

Suffixation as a Place Naming Strategy in the Central Pacific and its Implications for Prehistory

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This article uses comparative linguistic data to arrive at some generalizations about the place naming practices of the early inhabitants of the Central Pacific (Fiji, Rotuma, and Polynesia) who are believed to have arrived there some three thousand years ago. In particular it focuses on a pair of suffixes, **-(C)a** and **-(C)aga**, that had similar functions of nominalization and were therefore used quite extensively in various types of derivation, including place naming. Many place names so formed are indicators of the environment that prevailed when the place was named, so have great potential value in the reconstruction of prehistory.

KEYWORDS island place names, suffix, Fiji, Central Pacific, place naming practices.

Introduction¹

When the Dutch explorers Jacob Le Maire and Willem Schouten arrived in the Niua group in 1616 (comprising Niuatoputapu, Tafahi, and Niuafo'ou) in what is now northern Tonga, they were struck by the abundance of coconuts there. Accordingly, the first island they saw, Tafahi, they named *Cocos-Eylant* ("Coconut Island") (Claeszoon 1646, 39; Engelbrecht and van Herwerden 1945, vol. 1, 56; Schouten 1968, 44). In so doing, they were inadvertently repeating the observations and the naming strategy of the indigenous people who had first colonized the group, presumably the Lapita people who had preceded them by some 2400 years. They had named the island *Niua*, a Proto Polynesian (PPn) word, still used in Tongan, meaning "abounding in coconuts" (Churchward 1959). It is composed of the base **niu** "coconut" plus the suffix **-a**, here meaning "abounding in, full of". It is this suffix, along with its allomorphs and near synonym **-(C)aga**, that is the subject of this paper.²

The “nominalizing” suffix **-(C)a** (where C stands for any one of a particular set of consonants) has been used extensively in all the Central Pacific languages (Fijian, Rotuman, and Polynesian).³ Another nominalizing suffix, **-(C)aga**, has a slightly different meaning and a more restricted distribution. This paper is a preliminary study of the etymology and functions of these suffixes, particularly in the formation of place names. Many of these can be interpreted as describing various natural phenomena, the presence or prominence of which at the time of naming can be inferred from the names. While it is always possible that names have been replaced or transferred, nevertheless, I believe that most names of broader reference (i.e. larger islands and island groups) date back to initial occupation of the area some three thousand years ago, so can impart reliable information about what was prominent in that place when it was first named.

Place naming

Let me begin with some observations on place naming which seem to have validity in at least the Central Pacific.

Generally, places are named after natural phenomena that are either permanent or relatively so. This is particularly true of names of wider reference (larger islands, island groups). Villages and other places of narrower reference are likewise frequently named after natural landmarks, especially trees, but may also be named after large and relatively permanent artifacts such as houses, bridges, fish-traps, walls, fences, ditches, playing fields, and roads, and sometimes after actions that are, or were, regularly performed there.

As is the case all over the world, some meanings of place names are lost over time, so that the inhabitants are no longer aware of the original meaning. In the Central Pacific, however, this is not so common, as the time of occupation, especially of Rotuma and the more easterly Polynesian islands, has not been very long. Moreover, the languages are relatively conservative, that is to say, have not changed very much. Nevertheless, in recent and contemporary oral tradition, there are many folk etymologies based on the sayings and doings of ancestor gods, and these have been published in such works as Gifford (1923) for Tonga, and Reed (1961) for Aotearoa (i.e. New Zealand). Turner (1884, 10–16), for example, gives four different popular etymologies of this type for the name *Samoa*. An example from Fiji is the following etymology recently proposed by Ratu Viliame for the island of *Moturiki* (from *motu “island” and *riki “small”): “His [the ancestor god’s] mother told him ‘o iko na lai tiko i na yanuyanuu motomoto ya’ (you shall go and live on that sharp looking island over there).⁴ Ratu Viliame said this was essentially the origin of the name *Moturiki*” (*The Fiji Times*, 19 April 2015, 14). Similarly, it is taught in Fiji’s schools that the river *Dreketi* in Vuda is so named because the ancestor gods were *dreketi* (“carried on the back”) there. However, it is more plausible that it is simply a reflex of the now obsolete word *dreketi meaning “river”.⁵ Contrary to many such folk etymologies, there is no place name in Fiji which incorporates the sayings or doings of an ancestor god, and only one that incorporates an ancestor god’s name: a village on the coast of Nadroga named *Vajuolalai* (misspelled on modern maps as “Votualailai”), which means “stones of Lalai”, an ancestor god who built a causeway from there to woo the ancestor goddess of the island of Vatulele (Geraghty 2007, 2008).

Viti (the Indigenous name of Fiji) meant simply “east”. The word *viti “sunrise, east” can be reconstructed for PCP (Proto Central Pacific, the putative language of the initial settlers of Fiji), and would be an appropriate name from the point of view of travelers from the west, the direction in which the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu lie. The initial bearer of this name was probably *Naviti* (where **na** is the definite article), the largest island in the Yasawa group, by comparison with which the large island to the southeast was named *Navitilevu* (“large Naviti”), now often abbreviated to *Vitilevu*. The name *Tabiti* probably has the same etymology, comprising the article **ta** and **hiti**, a regular reflex of *viti, named from the perspective of Samoa.

After the settlement of Samoa (the etymology of which has been the subject of much speculation), the island groups to the north and south were named after their respective winds: *tokelau “north wind” and *toga “south wind”. The west wind, PCP *xadavu, gave its name to a number of islands situated to the west (from the perspective of their namers), including the large island of *Kadavu* in southern Fiji, the small uninhabited island of *Kadavu* west of Vuda in western Fiji, and *Atafu*, the westernmost of the Tokelau islands (Geraghty 1993, 356). That Kadavu was settled from the east is unexpected, being contrary to the general west-to-east movement of the colonizers of the Pacific. However, it receives support from the fact that Kadavu is the only island in Fiji where the “jumping-off place of the spirits”, which usually faces the point of origin of the earliest inhabitants, is situated at the eastern rather than the western end of the island (Geraghty 2017).

A second observation is that larger referents tend to retain their names longer. It is for this reason that many names of larger places preserve lexical items that are obsolete in the contemporary language. Examples from Fiji include *Viti* (noted above) and the following:

- cila/sila** “headland” in *Nacilau*, *Silana*, *Nasilai*
- cuku/suku** “bay” in *Cuku*, near Wainika Cakaudrove, *Cukuvou* (“new bay”) in Yadua Bua, and *Nasuku* in Ovalau
- dreketi** “river” in *Dreketi* (of which there are many), *Dreketilailai* (“small river”)
- levuka** “middle” in *Levuka*, *Levukana*, *Levukaigau*, *Levukaiyale*
- motu** “island” in *Moturiki*, a medium-sized island south of Ovalau
- one** “sand” in *Uruone*, *Onedrega*, *Vione*
- riki** or **driki** “small” in *Moturiki*, *Wairiki*, *Ogedriki*
- udu** “headland” in *Udu* (Vanualevu, Kabara, Totoya)
- vaga** “bay” in *Vaga*, *Vagadaci*, *Vagaloa*, *Vagariki*, *Vaganai*, *Vagavutu*
- yanuca** “small island” and its variants *Yanuya*, *Nānuca*, and *Nānuya*, common names for small islands throughout the group (Geraghty 2005)
- yaro** “front of island” in *Yaro*, *Narocake*, *Narocivo*, *Naroi*, *Yaroi*

Conversely, it is common to find names of villages and small islands or tracts of land that contain words that are relatively recent innovations. The Kadavu word for “stone”, for instance, which is now **solo** rather than the older **valu** found elsewhere in Fiji, occurs in many names of villages, small islands, and tracts of land in Kadavu, such as: *Solodamu*, *Solowaqa*, *Solovoavoa*, and *Solotavui*.

Another observation concerns the definite article. When place names are first formed, they are often preceded by the definite article: Fijian **na**, Polynesian **te** or a variant such as **ta**, **le** (Samoan), or **ke/ka** (Hawai'ian). This article then tends to be lost over time, in the same way that, for example, the noun phrase “the new castle” has become a place name *Newcastle*. Within Fiji there are significant geographical differences in place name morphology that can be explained by this tendency. For example, in the province of Lau, only 20% of village names begin with the article, while for the province of Tailevu (in eastern Vitilevu) the figure is 46%. This probably reflects the fact that village sites in Lau have been relatively stable, whereas in Tailevu there has been much more mobility, certainly within the last 200 years, within a much larger area.

Finally, place names can be transferred from the homeland by colonizers. Usually this is simply a case of commemoration, as in the plethora of British place names now found in North America and the Antipodes. Central Pacific examples include: *Rabe* (an island in Fiji, often called “Rabi” following the pronunciation of English-speakers) from the homeland of the Banaban (Kiribati) people who now live there (Brink 1996), and those transferred from Bikini to Kili in the Marshall Islands (Bender 1970, 183). There also seem to have been instances of place naming by mistake, similar to the famous case of the *West Indies*. As I pointed out in Geraghty (1993, 371), such Polynesian outliers as Tikopia and Anuta in the Solomon Islands and Futuna and Aniwa in southern Vanuatu may have been so named because the namers thought mistakenly that they were Cikobia, Yanuca (both in northeastern Fiji), Futuna, and Niua (in western Polynesia), respectively. It is possible also that Hawai'i was so named because the inhabitants of Central Eastern Polynesia who named it thought that it must be the island of Savai'i in Samoa, which it resembles in relative size, volcanic nature, general appearance, and distance from their home, while differing in its bearing (Geraghty 1993, 378).

In the following sections, I shall demonstrate the meanings of the suffixes **-(C)a** and **-(C)aga** and their use as place naming devices, and how their analysis can be valuable historically in pointing out features of places that were prominent when they were first named.

The suffix **-(C)a**

A “nominalizing” suffix of the form **-an** has been reconstructed for Proto Oceanic (Ross 1998, 33), and also its ancestor Proto Malayo-Polynesian, with a locative meaning.⁶ It is widely reflected in Oceanic languages, where it is realized most commonly as **-(C)a**, the final **n** being retained only in certain languages. In some languages of Oceania, including all Central Pacific languages, it has become a more general nominalizer (i.e. not specifically locative). While it appears that this suffix is no longer active in Central Pacific languages, it has certainly left a considerable legacy, as witnessed in the following examples from Tongan, where it is most frequently realized as **-ga** (Churchward 1953, 239–240; 1959):

abstract nouns: **fōtuga** “appearance” (**foto** “emerge, appear”), **tālaga** “discussion” (**tala** “talk”), **tupuga** “origin” (**tupu** “originate”)

instrumental nouns: **mohega** “bed” (**mohe** “sleep”), **puhiga** “spittoon” (**puhi** “spit”), **taula** “anchor” (**tau** “be at anchor”), **tanuga** “pit” (**tanu** “bury”), **tu’uga** “stand, pedestal” (**tu’u** “stand”)⁷

locational nouns: **fatuga** “place where mat weaving begins” (**fatu** “begin weaving mat”), **tafega** “place where something flows” (**tafe** “flow”)

resultative nouns: **ha’iga** “bundle, bunch” (**ha’i** “tie”), **putuga** “crowd, mob” (**putu** “crowd together”)

A number of such words can be reconstructed for Proto Central Pacific (that is, they are believed to have been used by the first settlers of Fiji, Rotuma, and Polynesia), for example:

- *mozega “bed” (*moze “sleep”)
- *tavaga “abrasive substance” (*tava “cut, slice”)
- *tavola “reef flat” (*tavo “haul (boat)”)
- *vavia “firewood” (*vavi “bake in earth oven”; also in Proto Micronesian *fafie “firewood”)
- *’aviga- “armpit” (*’avi “carry under the arm”)

Other examples that appear to be restricted to Fiji are:

- bunua** “fruit-bat roost” (**bunu** “join together”)
- darava** “doorway” (**dara** “enter, slip in”)
- ikilaga** “sign” (Lau) (**kila** “know”)
- pūpūsia** “blow-hole” (Taveuni) (**pusi** “blow”)
- itagaga** “horned top of masthead” (**taga** < **taqa** “rest on”, since formerly the yard of the sail rested on it)⁸
- tōtōkia** “club with pointed head” (**toki** “peck”)
- tunua** “hearth for firing pottery” (**tunu** “burn”)

Place names with nominalizing -(C)a

A number of place names in Fiji can be derived from words containing this suffix (Geraghty 2006).

The word PCP *gwalo “submerge, disappear” when suffixed yields *gwaloa, meaning “submerged place”. In eastern Fiji this would regularly become *Galoa*, which is the name of an inhabited island just off southern Kadavu, an inhabited island just off northern Vanualevu, and a coastal village in Serua; while *Nagaloa* (with the article **na**) is a coastal area of Ogea in Southern Lau. This etymology implies not only that all places named *Galoa* have subsided into the sea, but also that this occurred while humans were present to observe it.

Conversely, PCP *votu “emerge, appear” when suffixed yields *votua, meaning “emerged place”. There are at least five places called *Votua*, all situated on coastal plains or deltas, in the provinces of Nadroga, Ba, Bua, and in Muala (often spelt “Moala”, its Tongan form) in Lau; and two small islands in the Yasawa Group, *Navotua* off Nacula and *Korovotua* near Yasawairara, may well have the same origin. Again, this etymology

implies not only that all places named *Votua* have been uplifted from the sea, but also that this occurred while humans were present to observe it.

PCP *tavu “burn” when suffixed yields *tavua, meaning “burning place”, hence “volcano”. There are at least four places called *Tavua* – an island in the Mamanuca group in western Fiji, a district in northern Vitilevu near the Vatukoula gold mine, a village in western Koro, and a deserted village near Lekutu in Bua. This etymology implies that there was volcanic activity in these places, and that they were named by people who observed it. This place name is also found in Polynesia, for example in the well-known active volcano of Tofua in Tonga, near which the mutiny on the *Bounty* took place, the extinct volcano of Tafua in the district of ‘A’ana on ‘Upolu, Samoa (Ellis 1890, 560), and two villages named *Tafuautata* and *Tafuatai* (literally “inland” and “coastal” *Tafua*, respectively) in the southeast of the volcanic Samoan island of Savai’i.

“Full of” -a

Another function of the suffix **-(C)a** is (or was) to form adjectives and nouns from nouns, with such meanings as “containing”, “full of”, or “place of”. This function also appears to date back to Proto Austronesian (Blust 1999, 353), and is found in such PAN (Proto Austronesian) reconstructions as *babuy-an “pigpen” (from *babuy “pig”). In Oceanic languages, it appears to be confined to Fiji and western Polynesia. Some examples from contemporary Tongan are: **namua** “mosquito-infested” (**namu** “mosquito”), **ikā** “abounding in fish” (**ika** “fish”), **fekea** “abounding in octopus” (**feke** “octopus”), **vaia** “watery” (**vai** “water”) (Churchward 1959). At least two such words can be reconstructed for Proto Polynesian:

*fiso’a “k.o. coastal tree used for soap, *Colubrina asiatica*” (PCP *vuso “foam”)⁹

*’ulua “k.o. large-headed fish, *Caranx ignobilis*” (PCP *’ulu “head”)

Within Fiji the suffix is usually used with a reduplicated base, as in **nukunukua** “sandy” (**nuku** “sand”), **dregadregata** “sticky” (**drega** “sap, resin”). The following, however, are not reduplicated:¹⁰

diria “k.o. spotted freshwater eel, *Anguilla marmorata*” (**diri** “spot”)

ikua “long-tailed fruit bat, *Notopteris macdonaldii*” (PCP *iku- “tail”)

Place names with -a “full of”

A substantial number of place names in Fiji appear to be derived from common nouns by means of this suffix, of which the following are only a few examples:

Cicia a large island in Northern Lau (*cici “kinds of gastropod, including *Trochus* and *Turbo* spp.”)

Kanacea a small island in Northern Lau (*kanace “k.o. fish, mullet, *Mugilidae*”)

Kiā a medium-sized island north of Vanualevu (*kia “adze”)

Namuka a small island in Southern Lau, a small uninhabited island off the coast of Vitilevu near Suva, a district in Macuata, a village in Nakelo in the Rewa delta (*ñamu(k) “mosquito”)

Ogea a small island in Southern Lau (*coge “famine”; the loss of *c is unexpected, but found in other Lau place names, e.g. *Oloi*, the only hill on *Kabara*, and the uninhabited island *Olorua* “two hills”, both from *colo “hill”)

Urata a village on *Vanualevu* near *Savusavu* (*’ura “lobster, prawn”)

Vatua part of the names of two small islands, *Vatuamatau* near *Yacata*, Northern Lau, and *Vatuaqiliqili* near *Yaqaga*, *Bua* (*vatu “rock, stone”, *matau* “adze”, *qiliqili* “round”); also possibly in Rotuman *Hafua*, a rocky headland

Vulaga a medium-sized island in Lau (often given its Tongan name *Fulaga*), and a very small island near *Lomaji*, *Matuku* (*vula “kinds of large sea cucumber”, *Bohadschia* spp.)

Waya a large island of the *Yasawa* group (*wai “water” – *Waya* being the only well-watered island in *Yasawa*)

Elsewhere in the Pacific, reference has already been made to *Niua* (*niu “coconut”), and *Hiva* in the *Marquesas* may have the same etymology as *Viwa* in *Fiji*, as also *Futuna* (*Fijian* *Vutuna*), *Manu’a* in *Samoa* (*Fijian* *Manuka*), *Namu’a* in *’Upolu*, *Samoa*, and *Nomuka* in *Tonga* (*Fijian* *Namuka*).

There is also a *Namuka* near *Epi* in *Vanuatu*, appropriately enough a small mosquito-ridden island, and in the same area a larger island is named *Tongoa*, which can be derived from *togo “mangrove” (though it is almost entirely devoid of mangroves today). However, it would be rash to attribute this place naming strategy to *Vanuatu* languages on the strength of these two instances, since they occur in a very small area that has an extant *Polynesian* outlier language, and other place names that appear to be of *Polynesian* origin, such as *Tongariki*. I have already pointed out (Geraghty 1994, 238–239) that some place names in *Kiribati*, such as *Tabiteuea*, *Muribenoa*, and *Nukumanu*, appear also to be of relatively recent *Polynesian* origin.

The suffix *-(C)aga*

The nominalizing suffix *-(C)aga* parallels *-(C)a*. The meaning is exclusively locative in *Fiji*, but more general in *Rotuma* and *Polynesia*.

Although bisyllabic nominalizations are common in *Polynesian* languages, only a few can be reconstructed for *Proto Polynesian*, for example:

*kainaga “social group” (*kai “to people a place, occupy, inhabit” or *kai “eat”)

*moheraga “sleeping mat” (*mohe “sleep”)

*taulaga “anchorage” (*tau* “come to rest”)

In *Rotuman*, the bisyllabic nominalizer is always *-aga* (i.e. with no initial consonant) and occurs in a small number of words with locative/instrumental meaning, for example *pūpūaga* “slope, descent” from *pū* “descend”, *ūaga* “wind shelter” from *ū* “shelter from wind”, and many gerunds (e.g. *rēaga* “doing” from *rē* “do”) (Churchward 1940).

In central *Vanualevu*, *Fiji*, the reflex is *-(y)aga* and it is restricted to a small number of words, all with locative meaning. The following are from *Drakaniwai* (*Nabalebale* of Geraghty 1983): *moceaga* “sleeping place” (*moce* “sleep”), *’ixoyaga* “sitting place” (*’ixō* “sit”).

Place names with -(C)aga

In contrast to the monosyllabic suffix, place names with the bisyllabic nominalizer are restricted to eastern Fiji and Polynesia. Examples from New Zealand Māori include *Hokianga* “turning-place”, *Takahanga* “track”, *Tauranga* “anchorage” (Hawai’ian *Kaulana*), *Tirohanga* “view” (Hawai’ian *Kilohana*), *Waeranga* “clearing”, and *Whitianga* “crossing” (Reed 1961; Pukui, Elbert, and Mookini 1974). In Fiji, they are extremely common throughout Vanualevu, e.g. the villages of *Baleaga* (“crossing-place”) in Vatuova, *Nakayaga* (“fording-place”) in Koroalau, *Namotuyaga* (“slaying-place”) in Dreketi, and the headland of *Kaciaga* (“calling-place”) near Dawara.

The former extent of this bisyllabic suffix is suggested by a small number of place names in other parts of eastern Fiji: *Naikaleaga* (“anchorage”) in Kabara Lau, *Suliaga* in Beqa, *Nabaleaga* (“crossing-place”) near Navunikabi Namosi, and *Naikaciaga* (“calling-place”), a headland of eastern Vitilevu opposite the island of Qomā where islanders used to stand to call for a ferry to take them home.

Most intriguingly, there are two mountains in Fiji named *Tavuyaga*, one in northeast Koro and the other in southwest Taveuni. Like the previously mentioned *Tavua*, these place names can be analyzed as meaning “burning-place”, hence “volcano”; and it has indeed been determined that volcanic eruptions occurred in Taveuni as recently as 340 years BP (Cronin and Neall 1998). Distributional linguistic evidence (i.e. the more restricted area in which the bisyllabic suffix is found) also suggests that places named *Tavuyaga* were named more recently than places named *Tavua* – a nice example of place name stratification (Bender 1970, 166) (i.e. analyzing place names to determine which were coined earlier and which later). The same stratification is suggested by the fact that the bisyllabic suffix is not found in place names of wider reference, being largely confined to small islands and tracts of land.

Conclusion

Thus we can see that, since place names reflect prominent features of a place when it was named, if the feature is no longer prominent or entirely absent, there must have been a change in that feature. For example, places in Fiji that were named *Tavua* were so named because they were, or perhaps resembled, volcanoes, which therefore must have been active to some extent three thousand years ago, although there are no active volcanoes in Fiji today.

In addition to vulcanology, there is clearly tremendous potential here for any discipline that is concerned with the prehistory of the Pacific. For example, there is a reef off the coast of northern Vitilevu, near Yaqara, called *Namuka*. Since *Namuka* means “place of mosquitoes”, and mosquitoes are not normally found on reefs, then a possible inference, which can be tested, is that there used to be a mosquito-infested island there. If archaeologists are looking for an adze quarry in Fiji, then the island of *Kiā* (perhaps meaning “place of adzes”) would be a sensible place to start. Similarly, natural historians may be able to explain why (and when) *Manu’a* in Taveuni and *Manu’a* in Samoa seem to have been noted for jungle fowl, why *Vutuna* and *Futuna* were noted for Barringtonia trees, why *Kanacea* was noted for mullet, *Katavaga* for frigate birds, and so on. The names

Votua and *Galoo* also present a challenge, implying as they do that tectonic movement was observed after the settlement of Fiji.

Indigenous place names, and their etymologies (as determined by historical linguists), are therefore a valuable resource for archeologists, historians, geographers, and geologists.

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Notes

- ¹ This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented in May 2001 at a conference in Marseilles on “Cosmology and Society in Western Polynesia (including Fiji)”, and published in *Rongorongo Studies* (Geraghty 2001).
- ² An “allomorph” is one of two or more spoken or written forms representing a particular unit of grammar smaller than the word, e.g. *-en* in *taken* and *-ed* in *removed* are among the allomorphs of the past participle.
- ³ “Nominalization” is the process by which a noun is formed from some other part of speech.
- ⁴ The symbol * in historical linguistics is used to indicate a form that has never actually been heard or written, but which is inferred or reconstructed in a protolanguage on the basis of available evidence. Note also: Standard Modern Fijian has five pairs of vowels, long and short /i, e, a, o, u/, seven diphthongs /iu, ei, eu, oi, ou, ai, au/, and 18 consonants /p, t, k, ^mb, ⁿd, ^ŋg, f, s, β, ð, m, n, ŋ, ^rr, l, r, y, w/. Orthographic b = /^mb/, d = /ⁿd/, q = /^ŋg/, v = /β/, c = /ð/, g = /ŋ/, d = /^rr/, j = /tʃ/, and y = /j/. Orthographic vowels with a macron (e.g. ā, ē) indicate a long vowel. These orthographic conventions are also used in this paper for other Pacific languages.
- ⁵ A “reflex” is a word, part of a word, syllable, etc. derived from an earlier form.
- ⁶ A “locative” has the function of indicating location.
- ⁷ A closing quotation mark ’ word initially or medially is the orthographic symbol for a glottal stop (indicated in phonetics by [ʔ]).
- ⁸ The symbol < means “derived from”.
- ⁹ k.o. “kind of”.
- ¹⁰ “Reduplication” refers to the exact or partial repetition of a word, syllable, or phrase in order to express a grammatical feature, as, for example, in the formation of the plural.

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