

## THE CHARACTERS OF THE MODERN IGBO TEXTILE ART

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### **Abstract**

*For almost six decades of its inception, the history of modern Igbo textile art presents no generalized stylistic tendencies. Though style, as a manner of expression or characteristics, could be identified and are consistent and recurring, they are highly individualized, and are not identifiable with any historic period in the decades of modernism in Igbo textile art. However, these individualized characteristics will be assumed, and treated here, as the characterisations of the modern Igbo textile art. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to identify the characteristics of the works of the modern Igbo textile artists, and categorize and study them as the characterizations of the modern Igbo textile art. This study has deduced these characteristics from the conceptual attributes of the works of the individual modern Igbo textile artists. Six conceptual attributes; the ethnocentric, technological, impressionistic, metaphorical, and the painterly and sculptural are identified. Though they are individualized, they nevertheless can be seen as the characters of the modern Igbo textile art. While some of the artists build their concepts on a number of these attributes, others find satisfaction in one dominant area.*

### **Introduction**

The history of the modern Igbo textile art, from its inception in the early 1970s till date, presents a clear-cut periodisation: the Pioneering Period, from the 1970s to 1980s, and the Modernising Period, from the 1990s till date (Dike, 2011). These periods are not stylistic but historical and developmental; based on the changes in the creative atmosphere and on the art terrain. The periodisation is based on the changes in the attitude of the artists, in the words of Arnason (1977) “toward artistic means and issues – toward subject matter, expression, and literary content...and the problem of the nature and purpose of ...” Igbo textiles.

Style, in the words of Rita Gilbert (1998), “is a characteristic or group of characteristics that we can identify as constant, recurring, or coherent.” with the individual or group. Lazzari and Schlesier (2008) also see style as “the manner of expression that is characteristic of art either made by an individual artist or from a historic period or an entire civilization.” With this parameter, there are characteristics and manners of expression which are “constant, recurring and coherent” in the Igbo textile art, but they are only identifiable with individual artists. They are not identifiable with

any historic period or group of artists. These individualized characteristics of the modern Igbo textile artists will be assumed and treated here as the conceptual attributes or characterizations of modern Igbo textile art. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to identify these conceptual attributes of the individual artists and categorise and study them as the characterizations of the modern Igbo textile art.

Six broad characterizations or conceptual attributes of the modern Igbo textile art are identified. They include ethnocentrism, technological, impressionistic, metaphorical, and painterly and sculptural. While some of the artists built their concepts on a number of these attributes, others found satisfaction with one dominant area.

### **Ethnocentrism**

The most fundamental conceptual attribute is ethnocentrism which took its root in Uche Okeke's "natural synthesis", an advocacy of culturalism as the essence of art. More than any other characterization, most of the modern Igbo textile artists have come under its influence. Okeke developed this philosophy during his student days at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He was of the opinion that a work of art must speak of the culture that created it, and that such a culture must be understood for a full appreciation of the work of art. The ideology encouraged the study of indigenous culture and the use of indigenous idioms of creative expression, and experiences as design concepts and elements in contemporary art.

This study reveals two aspects of ethnocentrism: the folkloric and the iconographic. The folkloric derives from imageries from legendary stories and fables. Imageries from stories of the land of the living and the land of the dead have formed the conceptual base of the works of some modern Igbo textile artists who have found in these 'tales by the moon light' limitless sources of creative inspiration.

Iconographic ethnocentrism as a conceptual attribute borders on the use of traditional or cultural symbols of the Igbo in creating modern works of art. Icons like the *Uli* symbols derived from the traditional body and wall paintings, and wood carving became veritable sources of design ideas and motifs. Some elemental forces like thunder, lightning and the Moon and Sun provide sources for this iconography. Some aspects and materials of the Igbo culture like the masquerade tradition, and the relics of Igbo cultural and historical past, represent endless flowing streams of creativity from which the modern Igbo textile art has derived conceptual sustenance.

Apart from public lectures and conferences, Uche Okeke also saw the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka as a breeding ground for his ideology. When he became the head of department in the 1970s, he spared no efforts spreading and inculcating in his students the tenets of his natural synthesis. This is where most of the modern Igbo textile artists got bitten by the bug, because virtually all of them went through Uche Okeke as his students, and students of those he taught. Chukwuanugo Samuel Okeke was not Uche's student but he came on the trail of the influence Uche Okeke left at Zaria when he went to read fine art years after Uche had left. Ethnocentrism or culturalism, therefore, became the major conceptual attribute of the modern Igbo textile art.

Very few modern Igbo textile artists have expressed themselves in folkloric concepts. Uche Okeke as a poet, writer and folklorist does not only create folklores, but the ability to translate them into pictorial imageries is his forte. Using the lyrical

symbolism of *Uli*, Okeke expressed the Igbo folklore in his art, in a new light and showed his passion for *uli* and his cultural background. His *Onwuelo Depart* (Plate 1) a tapestry commissioned by the Federal Government of Nigeria for the Presidential lounge of the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Lagos, is a typical folkloric ethnocentric conceptual attribute of the modern Igbo textile art. Based on one of Okeke's folk tales in his book, *Tales of the Land of the Dead: Igbo Folk Tales*, *Onwuelo Depart* is a romance between an infatuated Onwuelo from the land of the living and a spirit being, a paragon of beauty. Onwuelo's passion beclouded his understanding that his love mate was a spirit. Okeke's other tapestry that typifies ethnocentrism as a folkloric conceptual attribute of modern Igbo textile art is his *Anya Nwammuo (The Eye of the Spirit)*. Also from folk tales, *Anya Nwammuo* eulogises the omniscient attributes of a spirit as superior to human.

Apart from Uche Okeke, the other modern Igbo textile artist who draws creative inspiration from folklores is Ifedioramma Dike. His *Onwuelo* (Plate 2), produced in 1977, is undoubtedly inspired by Uche Okeke's *Onwuelo Depart*, and is based on the same popular Igbo fable, *Onwuelo naba* (Onwuelo go home). With the same story line but now interpreted in batik; Dike's *Onwuelo* has a strong presence of the *uli* symbolism of the Nsukka School, accentuating its ethnocentric conceptual base. Onwuelo and the mythical spirit being in flight are symbolized with the *Okala Isi Nwa Oji* (half Lozenges) *uli* motifs. Perhaps, in *Onwuelo*, the artist tries to draw some relationship between iconography and folklore as ethnocentric conceptual sources of modern Igbo textile art. More than Uche's *Onwuelo Depart*, Dike's *Onwuelo* shows a motion; driven by the kinesis of Onwuelo's infatuation.

The Igbo folklore – *Onwuelo naba* (Onwuelo go back), a mythical story of the land of the living and the dead on which the two works are based, is encapsulated in the lyrical melody:

*Onwuelo naba* (Onwuelo go back)  
*Samala* (refrain)  
*Anyi bi n'Ogbu* (We live in the deeps)  
*Samala* (refrain)  
*Ogbu bu mmili* (Ogbu is waters)  
*Samala* (refrain)  
*Ogbu bu iyi* (Ogbu is shrine)  
*Samala* (refrain)  
*Ogbu bu Mmuo* (Ogbu is Spirit)  
*Samala* (refrain)  
*Onwuelo naba* (Onwuelo go back)  
*Samala* (refrain)

*Onwuelo* is a love story of Onwuelo and a spirit girl who is so beautiful that he, Onwuelo, was bent on following her home against her wish, not knowing that she was a spirit. The love play continued till it was getting late for her to go and dangerous for Onwuelo to go home. She started singing the lyrics, warning Onwuelo of the consequences of following her to the land of the spirits, her home; that they live in a far away land (*Ogbu*) – the deeps. That *Ogbu* is like the ocean, streams or waters inhabited by spirits, used as shrines. It is the land of the spirits (the dead) and, therefore, not for the living. This is the allegory Okeke and Dike aptly portrayed in two different media and

techniques.

Chuwkwuanugo Okeke's designs for printed fabric also show strong ethnocentric or conceptual attribute not only by their titles but also by their concepts. His *Plumage* is inspired by the traditional titles of the Igbo society which are status symbols of eminence. These titles are symbolized by the white feathers of the eagle, the number of which is indicative of the class or type of the society. This attribute is not only reflected in his choice of the eagle's feather as a motif but also the use of the red; the colour of the red caps exclusively worn by the members of these societies. His *Ufie na Uli* (Red and Uli) and the *Uli* (*Beautification*), are also based on concepts from the Igbo cultural environment. The *Uli* is inspired by the traditional Igbo carved doors. It is replete with lozenges and half, lines and slices, uli motifs and patterns commonly found on the traditional Igbo carved doors and furniture. Also important is his use of indigo, green, red, black and yellow; natural and Igbo colours of *anunu*, *akwukwo ndu*, *ufie*, *oji* and *edo* respectively. These local colours like his motifs are also ethnocentric conceptual attributes of Okeke's designs. His other works with ethnocentric conceptual attributes include; *Ikenga*, *Odinani* and *Nsibidi*.

Very strong ethnocentric conceptual attributes, perhaps of iconographic nature are illustrated in the works of Ifedioramma Dike and Sylvanus Asogwa who sojourned into the masquerade traditions of the Igbo people for design inspiration. Most of Dike's visually propelling fibre sculptures are inspired by the tactile, textural, visual and dimensional qualities of various masquerades of the Awka Igbo cultural region. The *Ijele*, *Idu*, *Mbubu Udo* or *Iga*, the *Okwo Mma* and the *Odo and Omabe* masquerade families of the Nsukka Igbo are few of the Igbo masquerades that have provided sources of inspiration for the creation of modern textile works of art..

*Something Binds us Together* is inspired by the male and female 'children' of the Ijele; *Umu Ijele*, rendered in a combination of the techniques and materials of production of some other masquerades. *It's a Sunny day* is inspired by the array of colours and the beautiful appliqué of the Ijele. The *Grandeur* and *The Bull* are also inspirations from the Igbo masquerades tradition. Dike has foraged the landscape of the fast disappearing Igbo culture and tradition in search of the 'lost scrolls' of Uli and Igbo masking traditions in his *Lost Scrolls (Lamentation)*, (Plate 5).

Conceptually, *The Lost Scroll* is a lamentation of the speedy erosion and loss of Igbo traditional values in their entirety, as evident in the fast disappearance of *Uli* as symbols and motifs for body decoration and murals. The dying Igbo masquerade culture is part of this cultural decadence lamented by *The Lost Scrolls*. The loss and erosion of the Igbo culture speak of untold volumes written in these scrolls which, if care is not taken, will remain lost to eternity.

Sylvanus Asogwa has also exploited the *Odo* and *Omabe* masking traditions of the Nsukka Igbo for design ideas and inspiration. *Nwangboto* (Plate 6) has not only been inspired by the masking tradition but the artist has also been propelled by the concept of the beauty of womanhood. *Nwangboto*, which is Nsukka word for beauty, idealises the high point of feminine beauty; the teenage age, the age of puberty during which the maiden is ripe for various rites of passage including maturity. The graphic encapsulation of the summit of teenage rites in *Nwangboto* emphasizes the ethnocentric conceptual attributes of the work and indeed the modern Igbo textile art. Other works by Asogwa driven by this conceptual attribute include the *Wise Counselor II* inspired by the costume

of the *Odo*, the production of which has incorporated the locally woven Nsukka cotton fabric which is the principal covering material of the *Odo*. On its face are two bright starring eyes, suggestive of the wisdom of a wise counselor.

Ethnocentrism as a conceptual attribute of Asogwa's works is also reflected in *The Royalty*. *The Royalty* is a tribute to the *Omabe* masking tradition. The concept is specifically on *Igele Nwoma*, one of the *Omabe* families of masquerades, whose essential features are stylized in this presentation. The *Ichi* facial scarification found on the *Igele Nwoma* is stylized as rays of yellow radiating from the eyes. The white quilted crown is a symbol of royalty and the sacred position of the *Omabe* as an adjudicator and bearer of justice in the Nsukka traditional society. The symbolism of *Ichi* is repeated in the adaptation of the quilted figure of the lizard, on the chest, that symbolizes resilience and self determination. The lizard in its radial form re-echoes the equally radial form of the *Ichi* motif.

*The Mediator* (Plate 7) is crafted after the *Igele Nwoma* mask. By its title, *The Mediator* assumes the symbolism of royalty, ubiquity, sacredness and wisdom of the *Omabe* as a dispenser of justice. The *Ichi* facial scarification typical of *Omabe* is also replicated in *The Mediator* as rays from its red eyes. Perhaps, Sylvanus Asogwa is one of the few modern Igbo textile artists whose works reflect very strongly the ethnocentrism of the conceptual attributes of modern Igbo textile art.

Nicholas Amamchukwu Anozie is one of the modern Igbo textile artists who have been seriously influenced by natural synthesis. The aesthetics of his works and their conceptual attributes have singularly remained ethnocentric. Their ethnocentrism is iconographic. Anozie has such a passion for the relics of the ancient culture of Igbo Ukwu, his home town, that virtually all of his works are inspired by the icons of this Igbo civilization and the uli tradition. His *Ora Eri* (Plate 8), a tie-dyed fabric for a dance troupe in an over-print, is a repository of various types of *uli* patterns which form the motifs of the design. *The Igbo Ukwu Roped Pot*, apart from being a rich collection of uli patterns, is conceptually based on the roped pot excavated by Thurstan Shaw at Igbo Ukwu.

*Ada Emi*, also a fabric produced for a dance troupe costume, falls into similar for conceptual framework. His Dress designs with Uli motifs are for men and women. Most of Anozie's works, being clothing materials, are commercially based, consumable and transient. For this reason, not many have survived. However, the few that are available speak the language of culture inspired by the icons of Igbo civilization.

Diogu has also derived a lot of inspiration not only from his cultural environment but also from other cultures among whom he had lived. For example, having lived in Gboko for several years, his creative output has often been enlivened by the Tiv cultural experience. A series of woven samples titled *Iyese* (Plate 9) is a typical example. Meaning scorpion in Tiv language, *Iyese* is inspired by the Tiv cloth – the Anger, and it is a modification of the traditionally plain fabric

## Technological

A unique conceptual attribute of the modern Igbo textile art is Chukwuanugo

Okeke's invention that brought him within the arc light of modernism in textile art. This was the *Anii loom* that was designed to improve on the yardage or the length of the locally woven cloth. The *Anii loom* has a technological concept. Perhaps, it represents the only technological attribute of the modern Igbo textile art.

### **Impressionistic**

A good number of the modern Igbo textile artists have allowed impressions created by the morphology or external appearances of objects around them to take control of their creative sensitivity. Some of them like Jane Emeafor and Adaobi Olikagu have been inspired by the textural and other visual characters of objects in creating visually propelling modern works of art. They have explored textile techniques mainly for the love of experimentalism, and the tactile and textural qualities of materials and objects. These designers have wondered through the deceptive power of appearances; abstractions and illusion, in search of design concepts and inspirations, and they really found them.

Jane Emeafor got inspiration for many of her works from human and animal bones. The concepts of her works are impressionistic with themes that range from the social to the entertaining, the technological and the natural. Her *Enmity* is on the theme of human relationship illustrated by the counter positioning of two bird-like patterns adopted from modifications of the skull of a rat. The back to back arrangement of the two bird-like patterns suggests disagreement and enmity. Her *African Drummer, Celebration* and *Praise Worship*, are on the theme of entertainment and joy. The *African Drummer* is a batik composition with adaptations of the ribs and other bones of the human body. These bones have been recreated and ingeniously fitted to form the entire body structure and even the drums.

Her *A Bird I* (Plate10), expressing an abstract serene concept is an impression of a bird that has just perched on a solitary landscape. It is an adaptation using the teeth of a dog and the femur of human body. If *A Bird I* is on serenity and solitude, the concept of her *A Bird II* (Plate11) is different. Wild and agitated, composed with adaptations from rat and human bones; *A Bird II* gives an impression of a bird of prey by its gruesome appearance. *A Bird I* and *II* express the dual quality in nature; the calm and the agitated; the serene and the wild. Emeafor has proved her creative forte by employing very effectively a single inspirational source in creating aesthetically impressive and modern works of art.

Adaobi Olikagu, perhaps, is the only truly impressionistic modern Igbo textile artist. The concepts and inspirations of her works are the illusionary and the abstract impressions created by objects and materials. She has been able to explore and exploit various textile techniques and the nature and characters of various textile materials, in creating works that are undoubtedly modern. She has depended almost entirely on the effects created in her vision by her perceived impressions (Plate 12).

Olikagu has exploited the tactile quality of the raffia in creating a three-dimensional and sculptural textile work. More than anything else, her concepts are on achieving sculpturality and three-dimensionality in textiles. Her *Nature's Beauty* is an experiment in the rug weaving technique, conceptually trying to capture the array of nature's beauty in a single snap shot. She has employed the aesthetics of *uli* which the work incorporates, the palette of various colours of acrylic yarns and dyed raffia, and the rhythmic graceful sweeps of colourful raffia, in creating her idea of the beauty of nature.

### **Metaphorical**

Textile art as a satire, a metaphorical conceptual attribute, introduced rather intellectual, nationalistic and journalistic qualities to the concept base of the modern Igbo textile art. Environmental and socio-political problems in Nigeria became resourceful conceptual frameworks for the critically minded modern Igbo textile artists. Artists like Ifedioramma Dike and Ritadoris Edumchieke Ubah see their works as not only objects of beauty but have used them as instruments of social reforms and platforms for seeking for justice, and means of drawing attention to the ills of the Nigerian society. Ubah's textile paintings are journalistic, particularly as her series based on the traffic menace of Lagos are satirical. In diverse themes, these works analytically critique, in a novel manner, with words, dyes, paints and fabrics, the problems and the attendant social ills of the traffic congestion of Lagos metropolis. *Ojuelegba* (Plate 3) speaks of the tragedy of not only the lack of good governance in providing good access and link roads but also the agony of being trapped in such traffic jam.

Unlike Ubah, the concept of Dike's works are not sugar-coated; neither satirical nor sarcastic. Rather, they are outright visual condemnations and brazen critiques of some social ills or state of affairs in Nigeria. Typical is his *The Wings Are There*, inspired by the failed state of the Nigerian nation. The work graphically and symbolically portrays the infinite human and natural resources of the country flowing from the bowls of its earth, the resilience of her people and her gigantic size as the giant of Africa, as her potentials to fly. These 'wings' are there yet she cannot 'fly'. Is it the ineptitude of the leadership, or is her inability to fly because of the unrealistic and unnatural three wings that can never fly; the fragile unity and unholy marriage between the Northern, Eastern and Western regions of Nigeria? But the wings are there, anyway.

### **Painterly and Sculpturally**

Ifedioramma Dike took recourse to the Igbo tradition, and saw in the masquerade culture an avenue waiting for the liberation and modernisation of Igbo textile art. He harnessed the textural, sculptural, painterly and dimensional qualities of the Igbo masquerades which are, in essence and by their materials and techniques of production, textiles works. The result was a series of works that broke the art protocols and changed the entire landscape of Igbo textile art.

Perhaps, very inventive and novel in the growth of modernism in Igbo textile art was the introduction of picturesque and dimensional qualities in Igbo textile art. This was not only for its quaintness or unusualness but for its aspiring to compete with the aesthetic qualities of painting and sculpture. The harbinger of this in the 1970s was Ifedioramma Dike who was followed later by younger artists like Chijioke Onuora (a sculptor) in his batiks, and Rita-Doris Edumchieke Ubah. With these conceptual attributes, these artists produced works that are singularly visually very appealing and impressive. Textiles became painterly and sculptural; not only three-dimensional but also free-standing. They became conceptually intellectual and sometimes abstract, and worthy of contemplation. Textiles works became more aesthetic than utilitarian (Plates 1 to 7 and 9 to 13).

## Conclusion

Five broad characterizations or conceptual attributes of the modern Igbo textile art have been identified. They include ethnocentrism, technological, impressionistic, metaphorical, and the painterly and sculptural conceptual attributes. While some of the artists built their concepts on a number of these attributes, others explored one dominant area. The most fundamental is ethnocentrism which took its root in Uche Okeke's "natural synthesis" that stresses culturalism as very crucial and fundamental, if not the essence of the African art. This study identifies two aspects of ethnocentrism: the folkloric and the iconographic.

The technological conceptual attribute in modern Igbo textile art does not have a wide acceptability. It is the least dominant character of the modern Igbo textile art; only limited to Chukwuanugo Okeke's invention of a modernised vertical loom, the *Anii Loom*. The innovation, though well intended, was not even given a chance by the resilience and resistance to change of the traditional weavers for whom it was meant.

The genre of artists like Jane Emeafor and Adaobi Olikagu are visual impressions created by the external appearances or morphology. Their works constitute typical examples of the impressionistic character of the modern Igbo textile art. They have been inspired by the formalistic, the textural and other visual characters of objects in creating visually compelling modern works of art. They have explored some textile techniques and these visual characters for the sheer love of effects and experimentation. These designers resorted to the deceptive powers of appearances in search for design inspirations and concepts to ventilate their creative urge.

Other characters of the modern Igbo textile art; the metaphorical and painterly were brought to an all-time high first by Ifedioramma Dike and later by Rita-Doris Edumchieke Ubah. Sculptural as a character of modern Igbo textile art was pioneered by Dike. Prior to his experiments, textile was redolent of yardage and functionally utilitarian than aesthetical.

It must be stated, however, for the sake of emphasis, that though these characters are constant, recurring, or coherent and clearly identifiable, they are only so with the individual artists and not with any group or historical period in the modern Igbo textile art. These characteristics, as individualized as they are, have been studied here as the conceptual attributes or characterizations of modern Igbo textile art.

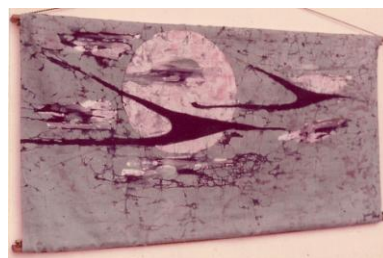




Plate 1 **Onwuelo depart**, (1977)  
210cmX150cm by Uche Okeke.



Plate 2 **Onwuelo Naba** (1977) by Ifedioramma Dike.  
Wall Hanging, batik on cotton. © The artist.  
Tapestry, © The artist.



Plate 3 **Ojuelegba** 180cmX54cm  
by Edumchieke Ubah. Tie-dye and



Plate 4 **Kano on Friday** (75cm x 50cm)  
by Ifedioramma Dike Batik on cotton, fabric ink.  
screen print on fabric. © The artist

Plate 5 **The Lost Scrolls (Lamentations)**, (1989),  
142cmx63cm  
By Ifedioramma Dike.  
Acrylic yarn, cotton twine, plastic rings, wood, appliqué  
© The artist



Plate 6. Nwamgboto (Maiden) (2004), 170cm x 66cm  
By Sylvanus Aosgwa,  
Raffia, acrylic yarn, plastic disc lets, gourd, Upholstery fabric  
© The artists

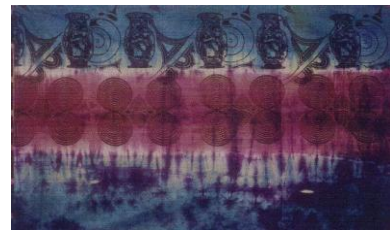
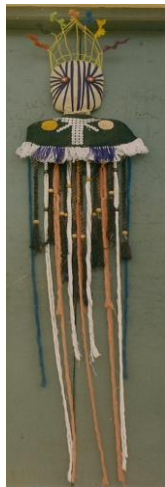


Plate 8 **Igbo Ukwu Roped Pot** (2001)  
Nicholas Anozie.  
Screen Print on tie-dye. © The artist.

Plate 7 **The Mediator** (2006) by Sylvanus Asogwa.  
Mixed media © The artist



Plate 9 **Iyese (Scorpion)**, Sample Anger cloth,  
(1989). By Godson Diogu © The artist

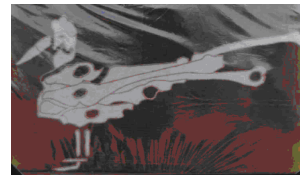


Plate 10. **A Bird** (2005).  
By Jane Emeafor  
Applique on fabric  
© The artist



Plate 11 **A Bird II** (2005) by Jane Emeafor.  
Appliqué on fabric. © The artist.



Plate 12 **The Struggle** by Edumchieke Ubah.  
Fabric ink on polo. © The artist

Plate 13 **Arid Experience**. (2006) 2662cmmX106cm by Adaobi Olikagu  
Raffia, acrylic yarn, jute fabric, cotton fabric and twine. © The artist

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