically.

Kahn explains: “Very simply, transperception is an aperception, a consciousness or intrinsic awareness of an energy that includes what has been traversed. In terms of the naturalization of telecommunications, it is also a perception of what has not been annihilated.” (Kahn, 2013:162). It is also noteworthy that “some of the long sounds can be heard as having acquired their character through the course of their propagation” (Kahn, 2013: 162). Considering the state of contemporary computing technologies (and the creative practice within its domain) – the environmental, spatial and hybrid qualities of ambient informatics, mobile computing and computing embedded in the everyday life embodied practices – yoik seen in such transperceptual perspective seems an adequate genealogy for a significant part of e-literature, especially practices using augmented reality. Such perspective – grounded in the sound phenomena and the circumstances of audio recording – inspires us to reframe the discussion on materiality and ephemerality in the contemporary mediasphere beyond too obvious binaries where ephemerality is understood as necessarily opposed to materiality. The propagation of soundwaves (including electromagnetic transmission) directs attention towards more nuanced theorizations, capable of accounting for finer granularity of the non-human world, including the subtle energies – barely visible and audible yet affecting the world – which at the same time enable keeping in mind the more tangible matter of varied infrastructures of political and economic inequalities and discrimination. This is how yoik allows for matter(s) stand alone and vibrate.

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