

**Across the bridge:
Polokwane Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa
from dependency to autonomy**

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Abstract

The authors analyse and discuss the history of an important “Dutch Reformed Mission Church” congregation since its inauguration under the first DRC “foreign” missionary, Stephanus Hofmeyr, in the late nineteenth century until today. They argue that it was a typical “mission church” congregation, suffering under white paternalistic authority and developing the typical ‘dependency syndrome’. It changed drastically in the era after 1994 and today the congregation has developed full autonomy and independence; also in financial terms. The authors see this as one of two possible models for church formation in the DRC in a democratic South Africa.

Introduction

Present-day Polokwane (previously Pietersburg) is the capital city of Limpopo Province, South Africa. It is a big, bustling and cosmopolitan urban environment, the biggest northernmost city of South Africa – centre of a big farming district with numerous game farms and reserves; therefore a centre of tourism. On 4 August 2013 the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) congregation of Polokwane inaugurated a big, impressive church complex in one of the new upmarket suburbs of the city, called Serala View. This article deals with the new development which is indicative of a change in ecclesiological understanding in the so-called Dutch Reformed family of churches in democratic South Africa (post-1994).²

This area looked very different in 1886 when Reverend Stephanus Hofmeyr arrived there as the first Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) missionary in 1886 (Polokwane 2013:4). At that time the body politic of South Africa consisted of two British colonies, the Cape Province and Natal, and two independent autonomous Boer³ republics, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic.⁴ The Orange Free State basically covered the area north of the Gariep River (border of the Cape Colony) to the Vaal River, and the ZAR covered the area north of the Vaal River to the Limpopo River (eventually the Zimbabwean border). The area where Hofmeyr settled, broadly indicated as “the Soutpansberg” (in the far north of the ZAR), was mainly inhabited by various black ethnic groups, among whom Afrikaner hunter-stock farmers (basically “trekboers” or nomadic farmers) had settled here and there. There were few white settlers and the Soutpansberg area was still considered “foreign land” by the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the Cape colony (the only established synod of the DRC at the time). As a result of the awakening of a wave of missionary enthusiasm in the 1860s, the DRC (under the inspiring leadership of Dr Andrew Murray jr) decided to start “foreign” missions – that is to say, missions outside the area of predominant white settlement (cf. Saayman 2007:50–55). Reverend Stephanus Hofmeyr was the first person to present himself to fulfil this calling, and he was sent to settle in the vast, unevangelised area in the 1860s (Du Plessis 1911:284–287).

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² The term “family of churches” is problematic for various reasons, which we will not entertain here. The 4 churches involved are the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), the Black African Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Indian Reformed Church in Africa (RCA).

³ In this instance *Boer* (capital B) is used to designate a specific ethnic group, the Dutch-Afrikaner colonists who migrated to the non-British area north of the Cape Colony in what became known as the Great Trek since 1834. The word *boer* (lower case) in Afrikaans also simply means a farmer.

⁴ In Dutch, the official language of the colony, the name was written as *Zuid-Afrikaans Republiek (ZAR)*, and this is how we will refer to the state.

The founding of the congregation

Around 1887 Hofmeyr proposed that the main congregation, Kranspoort, be divided into three congregations in order to promote greater outreach. In 1890 the congregation which would eventually become the Pietersburg congregation was established with the first missionary, Reverend SP Helm, stationed at Ga-Molepo (Polokwane 2013:4). Reverend Hofmeyr had already drawn the attention of the sending church, the DRC in the Cape, to the vast, unevangelised area to the north of the Limpopo River across the Soutpansberg mountains. When the dynamic Doctor Andrew Murray junior visited the Soutpansberg mission in 1886, Hofmeyr used the opportunity to prompt Murray to get the DRC involved in missionary work among the Shona people of Rhodesia (Saayman 2007:52–53). Helm made an exploratory journey as far as Great Zimbabwe, and in 1889 attended the Cape DRC synod in person and called on the church to start with mission work in Zimbabwe. In 1891 the first DRC missionary, Reverend AA Louw, accompanied by black evangelists in the employment of the Soutpansberg mission, went to start the first station at Morgenster near Great Zimbabwe via the Soutpansberg. We recount these events to indicate the important facilitating role the congregation of Polokwane played as gateway to DRC 'mission fields' in foreign areas to the north (Du Plessis 1911:287–290).

The growth of the congregation followed the typical pattern of its time: a missionary at a central location, making evangelistic forays into the surrounding area, establishing “outposts” of the congregation; and recruiting and appointing indigenous workers to provide in the spiritual needs of the new searchers and converts (Polokwane 2013:4–5). Owing to the diligent work of these indigenous workers, and the organisational system put in place by hardworking missionaries, the congregation grew quite rapidly and by 1914 recorded a total number of 670 confessing members.⁵ As was the case in all the contemporary 'mission congregations' in the interior of South Africa at the time, most of the evangelising and training work was done by indigenous workers, mostly called “evangelists” – men (in those days all of them were men) who could preach, do house visits, pastoral work and catechesis, but were not allowed to administer the sacraments (baptism and holy communion). Very often little is known about these early indigenous pioneers (as a result of the racist hierarchical organisation in the church), but the Polokwane congregation did pioneering mission historical work by gathering as much information as possible about the pioneers and published their full names and work stations in the brochure published at the inauguration of the new church complex at Serala View in August 2013 (Polokwane 2013:14–25).

Nineteenth century mission and the dependency syndrome

It is, of course, impossible to discuss Christian mission work in the nineteenth century in separation from the colonial project. As in other parts of the world, Christian mission work in South Africa was totally entangled with first Dutch and later British colonialism (cf. Saayman 1991:22–35). And, as Bosch (1991:298) states, mission work at the time was grounded in the concept of manifest destiny which, proceeded not only from the assumption of the superiority of Western culture over all other cultures, but also from the conviction that God, in his providence, had chosen the Western nations to be the standard-bearers of his cause, even to the uttermost ends of the world, because of their unique qualities.

Proceeding from this ingrained sense of election and superiority on the side of the missionaries in terms of both culture and faith, and the presupposed inferiority on the side of the 'objects' of mission, it was understandable that Western missionaries considered themselves to be guardians of the “undeveloped, childlike” people of Africa. This implied that the missionaries had the education and wisdom to take fundamental decisions (e.g. around issues of church planning and formation), and also the responsibility to take financial care of their “charges”. The missionaries were obviously remunerated by the sending church (the white DRC) as were the buildings erected at the various outposts and the appointed evangelists. This course of action was totally self-evident in that time and place – colonial Western powers were clearly “superior” (in contemporary terms) in terms of technology and education; and so much wealthier in monetary terms that it was a matter of course for the Western missionaries to take the lead. What the missionaries did not foresee was the culture of dependency which would not only develop, but would actually be promoted on this basis of superiority/inferiority. Any convert engaged in carrying out a specific task expected to be remunerated for this “work”. And if a building had to be erected it was the responsibility of the “mother church” to provide the financial means.⁶ As a result of this state of affairs, “native Christians became both spiritually and materially dependent upon European or American missionaries” (Beyerhaus 1988:28). As Beyerhaus indicated (:29), this

⁵ That is to say, members who had passed through the extensive process of catechism after baptism, and made a public confession of faith before the congregation.

⁶ As proof of this “dependency syndrome”, one can refer to the reality that in 1997, more than a century after its founding, the Polokwane congregation contributed the grand total of R37,000 to the finances of the congregation – not enough even to remunerate 1 minister, let alone all the other expenses of the congregation (Polokwane 2013:12).

“paternalistic system” was a recipe for disaster, “for it doomed the work to complete stagnation as soon as the sending bodies should have exhausted their resources of personnel and funds”. In other words, one can say that it was a disastrous recipe for ongoing dependency which could do nothing else but lead to a dependency syndrome in the younger churches. The understanding and process sketched here certainly characterised missions efforts in the DRC and in Polokwane. The all-powerful white “mother church”, as the God-appointed guardian of the “childlike natives”, was regarded as a source of funding if the “mother” could not provide, then the “children” had to go without.

Polokwane in the days of the Group Areas Act

The consequences of the universal dependency syndrome on younger churches in South Africa were bad enough in themselves. Yet in the peculiar socio-political context of pre-1994 South Africa, the results were aggravated by the racist ordering of the political economy. It is general knowledge that apartheid brought total racial segregation in all areas of human life in South Africa. What is sometimes not so well known is that racism, as a fact of everyday life, long preceded National Party rule and apartheid; indeed, it was an inherent part of the Dutch and British colonialist heritage (Saayman 2007:20–21). This early heritage was reinforced by the nascent mining and industrial conglomerates (mainly of British origin) after the discovery of diamonds and gold in the interior of South Africa in the late nineteenth century (cf. Saayman 1996:3–5). These early developments culminated in the nadir of human relations in South Africa: the infamous Land Act of 1913 which limited black ownership of land to around 13% of the total area (cf. Saayman 1996:4). For the members of the congregation of Polokwane (then Pietersburg) it meant that they only had limited access to small, isolated pockets of land in designated areas in the urban environment, the “native location” (Seshego) the rural areas, in certain “native reserves” and on farms where they could stay as workers. This determined the central location of the Polokwane congregation in Seshego⁷ with six 'outposts' in areas of native settlement.⁸ So, the congregation was firmly pushed into the “black corners” of the vast area opened for the gospel by Stephanus Hofmeyr.

One of the consequences of racial separation in every area of human life in South Africa, most prominently incarnated in the racially separated residential areas of the Group Areas Act, was racial separation in Christian life and worship. The DRC obviously sanctioned racially separated churches (cf. Saayman 1979), but the National Party wanted its apartheid policy to enforce racial separation, at least in worship, even in the so-called “multi-racial” churches (such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and a few other churches). So, the National Party government passed a law which expressly prohibited interracial worship in proclaimed white areas (cf. Saayman 1993). This law was most probably never enforced (ibid.), but it clearly stated the dominant policy: no black worship in white residential areas. The problem was that there was no such thing as a lily-white 'residential area' even in the days of the most stringent enforcement of apartheid laws in South Africa. In the majority of white residential areas, but especially the more affluent ones, every white family employed at least one black domestic worker who was supposed to be on duty before breakfast until after supper at least every weekday. Since most black townships (such as Seshego, in the case of Pietersburg) were situated quite a distance from the white residential areas, and there was no dependable system of (racially separated) public transport, it was very difficult for the black women (domestic workers) to be at work early enough in the mornings and find transport back to their homes at night. So, another one of the peculiar apartheid institutions developed: the white government was only willing to give residential permits to the domestic workers (no spouses or children were allowed to accompany them) to live in designated 'servant's quarters' in the backyard of white residences so that the domestic workers could be at the beck and call of their white overlords from sunrise until after sunset. Most of these domestic workers only had one weekend per month free, so if they wished to participate in worshipping with her faith community, they were faced with serious problems on the other three Sundays of the month. Pietersburg was mainly populated by Afrikaners; and their customary habit is that the Sunday lunch is the main meal of the week. That is when the whole family would be expected to be present, as well as close friends and other guests. It was obvious that the domestic worker therefore had her work cut out on a Sunday morning: while the white family attended church, the domestic had to prepare the sumptuous lunch to be celebrated afterwards (cf. Saayman 2009:134–135). Such a sumptuous meal obviously left a lot of dishes to be washed and a lot of cleaning up to be done. This was also the responsibility of the domestic worker. So she would be fortunate if she could be free of duties by 15:00 on a Sunday afternoon. As a devout Christian (as most of these workers were) where to now for community of faith?

By the 1960s Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA – the DRC mission church for African black people) congregations in the black townships were officially linked to the white DRC congregations in the “white” towns. In fact, the DRC congregations generally paid the salaries of the (at that stage, generally white) missionaries working in the townships. So, the missionaries could easily work together with the white

⁷ In the case of the Polokwane congregation, it was the “Pietersburg” congregation, until 1973 when it was moved to Seshego under the auspices of the Group Areas Act.

⁸ The outposts are: Blood River, Ga-Chuene, New Lands, Ga-Teffo, Ga-Mashashane and Ga-Maja (Polokwane 2013:19-25).

congregations and their members. The DRC developed two ways of ministering to the domestic workers in the “white” part of town: they arranged worship services on Sunday afternoons in the garages of white members; and in big cities like Pretoria, they even arranged services in the open air in parks. This was the only way for DRCA (nowadays URCSA) members of Polokwane who were working as domestic workers in “white” Pietersburg to worship together with some of their own on Sundays.⁹ This was obviously a very unsatisfactory solution; the domestic workers basically never had the opportunity to worship with the members of their congregations; and serving the sacraments was quite problematic.¹⁰ Apartheid as political policy, and “religious apartheid”, in the cloak of racially separated churches, were so closely linked together (cf. Saayman 2007:69–72) and upheld with such legal, economic and political power that it seemed impossible for the inherently ‘inferior’ mission church ever to change this situation.

A new dawn: the end of apartheid

As could be expected, the end of apartheid, which was officially announced by the last white President, FW. De Klerk, in parliament in February 1990 and institutionally executed in the first democratic and non-racial elections in April 1994, brought wholesale changes. This was the case in ecclesiological terms especially in the family of Dutch Reformed churches, because of the close affinity and symbiosis between white state and white church (cf. Saayman 2007). Official negotiations about church unification between the DRMC, the DRCA and the RCA had already started in 1987 as an initiative of the DRCA (Saayman 2009:142-143). Eventually this would lead to the reunification of just two of these churches, the DRCA and the DRMC in 1994 as the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA).¹¹ In the light of the racial segregation of townships for Africans and Coloureds compelled by the Group Areas Act, former DRCA and DRMC congregations in the same urban areas (such as Tshwane, Polokwane, Cape Town, etc.) became sister congregations of one church divided by apartheid social planners along arbitrarily established geographical lines. It is also clear that congregations of the new URCSA could now be established legally in the old “white” residential and central business district (CBD) areas. This obviously calls for new thinking about practical church formation: how could the old racial and geographical divisions be overcome and fully integrated new congregations of URCSA be established?

At the moment we are aware of two models in the Dutch Reformed “family of churches”. The first one is where an URCSA congregation took over the buildings of an existing DRC congregation in the previously white CDB of Tshwane (Pretoria) where the majority of white members of that congregation had moved to outlying new suburbs as a result of the “Africanisation” of the CBD. We refer to the URCSA congregation of Melodi ya Tshwane in the centre of Pretoria (Saayman 2010). The other model is the establishment of a URCSA congregation which had previously existed in the black township, in a newly developed non-racial suburb in an area which would previously have been all-white, as in Serala View in Polokwane. This implies acquiring expensive new premises in an area where the establishment of a black church of the “family” of Dutch Reformed Churches would previously have been unthinkable. In this sense URCSA Polokwane has truly “crossed the bridge”, and opened up new possibilities of autonomous and independent church formation. The pattern in DRC mission was set very firmly; it simply followed the state in its policy of “group areas” for different “races”. So the clear understanding was that whites would have their own churches in white areas, and blacks would have their own churches in black areas. It was not even worthwhile for the black congregation to attempt to procure a stand in the white part of town to build their (black) church. Since 1994 things have changed somewhat in the cities, where some URCSA members moved into previously white group areas and started attending worship services in previously white DRC churches. But in the rural areas the situation was quite different: black Christians were not really encouraged to attend the white church, so they had to make the long trek – “across the bridge” – every Sunday to be able to worship in their church of choice. Therefore, the second model presents a real break from the historical model of Dutch and Uniting Reformed church formation: how and why did it become possible?

The stirrings of change: “Across the bridge”

One can trace back the clear signs of a new attitude to the late 1990s. Reverend Thias Kgatla was called to become the minister of the congregation in 1997. After his induction service, the congregation gave him gifts: a wheelbarrow, a pair of overalls, and a pick-axe, with the injunction: “Reverend, get to work!” The desire for

⁹ White DRC congregations did not allow black worshippers in their church buildings. So the DRCA members could not worship with their employers.

¹⁰ The reigning practice in the DRC requires that the sacraments be served in a full worship service under supervision of the church council. So separate serving of the sacraments for individuals rarely took place.

¹¹ Since 1994 the congregation of Pietersburg thus became a congregation of URCSA, and when the name “Pietersburg” was officially changed to “Polokwane”, it became the URCSA congregation of Polokwane. This is why we are dealing in this article with the URCSA congregation of Polokwane (previously the DRCA congregation of Pietersburg).

change was inspired by the struggle, sweat and sacrifice the black people had to endure in crossing endless metaphorical bridges created by the apartheid establishment. Apartheid created chasms and gulfs between “races”, forcing black South Africans to cross endless bridges in any effort to enter the mainstream economy. These bridges are, among others, geographical (black children had to travel long distances in order to access quality education); economic (whites have more economic power in their white enclave than blacks on the periphery); ideological (overcoming the invidious indoctrination that blacks have been created as inferior to whites and so forth) In the completely new South African context created by the democratic elections of 1994 and the implementation of a new Constitution in 1996, the members of the Polokwane congregation had become aware that the bridges could be crossed.

It was in this new set of circumstances that Reverend ST Kgatla¹² was called to be minister of the URCSA congregation of Polokwane in 1997. The new approach he would follow in his ministry in Polokwane was foreshadowed already in his doctoral thesis (Kgatla 1992:16) in which he clearly stated his conviction that the DRC missionaries to the Northern Sotho people had not succeeded in “communicating the Christian message of salvation effectively” as a result of “cultural superiority and the strong Reformed view of orthodoxy which was not sensitive enough to the [current] existential needs” of the people. He was convinced that issues such as liberation, social justice and black empowerment were neglected and undervalued (Kgatla 1992:17). This was so because

Beyond the positions held by white and black missiologies which hitherto have occupied the attention of many South Africans, lies a missiology which is capable of taking a hard look at itself and also at others. It transcends ideological limits imposed on the church during the course of history (Kgatla 1992:iii).

This missiology Kgatla (1992) called *a missiology of self-transcendence*. It is supposed to be a missiology which could enable disenfranchised black South African Christians to attain spiritual maturity (Kgatla 1992:321). Apartheid in state and church inculcated a lack of self-confidence, which could only be overcome through “Christian transcendence ... the act of God who comes towards humankind and summons it to his Kingdom” (Kgatla 1992:322). This was and is necessary if the black church is to move into the new (post-1994) future, in order to achieve authentic self-realisation through self-transcendence. This means “self-affirmation and self-love of the individual in the reality of its subjectivity, and realization of its potentiality for objectivity in order to be capable of transcending itself” (Conn in Kgatla 1992:325). It is for this reason that Kgatla (1992:325) concludes that, “the self is not negated through transcendence, but it is realized in its authentic being”. He and his spouse decided to model their mission and ministry at URCSA Polokwane according to this missiology, and the subsequent history of the congregation was informed by this missiology of self-transcendence. As a result URCSA Polokwane started the project *Across the Bridge*¹³ to erect a church building in Serala View and save its members the constant reminder of crossing the bridges to Seshego and other apartheid-created places for church service. “We believe it is a project worthy of support and to encourage other Churches to establish themselves in the heart of Polokwane without apologising for those who do not want us there” (Kgatla 2007).

This essential missionary idealism and motivation would, however, be backed up by a clear and systematic approach to ministry. In his inaugural sermon preached on 27 July 1997 Kgatla (Polokwane 2013:9) declared that he would follow a systematic approach to his ministry, basing his practice on an outcomes-based approach, “striving for results in terms of measurable, achievable and manageable objectives”. In order to achieve this, he divided the traditional DRCA area congregations into small wards of 10 to 12 families each (similar to the well-known cell group approach), increased the numbers of elders and deacons to oversee the change, set financial and spiritual targets for each small ward (based on a realistic analysis of possibilities in post-1994 SA)¹⁴ and instituted a functioning feedback system to test the results. Apart from spiritual growth, the congregation realised a growth in income from R37 000 to R258 000 in one year (:12). By 2013 the total income from all wards amounted to R4 582,000 (:43). Obviously, it required hard work from the ministerial couple, with the support of a motivated church council, to achieve the buy-in from the congregation to make this possible. We do not relate this development to sing a praise song to a few exceptional human beings, but rather to indicate what should be more widely possible in the socio-economic context of the so-called “new South Africa”.

¹² Selaelo Thias Kgatla started his professional life as a Forestry Officer in the (Bantustan) Lebowa government. He studied Theology at Unisa, where he became the first black African student to obtain a Doctorate in Missiology at a South African university in 1992. He served the congregation of Lebowa kgomo before being called to Polokwane in 1997.

¹³ The slogan “Across the bridge” was based on a revision of the Jim Reeves song by the same name of the 1960s (Kgatla 2007).

¹⁴ Polokwane is the capital of Limpopo province, one of the 9 provinces of democratic SA. As such it is the residential area for members of the Provincial Legislature, civil servants in the new provincial authority, entrepreneurs and business people, etc. This implies a greater source of income for an URCSA congregation than had been possible before 1994.

We choose our own path and our own means: autonomy and independence

The inauguration of this new church centre, therefore, implies more than simply taking possession of a functional new church centre. It is indeed symbolic of the emancipation of a perennial foster-child, bound in the chains of racism, coming of age and claiming its autonomy and independence as a mature member of the body of Christ. For this reason this event has implications for ecclesiology and church formation in the mainline/mission churches in South Africa post-1994. We want to draw your attention to the following dimensions:

- 1.1 The widespread dependency syndrome in mission churches in the Third World was without doubt **also** a factor of racist colonialism. One can argue that the early European colonists in South Africa were ethnocentrist rather than racist (Keegan 1996), but developed very rapidly into racist supremacists (Saayman 2007). The generally acknowledged dependency of black South African mission churches can, therefore, not simply be ascribed to some inherent genetic defect in black Christians (as it often is characterised by white South African Christians even today). The development of the URCSA congregation of Polokwane, as demonstrated in the inauguration of the Church Centre in Serala View, is a convincing proof of this statement.
- 1.2 Apartheid in state and church, viewed as divinely ordained trusteeship, by nature inculcated a sense of dependency in black converts. Apartheid was conceived as a total system of both governance and belief, indeed, a life-and-world view. Therefore, white Christians were supposed to be the perennial providers and black Christians the perennial receivers of charitable gifts. The collapse of apartheid was, therefore, in one sense a necessary precondition for a new sense of autonomy and independence to take root among the black members of the “Dutch Reformed Family” of churches.
- 1.3 The collapse of apartheid in itself is, however, not sufficient guarantee that racist fault lines in the South African society and Christian community will correct themselves. Despite an excellent non-racist constitution and government institutions in South Africa post-1994, racism is alive and well in all areas of society (Saayman 2009b). In our opinion, this is the case, because racism, as a social construct, will not disappear of its own accord; it has to be combated by a well-developed and well-directed **anti-racist** programme. The well-established, racially-inspired dependency syndrome will, therefore, not correct itself; the “Dutch Reformed Family” of churches will have to institute a well-considered programme to promote autonomy and independence. URCSA should take the lead in such a programme, and the experience in developing Serala View can serve as an important element in such a programme.
- 1.4 Finally, it is evident that Reverend Kgatla and his spouse played a central role in the developments in Polokwane since 1997 (Polokwane 2013). Yet the story of the coming into being of this unique project should not be regarded as the story of a heroic couple or a uniquely gifted church council. It is, in the end, the story of a **community mobilising for its own liberation**. It was the Latin American Liberation Theologian Leonardo Boff (1986) who drew out attention to the new phenomenon in church formation which established itself in the era of decolonisation after World War II (cf. also Saayman 2009c). Boff (1986:1–23) characterised this new trend as not rotating on “a sacramental and clerical axis”, but centred on ‘a community mobilising for its own liberation’. This ecclesiastical paradigm was centred on “the *human community in a certain, specific place, and with certain, specific needs*, not on some faraway benevolent but unfamiliar fount of authority” (Saayman 2009c:294; italics in the original). Such an approach incarnates autonomy and independence in its very essence, and this is what happened in URCSA Polokwane.

Conclusion

It is self-evident that every aspect of life underwent change as a result of the sea-change which followed on the democratic elections in SA of 1994. This holds true also of church and mission, and is reflected in the comprehensive change which took place in URCSA Polokwane. Church formation in democratic South Africa should, therefore, proceed along different presuppositions than before 1994.

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