Media Culture in Nomadic Communities

Allison Hahn

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1. Introduction

Abstract
A plethora of herding communities – the Bedouin of the Middle East and North Africa, the Maasai of East Africa, the Mongolians of Central Asia, and the Sámi of Northern Europe – are using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to form new methods of communicating, utilizing public services, and engaging in protest. This chapter discusses the field and archival research conducted for this text, introduces each of the chapters, and provides a detailed analysis of the terms (such as "herder" and "pastoral nomad") used in the text.

Keywords: communicative network, herder, pastoral nomad, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

A cell phone buzzes in Mongolia. The national government is asking each herder to weigh in on mineral policy. In East Africa, a Maasai herder texts relatives in the city to determine the going price for cattle, then later uses the same phone to record his interactions with local police. In China, a young man articulates his love for both the city and pasturelands, distributing music and protest about land policy over his smartphone. From Kenya to China, Egypt to the United States, rural and nomadic communities are utilizing cellular phones to connect with local, national, and international debates, activists, movements, and policy makers. This book examines the ways that mobile communities from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America are recording their experiences, presenting arguments from multiple cultural standpoints, preserving traditional lifestyles, and sometimes reclaiming elements of mobile lifestyles even though their communities are now settled. From the collected case studies, I ask how new technologies and information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures have changed the communicative norms and patterns that regulate these communities' engagement in local and international deliberative decision-making.

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When I described this book project to my International Communication class at the City University of New York, I was met with surprised stares and questions about whether rural community members really have access to cell phones. As I answered these questions, I noticed one student smiling in the back of the classroom. "Omar," I called, "can you explain to your classmates why you are smiling?" Omar's smiled widened as he told the class that many herders in his native Pakistan have cell phones, and how his father frequently calls rural relatives to find the best deals on meat, fresh foods, and to recruit day laborers. Completing his story, he told his classmates, "We are not poor, just different from you."

This difference – the ways that rural, mobile, and nomadic communities have integrated cellular technologies into their traditional lifestyles – is commonly accepted by the communities themselves, and by their neighbors, such as Omar's father, with whom they are in frequent contact. But for the rest of the world, in this case for students from New York City, rural, mobile, and nomadic communities are far away. Often these distant communities are imagined through images found in *National Geographic*, seen on television specials such as BBC's *Tribe*, or imagined in feature films such as *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. These media productions tend to portray nomadic and indigenous peoples as isolated, pure, and out of time.[1] Simultaneously, the lands on which they live are described as the most pristine yet endangered spaces in the world. Environmental communication scholar Phaedra Pezzullo notes that through these images, distant environmental spaces have "already come to signify significant spaces in [our] personal and national imaginaries."[2] These depictions often obscure the more complex and challenging reality facing rural, mobile, and nomadic communities in today's world, where state-sponsored development projects, corporate mining projects, and pressures to settle all come into conflict with nomadic and semi-nomadic ways of life. Like many topics of contemporary interest, rural, mobile, and nomadic communities' conflicts are frequently reported, debated, protested, and adjudicated through social media platforms. These deliberations have forged new communicative networks between settled and mobile communities. Some of these networks are between groups that have one touch point – such as tourists and their guides. Others are between protesters brought together by a similar topic. Some networks are forged between communities that have much in common, such as indigenous communities that live in separate regions but are connected

1 Caplan, 2005; Lee, 1986; McShane and Danielson, 2010; and Neumann, 1997; Todd, 2010

2 Pezzullo, 2009, p. 171

across platforms and through those platforms have also organized real-world meeting spaces.

Working with and among Rural Mobile Communities

I began working in Mongolia in 2004 as part of an archaeology project on the origins of pastoralism. While digging 900 test pits in the blazing sun, I spoke with my Mongolian counterpart, who grew up as a herder and had only recently moved to the national capital, Ulaanbaatar, to study archaeology. Though he was working toward a professorship in archaeology, he was also determined to later retire and return to living in the countryside as a herder. His life plan was radically different from what I had previously learned about rural development. Before coming to Mongolia, I had been told that when given access to education and employment opportunity, herders would choose to settle and enjoy the comforts of modernity. No one, according to my textbooks and professors, would plan for retirement as a pastoral nomadic herder. And yet, my Mongolian classmate was doing just that.

Later, I continued to learn about pastoralism by conducting research and working on education projects through Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. I met academics, politicians, and activists from Berber, Bedouin, Fulani, Maasai, Mongolian, Sámi, and Tibetan communities who all planned to return to life as herders, or who were oscillating between sometimes living in settled communities and sometimes in herding communities. Traveling in the countryside with these scholars, I met even more pastoralists who were determined to protect and maintain their herding lifestyles. I also met former herders who had no intention of returning to a herding lifestyle, but even those individuals were connected to and supportive of their relatives who were living and working in the countryside. Many of these community members were aware that governments, conservationists, and development workers wanted or expected their communities to give up their herding lifestyles. Some herders expected that this was just a ploy to attract more tourists to see the "last" of a disappearing tribe. Others framed their herding lifestyles as continued acts of resistance against governments, capitalism, and/or development projects.

What struck me as I spoke with herders was that their knowledge of the plans being made for them was detailed, accurate, and up to date. How, I wondered, could these communities, which were so far from city centers, be so well informed? When I first worked in Mongolia, I would travel with university professors who were conducting ethnographic interviews. We

would often bring along books, newspapers and other reading materials which family members frequently asked for to help keep up to date with local and national news. However, the media landscape soon changed, and many Mongolian herders are now receiving their news through text messages, phone discussions with family members, and other uses of new media. Later, when I traveled in Kenya, I met with Maasai pastoralist who coordinated their herding schedule, payments, and other business matters via cell phone.

This book is an attempt to better understand these herders' communicative networks. I investigate both how these networks are changing the communicative norms within herding communities and what those changes mean to national and international stakeholders. Drawing from archival research, oral history interviews, and argumentative analysis, I explore a diversity of communicative events and ask how pastoral nomadic communities are working to participate in these discussions.

One of the hardest tasks in producing this text is that I want to highlight the parallels between these shared pastoral nomadic experiences with modernity while not glossing over, or homogenizing, critical parts of these individual community identities. Many of the communicative events studied in this book address development and conservation. In this analysis, it is not my goal to vilify settled communities or development programs. Many international programs do excellent work and share conservation goals, if not methods, with pastoral nomads. Strong and persuasive arguments have been made in full support of pastoralist and indigenous communities, such as Mark Dowie's *Conservation Refugees*, and Dawn Chatty and Marcus Colchester's *Conservation and Mobile Indigenous Peoples*, which argue that herders must not be framed as opposed to conservation as their lifestyles are frequently in line with the same goals. There are also excellent, specific studies of the modern position of pastoralist communities, such as Dorothy L. Hodgson's *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous*, and Rebecca Empson's *Harnessing Fortune*, which study resilience within herding communities. And Israeli scholar Oren Yiftachel gives us the concept of a "trapped minority" to describe the Bedouin who fall outside of the nation-state, despite being trapped within its borders. This concept of trapped positionality applies not only to the physical borders of the state, but also to the cultural representation and participation of the mobile and nomadic communities examined in this book. However, there are few texts that examine the comparative experiences, arguments, and positions of mobile and settled communities. Many of the books that do exist, such as Jimmy Nelson and Mark Blaisse's *Before They Pass Away*, focus on the disappearance of pastoralists. In this

book I questions the presumption that pastoralists are disappearing while working to more fully understand the modern position of pastoralists, conservationists, and development workers, but also to understand the milieu in which they live and work.

I have chosen to focus on a diversity of herding communities: Bedouin of the Middle East and North Africa, Maasai of East Africa, Mongolians of Central Asia, and Sámi of Northern Europe. These communities herd cattle, sheep, goats, camels, horses, reindeer, or yaks, and have adapted their herding to arid steppe landscapes. At times these communities have herded alongside agriculturalists, sometimes they practice a mix of herding and farming, and at other times they have conquered settled lands and raided other communities' herds. They are drawn together by these complex histories, as well as their long-term engagements with socialist and capitalist governments, colonialism, and, more recently, conservation and mining pressures. While all of these communities have lost large swaths of land to state-sanctioned conservation and mining projects, they have also worked to maintain their traditions through herding, migration, and cultural preservation. It would be tempting to use these struggles to make sweeping generalizations about how these communities have much in common. However, it is important to keep in mind the many ways that these communities, and their experiences are unique. This book is not an attempt to make comparisons between groups. Instead, I am working to find what Jacques Lacan and later Slavoj Žižek call a *point de capiton* or "quilting point."[3] Their metaphor draws from the process of making furniture, referencing when two pieces of fabric are drawn together and secured by a button. Those two fabric pieces are separate entities, but they come together across the couch or chair, and they give strength to the furniture because they are joined together at specific points. For Lacan and Žižek, this metaphor is useful because they are talking about ideological fields where signifiers are slippery – their meanings are frequently changing. Quilting points are useful for them because they tie down ideology at a specific moment and claim "this means that at a specific time." For this book, the slipperiness is in herder identities, livelihoods, and lived realities. Herders may experience extreme changes throughout their lives – from living in pastures to living in large cities, from moments of wealth to poverty, from changes in education access, political power, and freedom of movement. To produce a static book that firmly defined that a "herder is always this" would miss the richness of herder identity, movements, and communication.

3 Žižek, 1991

Instead, in this book I have been inspired to draw from Lacan and Žižek's idea of quilting points to look for moments when the social fabric of a herding community has been drawn together – has been anchored into place. In the case study chapters, these quilting points are found at the moment of a protest, a vote, or a poem. Then, in the concluding chapters, these quilting points are found when herding communities from around the world have come together – both in person and online – to exchange ideas, tactics, and develop new networks of communication. These quilting points happen, and then herding communities again disperse. One such quilting point, examined in Chapter 8, is the joining of mobile and nomadic communities from around the world at the Standing Rock River Sioux Tribe's opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The resulting transnational and transcontinental deliberations is one way in which this book finds parallels in the communicative strategies of mobile and nomadic communities.

New media and social media platforms have radically changed how communities define themselves, share information, and find new supporters. Herders have actively adapted these tools, especially cellular phones, which are sometimes charged by solar panels and generators. Telecommunications infrastructure, which rapidly expanded in rural areas, has encouraged herders to participate in online petitions and protest, circulate market prices, and receive weather reports. Photographers recording this delight in producing images of Maasai warriors holding cell phones, or Mongolian herders texting while on horseback. Beyond the voyeurism that such images encourage, Chapter 2 examines the establishment of ICT infrastructure and the ways that cellular phones have become available to and used by rural and mobile communities around the world. This chapter examines the impact of these new networks and the ways that they have opened up new information pathways between herding communities, government officials, and development programs.

Methods and Materials

In a YouTube video, Maasai women in the Serengeti gather around a microphone to make a plea for audience attention. One begins, "Many have spoken for us, now we speak for ourselves." This speech is a radical change from Western discourse, fiction, and art, which is filled with images and imaginaries of distant and unknowable herders. Historic encounters with these communities were almost always mediated through the writing of a few scholars and adventurers who dared to travel through distant lands.

From Marco Polo to Dr. Livingston, the spaces in which herders live have been framed as distant and, in the case of the Central Asian steppe, the ends of the earth. This expectation of distance, coupled with low levels of literacy, has often resulted in the expectation that herding communities could not speak for themselves or could not be directly encountered by travelers.

I argue that rural, mobile, and nomadic communities are recording their own experiences, presenting arguments from multiple cultural standpoints, preserving traditional lifestyles, and sometimes reclaiming elements of mobile lifestyles even though their communities are now settled. From the case studies presented in this book, I ask how new technologies and ICT infrastructures changed the communicative norms and patterns that regulate these communities' engagement in local and international deliberative decision-making. Chapters 3 to 7 each examine a herding community that is working to overcome this expectation of silence, and has built a communicative network that utilizes new and social media to ensure that the community's perspective is heard. These chapters are built on a complex body of research that I have collected over the last decade. For contextual background, each chapter utilizes oral history interviews juxtaposed with archival documents, including government reports, ethnographic studies, photographs, newsreels, educational materials, and propaganda productions, to understand the multiple, historical interpretations and representations of herder identity.

Media Culture in Nomadic Communities is the result of fieldwork supported by grants provided by the Council of American Overseas Research Centers, the Mellon Foundation, the University of Pittsburgh Nationality Rooms Travel Fund, and the City University of New York PSC/CUNY fund as well as a Fulbright Fellowship and a Eugene M. Lang Fellowship. I conducted research through field surveys, interviews with nomadic and mobile community members, archival research, and online data mining. The resulting book reflects the changing textual landscape, where new media productions by nomadic and herding communities are gaining prevalence, but are not yet commonly studied as anything more than an outlier or anomaly. By bringing together examples and studies from around the world, this text argues that although these communities have historically been cut off from decision-making processes, their contemporary use of mobile media demands that their claims be heard indicate a new era of deliberation and communication.

Additionally, in this book I ask what information has been collected by local government agents and then changed or omitted before submission to higher levels of government. These questions are guided by historian Robert Tignor's comparative study of Kenyan and British archives. He reports that

materials recording colonial government failures are often held in Kenyan archives, but missing from those in England. Meanwhile, documents still labeled as "state secrets" in Kenya have been readily accessible in England for decades.[4] By consulting multiple archives I have tried to access the widest diversity of archival material possible in order to understand as many standpoints as possible. I am grateful for the many librarians and professors who have helped me to access these document collections at national, local, and university archives in England, the Netherlands, Tanzania, Kenya, Mongolia, and China as well as those at the United States Library of Congress, the National Geographic Foundation Archives, the Smithsonian Institute, Harvard University's Tozzer Library, Indiana University's African Studies Collection, and the Dutch International Institute of Social History. This international diversity of archival access is particularly helpful for my study of nations which have recently undergone political transition, allowing me to access historic documents purged or lost from Tanzanian, Kenyan, Mongolian, and Chinese libraries during periods of political transition.

One space of disagreement found throughout archives and contemporary posts on social media is how to refer to communities such as those discussed in this book. Before delving into each community's experience, this introductory chapter will examine the multiple terms used to describe these communities, and the entailments of the decision to use one term as opposed to another.

Nomads and Herders

Communities such as the Bedouin, Maasai, Mongolian, and Sámi are labeled in many different ways. Sometimes labels such as nomads, pastoral nomads, and herders are used positively. Other times, these communities are pejoratively characterized as being primitive, barbarian, savage, underdeveloped, uneducated, or impoverished.[5] I often use the term "herder" to describe these communities. I have chosen this term based on the literal and figurative translation of the traditional phrases used by these communities to describe themselves. For example, Maasai herders use *kínèjì*, and the Mongolians use *malchid*, which both loosely translate to the English term "herder." Additionally, referring to these communities as herders highlights the centrality of herds to community identity and survival.

4 Tignor, 1976
5 Hall, 1991

Western literature typically refers to these communities as nomads, pastoral nomads, or pastoralists. Historically, labeling a community as "nomads" has produced an expectation of wandering at random, eluding the state, social hierarchies, and complex economies.[6] This misunderstanding of herders fails to acknowledge the complex, often hierarchical structures of their communities and networks of exchange.[7] What it does, however, is establish a rhetoric of dualism between nomadic and settled communities, between the civilized and the barbarian, between the knowable and unknown, and between right and wrong. As such, while I do at times use the term "nomad" in this book, I've tried to be critical in the term's application and avoid these negative connotations.

Beyond separating mobile and settled communities, colonial encounters with rural and mobile communities created a preference for the specific, ethnographic term of "pastoral nomads" to separate herding communities from other types of nomads such as migrants, wanderers, and hunter-gatherers. This definition of pastoral nomadism is based on two factors: the keeping of domesticated herds and seasonal migrations between pasturelands. As such, referring to herders as pastoralists or pastoral nomads can be helpful as it underscores the necessity of access to pasturelands. However, the term "pastoral nomads" was also used by invaders, colonizing governments, and development organizations as an ethnographic terminology to justify boundaries, education, and specific versions of history. When using the term "pastoral nomad," these colonizers constructed real, lasting implications for land use, conservation, development, and tourism with little regard to the multiple, geographically diverse communities collected by the term "pastoral nomad."[8] This collective term has been legitimated through essentializing misrepresentations of herder communities that foreground the "pure" or "essential" elements of pastoral nomadism while omitting anomalies or changes in tradition.[9] For example, in Mongolia, the label of "pure pastoralists" has been used to characterize those who identify as herders and do not engage in any other economic or employment activities. At the same time, development organizations use the term "absentee herders" in similar contexts because the subjects in question own but do not move with herds. Herders often move to urban areas seeking employment, leaving their animals with younger family members. Many herders plan to return to the countryside and a

6 Lafitte, 2011
7 Ahearn, 2018; Sneath, 2007
8 Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson, 1980; Palmer, 1998; Waller, 1984
9 Miller, 1998

herder lifestyle upon retirement or after they have earned money in the city.[10] This means that a part-time teacher might identify equally as both a herder and teacher, but to a development organization she is identified by her mode of employment – as a teacher. The concept of "pure pastoralism" creates absences in development policies targeted only at visible herders. These policies may help "pure pastoralists" through programs such as credit to buy fodder during environmental catastrophes. However, "absentee herders," such as the teacher that also keeps herds, would not be classified as a herder and therefore cannot access those same lines of credit to protect her herds.

Similarly, suggesting and, at times, romanticizing pastoral nomads' underdeveloped livelihoods can prevent audiences from learning about the many ways that herding communities have appropriated technology and adapted to modern conditions.[11] My students have frequently fallen into this trap when we begin to talk about my research and herding communities. They expect me to tell them about a distant, nearly alien people who are fully self-sufficient, have never seen an electric light, car, or other trapping of late modern capitalism. This perspective makes sense as it is informed by movies such as *The Gods Must Be Crazy* or *Mongolian Ping Pong*. They are then amazed – and a bit confused – when I tell them about my research and show them pictures of the families with whom I visit. These images often include a mixture of traditional herding tools and electronic devices. This expectation of primitivism can result in a misalignment of development projects or overbearing projects that presume herders do not have the education or experience to determine which technologies can or should be used by their communities. This presumption of primitivism can also be used as a tool to oppress herding communities. For example, they might assert that herders who participate in online deliberations cannot possibly be "authentic." We'll see this desire for authenticity, and claims that herders online cannot be anything but photoshopped, in Chapter 8 where I examine the ways that Samburu herders from Kenya voiced their support for the Standing Rock River Sioux's protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Organization of the Book

Communicative networks alter the ways that herders move through new social spaces, and call into question historical networks of power,

10 Fernandez-Gimenez, 1999

11 Grzimek, 1959; Grzimek and Grzimek, 1960; Evans and Humphrey, 2002

communication, and technology.[12] This book contains six case studies, drawn from across the world to investigate the ways that pastoral nomadic communities are using ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) to form new methods of communicating, utilizing public services, and engaging in protest. Each of these examples could stand alone as a case study of how a rural community is working to engage in international development while maintaining their traditional lifestyle. Yet, when read together, this text argues that while not all communities have the ability to skillfully utilize new and social media, many do. And by studying what has worked well for herding and nomadic communities, it may be possible to expand upon these successful projects.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed look into the ways that ICTs have been used and developed by mobile communities. Many rural communities around the world were latecomers to ICT development. However, when they were able to access new and emerging technologies, they often leaped over older technological tools and systems. Rather than have to lay telegraph lines, telephone lines, and then fiber optic cables, many communities went straight to satellite connection. They did so by using solar panels, portable batteries, and generators, allowing devices to be charged while on the move, and reducing the need for mobile communities to return to a stable location to connect with an electricity grid. Chapter 2 introduces these technologies, their emergence, and the international development programs that funded their expansion into the most rural locations. While many readers from settled and Western communities use the same technologies, this chapter introduces some of the novel adaptations that herding communities have made to utilize ICTs while on the move. In this chapter, I explore the development and instillation of these emergent technologies and resulting communicative networks that have the potential to change herding communities' relations with the state, access to banking, and use of image testimony.

Chapter 3 focuses on how the Maasai have used ICTs to build networks of international supporters and then use those new networks to put pressure on their national government to change land policy. This chapter examines the ways that the Maasai joined with Avaaz, an online activist network that provides organizing tools (such as online petitions or letter-writing platforms), to raise awareness of the Maasai's problems and gather 2.25 million signatures opposing the eviction of Maasai herders from their traditional lands. Through examination of the Avaaz petition, this chapter

12 Baasanjav, 2003; Chachage, 2010; Dyson and Underwood, 2006; Musiitwa, 2012

finds that Maasai communities have formed an international network that successfully pressured the Tanzanian government to revise its policy of evictions in the name of tourism and conservation.

Chapter 4 moves to the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR) of China, where herders and settled youth from herding communities are utilizing online message boards to build new communities, network across international borders, and negotiate what it means to be from a herding community in modern-day China. This chapter examines the ways that local and international supporters recorded and debated about a 2012 road protest during which a herder was run over and dragged to his death by a mining truck. Focusing on the use of ICTs by rural citizens, this chapter finds that herders were able to publish their own narratives in real time, often challenging narratives presented by the state. Additionally, through these narratives, youth in IMAR identified with and expressed a herding tradition and identity, even while living largely settled lives.

Chapter 5 examines the use of ICTs by Bedouin herders in the Middle East and North Africa. This chapter examines the ways that the traditional form of Nabati poetry is produced and shared across social media platforms. I then examine the ways that one Nabati poet, Hissa Hilal, performed her work on the *Million's Poet* reality TV competition show. Her work sparked new debates about the work of women Nabati poets as well as Bedouin women's rights throughout the region.

Chapter 6 examines the Mongolian government's use of ICT infrastructures to encourage democratic deliberation and decision-making, even among the most rural herders. This chapter focuses on the 2015 cell phone referendum, in which each SIM card owner was given one vote in a national referendum on mining policy. While the referendum was widely regarded as a flop due to low voter turnout, this chapter argues that the referendum established the expectation among Mongolian herders that their government can and should reach out to even the most remote herders for feedback on national policy.

Chapter 7 examines the Sámi of Finland, Norway, and Sweden and asks how these communities have turned to online petitions, protests, and campaigns as a way to fight against deep-sea drilling, oil extraction, and railway development. The Sámi's protests are made difficult because on paper these seem like ecologically sound developments. But in person they damage the pastures and herds. Through Twitter and YouTube the Sámi have launched a diversity of campaigns to maintain and reclaim their rights. This chapter also examines the role of international agreements for a transnational herding community.

Chapter 8 examines the youth members of the Lakota Sioux's organization and promotion of the Standing Rock protest of 2017 through new and social media. This protest against the expansion of the Dakota Access Pipeline brought together many Native American communities as well as their supporters from within the United States and around the world. This chapter focuses on the ways that international herding communities, including representatives of Sámi and Bedouin communities, joined and supported the Standing Rock protests. It also examines activities prompted by herding activists who took part in the DAPL protests.

Chapter 9 examines the presented cases in tandem, and explores the multiple meanings that they hold for development politics, programs, and research. The case studies presented in this book do not point to a winner or a conclusion. But what they do indicate is that many herding communities are active users of ICTs and are presenting data, narratives, images, and films that enrich and advance academic and international understanding of moments of crisis. These many uses and affordances of new and social media are examined for their application to academia and development politics. This chapter examines how herding communities are deliberated about through frames of "nomadology," proleptic elegies, and settlement, as well as the role of academics in ensuring that nomadic and mobile communities are accurately represented, discussed, consulted, and collaborated with in future research projects. The chapter begins by examining the ways that these communities have been studied in academia. Then, it discusses the ways that new and social media enable direct consultation. The chapter ends with a discussion of research methods and collaborations.

Throughout these chapters, I have looked for quilting points that help the reader to see connections between each community's protests, day-to-day activities, and engagement in online deliberation. I have also included moments of my own engagement with herding communities and reflections on the ways that I and my students based in New York City are able to encounter herders. In doing so, I hope that this book will help readers to imagine future collaborations between themselves, herding communities, conservation projects, and development programming. I have been fortunate that my educational experiences and now employment as a professor have allowed me to return to these herding communities and I look forward to the day when I can present copies of this text – both bound and digital – to the many herders who have helped me to better understand the world in which we all live.

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