

An Account of Music Education in Eritrea

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Abstract

In this paper I talk about some of the people I met in 2000 during a career break spent in Asmara, capital city of Eritrea. Having been a music teacher for a long while, principally in secondary schools, by then I had been doing initial teacher education in music for almost a decade. Although an interesting job I felt the need for a change! My acceptance by the international development charity VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) led to the unusual opportunity to take my particular expertise and experiences as a music teacher to a developing country.

Except for working with individual students themselves, so far as the job I had been designated was concerned, its most interesting point probably came on the first day that I met with the music school's Headteacher and his Deputy. They began by telling me of the earliest incarnation of the music school, which had developed within the revolutionary school set up behind the liberation army's lines during the Eritrean struggle for independence from Ethiopia. I later became aware that a few weeks subsequently I had been introduced to some more of the "Zero School" music students in their current role as the National Marching Band. I began to collect personal stories from this remarkable group, which attracted me both in their own right, and as a chance to learn about ethnography as a research approach in practice. As background I did what I could to try and understand the roles and practices of music in contemporary Eritrea, occasions for which were limited by the state of imminent invasion by Ethiopia, like so much else at the time. In other words I was attempting to identify the various contextual layers surrounding the Band members. It is on these people that I focus my paper.

Background to my story

My association with Eritrea had its roots in my need to take a break from teaching in higher education, after a couple of years which had become increasingly stressful. Without leaving my post that I had occupied 8 years, which I was reluctant to do for a number of reasons, it was difficult to see a way forward until I hit on the notion of taking a career break to do Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). My sister had taught in Kenya for 5 years in the 1980s, initially with VSO, so that I knew something of its reputation and ways of working. An initial enquiry over the summer vacation led swiftly, through a series of phone calls in which the job of a music educator was floated, to an interview and some brief training in adjusting to living in the developing world. Thus by February 1st, 2000, anticipating an 18 month furlough, I found myself in Asmara, beautifully situated in the comfort

of the central Eritrean highlands, “by any standards, a very safe, picturesque and relaxed capital” (Denison and Paice, 2002, p.95).

In fact my stay was cut short by the Ethiopian invasion of Eritrea in May 2000, when all the volunteers were repatriated. Therefore, although I arranged to return a few months later, independently of VSO, I was only able to stay there for less than a year altogether. I have recently been back for 3 weeks, but the cost of travel coupled with limits to the time I can be away from home have so far prevented me from bringing this research to the level of reliability which I should like to achieve. Nevertheless I am keen to draw attention to what I have managed to find out about music in the newly independent state, in this paper highlighting the particular experiences of an exceptional group of musicians trained in western music for specific, politically motivated reasons.

My intention is to introduce Eritrea and its recent history as the context for the distinctive upbringing of the young people in the National Marching Band. I then go on to relate some of the events, attitudes and preferences which a small group of Band members talked to me about. I trust these stories will, in themselves, indicate why I believe they deserve to be told outside their immediate setting. Although I have my doubts about speaking on the Band’s behalf, taking into account both the indefinite travel restrictions imposed by an increasingly repressive political regime and the restraints on the mass media which result from the general low income, along with their keen desire to place their country, its cultures and history in the minds of the wider world, I feel less inhibited than would otherwise be the case. My confidence has recently been increased by the fact that my principal informant is currently well into an undergraduate anthropology degree and has thus been able to turn a professional eye to my limited exposition of the Band.

Eritrea: an introduction

The geography and recent history

The 10 year old country of Eritrea lies along the west coast of the Red Sea, sharing its western border with Sudan and much of the remainder with Ethiopia. The country is about the size of England, with a population of disputed numbers between 3 and 4 million. It ranges from the temperate central highlands, about 3,000 metres at their highest, to the Danakil desert, 75 m below sea level and vying for the position of hottest place on Earth. An Eritrean tourism poster suggests that, travelling from one geographical zone to another, one can experience three seasons in 2 hours!

Eritrea's history only began to diverge widely from that of Ethiopia when it became that part of Abyssinia colonised by Italy towards the end of the nineteenth century. Eritrea remained under Italian rule until the second world war when British forces expelled the Italians, restoring Haile Selassie to the Ethiopian throne and establishing a military administration in Eritrea. After the war the United Nations (UN) was responsible for disposing of the former Italian colonies, with different interest groups lobbying for and against Eritrea's return to union with Ethiopia. Self-administration under a federation with Ethiopia was the eventual outcome in 1952. However, Eritrea's autonomy was swiftly undermined as a result of the United States' support for Ethiopia, such that in 1962 Eritrea was officially annexed as the 14th province of Ethiopia. In spite of Eritrean nationalists' increasing resistance to Ethiopia over the period of the 'fifties, reaction from the international community was not forthcoming, so that 1961 saw the birth of armed struggle to achieve independence.

The history of the various independence factions' successes, failures and in-fighting is at least a paper in itself. Suffice it to say that the eventual victor of the fight for autonomy was the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF): financially supported by the Eritrean diaspora, they became a flexible, effective military force, whilst developing their Marxist philosophy into practical education and healthcare. The impressive ability to "make do and mend" supported these aspects of their self-reliance, with all nine of the Eritrean ethno-linguistic groups (known internally as nationalities) represented in the liberation army, and about one-third of the "fighters" being women. The title "Fighter" was, crucially, one applied to all within the resistance movement, whether soldiers, engineers, teachers or medical staff, for example. Eventually, 1991 saw the defeat of Ethiopia, now ruled by the Marxist, Soviet backed Dergue. Selassie had been overthrown in 1974, and the Dergue's police had subsequently terrorised Eritrean civilians wherever the EPLF was not present. In 1993 Eritrea was recognised by the UN as the world's newest nation state.

Eritrean culture

What more do you need to know about the country and its inhabitants? The people are still largely either semi-nomadic pastoralists (about 1/3) or agriculturalists living by subsistence farming, both livelihoods which have suffered again this year because last year's rains failed. As a result, about three-quarters of the population is currently receiving food aid. The nine ethno-linguistic groups I mentioned above, each of which has a unique history and culture, are far from evenly represented numerically. Roughly half the population is Tigrinian, sedentary, Orthodox Christian highland farmers. The Tigre people, mostly Moslems, who are nomadic by custom, represent a further third.

In spite of the enormous pride in cultural diversity, which impressed me throughout my stays, it seems that only very recently has the notion of making a systematic attempt to collect and preserve local musics been mooted. Possibly because these musics are still seen very much as living traditions, annually demonstrated both there and overseas by Eritrean "Expo" performances, it is only now becoming obvious that some are on the brink of their demise. However, the written form of the last of the smaller languages has only been developed within the past couple of years (in order to meet the need for school textbooks in each mother tongue) so that conservation of arts traditions could hardly be expected to be a high priority. Therefore, although there have been some recordings over the years, they are only very occasionally referred to in the literature and need to be searched for even in Eritrea itself. The musics that I've heard so far lie squarely at the cross-roads between what Nettl et al. (1997) suggest is broadly representative of the Middle East (generally taken to include North Africa where ethnomusicology is concerned) and sub-Saharan Africa, some falling more clearly into one than the other. Add to this the inheritance of the Ethiopian, now Eritrean, Orthodox church, with its musical roots entwined with the Jewish church and a tradition which includes one of the oldest forms of written music, and maybe it's not so hard to see why tiny, diverse Eritrea has barely caught the ear of ethnomusicologists to date.

It should be borne in mind that some 200,000 Eritreans, a significant number given the small size of the resident population, live in Australia, Europe and North America. They are still counted as citizens by virtue of their significant contribution to the nation's taxes. A fundamental difference between these and the Eritreans still living in the country itself, however, is that they have not been caught up in the current mobilisation which has affected some young people since the mid-'nineties and almost all of them for the last five years. The continuing perception of intimidation by Ethiopia, with which neighbour there have been three outbreaks of fighting since 1998, has resulted in most men in their 20s and 30s unable to obtain exit visas, doing their national service either by being retained in vital occupations such as teaching, or in direct military duties. Women have been affected differently, mobilised in times of direct threat, but now mostly working for the government for the national service pay - approximately 10% of a teacher's normal salary. Women married to men on national service, i.e. the vast majority of those in their 20s and 30s who are married, are treated quite differently however. They are expected to be bringing up children, and can therefore work in the private sector or even go overseas. This has led to the situation where marriages of convenience are being contracted, so that at least some family members can go abroad and send home a living wage. With the rate of exchange favouring western industrial countries to the tune of about a factor of 10 -

in other words my teacher's salary here is about 10 times that of a teacher in Eritrea - clearly even a little currency in US dollars, euros or sterling goes a very long way.

Origins of the National Marching Band

Which all brings me to the young people on whom this paper focusses. They constitute the National Marching Band, a group of 40 men and women now in their late 20s and 30s who mostly live in the military camp in Asmara. They represent one of the direct descendants from the performing arts groups formed in the Zero School - the revolutionary boarding "school behind the lines", started in 1974 for orphans, refugees, children of fighters, and those who had run away to join the resistance but were too young to fight (Gottesman, 1998). The school identified those with talent and interest in performing from each of the four sections (sections eventually being nearly 1000 strong each) so that small groups were given special tuition in music and drama in particular, and expected to develop propaganda theatre to perform within and outside the school itself. The cream of these students became one of the performing groups known as "The Red Flowers", a title which has been passed down to a contemporary group of young musicians. Interestingly, one of today's (3rd generation) Red Flowers attended the music school where I was employed, whilst one of my colleagues amongst the six strong teaching staff, now in his 40s, was in one of the original groups.

The young people in the National Marching Band were at the Zero School in the 1980s, so that when liberation came in the early 'nineties they were still only in their teens and early 20s. It was at that stage they were given the option of continuing their music education in more conventional surroundings. In fact, they were the first incarnation of the Asmara music school to which I turned up nearly 10 years later (although it was not through the music school that I came to know of their existence). They had already undergone the dry training in music theory which I subsequently encountered, unaltered from the Italian model on which it was built as I understand it, so here they went on practising their instruments. They came together in various combinations which were always short of appropriate music to play, approaching, with difficulty, western harmony whose conventions are not even hinted at in any of the indigenous musics that I encountered. It was by chance that before going to Asmara I had been in brief email communication with an American volunteer who had worked at the school with some of these people a few years before me. It seemed that the focus of his work had been to try and arrange music for the various instruments so that they didn't simply play in parallel octaves (or 4ths/5ths depending on the instruments' keys). Likewise, the only staff development in which my music school colleagues were interested in working

on with me also turned out to be reinforcing their grasp of diatonic harmony, unlike the pedagogical innovation which I had assumed was wanted, and, in my view, was desperately needed.

After some weeks in Asmara I met some members of the National Marching Band through someone who has since become an important friend, wanting guitar lessons when we first met at a wedding reception. (I mention this latter as a good illustration of the insatiable demand for western music which I encountered throughout my stay.) Not surprisingly perhaps, given both their upbringing in the Zero School, with its isolation from ordinary family life and surroundings as well as its special political orientation, and their unusual training as young propagandists, these musicians were keen to tell their story.

The lives of members of the Band

1. The Zero School

At this point I want to talk about the half dozen Band members who took up my invitation to talk about themselves as musicians. I already knew a little about the former music school within the “school behind the lines” from the Head and Deputy (the former Red Flower) of the Asmara music school where I worked at the time, who had told me about it in some detail on the very first afternoon we had been introduced. Little was I to know that this would probably be the most interesting occasion that we spent together, and that the history of some members of the school, effectively part of the history of formal western music education in Eritrea, would become the focus of my attention and research. The Head, like the other three most active of the six teachers in the school (the others being two young trainees) was an ex-fighter. As such, he had been awarded a sinecure, encouraged by privileges such as owning a car without paying the usual 100% tax to the government, and seemed immune from the need to justify his actions and their outcomes.

The band members, one woman and five men (called here by their initials: S plus F, H, M, M-S, O) each came to where I was living, alone or in groups, willing and able to speak English and, whilst all apparently keen to tell their story, ranging from the relatively shy to outspoken beyond the bounds of what the others considered appropriate. Even within this particular group there was a variety of reasons for being in the Zero School: three had either been born in the field, or had at least one parent there by the time he was in his teens. Both of F’s parents, for instance, had been “martyred”, as was the usual term, by the time he was 6 years old. M simply referred to those days, for which he produced a revealing book of photographs, as being “like a dream” because he was so small. O, from a very remote part of the country, was taken and left there, alone, by his parents, because of the

education on offer. H, meanwhile, a few years older than the others, decided to leave home at 11 when his father's second wife gave birth to a step-sibling, although he admitted that visits from two of his uncles when he had been younger, complete with their long hair and Kalashnikovs, had been an enticing influence. Except for H, the eldest, they had all initially been involved with music within their divisional cultural groups, although just clapping and singing. This move to the separate group hadn't always been such a comfortable experience: two mentioned being very unhappy to begin with because they had to leave their friends, whilst one was angry too, believing that musicians were stupid. He remembered being told "If you don't go you are not going to have lunch here." The others, however, had no difficulty remembering their enjoyment of whatever music was an offer, one recalling hearing the small "pop" group in which H had already been placed on his arrival.

2. The Red Flowers (2nd generation)

The Red Flowers was formally reformed in 1987, the exact date being emphasised to me in the manner of someone's birthday or a first performance of a new musical work. My informants each recalled the tremendous honour of being invited to join, a couple of them highly aware that they were there to represent their particular ethnic group. The students undertook a year of theory, which, as I've already mentioned, seemed to have been just like that which I was currently seeing at the music school as far as I could tell. They were then allocated instruments by their teachers on the basis of their "physical fitness", either upper strings or brass in the case of these six. However, the choice of instrument was contested by three of them. M-S had been left on the krar (a local 6 string harp) after others were given violin, keyboard or brass. He recalled: "At that time I was angry. After 6 months I talked with Z [the leader of the school] and I was crying. 'Why didn't you give me another instrument? Why do you give me a krar?' And after that he gave me a recorder. But still I was not satisfied. After some time we were 7 at the recorder, one by one they left me I was left alone, and I was discouraged. After that I went to X [by then the leader of the school, and later my Headteacher] I liked at the time saxophone - I told him. He told me we are not having more saxophones and I told him give me a trumpet and he gave me a trumpet. I was happy, I was jumping and laughing at that time." Meanwhile O, who started on the viola and was moved to violin, believed that he learned it wrongly as he gets so tense when he plays, and M, given the French horn, would have preferred guitar or drums.

H, the oldest one of the group, was already playing the krar by the time he left home to join the Zero School, and there made his own guitar. He was assigned to the trumpet within the music school, which had only ten pupils at that time. Seemingly his education was interrupted by spells of

“vigilance” duty, i.e. guarding Ethiopian prisoners of war (whom by other accounts, were not usually keen to leave their captivity, where they were treated with more respect than by their own commanders, who were likely to shoot them for their failure). These older ten also helped with the younger musicians, a certain deference being shown to H by the others even 15 years later when I met them all. The song he demonstrated to me, as one of those they had used, had a traditional melody but with words about “the struggle” substituted. Having been assigned to the front, H was eventually returned to the music school on Liberation. Of the original ten, I was told that one went to America and another simply left. He continued to play the guitar to himself, and the trumpet and sousaphone in the band, until he broke his clavicle in a car accident when he changed to the trombone.

3. The National Marching Band

After the country was liberated in 1991, i.e. Ethiopian troops had finally been forced to retreat behind their border, the music students were encouraged to move to the music school in Asmara and most of them went into the National Marching Band shortly afterwards. Anyone without another job or family duties, or even somewhere to live if it came down to it, which was about 2 out of 3, took this opportunity. Altogether 40 musicians moved to the Band, 20 women and 20 men. Naturally the demand for instruments was changed, so that two of the string players amongst my informants changed to percussion, and the third to trumpet. S, the only woman said, “ Teachers don’t allow them to play another [instrument] I would prefer to play the viola. I love the viola because I played it so young and it was the first instrument I played.” It appeared that, so far as she was aware, she had never heard recordings of viola players and that there were no viola players in Eritrea. O, the other percussionist, who had talked about belonging to a string quartet in 1996/97, now focuses on drums. He was especially interested in the traditional drumming which is a feature of some of the national groups. He had tried to notate the rhythms, and was disparaging about the use of drum machines which is endemic amongst popular groups (who rarely have access to real kits). F, the 3rd violinist, had to become a trumpeter, a change which he regretted and talked of with some emotion. As he said, he needed a job, but suggested that the trumpet “it’s like the hammer - a tool - but I don’t feel it like the violin.” At that stage F was completely unable to get hold of a violin or a teacher, and, as it happened, came back and saw me a number of times to find out if I really meant it when I said that I would do my best to get a violin to him in the future. In fact by the time I returned just recently, F had already managed to obtain one by his own efforts, but I understood that he had been angry that I hadn’t found a way to get one to him in the mean time. The violin was clearly the instrument with which F strongly identified as a musician.

Of the other three musicians, both the trumpeters kept on playing, whilst M, the French horn player, had to leave his instrument in the music school and also move to the trumpet. He was not pleased, did not like to Marching Band, and missing his French horn, listened out for it on the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) overseas service. M has since taught himself to play the guitar.

4. Musical Interests

When asked about their more general interests in music, the Band members showed a wide range on the one hand, coupled with frustrations at the curbs which Eritrea's situation puts on their access to resources, and a deep longing to have more opportunities to pursue their activities on the other. Classical music, mentioned by four, and clearly a serious interest amongst a couple of them, specifically covered Debussy (from the French speaker among them) Beethoven, Mozart and Tchaikovsky. M-S said "When I listen to classical music I thought that when I am asleep that I would fly. And sometimes I am happy - I don't know where it comes from." A wide range of contemporary performers and popular musicians were mentioned, from Wynton Marsalis, Nigel Kennedy, John Williams and Richard Clayderman, through Chuck Berry, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie, to Jimi Hendrix, Santana, Maria Carey and Whitney Houston, with the Blues given special attention by three of them. A couple had had musical experience within Christian churches, either Roman Catholic or Orthodox, but three of the remaining four emphasised their freedom from religion, making them typical of "fighters", although unusual amongst Eritreans, as I understand it. So far as exposure and involvement in traditional musics was concerned, they mostly expressed a general interest but had little or no practical experience, and that was far back in their past.

Perhaps it was when we turned to discussing their ideas for their musical future that their very individual take on life could best be detected. O, one of the viola players turned drummer, saw himself, ideally, as a composer, but thought he was too lazy to get on, having only achieved melody writing so far. He had kept the pieces however, saying "I am not the one to decide [if /when he could leave the Marching Band] I'm a soldier. Sometimes regret I know music" going on to talk about its association with the ignorant and handicapped as well as its evil connotations for the Islamic religion. S, the female viola playing percussionist, I later learned was going through a divorce at the time, having also had her only child die in an accident. She said "I love music - I dream about it and my children to do music. There is no more loneliness. Music is life. I would learn about music with a teacher You play whatever you choose. I would teach my friends, my relatives, my children about music, because music is life." F, the excessively extrovert violinist-cum-trumpeter, also stated "I think life is

music. If we have music we have life..." and saw his ideal future in terms of having a teacher. M-S, the former krar player who had been left so cruelly on the recorder before taking up the trumpet, wanted to "play music, not for money, for my fun, my happiness, for my life, for my joy. I want to play a lot of thing, trumpet and piano And I want people who don't know music, I want them to know it, to know the joy, power, satisfaction. But I think people who don't know what music is, they're poor." Personally he would most like to learn jazz "and take classical and jazz to the poor people." My principal informant, M, the French speaking horn and trumpet player who prefers the guitar, would like to be a French horn player in a symphony, or a fantastic guitarist, but was unable to get either books or a teacher. He would like to see a mix of traditional and western music such as that of Paul Simon. M likes music "but it's not easy to have your profession in it - perhaps I could be a business man and play in the evenings". And the last of them, H, the oldest, who had moved from his early days on the krar to a variety of brass instruments, was largely unable to see past the restrictions of a being soldier. "What will be, will be.... Had I the chance to study music, university studies, I would wish that.... I am 30 at this time. Perhaps I can be a business man. I can't imagine it."

Discussion

This is a military band in a military country, and whereas military music is frequently one of the first encounters people have had with their colonisers in the past (Turino, 1997), here there is reluctance to allow this particular group of musicians to progress beyond it. It is much too soon for Eritrea to move away from her newly minted origins: the national government is entirely in the hands of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the political party directly descended from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. President Isaias was the EPLF commander-in-chief, who, after his second 5-year term in office, seems unlikely to step down as the constitution requires, whilst the independent press has been entirely closed down over the last couple of years. The external threat from Ethiopia, although by far the greatest, is only one of numerous disagreements Eritrea has had with its neighbours since liberation; as a very small, very new state, Eritrea believes, probably correctly, that its survival depends on providing an aggressive reminder of its existence to the world at large.

The National Marching Band, like the Red Flowers and other cultural groups, is part of the propaganda with which Eritrea continues to make its identity. The lives of the Band members have been dedicated, since childhood, to being both a part of, as well as telling the national story. If one of the challenges for ethnomusicologists, as Nettl (1983) believes, is to identify communities of

musicians and their borders, here one can see a number of clear borders, like onion skins around the Band: on the outside is the nation state of Eritrea, within which is that part of the society which fought with the EPLF. Within the EPLF organisation was the Zero School, within which were the cultural propaganda groups. From them the music school was formed, from which, in turn, the 2nd generation Red Flowers and, subsequently, the National Marching Band came into being. The National Marching Band and its precursors are, essentially, the community by which these young people have been made as musicians and much else besides. Music for special purposes has brought and held them together. On the one hand they have experience and insight into western music which is outside that of almost anyone else in their country, certainly of their age group: it was no wonder that they should want to talk to me about what had happened to them. On the other hand, not only were they isolated in their specialist upbringing within the music school, within the Zero School, within the EPLF, they are being retained within the National Marching Band, mostly living in barracks even now. The Band is brought out for events such as the visits of international leaders, a rare event for little Eritrea, those occasional national holidays which are not religious, and the University graduation ceremony, the latter being the only time on which I was able to hear them. Consequently, they play together publicly less than once a month on average. In the meantime they practise and teach, like professional musicians everywhere.

The Eritrean government, as I've already mentioned, seriously curtails overseas movement of any of its younger citizens, with those in the military service requiring permits to take time off to travel even to other parts of their own country. The rate of exchange, meanwhile, as I've also explained, is extremely unfavourable to these people who are paid so little in the first place: the country imports very few luxury items such as CDs, radios tend not to be good enough to receive western stations clearly, internet access is limited and very slow, and visiting musicians are alarmingly few and far between. The overall effect is that these musicians cannot exit and little music is able to enter. In other words, having successfully had their appetite for western music whetted, the Marching Band members have it continually frustrated; it has been almost impossible for them to extend their learning in the conventional manner, whether through performance or opportunities to hear others perform.

Evaluation

As I trust I made clear near the start, I am only too well aware of the limitations of this study so far. Perhaps it hardly counts as ethnography, consisting of such brief encounters with those few Band members who have taken part to date (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983) whilst the fact that the

discussions were all in English is also a constraining factor. This latter has been recognised by Vulliamy et al. (1990) when undertaking educational research in developing countries, who suggest that perhaps it can be justified if there are numerous mother-tongue languages to be dealt with, and that English is the language in which the participants are being educated, both true in this instance.

So far as multiple sources of data are concerned I have been limited to semi-structured interviews (backed by recordings and photographs) and more informal discussions with a small number of Band members, as well as participant observation of music classes led by two of them, one with children and one with adults. I have my own notes and journal of course, including contributions from other personal contacts, such as the former volunteer from the music school and the staff members who had also been teachers or students at the Zero School. However I only saw the Band in action on one occasion (also recorded and photographed) and couldn't possibly have entered the barracks. My latest return to Asmara means that I can update some aspects, but even then I was only able to talk with my principal informant in person. I have been able to read a few secondary sources about the country, its history and life behind the lines during "the struggle", recently finding another published book and two dissertations available, but as yet unread. Ideally I still hope that I might be able to talk to Eritreans now resident in the UK who lived behind the lines and can recall the cultural groups there.

Nevertheless, even to have arrived here feels like an achievement for my first foray into this kind of research. The opportunity to reflect upon and begin to analyse the experiences of people such as I met in the Eritrean National Marching Band is one which is quite different from any other I've undertaken. It's a small opportunity to act as advocate for a group, seemingly so privileged from one point of view, yet, from most others, so thoroughly prevented from fulfilling their potential.

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