

Urbanization and Women in Awka Town, 1904–2014

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of urbanization on the lives and activities of urban women, and most specifically, women in Awka community. It essentially pinpoints the various sectors of women's lives that urbanization has impacted, such as health, politics, religion, social, etc. Urbanization involves the concentration of population in a particular territory as a result of infrastructure development, the growth of science and technology, and industries which facilitated better living standard and overall development for the people and, on the other hand, contributed to the negative effects experienced by the people especially the women. The consequences presented by urbanization affected both the individual lives and group activities of women in Awka community. Its negative effect on the women can be seen in the women's group loss of identity, decadence in the autonomy of elders, high rate of divorce, violence, tussle in the religion sector of the community, local language extinction, prostitution, weakness in the women's protective support system, decline in the traditional health sector of women, etc. This research study employed a thematic and chronological approach, which aims at addressing the trend of events in the Awka town over time. It adopted analytical and descriptive methods in accessing the historical data and presenting the available information for the study. The present study specifically aims to examine the consequences of urbanization on women individually and collectively. The study examines the medical, cultural, political, and religious lives of Awka women and the theoretical framework in relation to this research can be analyzed from modernization theory, Jass theory of change and feminist urbanism theory.

Key words: urbanization, consequences, women and Awka Town

Introduction

Urbanization, which refers to the expansion in the proportion of a population living in urban areas, is one of the major social transformations sweeping the globe. It represents the movement of people from rural areas to urban areas. A very notable feature of urbanization in human history all over the world is its modernizing and changing attributes and a man influenced by urbanization, according to Smith and Inkeles, is one who is quicker to adopt technical innovation and more ready to implement birth control. He permits his wife and daughter to leave the home for more active participation in economic life. The urban transformation of Awka town was propelled by numerous factors such as; its occupation as a district and administration headquarter under the colonial administration, Awka people individual development activities, projects aftermath of the Nigeria- Biafra war, the 1991 declaration of the town as one of the towns that made up the capital of Anambra state and different governors development policies and programs. All fueled transformation in the town and encourage high influx of population in it. The remarkable growth in the community can be seen in the sharp decline of farm land area from 25,500.51 km² to 17,848.44 km² in 2000 and further declined to 10,037.07km² in 2014. Also, urban growth of Awka town varied with time, while from 1904 to 1990 urbanization was barely seen, it became higher as from 1991 to 2014 due to the town capital status, the presence of Nnamdi Azikiwe University and Governor Peter Obi's development activities.

However, although urbanization in Awka town was seen as a modernizing factor, such as its contribution to better quality of life, increased tolerance, and better sociocultural stimulation, at the same time, it devastated the culture of the people, promoted crimes and prostitution among the women, increased the rate of divorce, diminished the influence of various women's groups in the community, and caused an increase in overall stress and mental ill health among the women in the urban area. These

changes brought about by urbanization drastically affected societal beliefs, stereotypes, superstitions and altered the trends in sex considerations.

Definition of urbanization

Urbanization is a world-wide phenomenon. It is a process of relative growth in a country's urban population accompanied by an even faster increase in the economic, political, and cultural importance of cities relative to rural areas. The term 'urbanization' describes an increase in human habitation linked with increased per capita energy and resource consumption and extensive landscape modification (McDonnell and Pickett, 1990). It is a natural consequence and stimulus of economic development based on industrialization and post-industrialization. Urbanization as a social phenomenon has attracted a great variety of scholars over the years, including anthropologists, historians, economists, political scientists, and sociologists. Drin-Drabkin (1997) mentioned that the basic trends in world urbanization are: (1) an increasing percentage of the world population is living in urban areas, with the largest cities having the fastest growth; 2) employment within the metropolitan areas is becoming concentrated in the city center; and 3) population growth is mainly occurring in the outlying regions of the metropolitan area. The concentration of population in urban areas is affected by economic growth, structural changes in employment, the concentration of industrial activities in the metropolitan area, a variety of auxiliary commercial services, and the diffusion of scientific medical knowledge. Lampard (1966) outlined three broad conceptions of urbanization: the behavioral, the structural, and the demographic conceptions. The behavioral concept conceives of urbanization as an adjustment of the personal behavior of individuals. The structural concept focuses on the patterned activities of the whole population; it involves the movement of people out of agricultural communities into nonagricultural communities. While the demographic approach focuses on space and defines urbanization as a process of population concentration, The United Nations (2014) described urbanization as a shift in the population of a community from one that is dispersed across small rural settlements in which agriculture is the dominant economic activity to one where the population is concentrated in larger, dense urban settlements characterized by industrial and service activities. Thus, the criteria for defining a place as urban involve the recognition of a set of criteria. As per the United Nations Demographic Yearbook, the definitions of urban fall into three major types: 1) classification of minor civil divisions based on a chosen criteria, which may include a) a type of local government, a number of inhabitants, and a proportion of the population engaged in agriculture; 2) classification of certain size localities as urban, irrespective of administration boundaries. In the Awka context, from 1904, the environment massively changed from agrarian to industrial, which facilitated an enormous increase in population.

Description of the Study Area

Awka town is situated 72 kilometers South-West of Enugu and about 35 kilometers North-East of Onitsha. The town is one of the earliest towns in Igbo land. Among these earliest Igbo towns, writes T.O. Okoye, an urban geographer, were Nri, the spiritual metropolis of the Nri theocratic empire, and Awka, the commercial center. The town is bounded on the north by Amansea, on the west by Okpuno, on the East by Isiagu, on the South-East by Nibo, and on the South by Nawfia. Awka town is divided into two main sections: Ezi and Ifite. Ifite comprises Ayom na Okpala, Nkwelle, Amachalla, and Ifite Awka villages, while Ezi is made up of Amikwo, Ezi-Awka, and Agulu villages.

Trends of urbanization in Awka

Urbanization in the Colonial Period (1904)

Awka was part of the Oil Rivers protectorate, which Sir Claude Macdonald was appointed commissioner and consul general of in 1891. This was the first significant attempt by the British to establish effective administration in what was then known as the eastern section of Nigeria. The British did not take control of Awka until 1904, when they established a district headquarters there in 1905. Christianity and western education introduced by the Europeans played a major role in the twentieth-century urbanization of Awka town. On January 11, 1905, the missionaries established the first Igbo Theological and Teacher Training College (St. Faith School Awka), which played a significant role in the development of Christianity and education in Awka and her neighbour. This marked the beginning of the urbanization movement in colonial Awka as people from neighboring communities came to Awka to acquire whiteman education and hear the gospel. In the trade and commerce sector, the establishment

of the United African Company (U.A.C.) branch at Awka to do business on agricultural products also accelerated the urban growth of the town. Many Awka people were appointed agents, and their duty was to collect palm oil and palm kernels from neighboring towns and transport them to the company's depot in Awka. By the late 1920s and 1930s, many Awka people had begun to travel out to engage in modern commerce.

Post-Colonial Urbanization Development Activities

The British administration came to an end in Awka in 1960, and since then, the town has been undergoing many developmental activities, both from the government and individuals. Chief James Chukwujekwu Eze, popularly known as JOEZ, Chief David Nonyelu Obuekwe, F.O. Onwuegbune, Awomili women, and the entire Awka people, through their personal contributions, constructed some projects that boosted the economic growth and industrial advancement of the town. After the Nigeria-Biafra war that ended in 1970, the federal government implemented the 3Rs policy (Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation), which led to the construction of many roads, hospitals, and schools in the town. The 3Rs projects led to the establishment of ASUTECH, Anambra State Technical College, reconstruction of Eke Awka market etc. Awka town witnessed remarkable urban growth in 1991 because of its declaration as one of the towns that made up the capital of Anambra State. The urban growth of the town can be seen in the sharp decline in farmland, as a result of encroachment on agricultural lands by developmental projects such as roads, houses, markets, and schools, among others, that have taken place over time.

Causes of Urbanization in Awka Town

Urbanization in Awka town like in many other places can be attributed to several factors:

Infrastructure Development: Improved infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and water supply and communication networks drew people to Awka.

Education and Healthcare Facilities: The presence of federal university, private university and better health care facilities in the town made it attractive for people seeking quality services for themselves and families.

Government Policies and Investment: All the governors' policies and investments in the town such as maximum security, housing schemes, commercial centers, and industrial zones contributed to urbanization of the town.

Social factors: Awka town offered diverse social opportunities such as cultural events, entertainment and social networks which are appealing to people seeking a vibrant social life.

Economic opportunities: Awka serve as a hub for economic activities, attracting people from rural areas in search of employment, business opportunities and better standards of living.

Consequences of Urbanization on Women in Awka Town

As much as urbanization brought numerous advantages and opportunities to women in Awka in the areas of education, economics, and the abolition of some diabolic practices, it drastically affected the lives and attitudes of the women in numerous negative ways. The emergence of urbanization in Awka brought a lot of vices and negativity in the lives and activities of women. According to Tacoli, urban women experience a high risk of violence, constraints on employment, mobility, and leadership that reflect deep gender-based inequalities. While women make significant contributions to their households, neighborhoods, and cities through their paid and unpaid labor, they still face persistent inequalities in terms of access to decent work, personal safety and security, financial and physical assets, and representation in the formal structures of urban governance.

The negative impact of urbanization on women in Awka town, will be examined in terms of individual and group influence.

Women's group loss of identity

Urbanization negatively impacted the *Umuokpu* (daughters of a community) and *Umunwuyendi* (women married in the same community) group, reducing their cultural strength and credibility. The expansion of urban spaces and migration reduced the group's spiritual and ideological basis, which revolves around truthfulness, selflessness, love, and sacrifice. Western influences seen in urban centers exposed members to foreign gender ideologies and practices, which were considered culturally

incompatible with traditional society. For example, the women's recent struggle with gender equality is in line with the women's previous struggles, which center on fighting against harmful cultural practices and gender discrimination against women. Fighting for equality with men can be confusing to the elderly because they believe that every sex has a role they are perfect in. Traditional societies prioritize equity and complementarity, and the women's struggle for equality has diverted their attention from important roles to an unnecessary fight with the men.

Modern urban lifestyles divided the *umuada* group, with some members disassociated and advocating for its discontinuation due to new religions and civilizing trends. Urbanization promotes individual female autonomy, while traditional African feminist orientation focuses on culturally linked public participation. It has displaced the women who would have taken part in learning the proceedings of *Umuokpu* and *Umunwuyedi*, thereby leading to the displacing of older women's knowledge.

Decadence in the power of the Elders

Awka people are governed by strict rules from birth to death, resulting in homogeneity. These rules, covering social, economic, political, and religious activities, attest to the antiquity of Awka Town. This personal discipline and orderliness distinguish Awka people from other cultures in Igbo land. During the traditional Awka era, women were divided into *Awomili* (70 and above), *Okpaku* (45 to 69), and *Obiageri* (the newly married youthful women). The culture of the people subjects everyone to respecting the decisions of the elderly, so therefore, the decision of the *Awomili* group in all cases is often seen as final without any objection. Inasmuch as the town practiced democracy, the *Awomili* group was seen as the Supreme Court, and their decisions are highly regarded in the community. As urbanization sets in alongside wealth accumulation, younger women challenge older women's decisions and tame the elderly, ancient, timid, and backward. This rivalry between the new generation of mothers and the elderly has resulted in disagreement and turmoil in the community.

In the traditional Awka community, women were their own lawmakers, lawyers, and police, with no written rules or regulations. They enforced laws and punishments for various offenses done in the community. The establishment of courts and security personnel has led to the settlement of *umuokpu* and *umunwuyedi* cases in police stations and law courts. Richer women have more opportunities to win cases in the modern means of dispute settlement, causing women groups to fear giving punishment for abnormal behavior. The activities of the police, court, and personal wealth accumulation have rendered women's groups powerless, resembling barking dogs without teeth.

High rate of crime and prostitution

In the old Awka community, certain behaviour were considered abnormal and punished with severe punishment, such as excommunication, banishment, lashes of canes, etc. Crimes such as inter-sex relationships, homosexuality, lesbianism, single motherhood (*ime mkpuke*), abortion, violence, rape, murder, etc. was not tolerated in the community and in the case of any above crime being committed, an Nri man will be invited to cleanse the land, and the person or family involved will carry out a thorough cleansing (*Ikpuaru*). As urbanization emerged in the community, all the activities seen as crime in the traditional period of the Awka community were regarded as the norm of the day. The urban period glorifies single motherhood, as they term it, baby mama, homosexuality, lesbianism, intersex, being married without performing traditional rites, etc.

Through the improved medical sector, there are no strict instructions on some drugs, especially abortion drugs, as they can be gotten over the counter in any pharmaceutical shops, thereby encouraging easy termination of pregnancies among women.

During the traditional period, crime was always avoided because everyone was afraid to swear before the deity, and the wrath of married *daughters of the community* was always avoided. As a result of the pursuit of personal wealth and lack of employment in the town, some women have taken to crimes such as robbery, child trafficking, kidnapping, sell of hard drugs etc. The high rate of hotel establishments in the town as against production industries has lured the women into sex trafficking. Urbanization in the Awka community led to a shift from a serene, orderly society to one dominated by crimes, intersex, homosexuality, and lesbianism.

High Rate of Divorce and Female Masculinity

The narrative *ugwu nwaanyi bu di ya* (the pride of a woman is her husband) was the ideology that guided the marriage institution and discouraged divorce in marriages in the traditional Awka town. Awka people, according to Amanke Okafor, detest divorce, which is why he said that ‘Di na Nwunye Awka anaro agwu agwu’ (Awka marriage doesn’t end). The teachings and high regard for marriage institutions in the traditional era of the community discouraged divorce unless in extreme cases of life-threatening situations. The divorce process during this period takes a long time, involving the whole family and, in some cases, the whole village. This process makes divorce not easily achieved, and along the way, the couple might make peace and continue their marriage. But with the establishment of customary courts and women's affairs that handle women's cases, the rigorous process associated with divorce has been minimized, which encourages and increases the rate of divorce among women. Kananyo Mba observed that these days we hardly know when a woman is divorced, as the court has made the process so simple to achieve. In those days, before the end of resolution by the kindred, the woman in question is already pregnant for a child, as the process is more stringent and time-consuming. Through economic emancipation presented to women by urbanization, the acquisition of wealth has eradicated the natural order of family and child rearing (father, mother, and children), as the women, through their wealth, can either adopt a child or sign for sperm donation, which will fertilize their egg. Economic emancipation gave rise to female masculinity and rendered marriage unionism useless and insignificant. The ideology “the pride of a woman is her husband” has been eradicated as urban women glorify their wealth at the expense of marriage.

Gender Conflict

One of the allied forces of urbanization is formal education. Through formal education and psychological growth, a lot of questions and uprisings have been seen among the women. The women began to ask questions regarding the activities of women and the reasons why they are not allowed to participate in various activities. The questions asked by women shake the foundation of community existence. The inquisitive nature of the women propelled by formal education can be seen in cases like: why is there gender disparity in masquerade and masquerading in Igboland and Awka in particular; why are women restricted from climbing the palm tree? Why are they not allowed to break kolanut in the midst of men, and why is the village meeting done in the *obu* of *otochalu na nwoke* (compound of the eldest male child) not done in the compound of a woman *otochalu*? All these questions and more asked out by women in the community have begun to upset the peaceful nature of the community and ignite tension between the two genders.

Faith Based Contention

The religion sector in the community is another sector in Awka where urbanization has negatively affected the women as it has encouraged dispute and segregation among them through the religion's teachings and practices. Before the presence of the Europeans in the community, history never recorded disputes or wars in Awka because of religious differences. Among the early churches in the community were the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church. During the late 20th century, new religion movements began to spring up in the community, and by competing for membership and presenting rival doctrines, the different churches inadvertently fostered schism in local or traditional community. According to Michael Muonwe, many Christians do not see eye to eye simply because of interfaith differences, especially between Protestants and Catholics. This is basically a result of the missionary transplantation into Igbo society of the post-reformation divisions and acrimony among Christians in Europe. Urbanization, with its religious factor, has turned Awka into a war zone: a war between the church and the village, the two made up of Awka people. The tradition of dust to dust by a woman to her deceased husband and *okuko onyenwa* (marriage rites) have been the bone of contention in Awka. A catholic woman will always avoid her daughter marrying from other churches and vice versa, and the proceedings done in various women groups in the community are according to the church doctrine of the leader of the group.

Furthermore, as a result of superstition being closely associated with every religion's practice, it necessitated a serene and peaceful community, especially in the area of religion, which gives more credence to the male than the female and clearly assigns certain functions and duties to the males. The wave of change in science, technology, economics, and social orientations has influenced changes in

sex considerations, and the knowledge gained by the women as a result of forces brought by urbanization has challenged all religions beliefs and brought the community into turmoil and warfare between men and women.

Weaknesses in the Women's Protective and Support System

Women in Awka experienced weakness and decline in their protective and supportive systems in the community as a result of the eradication of the spirit of communalism by capitalism. The pre-urban Awka community had relationships and social support, which were given to the women by various youth's age grades and family relations. It was during this period that the practical exhibition of the word *Nwunye anyi* (our wife) was in existence. With the wave of urbanization and its wind of pursuit of wealth among the people, the protective and supportive system provided by extended family, age groups, and peer groups went into extinction. With the disappearance of communalism, the practical exhibitions of the word *Nwunye anyi* disappeared, and the life of women in this contemporary period is the life of nuclear living and loneliness.

Decrease in farmlands

The land in Awka is said to be acidic and poor. The poverty of the soil is reportedly due to the fact that it has a poorly developed profile, which is structurally unstable and therefore readily susceptible to degradation and erosion. In spite of the poor nature of the land, it is very important to the Awka people, especially the women, because it is used for cultivation and other agricultural purposes. The urbanization development in the town led to a decrease in farmland in the community. It decreased from 8731.17 hectares in 1988 to 6797.52 hectares in 1989, further decreasing as a result of commercial and residential uses. Urbanization projects that took place in all parts of the town rendered the women landless and also made land expensive to purchase. The reduction in farmlands makes agricultural products which can easily be cultivated previously more expensive, as they buy majority of what they need, thereby encouraging increase in cost of living.

Gender inequality

Gender inequality means an imbalance of rights, privileges, and opportunities between the genders. It is an unequal perception and treatment of individuals based on their gender and the socio culturally political and economic manifestation in which women and men do not enjoy equal rights, privileges, and opportunities in all sectors of society. Women in urban settings face gender discrimination, overwork, and poorer pay scales. From the observations of McIlwaine, women were preferred by employers not necessarily for certain qualities that they possessed as workers but because female labour was flexible, disposable, and cheap. They are paid lower wages than men, even though they are as educated as men in similar jobs. Onyema also observes that 'the public sector in Nigeria is mainly dominated by women but controlled by men, even when some women have occupied the position of head of the civil service. Brouder and Sweetman observed that although the number and types of women who work have changed dramatically, numerous other aspects of women's work have remained impervious to change, like caring and giving domestic work, which is often underpaid and undervalued because traditionally, society has seen it as female work.

Urbanization provided the women mainly employment in the caregiving, domestic, and informal sectors because, biologically, it was the area that suited them.

Women in Awka are thankful for the economic opportunities presented by urbanization, which influence their financial lives. Through the various development activities, they have been able to secure employment in both private and government establishments, but monetary society and the pursuit of wealth have had a negative impact on the behavior of women. As married women in Awka devote more of their time to struggling for economic power, the men leave behind their primary function (the home). This has actually devalued the Igbo concept of family, a situation where husband, wife, and relation join hands to bring up children and the wife as homekeeper. The change in the economic life of women in Awka is said to have eroded the traditional aspect of submissiveness on the part of the women.

Decline in the traditional health care system

In the traditional Awka community, women were featured as herbalists, bonesetters, mental health therapists, and traditional birth attendants. They used vegetables, animals and herbs for cures. A

herbalist or medicine woman is called *Dibia Ogwu*. She was seen as a physician, psychotherapist, protector against evil forces, spirit healer, and supplier of means for realizing a person's aspirations. Women in Awka also played the role of midwives, traditional birth attendants who helped women deliver their child at home with the use of herbs and barks.

However, since the emergence of urbanization in Awka, the healers and traditionalists are now seen as an evil and dirty set of people that should not be associated with; they hardly see people coming in to take their plants and drugs, as English medicine has taken control of the medicinal lives of *Awka* people, rendering them useless. Before urbanization, it was through this process of administering drugs that we got money to take care of our family, but since *oyibo batalu n'Awka*, (since urbanization came to *Awka* with modern medicine) they hardly have customers, said Kenechukwu Nweke.

Furthermore, not only were the traditional healers and herbalists running out of business and termed evil and dirty, nobody was willing to take up the responsibilities from them, and the ideas, functions, identification, and uses of plants and herbs were dying with them without being passed on to future generations. Urbanization has diverted the minds of the young and growing ladies to other things like white collar jobs, fashion designing, English medical doctors, etc.

Mental Health Impediment

Studies revealed that mental illness is higher in urban areas, especially among women. As women's roles changed with the emergence of urbanization, the numerous stressors affecting women's daily lives and their work burden meant that urban women were more likely to experience mental health problems such as depression, dementia, etc. The Aliyu survey concluded, "That mental illnesses such as postpartum depression, mood disorders, anxiety, substance use disorders, and depression as a result of stress from the environment such as struggle of day-to-day life in urban areas, busy work schedules, involvement in multiple responsibilities, and loneliness are common among urban women."

Urbanization affects the social support system of women, which was in existence in the traditional setting of the community, especially during pregnancy and child rearing, and this makes them more vulnerable to anxiety and depression. Ilo Blessing mentioned the love and care given to pregnant women, which includes the fact that she will not be allowed to fetch water, firewood, or any other strenuous activities, and that her age, grades, friends, and family are always handy to help. More care and support were also given to a woman who gave birth. The period of 3 months is not to be played with, as she and her baby will be taken care of by everyone close to her. The care and attention given to a pregnant woman in the traditional period is missing in the urban *Awka* community, as everyone is occupied with activities involved in acquiring wealth.

Furthermore, the emergence of DNA in the health sector increased the rate of discord in families against what was practiced in the traditional period of the community where every child born by a legally married woman into a family regardless of paternity was regarded as the husband's child. Through DNA results, the recognition, acceptance, and implementation of *nwanyi anyi* (our child) through *nwunye anyi* (our wife) disappeared. The emergence of DNA has changed the ideology of all and separated the families of many.

Furthermore, the medical sector, which should concentrate on administering drugs and curing disease in women, has turned to advocating for crimes. Various hospitals in the town have turned to centers of abortion for women, and illegal drugs can be gotten over the counter from some pharmacy shops in the town.

Political Impediment

The *umuada* (daughters of a community) and *umu nwunyedi* (women married in a community) wielded some political powers in the traditional era, which was later restricted by colonialism, and colonial influence left a great impact on the post-colonial era. However, women continue to receive little shrift in political matters. Although many women are active in politics, their numbers are still minimal. In the past years of democracy and urbanization, *Awka* has only seen a few women in politics. Concerted efforts have been made by women groups, women advocates and activists, civil society organizations, the Nigerian government, international agencies, and donor communities to increase women's participation in both political and public life, yet the patriarchal ideology of the colonial administrators still lives in the current society. Political marginalization of *Awka* women is vividly seen in the position of the president of *Eke Awka* market, which is a man, and no woman has been seen as the *Uzu Awka*

(traditional ruler) or even Imoka (community god) attendant. Women seeking election have been hampered by a national political culture dominated by money, corruption, and power wielded by local political barons and overlords. In most cases, the few women are unwilling to challenge the patriarchal structure of authority and dominance.

Conclusion

Urbanization is a continuous process that cannot be stopped. However, the coming years will further witness the expansion of cities and all the associated problems. From the foregoing, it is obvious that the modern urban environment negatively influenced the lives and activities of women in urban centers in various ways. Its impediment can be seen in the group activities of women, where the power of *umuokpu* and *umu nwunyedi* diminished and the group didn't live up to their traditional obligations. There is also abandonment of the traditional ways, which had previously sustained their complementary development role in Igboland. As a result of the attendant forces of change brought by urbanization, lands are shifting from the hands of women who used them for agricultural purposes to developmental projects by the government and individuals at large.

The compromise of the health of women shall compromise the health of the entire family and society at large. In the current study, the social role of women is different from what was expected of them decades ago. Expectations have been changed to a greater extent by the process of urbanization, which contributes to increasing stress. Mental disorders presented by urbanization to women include depression, anxiety, postnatal depression, etc. The employment sector in the urban center is not favorable to women, as they keep experiencing marginalization and segregation. Urbanization, with all its glory, influenced negatively the lives and activities of women in urban centers.

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