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THE ALGERIAN UNIVERSITY: TRAJECTORY AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explain the path taken by the Algerian university, setting out its central features since its founding during the colonial period, and then working to trace its line after independence when Algeria inherited the French colonial university. There was what was known as university reform in 1971. An attempt by those responsible for higher education, on the one hand, to get rid of the legacy of colonialism, especially from a cultural point of view, and, on the other hand, to keep up with the progress and the requirements of modern technology. Some goals of the reform are Arabization, the connection of the university with development, regard to people, and technology, as well as the democratization and Algerianization of education. Notwithstanding all attempts at reform, the reality of the university has not yet achieved what the reform engineers aimed for. We can note this in particular in the various negative phenomena that the Algerian university suffers from in its various aspects, such as : 1. The demographic fact: the large number of students seemed to impede the institution of the university, although the real impediment lies in coping with these numbers, which indicates a failure to deal with this situation. 2. The pedagogical fact: It indicates some forms of pedagogical design that do not take into account the specificities of society and the persistence of some bad practices in the pedagogical field by professors and students. It also indicates some other phenomena, such as the introduction of ready-made curricula and the interest in the formal aspects at the expense of the essential and the useful aspects. 3. Cultural fact: which reflects the ideological conflicts within the Algerian university. This had repercussions on the scientific dimension and on the objectivity of treating scientific topics. 4: The union fact: It reveals how student organizations work by using these bodies to serve personal interests.

KEYWORDS

University, Algerian University, The Reality of The University, Higher Education in Algeria, Path of The Algerian University, University Reform, The Reality of The Algerian University

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Introduction.

There is no doubt that the university is one of the most important social institutions. It trains cadres and provides them with knowledge and sciences, while also developing them socially, culturally, and politically so they can integrate into society and eventually lead it. From this perspective, there has always been great interest in the university institution in Algeria, both before and after independence. Algerians inherited a university system from French colonialism; this legacy had the merit of laying the foundations for the Algerian university but was, at the same time, a heavy burden—particularly on the cultural level—which necessitated attempts at restoration and reform, the most significant of which was the 1971 reform. Despite ongoing reforms throughout the trajectory of the Algerian university, it has continued to suffer from numerous problems that have weakened it and revealed the fragility of its structure. This compels us to revisit some important milestones in its development and examine certain key aspects of its structure for deeper understanding.

1. The Trajectory of the University and Higher Education in Algeria

1.1 Higher Education in Algeria During the Colonial Period:

The beginnings of higher education in Algeria during the colonial period date back to the early years of the French colonization of Algeria. The first “university-level” lesson was given on Monday, January 2, 1832,

in a place known as the Day's Garden in Bouzaréah, in an elegant building constructed in the second half of the eighteenth century, where the French established the new hospital. (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, unpublished document, p. 8)

The first lectures given during this period were related to medicine and surgery. The French army's chief physician, Stephanopoli, delivered his first lecture on physiology to about thirty students preparing for medical duties. The next day, surgeon Major Boudens began his lecture on operative surgery. (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, unpublished document, p. 8) The nature of the education provided at the beginning of the occupation was purely military, aimed at treating French soldiers injured during the colonial campaigns against Algerian towns and villages.

In addition to the School of Medicine and Pharmacy, which was established by a decree dated August 3, 1857, three other schools were created on December 20, 1879, to teach law, science, and literature. These schools enrolled 103 students between January 15 and November 15, 1880. (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, unpublished document, p. 9) After these schools were established and began playing a significant role in education, attracting many students, there was a push to create an independent university to accommodate the increasing number of students and expand the fields of study covered by these schools, as well as broaden these specializations themselves. Indeed, the University of Algiers was established in 1909.

The establishment of the University of Algiers was the laying of a fundamental pillar designed to consolidate colonialism in all its dimensions. This is clearly illustrated by Jean Méliat's words in his book *The History of the University of Algiers*: "The child of France—which is the University of Algiers—has gone through a stage of development and expansion. It can now look back fearlessly at the road it has traveled. The time has come to close accounts and present a clear, positive image of Frenchification, regardless of the so-called ideological contradictions surrounding the 'Algerianization' of the most important French sector overseas." (University of Algiers, 1983–1984)

The debates among the French focused mainly on the dilemma of whether to link education in Algeria to the French university system or to "Algerianize" it, taking into account the interests and cultural particularities of the European minority. However, the creation of the University of Algiers did not mean giving a gift to Algerians to help them understand reality and acquire knowledge that would work against colonialism. Rather, it was a tool through which France sought to draw a single path for the aims of both the settlers and the Algerians receiving education at this university alike. It was, therefore, a mechanism of ideological formation aimed at maintaining the presence of colonialism in Algeria.

This statement is supported by colonial practice, as higher education remained "uniformly inaccessible to Algerians, despite the modest increase that fluctuated for many years as a result of colonial policies of discrimination and exclusion toward the native population." (Remili, 2005–2006, p. 113)

By 1914, around 67 French-Algerian students had obtained the baccalaureate, and before 1910, only 29 students managed to obtain it. (Hammadi, unpublished, p. 16) In 1954, the number of Algerian students enrolled at the Central French University in Algiers did not exceed 600 out of a total of 1,200 students in all French universities. The Central University of Algiers accounted for 11.4% of enrolled Muslim Algerian students, even though the Muslim Algerian population represented 89.5% of Algeria's total population, while the literacy rate among young Algerians exceeded 40% of the total population, according to General Daumas, who oversaw the census of the educated population in Algeria. (Hammadi, unpublished, p. 10)

All this illustrates how colonialism exploited the university and education in general to serve its own interests, ensuring—as noted earlier—that education was not made accessible to all Algerians unless certain social and cultural features that could benefit colonial interests were present. Thus, students had no possibility "of attaining the baccalaureate and university education unless their family files were thoroughly examined by the colonial authorities." (Remili, 2005–2006, p. 113)

Therefore, based on its assessment of how well Algerian students could serve colonial policy, the colonial system decided who could or could not pursue higher education. It also banked on those students included in its university and school rolls to become useful tools in the hands of the colonial regime. This is clearly reflected in Governor General Naegelen's statement in 1949: "The future of Muslim Algeria is being prepared now in French schools, despite the miserable prophets." (Hammadi, unpublished, p. 14)

Higher education in Algeria during the colonial period was, from its inception and in its objectives, deeply linked to serving the colonial presence in Algeria. Although the French colonial system faced great challenges from the Algerian elite it had itself educated—an elite that later spearheaded the national movement and launched the revolution—its intellectual and cultural legacies continued even after independence and, to this day, still influence and at times shape Algeria's cultural and intellectual landscape.

1-2 The Algerian University After Independence

1-2-1 Before the University Reform

It is only natural for a society that experienced prolonged colonization to inherit, after independence, a university system shaped by the colonial period, since the education programs during that time aimed to keep Algeria subordinate and dependent. Thus, at the beginning of independence, the university institution remained “an extension of the French university in its administrative organization, language, curricula, educational programs, and assistant professors, as well as in the degrees recognized by the French state.” (GHALAM-ALLAH, 2006, p. 14)

From 1962 until the early 1970s, the Algerian university remained captive to the type and structure of education that was entirely tied to how education was organized in France. In this regard, Alain Coullan (A. COULAN) states: “In 1970, the Algerian university still operated according to Paris time; the first year in the faculties of sciences and humanities was still the preparatory year in the French university system known before 1966.” (Toutaoui, 1993, p. 38)

The Algerian university relied fundamentally on two aspects: imitation and emulation. It replicated the French educational content and structures due to the psychological conditioning and the policies of ignorance that afflicted Algerian society during colonialism, and it emulated French educational models, remaining tied to them due to the lack of competent human resources—a direct result of colonial policies—and the intellectual dependency of Algerian cadres nurtured within the French intellectual system. As a result, “the Algerian university in the post-independence period lived in a state of uncertainty and dependency in its pedagogical forms and educational content. It was characterized in particular by the persistence of the inherited educational system and the dominance of the French spirit in its curricula, while standards and traditions remained in effect despite the social and economic transformations within Algerian society.” (Madani, 1987–1988, p. 75)

The development witnessed by the university in the period following independence was more quantitative than qualitative, as the number of students increased from “3,000 in 1962 to 10,000 by 1968, with an annual growth rate of about 1,000 new enrollments. The institution, however, saw a doubling starting from the 1969 academic intake.” (GHALAM-ALLAH, 2006, p. 14) By the 1974–1975 academic year, the number of enrolled students had reached 35,739, while the number of graduates in 1973–1974 rose to 2,188 students. (Taouti, 2001, p. 9)

This marked increase in student numbers reflects the efforts made in the field of higher education, embodied in the 1971 university reform—especially in what became known as the democratization of education—which aimed to eliminate disparities among Algerians and open the door to higher education to all those eligible for it. This idea—emerging immediately after independence—was perceived either as a form of psychological retribution against the colonial policies of exclusion and segregation or as a challenge to the economic conditions that required a sufficient number of qualified cadres to develop a country exhausted by a protracted war, and it was institutionalized through the 1971 law.

1-2-2 The 1971 University Reform and Its Objectives

The university reform reflected the level of aspirations and the efforts made by the university community to prepare cadres capable of addressing the country’s economic and cultural challenges. At that time, the country was in dire need of builders focusing first on strengthening the economic infrastructure and reintegrating the university—and, through it, society—into Algeria’s national culture, as the reality still reflected French cultural and intellectual molds. Cultural independence is an inseparable part of the material independence Algeria gained in 1962, and thus the university was entrusted with achieving this goal.

For the Algerian university to be effective and capable of fulfilling the ambitions of a newly independent society—along with what this implies for development—a set of objectives was outlined and pursued in practice to achieve genuine independence in both form and content. These objectives were:

- **Linking the University to Development:** This was the backbone and essence of the reform, as the development of various sectors of society required an instrument to support it. Considering the university’s enlightening function, it indeed plays a pioneering role in this development. The reform thus aimed at “linking the outputs of higher education institutions and research centers with the needs of development in society by providing sufficient numbers of scientists, researchers, and cadres to carry out the development process in all fields.” (Salhi & Zawawi, 1996, p. 407) For this purpose, several university centers were established alongside the three main universities (Algiers, Constantine, and Oran) in provinces such as Annaba, Sétif, Tlemcen, Mostaganem, Batna, Tizi Ouzou, and others to absorb the increasing number of students and expedite their qualification to take on their roles in national development.

• **Democratization of Education:** This goal was founded on the necessity of abolishing the colonial education system, which reserved higher education for certain classes and groups to the exclusion of others. The democratization of education aimed to make it accessible to all Algerians without exception, provided they met the objective conditions for entry. In quantitative terms, the persistent efforts to achieve this goal led to a massive increase in student numbers: for example, during the 1995–1996 academic year, the number of students reached 300,000 compared to only 500 students at the end of the colonial era. (Salhi & Zawawi, 1996, p. 407) This starkly contrasts with the colonial period, during which the concept of democratized education was meaningless due to the practices of discrimination and segregation enforced by colonialism.

- Arabization of the University:

The effort to Arabize the university was an attempt to escape the French cultural dominance that continued to prevail in the Algerian cultural reality, especially through language as one of the main frameworks reflecting this control. The logic of the reform was governed by the idea that linguistic independence would necessarily lead to cultural independence. Linguistic independence means that the university becomes sovereign by using the mother tongue to express its own identity and personality, while using other languages across scientific fields in ways that achieve clear scientific benefits. After the French language had dominated all scientific branches except for Arabic literature, the reform decided to: **(Ould Khalifa, 1989, p. 220)**

A. Teach Arabic as a language in specializations that were still taught in French. B. Create departments that use Arabic as the language of instruction. The aim of teaching Arabic in departments taught in a foreign language was: **(Ould Khalifa, 1989, p. 221)** A. To integrate these students into the general context of the Arabization process. B. To enable them to use the national language after graduation as a working tool, especially after mastering the technical terminology related to their profession.

The ultimate goal of Arabizing departments or teaching Arabic was to train students to use it when entering the job market, meaning to Arabize employment sectors and thus Arabize society through the university.

Introducing the Arabic language in all areas of training that use foreign languages and creating studies in the national language to obtain various university degrees, including scientific ones, and fully Arabizing teacher training programs — all of these are measures aimed at encouraging the development of cadres capable of expressing themselves in the national language.” **(Benachnou, 1981, p. 7)**

According to Dr. Ould Khalifa, by 1978, students studying in the national language made up a third of all students, which shows that Arabization had reached a significant level. However, the maturity of this process did not reach its peak due to:

- The limited number of instructors proficient in Arabic and their weak pedagogical training.
- The scarcity of references and educational materials in Arabic.
- The ideological barrier and the emergence of an elite opposing Arabization, claiming that Arabic is a “dead language” incapable of translating the achievements of modern science and civilization.

- Algerianization of Education:

This concept refers to relying more on Algerian cadres and competencies and making education, in its curricula and content, more Algerian — that is, adapted to the Algerian reality, which requires specific curricula and imposes contents with particular meanings aiming at cultural and scientific liberation, while targeting the comprehensive development of both the individual and society. Accordingly, curricula were revised through full modifications, the duration of studies for some university programs was extended, and the annual system was replaced by the semester system. All of this was to adapt study programs and methods to the country’s realities and development needs and to enable the university to meet society’s needs and aspirations.

- Prioritizing Scientific and Technological Training: To achieve this goal, the authorities responsible for education worked to direct students toward scientific and technical fields, believing that encouraging enrollment in these disciplines would strengthen development sectors by multiplying the number of graduates qualified to enter the job market. However, this created an imbalance between students’ desires and the needs of society. The rush to expand certain specializations such as computer science and electronics before their time came at the expense of other, more urgent fields like irrigation, mining, and veterinary medicine. **(Ould Khalifa, 1989, p. 218)**

The reform sought to achieve these goals based on the nature of the period that Algerian society was going through, aiming for change and keeping pace with scientific and social developments. Accordingly, the strategy of change centered on achieving the above objectives from the perspective of the vital role that higher education plays in social transformation and the function carried out by the Algerian university, which was

clearly stated in a circular from the Ministry of Higher Education in 1987, which specified: **(Remili, 2005–2006, p. 119)**

1. To provide higher education and specialized, continuous training for the human resources necessary for national development in various professions, positions, and disciplines across all fields of science and culture.
2. To promote national and human culture and intellectual activity in general, utilizing the university's cultural, scientific, and pedagogical capital and its pool of competencies.
3. To develop and expand scientific research, foster a scientific spirit among students and professors alike, and work to establish its foundations and ensure its continuity.

Nearly twenty years earlier, Dr. Ahmed Taleb Ibrahim, who was in charge of the same ministry in 1968, had outlined the functions of the Algerian university as follows: **(Ibrahimi, no publication year, pp. 141–142)**

1. To train the cadres needed by the country.
2. To advance scientific research.
3. To disseminate culture in general and national culture in particular.
4. To ensure continuous education.

A look at the points listed as the university's functions in 1968 — before the reform — shows they are the same points raised twenty years later (in 1988) and remain the same functions proposed for the Algerian university today. This makes it necessary to ask: *Has the university fulfilled these functions effectively and successfully?*

2 - The Current State of the Algerian University: Since independence, the Algerian university has tried to fulfill its designated roles, such as training cadres and opening avenues for scientific research. Undoubtedly, it has succeeded in achieving this goal to a certain extent. However, true success in its deepest sense remains an elusive objective due to the various problems that hinder its performance in many aspects.

2.1 Demographic Reality

It seems that the main problem facing Algerian universities is the sharp increase in student numbers. By 2005, the student population had reached 840,000, compared to 372,647 students in the 1998 academic year (Taher, 2006, p. 13). According to data published by the Ministry of Higher Education, *the total number of graduates in various fields from 2001 to 2005 amounted to 337,010 Bachelor's degree holders* (Taher, 2006, p. 13). These figures, which illustrate the growing student population and the large numbers of graduates, can be viewed positively when interpreted independently from the societal and institutional context. In fact, a large student population is a clear indicator of distancing society from ignorance and illiteracy, and achieving some level of development, since the basic measure of nations' progress is a low illiteracy rate and the constant pursuit of universal education.

However, interpreting these figures within a broader framework that takes into account the reality of universities and society reveals that this increase constitutes a heavy burden on both. In the years following independence, Algeria relied on increasing student enrollment to meet developmental needs and fill positions required by various sectors. However, what actually occurred is that student numbers far exceeded these sectors' demands—or rather, these sectors stopped creating new positions, an inevitable result of development slowing to a certain level.

The paradox we observe here is that some university administrators blame the institution's inability to fulfill its role and the society's failure to integrate the large number of graduates into jobs they were trained for on the sheer number of enrolled and graduating students. At the same time, they boast about these increasing numbers. Every year, we hear statements that the number of students will reach, or exceed, one million in the coming years. This sense of pride is especially evident at the beginning of each academic year, when “officials recite streams of figures about major achievements—new educational seats, student housing beds, total student numbers, new student enrollments, graduates, supervising professors...” (Saidi, 2006, p. 29).

University administrators view the large number of students as a problem only when linked to the growth of infrastructure and availability of supervising professors. However, this linkage removes the problem's essence when we consider the inability to provide sufficient university capacity to accommodate the increasing student numbers, and the lack of societal sectors capable of absorbing the vast numbers of graduates. Thus, the real issue lies in how to manage and utilize these numbers effectively, not in the numbers themselves. This naturally leads to the discussion of the failure in policies for employing and exploiting this growth, both in terms of graduates and non-graduates, and in designing effective plans to invest in them properly.

2.2 Pedagogical Reality

The pedagogical aspect is the core axis of the education process, especially when it is built on scientific foundations and takes into account spiritual and psychological dimensions to help achieve set goals. Since the 1971 reforms, Algeria has been keen to design proper visions for higher education. However, this commitment has proven fragile in practice due to the cultural and social composition of Algeria's intellectual elites, particularly their differences and the way some hinder the projects and visions of others—an aspect that has characterized ideological conflict among Algerian elites. This has often negatively impacted the pedagogical side, with the student community becoming a field for experimentation.

This was notably observed with students who sought to study medicine during the 1998–1999 academic year. Many endured significant difficulties that led some to change majors and abandon their scientific ambitions—with all the negative effects this has on the student's creative potential—despite having achieved good grades in the baccalaureate. This was due to their placement in a common core (*tronc commun*) that combined multiple sciences beyond the student's ability to fully grasp. This issue was addressed a year later when education officials began directing students to their specific majors directly without passing through a common core system.

It appears that many pedagogical arrangements are made without the necessary scientific studies that consider the nature and characteristics of the society to which they are applied. This was evident in the debates surrounding the implementation of the L.M.D. system (License, Master's, Doctorate) in Algeria. This system, which limits the total duration of university studies to eight years—three years for the Bachelor's degree, two for the Master's, and three for the Doctorate—was adopted in Algeria mainly by imitating systems used in developed countries, without thoroughly examining the specificities of Algerian society and the capacities of its universities.

In addition, there are many practices reflecting the prevailing culture in Algerian universities, such as focusing on superficial aspects rather than substantive ones. In this context, Dr. Abdelghani Megherbi raises the issue of the excessive reverence for regulatory and legislative texts, which is clearly observable during thesis and dissertation defenses. This comes at the expense of the freedom that should be granted to students to innovate, create, and demonstrate their scientific and intellectual capabilities. Dr. Megherbi states: *"... why, in this case, do we show such complexity when we know that the higher degree—Doctorat d'État—can be awarded to a person who does not even hold a Master's degree? The awarding of this degree does not happen secretly, as one might assume, but within this semi-official framework where regulatory texts are strictly adhered to because the defense takes place publicly. Here, we emphasize that strict adherence to the letter kills thought."* (MEGHERBI, 2006)

Moreover, indifference and negligence add to the pedagogical problems within the university, which, according to Professor Mohamed Ghalam-Allah, cloaks itself with the motto *"Let it pass."* This negligence results in most faculty researchers *"...not engaging in research to update their lectures but rather recycling the same outdated information, deteriorating further each year. This produces unqualified graduates and drives the institution and its people into a 'slow death.'"* (GHALAM-ALLAH, 2006, p. 15)

2-3. The Cultural Reality

The university is considered a hub for the convergence of cultures; it acts as a melting pot for the cultural characteristics brought by students from every region of the country. This is evident when individuals from various areas meet, each transferring the features of their own environment to other individuals and groups. Despite this, conflicts sometimes arise within the university, which often turn out to have political or ideological roots. It seems that one of the most distinctive features of the Algerian university since independence, on the cultural level, is the persistent tension between the "Francophone–Arabized" dichotomy. This reflects the state of the Algerian elite during the colonial period. Thus, independence was not a turning point that transformed this dichotomy but rather deepened it, leading to a sort of dissonance between these opposing currents, which played a significant role in shaping the Algerian elite. (KADRI, 2006, p. 14)

Moreover, the Algerian elite has been divided intellectually as well, with each group aligning itself with certain ideological directions, especially with the spread of communist ideas and the rise of Arab nationalism among a segment of Algerians educated in the Arab East, alongside another group whose visions and projects were centered around religion. Thus, we still observe these sensitivities between elites, which persist simply because each faction adhering to one ideology is disturbed by the proposals of other ideologies. As a result, the scientific discourse, which should ideally be characterized by objectivity, has become subordinated to these

ideological leanings rather than guiding them. This raises significant questions about the true value of science and research within the Algerian university, especially in the realm of the social sciences.

2-4. The Trade Union Reality

Following the introduction of political pluralism and the right to form associations, student associations and organizations began to emerge from 1990 onwards, proclaiming themselves as representatives of students and defenders of their rights. Parallel to this, associations were established to achieve the demands of professors and defend their rights, such as the *National Committee of Higher Education Professors (CNES)*, which leads professors in strikes aimed at improving their social and professional conditions.

To the casual observer, the proliferation of student organizations in Algerian universities today might suggest that the student community is well-organized, with its aspirations fully articulated and represented before the administration by these organizations. However, a closer look reveals that these organizations do not truly represent students and their ambitions as much as they represent the political parties to which they are affiliated. These organizations actively work to disseminate the principles of these parties and promote their ideas and agendas. Therefore, these organizations are essentially political entities lacking true independence, despite certain university regulations that prohibit political activities on campus — such as Article 35 of the Internal Regulations of the University of Algiers, which stipulates that “associations of a political nature may not operate within the university, as their activities conflict with the customs of the academic sanctuary.” (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2006)

Although these organizations appear to have a purely union-oriented objective namely, to achieve students’ demands — in reality, they are politically and ideologically positioned, given that the parties with which they are organically linked have their own principles and visions based on specific intellectual and ideological foundations. In practice, these organizations often exploit their legal influence to exert pressure on the administration to achieve personal gains and secure certain privileges related to employment competitions and enrollment in graduate studies. Consequently, students remain mired in their social and academic problems, lacking genuine representation that defends their interests seriously — except when these interests align with those of the organizations. These organizations typically focus their protests on social issues, as they perceive these to be the most effective means of rallying and attracting the support of students, who suffer from poor social services. This strategy aims to strengthen their position and serve the political currents they represent, rather than to serve the students they claim to defend. This is evident in their neglect of other important aspects — such as pedagogical, academic, and intellectual issues — during the protests and strikes they organize.

Conclusions

The Algerian university has gone through many stages, acquiring numerous characteristics and features throughout its development. The university of the independence era is markedly different from the university during the period of French colonialism, despite the persistence of certain colonial-era traits — such as the language of instruction and teaching methods — within the post-independence university. However, the most significant factor is the effort made by those in charge of the Algerian university after independence to implement reforms that would reflect the new era. This was evident in the principles laid out in the 1971 reform, including the principle of Arabization of the university, which aimed to break free from linguistic and cultural dominance, and the “Algerianization” of education, which entailed considering the specific characteristics of the Algerian context and providing opportunities for national talent.

Moreover, the democratization of education was emphasized as a form of retribution against the colonial policy of discrimination among students. Attention was also given to the scientific and technological fields to meet the country’s urgent need for development. All these efforts placed the Algerian university in a position that would allow it to take off and thrive. However, the persistent problems that have plagued both the university and society at large have hindered its trajectory from unfolding as planned. The Algerian university has faced numerous challenges at the pedagogical level, necessitating constant and ongoing changes to its systems and curricula — a situation that reflects a state of restlessness and instability. It has also encountered various other issues at the demographic, cultural, and trade union levels.

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