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RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM: THE BALKAN EXPERIENCE**

Abstract

This paper examines the pivotal role of religion in shaping Balkan nationalisms. It aims to identify specific aspects of this process and categorize local nationalisms accordingly. Employing phenomenological analysis, the study explores the development of national identity in the Balkans, operating under the central assumption that religion has been crucial in defining identity boundaries. While acknowledging the significance of language, particularly in the Albanian context, the paper primarily focuses on the religion's impact. The analysis begins by considering historical-institutional settings, positing that religious nationalism in the Balkans should be viewed as a product of specific historical developments marked by key turning points that determined this development, including identity movements. The key findings highlight religion as a primary driver of national identity formation in the Balkans. The linguistic similarities among the South Slavic population further facilitated this development, with religious communities emerging as central players in shaping national identities.

Keywords: religious nationalism, Balkans, myths, millet system, national identity

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding the complexities of the Balkan region – its history of conflicts, attitude towards history, and current interstate relations – requires a deep insight into the very structure of national identities. This requires a comprehensive examination of identity development and the critical junctures that have guided its evolution. A central question arises: what form do Balkan nationalisms take? Can they be categorized within the classic ethnic-civic dichotomy, or do they represent a distinct model primarily shaped by religious influence? This paper aims to demonstrate the fundamental importance of religion as a limiting factor in the formation of the Balkan nations. At the same time, bearing in mind the different phases of the development of the national identities of the Balkan peoples, within which there were attempts to reaffirm it as a more inclusive model that would embrace members of different confessions, it is important to note that this paper focuses on the formative period of the construction of national identities, when religion was the main marker of demarcation. This does not suggest a purely religious model, as the region's development has been significantly influenced by broader European ideas that largely shaped national communities. However, it is undeniable that within this specific historical trajectory, religion has emerged as a fundamental factor of national identity. Therefore, this does not mean that religion is the exclusive factor, given that language was and remains essential. Where it was not possible to draw the boundaries of national belonging based on religious criteria, language was resorted to as a link of homogenization. The Albanian case, in particular, highlights the need for caution in such categorizations.

The pervasive overlap of ethnic and religious elements in the construction of most contemporary Balkan nationalisms points to religious nationalism as a crucial framework for further analysis. In this regard, the paper will first define and outline the basic characteristics of religious nationalism. Additionally, it will then trace its historical development, identifying critical moments that steered this identity evolution. A special focus will be given to the Ottoman millet system and its profound influence on establishing religion and religious communities as key factors of (later) national integration. While acknowledging historical context, the paper primarily focuses on the religious character of national identities rather than an exhaustive historical analysis of the concluding section will address national myths as a flagrant indicator

of the intricate connection and intertwining of ethno-religious elements in the construction of contemporary Balkan national identities. This is an eclectic approach to this problem. Therefore, this paper can be methodologically viewed, on the one hand, as a historical-comparative analysis and, on the other, as a theoretical synthesis of the literature and an interpretative analysis of discourse. Also, the development itself is viewed through the prism of historical institutionalism, specifically the concept of path dependence. It is important to note that each Balkan national project and movement exhibited specific features during its development, which is why the paper provides an overview of that development, with a focus on religion, which, in most cases, played a decisive role.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM – DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS

Different definitions of nationalism can be found in the literature. One of those definitions offered by Anthony Smith defines nationalism as “the whole process of forming and maintaining nations or nation-states” (Smith 1991, 72). Typologies of nationalism usually begin by distinguishing between civic and ethnic concepts. The civic model is primarily rooted in a territorial understanding, asserting that nations must possess a defined territory with deeper historical significance. This perspective also emphasizes the existence of a legal and political community, the equality of all its members, and a shared civic ideology and culture as fundamental elements (Smit 2010, 23–26). In contrast, the ethnic model is based on a culture of origin and a community of birth as fundamental features. It underscores the importance of language and customs for a nation’s survival and development (Smit 2010, 26–27). In this context, the ethnic model is inseparable from religion, as religion often serves as the genesis of the culture, tradition, and customs that derive their meaning from its religious foundation.

However, despite religion’s undeniable influence on the formation and shaping of ethnic nationalism, religious nationalism constitutes a distinct form, profoundly and decisively marked by religious influence. Kemal Karpat terms this type of nationalism communal, defining it as a synthesis of religious and ethnic elements (Karpat 2019, 21). Barbara Rieffer similarly describes religious nationalism as an inseparable combination of nationalism and religion, characterizing it as a model

denoting “a community of religious people or the political movement of a group of people heavily influenced by religious beliefs who aspire to be politically self-determining” (Rieffer 2003, 225). Religion provides symbolic material, forming the basis for the constitution and shaping of national identities by filling collectivities with new cultural content and sources of authority (Friedland 2001, 139).

While authors like Barbara Rieffer emphasize the high probability of religious nationalism emerging in religiously homogeneous states (Rieffer 2003, 225–226), Goalwin argues that it is precisely the existence of religious heterogeneity that dictates and conditions the emergence and development of religious nationalism (Goalwin 2022, 21). According to Goalwin, religious diversity, a common threat, moments of structural social change, a high level of religiosity, and a position in border religious areas are the primary conditions for the emergence of a religious nationalist movement (Goalwin 2022, 22). This perspective aligns with Barker’s assertion that religious boundaries and threats are key factors shaping religious nationalism. Although Barker acknowledges other potential pathways for religious nationalism to emerge, he argues that the combination of the two factors is a necessary condition for its formation (Barker 2009, 182). In other words, “the proximity of another religious group makes religion a useful tool for nation building. However, it is only when the seed of a threat is planted that religion is actually used for that purpose” (Barker 2009, 44). In this framework, one’s own nation is often perceived as chosen, and its territory as a holy land consecrated by the blood of ancestors martyred for faith and nation (see: Čolović 2016). This illustrates the inherent intertwining and identification of the religious and the national. Within this national-religious construction, the neighbor is both a national enemy and a heretic. It is important to emphasize that the role of religious heterogeneity in fostering religious nationalisms should be primarily understood within the regional context of historically opposed and religiously diverse states. Intrastate movements are often a reflection of regional trends; thus, the development of religious nationalism in religiously homogeneous states is often influenced by the religious diversity of their surrounding environment. The Balkans exemplify this matrix (see: Perica 2002).

Religious nationalism integrates religious and national myths. In other words, national myths are articulated through religious language and interpreted within the framework of established religious truths. National heroes become not only martyrs for the salvation and

preservation of the nation but also for the preservation of the faith that is inextricably linked to the nation (see: Čolović 2016, 39–46; Popović 2007). In this sense, religion provides a linguistic apparatus for expressing one's own national role models and aspirations (Rieffer 2003, 225). It becomes a fundamental element of national identity and, alongside language, constitutes a particular nation. In this relationship, religion serves national identity, contributing to its existence and strengthening (see: Barker 2009, 13–14; Vulić 2025, 32). It persists as a marker or symbol, irrespective of the actual commitment and practice by the majority of the population. As Barker indicates, a nation where 90% of its members regularly practice religious rites may or may not exhibit a stronger connection between religion and politics than one where only 20% engage in regular religious activities (Barker 2009, 14). In Greece, for example, only 5% of the population regularly attends church; however, as many as 98% identify Orthodoxy as an integral part of their identity (Barker 2009, 14).

RELIGION AS A BORDER MARKER OF BALKAN NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Boundary markers represent those identity features on which ethnic groups insist when emphasizing their specificity and distinctiveness (Šeflin 2015, 234). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced when different identities share a high degree of similarity. Defining national identity through these features not only establishes commonalities within a collective but also differentiates it from others, especially when national identities resemble each other (Bakić-Hayden 2006, 158). The post-Yugoslav space frequently serves as an example of the so-called “Cain and Abel syndrome” characterized by extreme intolerance between national groups despite obvious linguistic (and other) similarities (Ignatiev 2015, 314–315). Consequently, language alone was not a sufficient marker of national constitution, leading religion to become the most potent means of solidifying national identity (see: Čorbić 2023). In this regard, local nationalisms exhibit unique characteristics compared to European models. Religion, or more precisely religious communities, became key actors in promoting and articulating national culture. Although 18th-century South Slavic national movements adopted European models regarding the importance of language, they failed, due to their specific cultural and historical development, to nullify the already established

religious barriers (Ekmečić 1989, 15). Thus, the failure of the Yugoslav national project is often attributed to its belatedness, thwarted by the already formed consciousness of local communities rooted in distinct, primarily religious, foundations (Čalić 2013, 33; 413). As Ger Duijzings observes, “for centuries religion had been the main repository of identity in the Balkans and the primary source of loyalty, which could not just be pushed aside. Consequently, many Balkan nationalists realised that new forms of identity and political loyalty required the same religious component in order to be most effective” (Duijzings 1999, 159).

This development is historically conditioned. Kemal Karpat highlights that nation-building in the Ottoman Empire was largely shaped by the socio-ethnic structure and religious identity conceptualized within the millet system. This system fostered the foundations of nationality through the experiences gained within its framework (Karpat 2017, 137).¹ Based on this, Karpat identifies a fundamental difference in the emergence and nature of nation-states in Western and Southeastern Europe. In the West, nations emerge and crystallize through an emphasis on linguistic and cultural specificities to affirm the monarchical rights against ecclesiastical authority. In Southeastern Europe, however, this process was based on emphasizing religious differences in relation to Muslim rulers (Karpat 2017, 143). While acknowledging the fundamental importance of language in the construction of national identities in the Balkans, Maria Todorova posits that “it could not raze the fundamental boundary between Muslims and Christians that had been established during the centuries of Ottoman rule” (Todorova 2009, 177). This does not mean that the millet system necessarily produces Balkan nationalisms. Recognizing the fact that local nationalisms develop as a product of modernity (Malešević 2021, 212), in line with European influences, it is actually argued that the millet system gave certain contours to a process that would *later* be directed by modern Balkan states, that is, their elites and institutions, and under the great influence of church circles.

¹ Karpat understands the millet system as a socio-cultural and communitarian framework based primarily on religion, while also taking into account ethnicity and linguistic differences. This definition of millet provides a suitable framework for considering the later process of national constitution in the post-Ottoman Balkans (Karpat 2017, 139).

Consequently, the emergence and evolution of Balkan nationalisms were significantly shaped by the Ottoman experience, affecting both Christians and Muslims. While Bosnia and Herzegovina is frequently cited as an example, the processes of national constitution in Turkey and Greece also demonstrate religion as a fundamental marker of national identification (Cagaptay 2006; Katsikas 2013; Merdjanova 2013, 3). In this context, the population exchange stipulated by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which implemented resettlement according to the logic of the millet system, is noteworthy (Pavlović 2018, 325). Irrespective of linguistic criteria, the exchange system included the Turkophone Anatolian Orthodox, as well as the Greek-speaking Muslim population of Crete (Pavlović 2018, 325). The millet system's influence persisted into the post-Ottoman period, particularly concerning the treatment and status of the Muslim population in the newly formed Christian-majority states (Todorova 2009, 178). The success of national projects depended (to a large extent) on the existence of autocephalous national churches (Mylonas 2019, 874). This is clearly evidenced by the case of the Bulgarian Exarchate, whose establishment in 1871 was a crucial moment in the process of national constitution (Karpát 2019, 60; Jelavich 1977, 134 cited in: Mentzel 2000, 202).² This is especially important given the Hellenizing tendencies of a segment of the Bulgarian upper middle class of that time (Karpát 2019, 60). The Bulgarian case is further illuminated by the state's approach to the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, the Pomaks. Despite linguistic similarities, the religious component of identity impeded the full integration and assimilation of the Pomak population into the majority Bulgarian national identity. Within this context, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's ideas regarding the *re-Christianization* of this population should be considered. This policy resulted in a part of the Pomak, Slavonic-speaking population of Bulgaria being absorbed into the larger Turkish national movement due to religious ties (Klejer i Bugarel 2020, 92). The importance of autocephalous churches in the process of building Balkan nations is also evident in the Romanian case, in which the Romanian Orthodox Church played a crucial role in defining and promoting national identity (Leustean 2007).

² The cases of Macedonia and Montenegro are illustrative, where church autocephaly was seen as one of the prerequisites for completing this process (Perica 2002, 174–175).

The aforementioned case of Bulgaria's Muslim population reveals characteristics also observed in other parts of the Balkans, where smaller, ethnically less defined Muslim groups tend to assimilate either into a larger, nationally established Muslim minority or into the dominant Christian nation of a particular state. The example of Torbeš in North Macedonia is indicative of their self-identification varying among Albanian, Muslim, Turkish, and the majority Macedonian identity. It should be noted that within these identity tendencies also include efforts to articulate a separate ethnic identity of smaller groups (Klejer i Bugarel 2020, 18; 239). Churches thus become central actors in national mobilization and integration. Their activities have national and religious dimensions, leading to the crystallization of national identities through the inseparability of these elements (Čalić 2013, 141; Perica 2002, 215–216; Duijzings 1999, 28–29). Vjekoslav Perica terms this synthesis of religious and ethnic elements in the Balkan variant of national identities “ethno-clericalism” (Perica 2002, 214). Specifically, “in societies where religious and ethnic identity and nationality are congruent and there exists a religious institution perceived as a ‘progenitor and guardian of the nation’, religious monopoly (i.e., authoritarianism) is more likely to establish and maintain itself as a ‘natural’ political order” (Perica 2002, 214). Experience demonstrates that the full consolidation of national identities in the Balkans requires the existence of a national church that gives the national movement a sacred, mythical character. These churches are among the key actors in promoting and articulating nationalist ideas, as evidenced by national myths and the broader discourse heavily influenced by dominant religions and religious heritage. Consequently, national identity (mostly) aligns with belonging to a specific church or religious community (Duijzings 1999, 28–29; Perica 2002, 215–216; Čalić 2013, 141).

Although the Albanian case does not fit into this national model today, it was not immune to the challenges of religious divisions. The slogan “‘Albanianism’ being the only true faith of the Albanians” was coined precisely to avert these differences (Duijzings 1999, 152; 152–158). In its original, initial phase, several versions of the Albanian national identity developed under a dominant religious influence, which also manifested linguistically in the choice of script (Bartl 2019, 113–116). The initiative by the renowned poet Naim Frashëri to establish Bektashism, chosen for its syncretistic character, as the national religion of Albanians, aimed precisely at ensuring national unity (Duijzings 1999,

80; 151; Klejer i Bugarel 2020, 101–102). In the context of religious heterogeneity, language became a fundamental element of the further process of national constitution (Duijzings 1999, 152–153). Namely, when considering the experience of building the Albanian nation, it is precisely the linguistic distinctiveness in relation to neighbors, that is, co-religionists, that should be taken into account as a barrier to the immersion of Albanians into culturally close identities³ (Duijzings 1999, 153). However, this does not mean that religion understood as a value-civilizational choice does not play any role in the contemporary understanding of Albanian national identity. In this context, the debates between the famous writer Ismail Kadare, who emphasizes the European and Christian character of the Albanian nation, while Rexhep Qosja insists on the Ottoman-Islamic component of the Albanian national identity, are indicative (Klejer i Bugarel 2020, 272).⁴

NATIONAL OR RELIGIOUS MYTHS?

Within this environment of interpenetration between ethnic and religious elements, Balkan nationalisms largely crystallize as a religious model. This is particularly evident in national myths, which draw their content from religious representations and traditions (see: Čorbić 2023). This is particularly evident in the post-Yugoslav space. Religious organizations, in cooperation with intellectual circles, contributed to national-building precisely by shaping national myths via celebrations, commemorations, and the canonization of national heroes. The objective is to cultivate a comprehensive culture of memory that strengthens the foundations of national identity (Perica 2002, 6). Myth, especially in

³ As is the case with the Orthodox Albanians in the south of the country in relation to their Orthodox Greek neighbors. See the history of the emigration of the Albanian Orthodox population to Greece (Bartl 2019).

⁴ However, even on the linguistic level, things were not simple. The religious division was largely accompanied by a linguistic border. Specifically, north and south of the Shkumbin River, the Gheg and Tosk dialects developed. The situation was particularly complicated by the fact that religious differences largely coincided with linguistic ones. Thus, the Orthodox and Bektashis stationed in the southern part of Albania were Tosk speakers, while Sunni Muslims and Catholics spoke the Gheg dialect. The fact that the standardization of the Albanian language would only be carried out in the early 1970s during the Hoxha regime testifies to this complexity (see: Bartl 2019).

the context observed, can therefore be understood as “an entire cultural complex, encompassing a system of stories or songs with which the material and spiritual culture of a people or an entire civilization are inextricably linked (Christian myth, Kosovo myth)” (Nedeljković 2006, 156).

Where there is no dominant overlap of ethnic and religious elements, more secular methods are resorted to in creating national myths. In the Albanian case, Skanderbeg is often portrayed primarily as a fighter against foreign invaders rather than against Muslims. Potential interpretations of Skanderbeg’s Albania as an *antemurale christianitatis* are actualized within efforts to affirm the European character of the Albanian nation (Endresen 2012, 228–232). However, even the Albanian national movement, as previously demonstrated, is not devoid of mythical iconography rooted in religious tradition. The efforts of Naim Frashëri to establish Bektashism as the national religion of the Albanians and to find motifs for expressing Albanian national suffering in the suffering of Kerbela serve as clear indicators of such tendencies (Duijzings 1999, 158–167). The following verses by Naim Frashëri from his renowned epic Qerbelaja attest to this:

“O God, for the sake of Kerbela,
for Hasan and Husayn
for the sake of the twelve Imams
who suffered as they did whilst they lived,
for all that suffering
for my deepest sadness
Do not let Albania fall nor perish.
Rather let it remain for ever and ever”
(Frashëri 1978, 288 cited in: Duijzings 1999, 167).

Of particular interest is the deployment of the aforementioned myth of the *antemurale christianitatis*, or so-called “defenders of the gates” (Kolstø 2005, 19) of Christian Europe among the Christian peoples of the Balkans.⁵ As noted in the case of the Albanian use of this myth, its purpose is to classify the group within the European-Christian

⁵ On the other hand, as a counterpart to this representation, one can cite the Bosniak version “of Bosnia as a *serhat*, or *Islamic antemurale* against the West” (Džaja 2005, 113).

civilization, thereby confirming the nation's European character. Furthermore, the concept of *antemurale christianitatis* encompasses not only the Islamic, but also the Byzantine-Orthodox world. Consequently, the use of this myth is frequently conditioned by prevailing political circumstances (Jezernik 2010, 24; Kolstø 2005, 25; Žanić 2003). The *antemurale christianitatis* is also a significant feature of the Kosovo myth, representing a struggle for the preservation of the Christian system of values and civilization (Antić 2003, 259–260). In essence: “The *antemurale* myth, then, stresses not only that the group is an integral part of the true civilization, but also that it represents *its very outpost*. As this ‘wall’ throughout history has been assailed time and again by the dark forces of the other side, the group has been chosen by divine providence to sacrifice itself in order to save the larger civilization of which it is a part. In this martyrological version the *antemurale* myth acquires messianic overtones: the nation is seen as a collective Christ that gives its life for others” (Kolstø 2005, 20).

The study of the Kosovo myth perhaps best exemplifies the phenomenon of the religious elements expressed in the national mythologizing of newly formed states. Popović reveals the structure of the Kosovo myth, identifying deep, not only Christian, but also pre-Christian motifs (Popović 2007). The myth's structure is rich with biblical narratives that give it the vitality of religious truth.⁶ As Nedeljković notes, the Croatian myth of Ban Jelačić (and his monument removed in 1947) “is shaped according to the Christian myth, as evidenced by the motif of resurrection [...]” (Nedeljković 2006, 174). He further states that many verses honoring Ban Jelačić were sung in ten-line meter and are reminiscent of the songs of the Kosovo cycle (Nedeljković 2006, 176). One of the reasons for such a striking presence of religious motifs lies in the role of church circles in the creation and promotion of the national identities of the Balkan states. Biblical elements such as martyrdom and suffering underscore the role of church circles in the articulation and shaping of the content of the Kosovo myth (Čolović 2016, 39–40).⁷ Church authorities in Croatia, through the Great Novena,

⁶ For more information on the intertwining of the mythical and the biblical, refer to Popović (2007) and Čolović (2016).

⁷ Consider the importance that Petar II Petrović Njegoš places on the Kosovo tradition (Čolović 2016, 18; 160–174).

i.e.⁸ the celebration of the anniversary of thirteen centuries of Christianity among Croats, as well as by spreading the cult of the Virgin Mary as a religious and national symbol, sought to strengthen national identity. More precisely, it could be said that they sought to emphasize the central role of Catholicism in the construction of the Croatian nation (Perica 2002, 21; 59–63; 73).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, religious nationalism pertains to communities where religion constitutes a fundamental component of national identity. In contexts such as the post-Yugoslav space, characterized by linguistic similarity, religion serves to delineate cultural boundaries between “us” and “them.” While religious motifs and symbols are present in this ethnic model, the fundamental importance of religion in establishing these communal boundaries renders religious nationalism distinct. Religion and nationality are thus inextricably linked. Religious communities, acting as interpreters of the national idea, promote a version of nationalism deeply infused with religious influences. They consequently position themselves as simultaneously and inseparably religious and national actors, addressing a community of believers that is primarily national.

This framework offers a pertinent explanation for the Balkan experience. As demonstrated, the borders of the newly formed nations were drawn in accordance with the religious affiliation of their members, more precisely, with the administrative jurisdiction of the national churches. Although the Albanian national project may be considered an exception, other Balkan nationalisms have generally favored and remained aligned with the dominant religious community. This is further evidenced by national myths, which are deeply rooted in church traditions. By emphasizing religious motifs, mythologemes aim to depict the rootedness in a specific spiritual milieu from which it derives its fundamental values. Such national iconography further solidified the demarcation between members and non-members of the nation, thereby

⁸ This jubilee celebrates thirteen centuries since Croatia adopted Christianity, as interpreted by the church to have occurred in 641. The celebration was interrupted by the beginning of World War II and the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Perica 2002, 21).

impeding the integration of religious minorities into the majority national community.

Based on the foregoing, religion is clearly an indispensable factor in understanding the nature of local nationalisms. Its influence on the process of national constitution must be examined in conjunction with specific historical developments, particularly the role of religious communities during the Ottoman period. Having endured the collapse of medieval Christian states, the church served as the custodian of historical memory, especially of Orthodox peoples within the Ottoman Empire. However, religion's role is evident not only in historical development and national myths but also in current trends. Consequently, religious communities can be characterized, if not as the most significant, then certainly among the most significant subjects in affirming national identity in this region.

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РЕЛИГИЈСКИ НАЦИОНАЛИЗАМ: БАЛКАНСКО ИСКУСТВО**

Резиме

Предмет овог рада је анализа улоге религије у процесу конституисања балканских национализма. Полази се од претпоставке да је религија била кључни фактор у исцртавању идентитетских граница. Тиме се не занемарује утицај језика, нарочито ако се има у виду албански случај. Балкански национализми су у свом развоју били под утицајем европских идеја што је важно имати у виду приликом овог разматрања. Ипак, код већине балканских нација религија је послужила као главни елемент/граничник у процесу националне конституције. У том контексту је веома значајно османско наслеђе и утицај милет система. Наиме, у раду се религијски фундаменти балканских националних пројеката доводе у везу са османским искуством унутар којег је фаворизована идентификација становништва по верским критеријумима. То не значи да су балкански национализми проистекли искључиво из милет система, већ сугерише на утицај тог искуства на сам процес. Отуда је ова анализа заснована на поставкама историјског институционализма услед чега се религијски национализам на Балкану може сагледавати као производ специфичног историјског развоја. О улози и значају религијске компоненте унутар балканских националних покрета сведоче и национални митови засновани на црквеним, односно верским предањима. На тај начин се додатно ојачавала граница између верских групација упркос језичким сличностима о чему сведочи и постјугословенски простор. Дакле, у оквиру језички сродних друштава расте значај религије као националног маркера. Из тога произилази и важна улога верских заједница као актера

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у процесу изградње и јачања националних пројеката на овом простору.

Кључне речи: религијски национализам, Балкан, митови, милет систем, национални идентитет

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