THE PROCESS OF IRANIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN INTERACTION WITH ISLAM: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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Abstract- This paper is inspired by the hypothesis of the "Undeniable position of divine religions in the identification of societies and the cultural essence of Islam", discussing the following, respectively: Iranian cultural identity in classical sources, important axis of this identity on the eve of the arrival of Islam, Iran's accession to the Islamic caliphate without adopting the Arabic identity, prominent identity indicators of Islamic culture, formation of Iranian Islamic identity and factors responsible for the cohesion of the Iranian Islamic identity. The present paper suggests that the elements of the identity of the ancient Iranian culture, which were not in conflict with the Islam, were preserved, and what was not in harmony changed.

Keyword: *Cultural Identity, Iranians, Islam, Islamic Culture, Monotheism.*

Introduction

In less than half a century after the demise of the Prophet of Islam, a wide area from the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates to beyond Jihun and North Africa was conquered by the caliphs after him. As a result, a new concept gradually emerged since then called the "Islamic world." In addition to the Arabs, other nations and ethnic groups participated in the formation of this geography and concept, some of which had roots in civilization with a long history, including the Iranians and the Greek tribes of Maab (Yarshater, 1991, 4-5). Iran was ruled directly by the Arab caliphate for more than two centuries and then indirectly under the influence of the caliphate for several more centuries, yet the Iranians could preserve their cultural identity. In addition to that the Iranians played an effective role in shaping Islamic culture and civilization by transferring their cultural and civilizational heritage to the Islamic culture and civilization, which began in the first century. Thus, the Iranian history and culture continued with the introduction of Iranian elements and culture in various aspects of the life of the Islamic society.

Analytical Considerations

It seems that attention to issues such as identity emerged after the French Revolution and the expansion of the printing industry and the collapse of empires and governments based on divine rules. As far as the Iranian question is concerned, the issue of cultural identity has been given more importance in the contemporary era and after their acquaintance with the Westerners. But, it is a challenging issue; the studies of researchers on the subject indicate the existence of different and sometimes conflicting views. A number of people who first became acquainted with Western ideas during the Qajar period for various reasons --- including the industrial backwardness of Iran and backwardness of other Islamic countries in comparison with the Western states, lack of familiarity with Islam and lack of knowledge about post-Islamic Iranian history --- were hostile and in conflict with Islam. Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aga Khan Nouri are regarded as the pioneers of such theory. Akhundzadeh spent most of his life in the Caucasus, focusing on strengthening Iranian nationalism and identity (Adamiat, 1357 AH, 81). He often criticizes Islam and its teachings; his emphasis on Iranian identity is at the cost of moving away from Islamic identity. Influenced by Western philosophers, Mirza Aga Khan Kermani also moved towards the theory of Iranian nationalism (Mansournejad, 2006, 81). These figures and the like-minded have identified Islam as the responsible factor for threatening the Iranian cultural identity. Some other scholars, however, have tried to analyze the issue in a balanced manner, though they have been somewhat caught up in racism and ethnic superiority. Zabihullah Safa talks of racial originality by emphasizing the element of Iranian race and nationality. He believes that the period of boasting about the Iranian race and nationality was accompanied by the freedom of thoughts and ideas of different sects and the non-prejudice of the rulers (Safa, 1992, 36-35). In analyzing the cultural identity of Iranians after the advent of Islam, Ali Shariati believes that the Aryan character changed in relation to the Semitic character, and from the connection of these two characters, a third reality emerged. In his opinion, the effects of this historical connection was the fusion of inspiration and reason in Iran's culture, which is the highest experience that human beings have reached in the history of thought (Shariati, 2008, 298-263). This view reflects the confrontation of cultures, and despite the application of the concepts of Aryan and Semitic characters, it is distinct from a bio-racial perspective (Ghaneirad, 2005, 56).Morteza Motahari attributes the emergence of Iranian talents to the nature of Islamic teachings and writes that, "By removing internal and external barriers and by expanding education among the masses and providing the possibility of cultural interactions, Islam provided the grounds for the emergence of Iranian talents (Motahari, 1980, 355-369). However, in most of the sources that have dealt with the subject of Islam and Iran, usually a wide range of different topics has been discussed, but the Iranian cultural identity in the first centuries of Islam has been less coherently considered. By focusing on the Islamic discourse in Iran, the present paper tries to deal with this issue. The process of annexing the vast territory of Iran to the Islamic caliphate and the gradual expansion of Islam in Iran, while not losing the Iranian identity, is the issue that will be considered in this paper. What doubles the need for a research in

this field is to respond to some analysis about the Islamic discourse and the Iranian cultural identity in the first centuries of Islam, that is to say, while many in Asia and Africa lost their former cultural identity and chose the Arabic identity in those centuries, this did not take place in Iran.

Result and Discussion

A.   Iranian cultural identity in classical sources

The historical land of Iran has been known by this name since ancient times. Some European and American Iranologists believe that at least from the Ashkanian period onwards the word Iran was used for this land and from the Sassanid period it had an identity meaning for the Iranians (Gnoli, 1989, 48). Apart from this, the name of Iran is mentioned in Avesta and other texts of ancient Iran (Farhoushi, 1374 AH, 37). The use of the name Iran in historical and literary texts after Islam has been repeated many times. Although the inscriptions, writings and other documents of the Greek and Achaemenian historians such as Herodotus and Xenophon is available on the characteristics of the Iranians, they do not contain comprehensive information about the cultural identity of the Iranians. With the fall of the Sassanid and the lifting of restrictions on teaching and learning in Iran, many writings of Pahlavi language in the form of Khodainameh (Khodai Namak) and Ayinnameh (Aynam Namak) were translated into Arabic and used in some historical sources. Famous translators including Ibn Muqaffa (Roozbeh, son of Daduyeh), a writer and translator of the second century AH, who, in addition to the above-mentioned books, translated other important books such as Mazdak and Al-Taj, about the life of Anushirvan, king of the Sassanid era, were translated into Arabic (Mashkoor, 1998, 31). Many other writers and historians, most of whom were Iranian and familiar with both languages, followed this method or devoted part of their books to expressing the past history and culture of the Iranians. The attitudes and sometimes the method of these authors may be different from each other, but in the books of general history, the expression of history begins from the creation of Adam and is written until the contemporary of the author. In some of these books, some figures of the history of ancient Iran have been tried to be adapted to the history of Islam. For example, Kiomars is the same as Abolbashar, and some of the mythological and historical figures of Iran are considered to be the children of great prophets such as Noah. Or, Sam, the father of Zal and the ancestor of Rostam, the mythical hero of Iran, is introduced as one of the Noah's sons (Dinvari, 1987, 26). Thus, the history of Iran is considered in harmony with the human history. Tabari, the Iranian historian of the fourth century AH, states that the reign of Kikaus, son of Manouchehr, coincided with the reign of Hazrat Suleiman, and Kikaus asked Suleiman to give him the Diwan (Balami, 1963, 51-47). Some other post-Islamic historical texts have chosen a different way of expressing the history of Iran; they have written sections related to the history of the world from creation of Adam to Prophet of Islam and then in an independent section to the history of Ajam or the Persian. Hamzeh Esfahani, a historian of the third century AH, has written the history of Iran in a separate section in four periods: Pishdadian, Kiyanian, Parthian and Sassanid (Isfahani, 1988, 61-30).

B.   Important axis of Iranian cultural identity on the eve of the arrival of Islam

The foundations of Iranian cultural identity have been based on the specific axis of their identity and their distinguishing factor from other nations. One of the most prominent features of Iranian identity has been their religious beliefs. This issue has been depicted in the inscriptions of different periods, especially in the Achaemenid and Sassanid eras. The Sassanids after gaining power made great efforts to revive the Zoroastrian religion; they tried with great determination and rigor to spread their beliefs. Tensor, Hir Bain Hir, tried to collect the forgotten religious heritage by the command of Ardashir (Kherde Avesta, 32). Ardashir followed the severity of his action with strict orders. He ordered that those who

teach non-Zoroastrian religions and do so knowingly would be sentenced to death (Vandidad, 1997, 3-15). The extraordinary attention of Ardeshir and other Sassanid kings to the element of religious unity in Iran and the relentless struggle against other ideas not only expresses their religious and even national policy but also forming important role in shaping the cultural identity of these people. An integral part of this identity was the combination of religion and politics. Among them, Moghans[1] and Zoroastrian spiritual leaders had a prominent position. The subjects learned in religious teachings were that good thought, good speech, and good deed belongs to one who has the command (religious leader), and bad thought, bad speech and bad deed belongs to one who is unrighteous (Yasna, 1977, 1, 176). One of the highlights of the Iranian cultural identity, which was formed in a vast land despite the presence of different ethnicities and races, was the importance of blood and race, especially in the case of religious leaders and rulers. This policy was also implemented with full intensity by the Sassanid rule. Ardeshir Sassani declared his rule as follows: "Subjects must be placed in four classes and no one has the right to be transferred from one class to another. In order to preserve the authenticity of blood and race in the Aryan aristocracy and clergy, the holy tradition of Khatudat[2] must be implemented" (Karnameh Ardeshir, 1342 AH, 128). Another characteristic that has been emphasized among the Persians is "illuminated" identity. An enlightened sage is one who has a divine essence and enjoys wisdom that is the result of two things: thought and inner contemplation or self-purification. Some post-Islamic scholars, such as Sheikh Ishraq, who paid attention to this wisdom, did not deny the efforts of theoretical reason, but in the end, considered that everyone can reach enlightenment and intuition and benefit from the divine spark (Suhrawardi, 1998, 20). Although the people of Iran, before or after Islam, faced obstacles in cultural, social and moral spheres, in critical times this inner trait was crystallized and left a profound effect on the fate of their homeland. Various events during the Sassanid era could not hinder the tendency of these people towards justice and rightism. For example, prolonged wars with Rome led to poverty and deep class distance within the Iranian society. The widespread tendency of the people towards Mani and Mazdak was indicative of the fact that they were dissatisfied with the status quo. The occurrence of some natural disasters such as the flooding of the Tigris in 628 AD and the spread of cholera, plague and famine (Ibn Balkhi, 1363 AH, 108) created awful conditions for the people. As it is narrated, the people perished and were ruined to the point that they sold a maid for dirhams (Qomi, 1361AH, 180). In such circumstances, those farmers who could flee left the country (Kolsinkov, 1978, 214), but the rest waited for salvation where they encountered with the Muslims.

C.   **Iran's accession to the Islamic caliphate without adopting Arabic identity**

In analyzing the issue of the rise and fall of civilizations, various models have been proposed, including the Toynbee model. According to this theory, after reaching a period of fertility, civilizations tend to lose their cultural stimuli and as a result they decline, but in the process of decline, the creative forces do not completely disappear. These forces may organize some of the old signs in new forms. As a result, the process of cultural evolution continues (Toynbee, 1355 AH, 41). The occupation of Iran by Muslim Arabs confronted the people of this land with two elements: Arabs and Islam. The Iranians soon realized that the two were not only synonymous with each other, but also had nothing to do with each other. Among the Muslim commanders and soldiers, there were those who participated in

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[1] Generally it is referred to the leaders of the Zoroastrian religion.

[2] It is same as incestuous marriage, one of the common traditions among Zoroastrians, which was mostly performed among aristocrats and Moghans, and its purpose was to preserve the authenticity of the Ahura blood and race.

battles on the basis of faith and welcomed martyrdom (Blazeri, 1978, 370), however, many of these people did not have sufficient knowledge of Islam. Another important fact was that many of these people also had financial incentives. Thus, Iran's accession to the Islamic caliphate did not cause the Iranians to adopt the Arabic identity. The people of Iran generally rejected the identity criteria of the dominant ethnic culture (History of Sistan, 1366 AH, 82), and had no attachment to the ethnic and racial aspirations of the Arab rather resisted the Arabic racial values. Two reasons can be presented in why the Iranians did not adopt the Arabic identity. First, the Iranian language has been one of the constructive and determining elements. The Persian language, more than any other element, displays a prominent and unique feature of Iranian culture which has preserved their identity. Second, in the meantime, one should not ignore the encouragements of Saffarians, Samanids, Ghaznavids and Al-Buwayh in promoting Persian poetry. The rulers of these dynasties always encouraged the poets to focus on Persian poetry (Bahar M, 1314 AH, 102). In fact, if there was no special talent and ability in Iranian culture and civilization, they, like many other Asian and African nations, would be attracted to the Arabs. There is a historical evidence to suggest that one of the policies of the Umayyads was to relocate the Arabs to Iran and settle them in Iranian lands, as 200,000 Arab families were settled in Khorasan alone. But from the first half of the second century AH, the Arabs living in Iran either remained in this land and absorbed Iranian culture, or could not adapt to the Iranian climate and culture and returned to the Hejaz. According to Ibn Khaldun, the Arabs of the Hejaz returned to the primitive nomadic and pastoral life or to the same situation as before Islam, after a while (Ibn Khaldun, 1345 AH, 291).

D. Prominent identity indicators of Islamic culture

To understand the impact of Islam on the cultural identity of Iranians, one must evaluate the type of relationship that was established between the two, because their attachment was to Islam rather than the conquerors. Islam was declared a universal religion and as a result was not restricted to a particular land, ethnicity or race. This attitude caused the society to feel a sense of belonging to the beliefs of the religion. The formation and deepening of this interest strengthened the connection between the beliefs and the interests of the society. The correlation between these ideals and some Iranian beliefs, which had monotheistic roots and were less distorted, and their conformity with human nature, accelerated this process. The most important features of Islamic cultural identity that were derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah and reflected in the society were worship, dignity, justice, equality, following the leaders of guidance (good role models), and the centrality of law and order. With the spread and domination of worship over the lives of the Muslims as an identity factor, no individual or group could consider themselves the idol of others simply because of their official or racial affiliation. Another indicator that complemented worship and led to significant changes in post-Islamic Iranian identity was dignity. The common people, especially the peasants, workers and other deprived classes of the society, who were previously in unfavorable conditions, could now have a status as human beings. One of the most essential aspects of individual and social life is the existence of justice. This issue has been one of the most fundamental principles considered by the prophets and has been strongly emphasized in the Qur'an. Some of these characteristics of Islamic identity were also seen among the conquerors, which attracted more Persians. For example, some sources emphasize that their commanders were no different from their soldiers (Tabari, 1987, 2, 226). In Iran, at the end of the Sassanid rule, there was an urgent need for fundamental changes in the society. Despite the apparent grandeur, the governmental institutions were internally weak. The country's economic system was not favorable due to the long wars with the Romans and the collection of heavy taxes. The social situation has also been unsuitable due to these unfavorable conditions. Thus, the social context had remained unchanged. The structure of government, which held the bulk of society's means of production and wealth, was authoritarian in nature. The government not only owned

most of the agricultural land and water resources, but also roads, trade, industry and mines. Relying on the political and military power of the Sassanid monarchy, Zoroastrianism caused stagnation and therefore this religion could not compete or challenge the other emerging religions such as Christianity and finally Islam. (Christensen A, 1995).

E.   Formation of Iranian Islamic identity

Some sociologists believe that religions create a sense of belonging among their followers through collective customs and beliefs, and in this way, in addition to collective rituals and ceremonies, they cause solidarity and cohesion among members of the society (Brown, 1977, 128). What happened in post-Islamic Iran, as most historians quote, was the gradual replacement of other religions by Islam. In the reports of geographers and writers in several centuries after Islam, one can find the presence of a significant number of followers of other religions in some areas. In the fourth century AH, Ibn Huql spoke about the existence of several fire temples in Persia and wrote: Their number can be known only through the Diwan (Ibn Huql, 1366 AH, 43). At the same time, the presence of Zoroastrians in Persia was so great that they apparently practiced the rites of Gabran (Moqaddasi, 1361AH, 2, 64). Not only the followers of the people of the Book were free to maintain their beliefs, other sects such as the Manichaeans and Mazkis took advantage of the fall of the Sassanids and made their activities public. They maintained their glory for several centuries after Islam (Ibn Nadim, 1987, 600). It is even emphasized that not only Jews but also Eastern Christian sects such as Nestorians, Jacobites and others were more comfortable in the realm of Islam than in Rome (Fry, 1363 AH, 154). It is with this emphasis in mind that Western scholars, comparing Iran's religious freedom before and after Islam, state that overall the situation was much better than the past (Fluten, 1325 AH, 25). In these circumstances, there was no gap between the religion of Islam and Iranian society, because despite this cultural balance, no serious signs of distance and separation between the two were observed. Some attempts to create conflict or opposition to Islam never found general support. The process of formation of Iranian-Islamic identity, in addition to conforming to the natural desires of every truth-seeking human being, owes another part of its form to the common situations that resulted from the intellectual and doctrinal harmony of Iranians with some aspects of Islamic teachings. Therefore, for them, the acceptance of Islam did not mean the cessation of social cohesion, but that itself led to the solidarity and strengthening of the relationship between society and religion.

F.   Cohesion of Iranian Islamic identity: Role of Iranian elites

The first effective role of Iranians in the Islamic world was their presence in the administrative organizations of the caliphate. This trend accelerated at the beginning of the Abbasid caliphate until the government of Bani Abbas became known as the Ajami government of Khorasan (Mohammadi, 1374 AH, 51). The influence of Iranian bureaucrats, such as the Bramkeh family facilitated the cultural interaction between Islam and Iranian culture, and gradually the components of Iranian culture that were not in conflict with Islam were strengthened and continued. The existence of aspects of this efficiency caused Jahez, the fanatical writer and historian, to praise the Sassanid style of politics (Jahez, 1995, 510). The richness of Iranian culture and civilization along with the domination of some elites of this land over the administrative affairs of the caliphate and also the removal of some of the oppressive restrictions of the Sassanid era, especially the possibility of free education for all and the flourishing of Iranian talents, provided a favorable situation. Playing the role of the Iranian element in the dialogue of Islam on the one hand and the relations between caliphate system with the Iranians on the other hand maintained the balance of their interactions with each other. The Arab aristocracy's abuse of power to preserve and develop its Arab identity was contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an, and although it was successful in some areas, it was opposed in Iran. Familiarity of Iranians with the Islamic worldview and the biography of the Prophet and her family and lack of inclination to the culture of the dominant ethnic group met with widespread

reactions, especially from Iranian scholars and elites. The most famous movement against the racial domination and identity of the dominant people was the Shu'abiya movement which sometimes becomes the source of ambiguities and conflicts, the main causes of which go back to different periods and internal currents and the lack of a coherent system of thought. Shu'abiya was inspired by the word Shoaib in the Quran. In this verse, God says: "O people, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most pious of you (Quran, Sura 49, verse 13). The study of Shoobiyah's thoughts and ideas requires a separate opportunity, but here this much is sufficient to add that the elites of this movement, along with other Iranian thinkers, bravely defended their identities, as Abu Rihan al-Biruni opposed the attribution of the kings of Iran to Isaac son of Ibrahim as the Arabs and the Persians. Mentioning the words of the Prophet that Man is of Adam and Adam is of soil and that Arabs are not superior to non-Arabs except in piety, he says: Iranians have been needless of this attribution, and pride in overtaking moral virtues in doing good deeds and seeking knowledge and spiritual perfection is important (Biruni, 1363 AH, 177).

G.   Identity-making role: Persian language and literature

The Persian language and literature played an important role in the cultural life of the Iranians after Islam. Iranians retained their Persian language, while the official language of the caliphate in Iran until the third century and in the first semi-independent Iranian government was Arabic (Nafisi, 1335 AH, 186). The Saffarids spoke Persian in their court. In 253 AH, after the conquest of Herat, Yaqub Laith stopped the poets who wrote poetry in Arabic and said: "Why should I write poetry in a language that I do not understand" (History of Sistan, 1987, 106). The Samanids, despite having very close relations with the Abbasid caliphs, made an extraordinary effort to strengthen and develop the Persian language and literature. Masoudi Morozi, a poet of the early fourth century, with the support and encouragement of the Samanids, organized the historical and epic narratives of Iran and created the first Shahnameh (Shah Hosseini, 1993, 35). During this period, there were scattered epic narratives that include a part of the historical and cultural identity of the inhabitants of this region. Some of them, such as Akhbar Rostam, Kitab Garshasb, Akhbar Bahman and stories such as that of Bahram Choobin and Shirvi Rastabi have been collected (Zarrinkoob, 1978, 97). The collection of Samanid was followed by other governments to pay attention to Persian language and literature by collecting narrations and oral culture. Researchers and authors with Iranian taste and talent also took advantage of this opportunity to create lasting works. Ferdowsi has a special place in this. He is the pioneer of composing an epic that did the most service to the Iranian identity and presented a comprehensive image of life, creativity and morality (Shabani, 2006, 121). What is usually presented in the form of national epics creates a kind of sense of unity and connects the people of later ages with their common past. Some experts believe that the works of Ferdowsi and other Iranian poets have been effective in strengthening Iranian cultural identity and creating a sense of unity.

H.   Valuing the Iranian identity

Those Iranians living in Iraq, after the fall of the Sassanids were subject to injustice and prejudice. At that time, humiliation, oppression and injustice to non-Arab tribes, especially Iranians, was common (Ibn Abd al-Barba, 1353 AH, 3, 413). Such humiliation and discrimination led to the growth of national interests among the Iranians. Only during the short period of the caliphate of Imam Ali, Iranians were treated justly. However, the Ali's just behavior toward the Persians of Kufa, who numbered in thousands, caused discomfort and protest from the aristocracy and other fanatics. The matter reached a point where they threatened the Imam by saying that: "If you pay attention this much and respect the Iranians, we will go to Mu'awiyah" (Saghafi Kufi, 1355 AH, 24). According to Ya'qubi,

Ali equalized the people and did not give anyone superiority over another and treated the Iranians in such a way that he treated the Arabs (Ya'qubi, 1373 AH, 2, 82). The inhabitants of the central and eastern regions of Iran, who came to know about this, became more interested in the Ahl al-Bayt and more disgusted the fanatics. This hostility and resentment has been confirmed by some writers. As at the beginning of the Mukhtar uprising, most of his forces were Iranians, the nobles of Kufa went to Abdul Rahman Ibn Makhnaf to coordinate the suppression of this uprising. He said to them, "By God, your brave and elite horsemen are with this man ... Also, your slaves and masters are more hostile to you than the enemies, so Mukhtar will fight you with the courage of the Arabs and the hatred of the non-Arabs" (Tabari, 1987, 3, 518). Numerous other evidences show the Iranians' efforts to preserve their identity and resist their enemies. In the heat of Mukhtar's uprising, they felt at some point that the aristocracy of Kufa had gathered around him. They objected to Abu Umrah Kisan, the head of Mukhtar's guards, who was one of them, and said: Mukhtar is with the Arabs and does not look at us. Aware of the Iranians' resentment, Mukhtar said, "Do not upset. You belong to me and I belong to you." When the Iranians heard this, they relieved and announced to each other that Mukhtar would kill the Arabs (Ibn Kathir, 1351 AH, 8, 268). The Shobiyeh movement was in a sense in defense of the Iranian identity and even played a role in the formation of independent Iranian governments (Momtahen, 1991, 100, 203). The Iranian identity, when most people had converted to Islam, has been common for centuries. Some writers and poets emphasized over the Iranian identity. The masses of people were proud of their historical past. These developments had a socio-cultural meaning and indicated the individual's belongingness to a social identity and spread the spirit of solidarity.

Conclusion

At the end of the Sassanid rule, despite the apparent grandeur of Iran, the governmental institutions were internally weak. The Iranian identity was also in crisis. Thus, there was an urgent need for fundamental changes in the Iranian society. However, although with the emergence of Islam into Iran the Arab conquerors did not have the eloquence and charm for the Iranians, it was the teachings of the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet and the just treatment of Imam Ali which attracted the Iranians toward the Islamic culture. Over the centuries after Islam, some elements of Iranian culture that were in conflict with monotheism and other principles of Islam gradually changed and the attention to monotheism and the teachings of Islam were strengthened. Furthermore, not to be missed, the Iranian culture and civilization played its own role in preserving the Iranian identity. If there was no special talent and ability in Iranian culture, they, like many other Asian and African nations, would be attracted to the Arabs. The Iranian-Islamic identity has become the key of the Iranian nation's continuity and the process of revival (return to divine nature) and liberation from internal and external obstacles strengthened the spiritual dimension of the Iranian culture.

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