

CREATORS

Stitching together an archive of an endangered Palestinian art

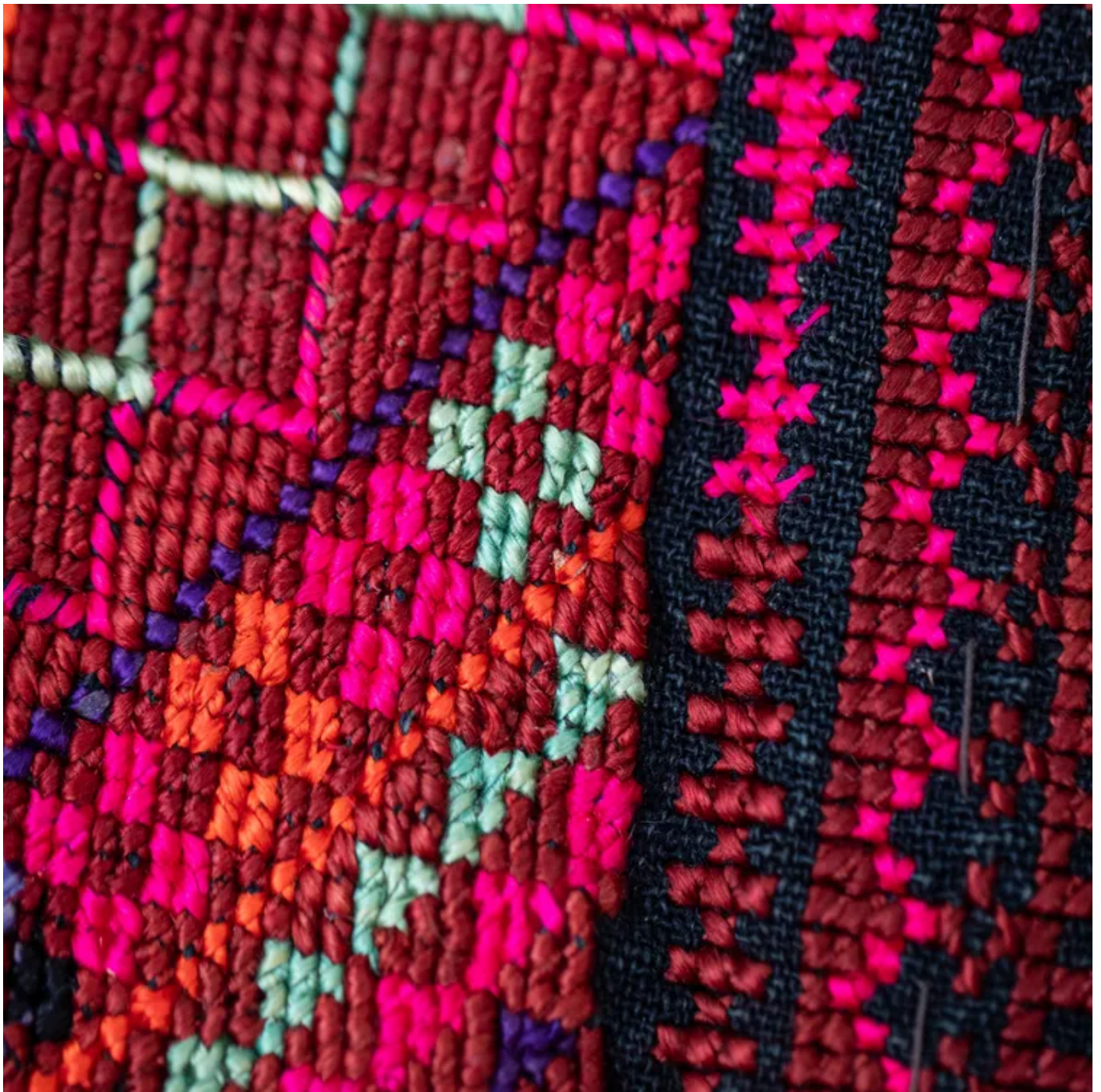
Palestinian embroidery is a centuries-old tradition. Can digitizing hard-to-access patterns help preserve it for a new generation?

By **Mia Sato**, platforms and communities reporter with five years of experience covering the companies that shape technology and the people who use their tools.

Photography by **Amelia Holowaty Krales**

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When Lina Barkawi began making her first thobe, she had no idea it would turn into a two-year endeavor. Barkawi ended up wearing the handmade dress for her wedding — but the traditional Palestinian outfit that she had meticulously sewed and stitched turned out to represent much more than countless hours of work. It brought into focus her own heritage, an endangered art form, and how she might play a role in preserving it.

Barkawi's thobe is pale gray with densely embroidered stitches of orange, green, red, and light blue clustered on the front bodice and running down the sleeves and to the ankles. The Palestinian style of embroidery — called tatreez — is the centerpiece of the dress, designed and stitched to represent Barkawi's heritage and also her personal identity and story. But developing the knowledge and skill to be able to express herself through tatreez wasn't as easy as finding YouTube tutorials or browsing forums, a typical way people learn a craft or art form.



Palestinian embroidery is a centuries-old art form that's passed between generations orally, like from mother to daughter or grandmother to granddaughter. But the art form's survival has become more and more precarious — Israeli militia and settlers have displaced generations of Palestinians, who've fled or were

expelled from their land. The dispossession has made handmade tatreez more and more rare and harder yet for Palestinians like Barkawi to discover and learn from. In that dearth, Palestinians are creating communal resources and digital spaces for each other in an attempt to digitize and reclaim the art form.

“I was super frustrated with the idea that there were not that many resources available to construct my own dress from scratch,” Barkawi says. “I found that to be really upsetting because it’s something so core to our tradition, but it’s not really something that anyone knows about — I didn’t know about it, my family doesn’t really practice it on my Palestinian side.”

One problem Barkawi and other novice stitchers encounter is a lack of easy-to-access high-resolution patterns that show embroidery motifs to replicate. Barkawi says she purchased several expensive pattern books when she first started out but wished they were digital instead.







Several Palestinian dresses with embroidery are part of the collection at Blue: The Tatter Textile Library in Brooklyn, New York.



Barkawi didn't realize it at the time, but a project addressing this issue was already underway and would soon become an indispensable tool for her embroidery.

[Tirazain](#) is a website home to over 1,000 digitized tatreez motifs organized by theme, geographic origin, color count, and how long the project will take. Barkawi now uses Tirazain "exclusively" instead of books, she says.

Seen together, Tirazain's library of motifs is striking; on the black background, the patterns look almost pixelated, evoking characters or scenes you might encounter in an eight-bit game. The archive includes an ornate [al deek \(rooster\) pattern](#), for example, composed of five thread colors and 8,747 stitches. The nature category features patterns for bayt al ankabout ([spider webs](#)), qamar ([the moon](#)), and nakhl ([palm trees](#)), among others.

The stitch patterns were collected by embroidery artist Zain Masri and a group of volunteers who have digitized motifs stitch by stitch since 2021. Now, when a user finds a pattern they want to make, they can download PDFs or other file types with each individual stitch plotted out on a graph. Many of the patterns come from existing pattern books that may be difficult for the community to obtain. (Masri's favorite motif in the collection is al nafoora, or [the fountain](#), which depicts birds and flowers surrounded by cascading water.)

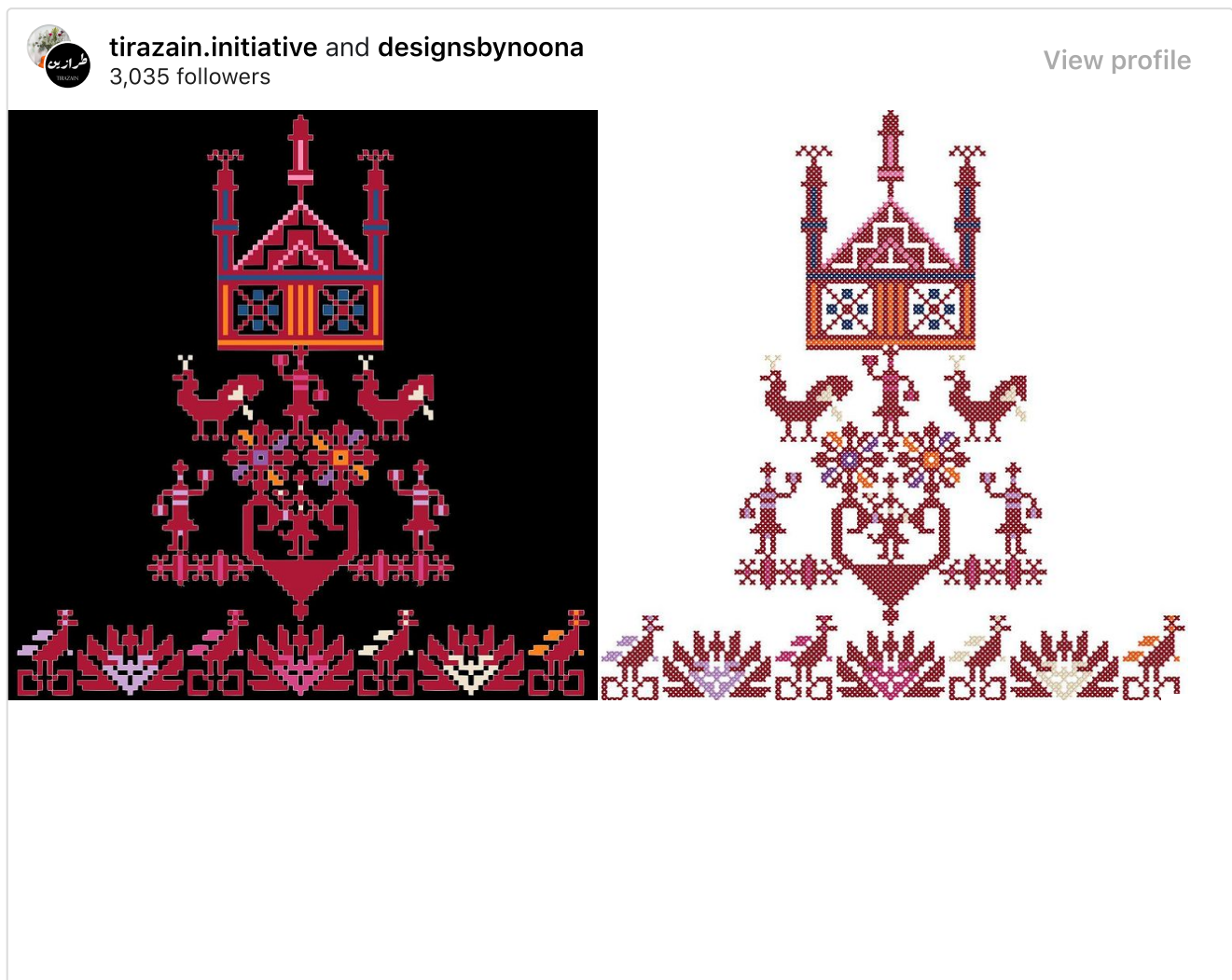
Tirazain's motif archive was digitized stitch by stitch

Masri, whose day job is working in marketing at Google, had learned about needlework from her grandmothers, spending the summer stitching and learning to sew. During the pandemic, Masri's personal interest in embroidery was reignited, and she soon found herself in online groups and scrolling pages dedicated to the art.

"Some would share, let's say, a low-res blurry picture of a cushion or a dress, and they'd say, 'I'm trying to recreate this pattern, but I can't find it,'" Masri says.

“Sometimes people would find bits and pieces, [or] a subset of the motif, but not the full design, and this was a recurring challenge.”

Masri wanted to collect embroidery patterns from books in one place, where anyone could find and use motifs for their tatreez work — especially younger Palestinians whose families may not practice embroidery due to historic mass displacement. The traditional method of sharing tatreez orally through generations doesn’t work if the physical garments a child would learn from have been lost or destroyed.



Tirazain users have stitched patterns on clothing, used motifs in beadwork, and incorporated designs into product branding and logos, Masri says. Barkawi recently used the archive to search regional motifs and created a map of Palestine featuring local embroidery designs.

Tirazain's work is equal parts an effort to make tatreez more accessible and a way to preserve its existence. In 2021, Palestinian embroidery was included in [UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage](#), a designation meant to draw attention to practices or skills so they can be safeguarded. Masri has worked on Tirazain in her free time, self-funding the initiative.

Artists who have taken up the task of protecting tatreez and sharing cultural knowledge approach the challenge in different ways. On Tirazain, for example, Masri has been intentional about including the geographic origin of specific designs — Palestinian embroidery motifs can often be traced back to specific regions or villages, and historically, one could look at a dress and see where its wearer was from.

“The fact that [designs are] clearly attributed to villages and to a group of people is first and foremost really important, rather than seeing the design out of context, maybe on a different platform or elsewhere,” Masri says.

Others, like [Wafa Ghnaim](#), take a more hands-on approach. Ghnaim is a dress historian, teacher, and author of books including *Tatreez & Tea: Embroidery and Storytelling in the Palestinian Diaspora* and has spent years teaching workshops and classes to Palestinians across North America. (Barkawi is a former student.) Ghnaim, whose mother is also a renowned embroidery artist, says the art has always been a part of her life, but it's now become a full-time job. After teaching thousands of people both in person and through Zoom or Instagram Live classes, Ghnaim will begin a fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in September.





Palestinian dresses hang in Blue: The Tatter Textile Library, in Brooklyn, New York

Through her teaching and research, Ghnaim hopes to recover and fortify the lost lineages of embroidery that are the reality for many Palestinians.



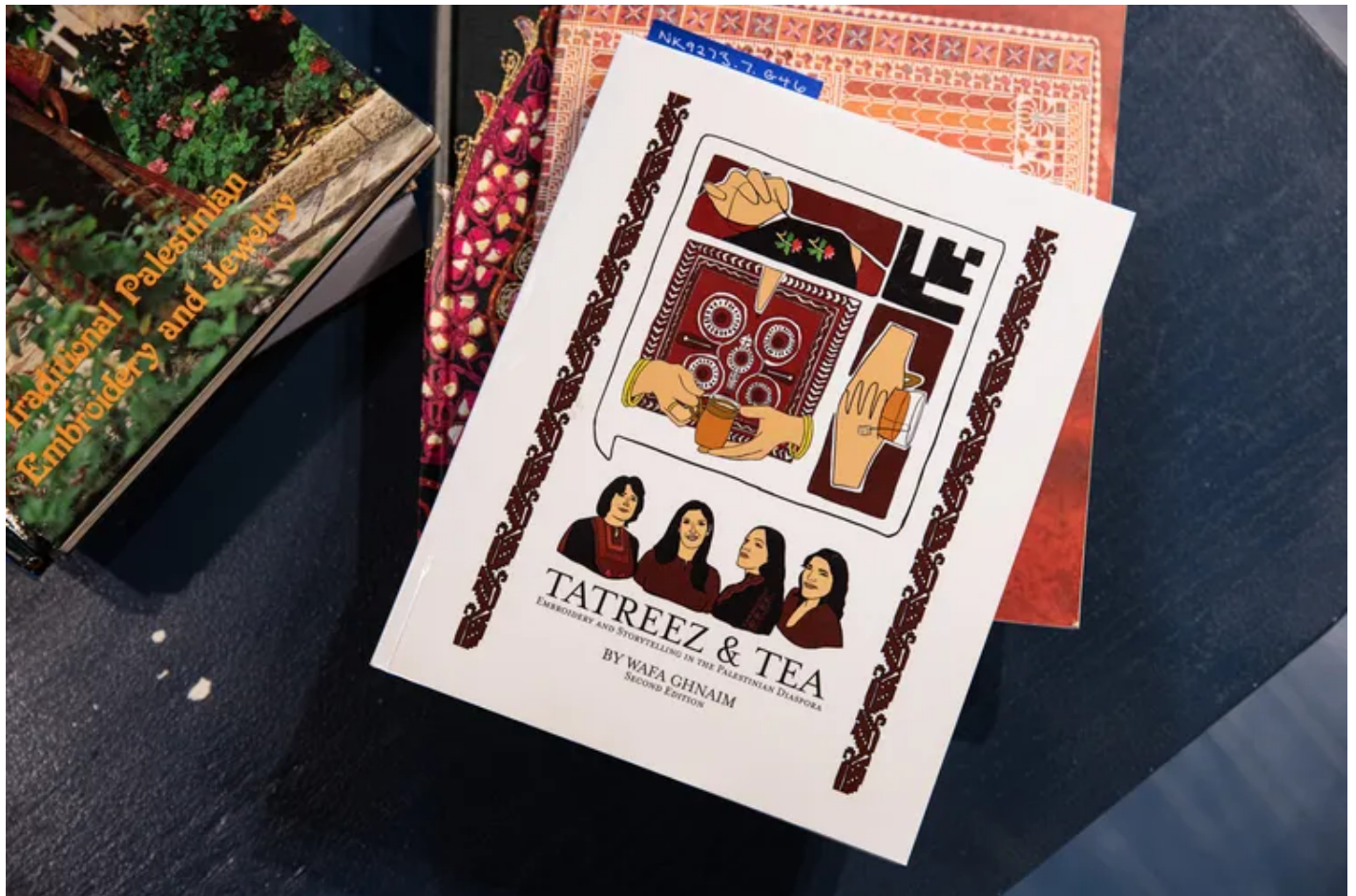
“This art form has been traditionally passed through oral history, and exile, dispossession, war — all of these things has caused this oral history to be compromised or broken for many families,” Ghnaim says. “I have been given the privilege of facilitating that oral history, because this isn’t documented in any book.” Above all else, Ghnaim says, virtual spaces can facilitate the communal practice of embroidery that so many Palestinians have been deprived of.

The art of Palestinian embroidery is vast beyond the documentation available online and in print. Many patterns online, for example, show cross-stitch, a type of embroidery that creates stitches shaped like an X. But there are dozens of traditional stitch types that are used, Ghnaim points out. She emphasizes that the new generation of embroiderers must work to redevelop the skills that their

ancestors had, like being able to recreate a pattern by just looking at an extant dress.

“Our dresses are exiled just like we are... They’re in all of these museums around the world, and we don’t have physical ownership over those dresses,” Ghnaim says.

“What we really need to be digitizing are all the millions of patterns on these dresses that are under lock and key in these museums that we will never be able to reclaim physically.”




Ghnaim's Tatreez & Tea was published in 2018.

Tatreez is an art form but also a language — and like any new vernacular, artists must learn to express themselves and know what they want to say. On Barkawi’s wedding thobe, she stitched palm trees to represent her name; mountains, water springs, and stars to symbolize earth; and unconventional Panamanian orchids in homage to her mother’s heritage. More recently, Ghnaim is encouraging students to stitch resistance motifs that were produced post-1948, when Israeli militaries

forcibly removed and displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes.

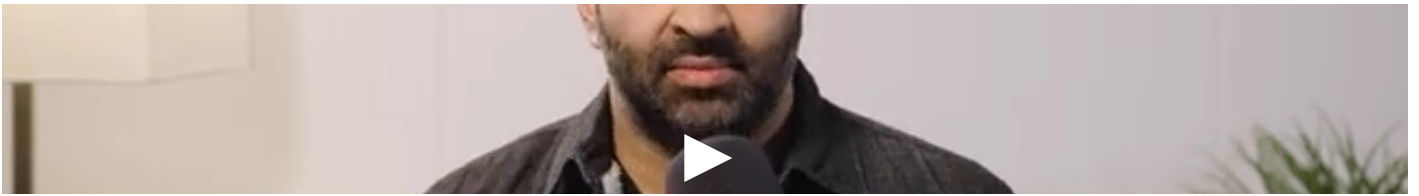
Generations of Palestinians have used embroidery to tell their stories — their religious, political, or national identity, marital status, or their village stitched into their clothing — with each generation having distinct characteristics and styles. The loss of knowledge in the diaspora coupled with the proliferation of machine-made dresses has made handmade embroidery all the more fragile — many Palestinians can't tell the difference between machine stitches and hand stitches, Ghnaim says. Asked what identity and motifs the current era of embroidery has, Ghnaim sounds mournful of what's been lost yet resolute with the promise of what could come.

“I look forward to the day that I can answer that,” she says. 

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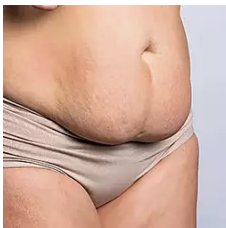


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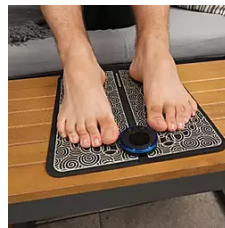
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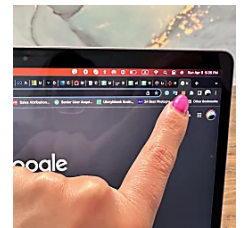
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