

Under Mango Trees

Women in the Sri Lankan Civil War



with

Sathajini
Rammenike
Vijayambikai
Bareera
Ambika

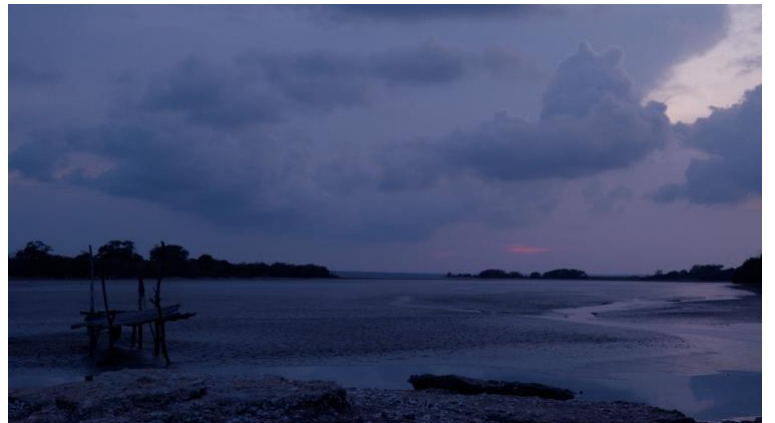
former Tamil Tiger fighter
Sinhalese farmer in the war zone
former Tamil Tiger fighter
Muslim woman displaced by the Tamil Tigers
forcibly recruited by the Tamil Tigers

«Maps are complicated things. [...] They're beautiful, but they can also hide the true ugliness of the world.»

Paul M.M. Cooper, *Changing Faces, Changing Names*.

«The bloodshed of those five months in 2009 far exceeded, in scale and trauma, anything that happened before in Sri Lanka. If the truth is not confronted, another generation of Tamils will inherit the collective trauma that fuels the desire for revenge.»

Frances Harrison, *Still Counting the Dead. Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War*



Credits

Author and Director

Editor
Cinematography
Additional Camera
Original Sound
Music and Sound Design
Dialogue Edit and Sound Mix
Foley
Post production
Maps
Colour Grading
Graphics
Soundmix studio
Translations Tamil-German
Translations Sinhalese-English/German
Speaker *She, the Tamil Eelam woman*
Singer *The sky does not know...*
Interpreters Switzerland
Subtitling German

Subtitling English
Subtitling French
Research photos
Duration
Languages

Production and distribution

Damaris Lüthi

Amaury Berger
Gabriela Betschart SCS, Nathalie Berger,
Meret Madörin SCS, Aline László SCS
Olivier JeanRichard, Kathleen Moser
Pascal Schärli
Kathleen Moser
Pascal Schärli
Trinipix / Christoph Walther and Aron Nick
Joana Locher
Christoph Walther
David Nydegger
Projektstudio GmbH
Juliet Jayanthi Sellathurai
Kapila Gunasekera, Nilanthi Gunasekera
Paramanatha Thayalan Jeevitha
Nilakshi Helapitiya Rajivi
Sumathy Manikkapooddy, Janani Sandirasekaram
Aron Nick, Damaris Lüthi, Juliet Jayanthi
Sellathurai
Aron Nick, Damaris Lüthi, Kapila Gunasekera
Jessica Stabile, Aron Nick
Carola Muttoni
89 Min.
Tamil/Sinhalese/Swiss German with
subtitles in German, French or English
Minimages Damaris Lüthi

Bio-filmography of the author

Damaris Lüthi, born in Brienz BE (Switzerland) in 1959, studied Social Anthropology in Bern and London, specialising in South Asia and Visual Anthropology. She conducted research in the Tamil region of India and among Tamils in Switzerland. During and after her studies, she made the documentary films '1000° Celsius', 'Silk, Muthappar and VHS', 'Hippie Masala' and 'The Shop Assistants', and collaborated on 'Messies. A Beautiful Mess'.

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Synopsis

They were enthusiastic or forcibly recruited fighters for the Tamil Tigers, civilian victims of attacks or displaced persons. Women from the opposing Sri Lankan civil war groups – the Tamils, the Sinhalese and the Muslims – remember. The film connects perpetrators and victims and gives an insight into the traumas and survival strategies.

From the early 1980s until 2009, Sri Lanka was ravaged by a predominantly violent conflict between a Tamil minority and the government. The Tamils rebelled against the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that disadvantaged them. They demanded their own independent state «Tamil Eelam» in the north and east of the island. The war ended in mid-May 2009 with the victory of the Sri Lankan army over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The civil war claimed more than 200,000 victims.

In Switzerland, the topic soon disappeared from the headlines. In Sri Lanka, however, tensions between the ethnic groups involved persist. Most Tamil families, but also many Sinhalese and Muslim families, have lost relatives in the war. Survivors from the combat zones are traumatised, including those of the subsequent generation. People are trying to come to terms with their wounds, anger and resignation. On the other hand, there is hope for a new beginning, including the prosecution of war crimes by the UN Human Rights Council.

There are hardly any films about women as actors in war. Contrasting perpetrators and victims is also rare. The documentary film «Under Mango Trees» about women in war combines both and gives an insight into the traumas and survival strategies. Five Sri Lankan women from the opposing factions – the Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims – talk about how they experienced the civil war as soldiers or as people living in the war zone, and how their experiences continue to have an impact today. The memories are still very present, the traumas are far from over. Two former fighters of the Tamil Tigers – who fled to Switzerland after the end of the war to escape persecution by the Sri Lankan government – explain their combat missions, 'heroic deaths' and war injuries. A woman who was forcibly recruited tells how she was captured by Tamil Tiger soldiers, trained as a fighter and sent to the front. The Sinhalese farmer Rammenike, who lived in a contested border zone, reports how her family were victims of a night raid by a Tiger unit. Bareera, a Muslim woman, recalls how she and her husband and newborn child were driven out of Mannar in western Sri Lanka by the Tigers after the Muslims fell out of favour with the liberation movement.

All warring parties suffered tens of thousands of casualties, not only in the warring armies, but also among the civilian population. The effects of the war on the soldiers and civilians were disastrous, regardless of which side they were on. The film gives an idea of this and takes sides with those affected, but not with the parties to the conflict. It gives meaning to the individual fates by bringing the women out of anonymity.

Positioning

There are very few films about women as combatants in war. The contrast between offenders and victims is also rare. The documentary film 'Under Mango Trees' combines both and provides an insight into the traumas and survival strategies. What is more, the people filmed and most of the crew were female.

It is a film on the subject of women in war, trauma and the coincidence of victimhood and perpetration. In 'Under Mango Trees', five Sri Lankan women from the opposing warring factions - the Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims - talk about how they experienced the civil war in their homeland.

Motivation und filming situation

«Under Mango Trees» is the result of seven years of preparation and six years of film and editing work on the subject of former combatants and victims of the Sri Lankan civil war.

I came across the topic during a small Tamil film festival in Bern in 2011, which I helped organise as part of my volunteer work for the Palmyrah association. I was asked by an activist if I would be willing to make a film about the Tamil victims of the Sri Lankan civil war. The war had ended in 2009 with the victory of the Sri Lankan army over the Tamil Tigers – and with an unimaginable bloodbath. She offered financial support by the Tamil Tigers for the filming. I said that I was interested in the subject, but that I would make my own film, which should not be dictated by the ideology of the Tamil Tigers or their money.

During my preparatory research in Sri Lanka in 2012, I realised that there were not only victims of war among the Tamil ethnic minority, but also among the other ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and Muslims. I therefore decided to give them space in my film as well. Because it was easier for me as a woman to get to know women, I also decided to focus on women.

It took several years and visits to Sri Lanka to find female protagonists, in particular former Tamil Tiger fighters and a Muslim woman. It was also not easy to keep the potential protagonists on board over a longer period of time until filming began. And it took until spring 2019 to raise the necessary funds for filming.

Ultimately, we were able to start filming in Sri Lanka in autumn 2019. Due to the family situations of the crew members, which did not allow long absences from Switzerland, we planned a total of three stays in Sri Lanka instead of a single, long stay. The coronavirus pandemic threw a spanner in the works. The planned shoots in 2020 fell through and we had to wait until March 2022 to continue. At the same time, I received a cancellation from an ex-LTTE fighter during the first shoot, stating that she was under constant observation by the secret service and that filming was therefore too dangerous for her. Fortunately, thanks to the mediation of a Tamil friend, several former female Tiger soldiers in Switzerland could be found, so that I started filming with two of them during Corona. After filming was completed, Amaury Berger began editing in August 2022, so that the film could be completed two years later.

The Protagonists

Sathajini – former Tamil Tiger fighter



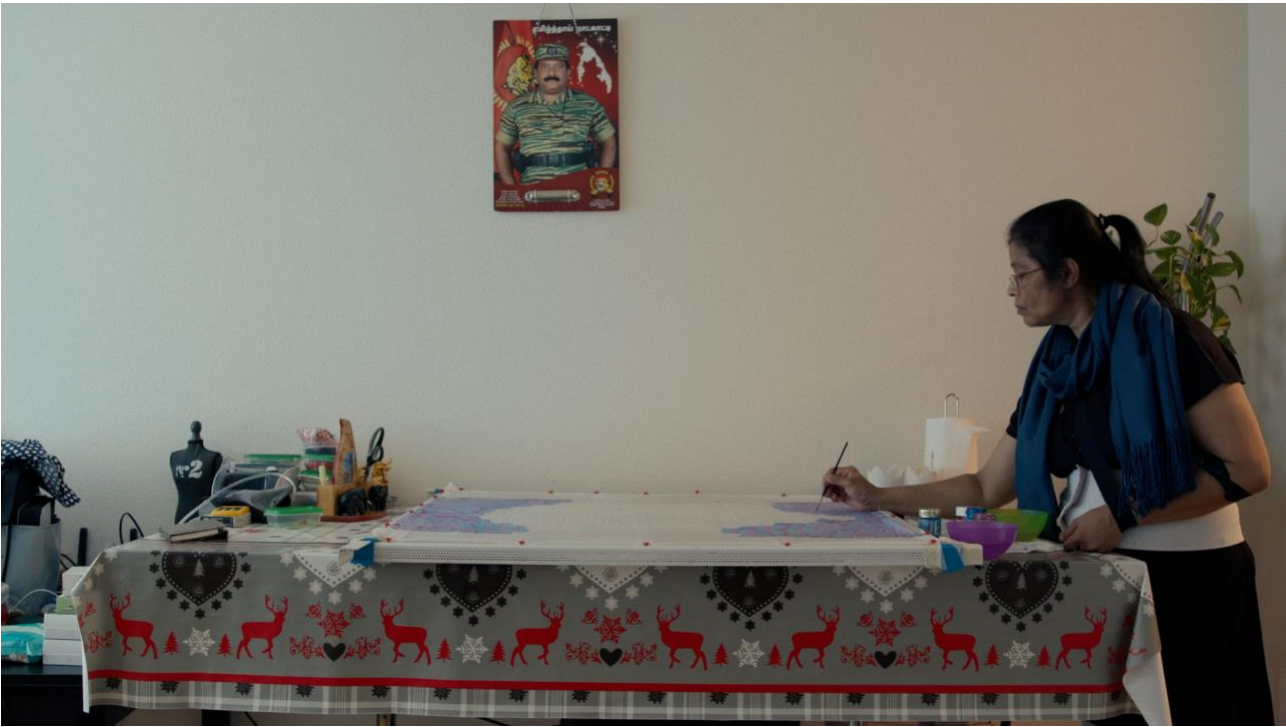
She joined the Tamil Tigers at the age of 19 and fought on the battlefield against the Sri Lankan army for a separate Tamil state.

Rammenike – Sinhalese farmer in the war zone



Rammenike, a Sinhalese woman, was a farmer in the centre of the combat zone. She lost her husband and eldest son in a tiger attack.

Vijayambikai – former Tamil Tiger fighter



When her brother fell in the liberation struggle, she joined the Tigers. She fought in the civil war for twenty years. The war injuries and experiences weigh heavily on her.

Bareera – Muslim woman displaced by the Tamil Tigers



She was dispossessed and driven out of northern Sri Lanka with her husband and newborn child by the Tamil Tigers.

Ambika – forcibly recruited by the Tigers



She was forcibly recruited by the Tigers and forced to fight at the battlefield until the end of the war.

Thoughts on the Sri Lankan civil war

From the early 1980s until mid-2009, Sri Lanka was ravaged by a civil war between Tamil separatists and the government, which claimed more than 200,000 victims. The conflict was fuelled following the country's independence (1948) by discrimination against the Tamil ethnic minority – in education, administration, law and religion – compared to the Sinhalese majority. The tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils led to pogroms in which around 400 Tamils were murdered in 1958 and several thousand in 1983, and 100,000 people were displaced. The Tamils then demanded a separate state of «Tamil Eelam» in the north and east of the island.

The Tamil minority

Initially, there were several rival rebel groups in parallel, from which the Tamil Tigers (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, LTTE) finally emerged as dominant in the mid-1980s. From 1986, women also took part in the armed struggle in the 'Women's Military Unit of the Liberation Tigers'. The female soldiers were respected by their male colleagues and had tasks with great responsibility. Restrictive rules applied to everyone in the Tiger Army: Marriage only after five years of military service, no pre-marital relationships and abstaining from drugs such as alcohol or cigarettes. Personal names were changed to conceal caste affiliation, and absolute loyalty to the god-like leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was required.

For two decades, fighting took place with alternating territorial gains and losses. In 1995, the Sri Lankan army occupied Jaffna, the heart of the Tamil homeland, which led to an exodus of 350,000 Tamils, together with the Tiger army. They settled in the Vanni area south of the peninsula and continued the fight from there. In the area under their control, the LTTE ran a de facto state with its own police force and judiciary, and introduced social reforms. The programme included the abolition of discrimination against women. They created laws against domestic violence and rape and banned dowry.

In 2002, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army agreed on a ceasefire. Two years later, the island was hit hard by a tsunami. Following clashes in connection with the distribution of tsunami relief supplies, hostilities flared up again from 2006. The Tamil Tigers were now increasingly cornered geographically. On 18 May 2009, the war ended with the victory of the army and the death of the rebel leader Prabhakaran.

The Sinhalese majority

Ceylon was colonised by the West from the 16th century, first by Portugal, then by the Netherlands and finally by England. The island became independent in 1948 and changed its name to «Sri Lanka» in 1972. During the colonial period, the British had promoted and privileged the Tamil minority in the education system and in administration, so that the Tamils dominated these areas. The Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhist and make up 75 per cent of the island's 21 million inhabitants, saw themselves and their culture threatened by the Tamil and later the Muslim minority. Shortly after independence, a 'Sinhala Only' movement opposed Tamil domination, and in 1956 the Official Language Act declared Sinhala to be the sole official language of the island. The government also repeatedly resettled Sinhalese farmers in predominantly Tamil areas, which was perceived as colonisation by the Tamils.

Many Sinhalese see themselves as the original inhabitants of the island and regard the minorities as ungrateful guests. They have no sympathy for the Tamils' protests against discrimination. Many Buddhist monks also advocate Sinhalese fanaticism. When the Tamil language was allowed again in the majority Tamil areas after the pogroms of 1958, a Buddhist monk murdered the (Sinhalese) Sri Lankan President Bandaranaike in revenge. From the Sinhalese perspective, the Tamil liberation movement was pure terrorism.

The Muslim minority

In October 1990, the entire Muslim population of the north (Jaffna, Mannar and Vanni) – 75,000 people in total – was displaced by the Tamil Tigers. They had to leave their homes within two days and hand over their valuables to the Tigers. Most of the refugees then lived in camps. The Muslims explain that the event was like a tsunami for them. For fear of a bloodbath, Muslim politicians and the Sri Lankan defence minister refrained from intervening, and the matter was hardly noticed internationally.

The background to the expulsion was that the political representation of the Muslims, whose mother tongue is also Tamil, could not come to terms with the idea of participating in a separate, independent state of Tamil Eelam. The Muslim League argued that the Muslim presence on the island was too dispersed and that a separate state as a clearly defined geographical unit would, therefore, not suit their situation. In response, the LTTE regarded the Muslims as traitors.

Still today, many of the displaced people live in camps and are frustrated by this situation, which has remained unchanged since 1990. Some have been able to buy land and build houses with the help of the government's 'Unified Assistance Scheme'. The rehabilitation efforts of the government and aid organisations after the end of the civil war concentrated on the recently displaced Tamils, while the earlier Muslim refugees were forgotten. In recent years, some Muslim families have moved back to their homes in the north, but many members of the second generation have no nostalgic feelings for Jaffna or Mannar and prefer to stay in the new places.

Forced recruitment and violence

Towards the end of the civil war, there was a dramatic increase in forced recruitment by the Tamil Tigers. Minors under the age of 18 were also conscripted. Some were abducted, according to a UN report even 12-year-old children. Forced recruitment had already taken place from the beginning of the civil war in the 1980s, practised by all Tamil rebel groups. Every Tamil family was obliged to provide at least one member to the liberation movement. According to a UNHCR report (2007), the Tamil civilian population was threatened with intimidation, arbitrary detention, abduction, torture, forced recruitment or targeted killings by both the rebel army and the Sri Lankan armed forces. People with links to the LTTE risked being targeted by the Sri Lankan police, army or paramilitaries; on the other hand, opponents of the LTTE or people suspected of espionage faced assassination by the Tamil Tigers; the LTTE systematically eliminated their political opponents within the Tamil community. In the areas under their control, the Tamil Tigers ruled through intimidation and the negation of basic rights. Tamil patriotism did not stop them from oppressing their own civilian population. There was at least one mass execution and whole groups were flogged

time and again. For years, the LTTE operated a compulsory pass system of their own to prevent Tamils from leaving Tiger-controlled territory.

Love-hate relationship with the Tigers

At the same time, there was also a great deal of pride in the rebels among the Tamil civilian population. 'Tamil civilians in the war-torn areas of Sri Lanka always had a love-hate relationship with the Tigers,' writes Harrison (2012). 'They loathed them when they stole their children. (...) But when the Tigers hit back against an oppressive army they revelled in their strength, feeling they could stand a little taller because someone was fighting back in their name.' The population also appreciated the fact that the LTTE introduced a number of progressive laws in the territory under its control.

Human rights violations

During the 26-year civil war, there were massive human rights violations by the Sri Lankan government and its security forces, among them murder, mutilation, torture, rape, offences against personal dignity and inadequate care for the wounded and sick (Harrison 2012: 240). The UN Human Rights Council lists more than 12,000 people by name who have been detained since their arrest; the Sri Lankan government has confirmed that 6445 of them are dead. Many journalists critical of the government have been killed. Paramilitary groups tolerated by the government are accused by human rights organisations of recruiting children, of torture, murder and extortion.

In the final six months before the end of the war (18 May 2009), the Sri Lankan army repeatedly targeted and bombed various 'no-fire zones' to the detriment of the civilian population, hospitals and humanitarian convoys. Journalists and aid organisations were denied access. During these last months, 70,000 civilians died and 300,000 were displaced, while the Sri Lankan government claimed to be pursuing a 'zero civilian casualty policy'. During the concluding battle between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan army, there were 250,000 civilians on Mullaitivu, a strip of coastline a few kilometres wide between a lagoon and the open sea. They had been driven into this 'no fire zone' together with the LTTE. The place became a war zone. Eyewitnesses report an unimaginable bloodbath. Up to a thousand people died every day as a result of bomb attacks. The LTTE imposed a travel ban from the controlled areas, except for medical emergencies. They blocked the escape corridors and ruthlessly stationed their weapons in areas with a high civilian population. The Tamil civilian population trapped in Mullaitivu towards the end of the war hoped that the UN would intervene and save them.

Moreover, the losses suffered by the Sri Lankan army and the Sinhalese civilian population during the 25 years of civil war were immense. 23,391 government soldiers were killed, a quarter of them in the final phase between July 2006 and May 2009. In addition, the LTTE killed many people from the Sri Lankan civilian population during the entire conflict period, including Sinhalese and Muslim villagers, Tamil politicians, and Buddhist pilgrims and monks.

After the end of the war, the several 100,000 displaced persons were housed in closed camps by the government. The members of the LTTE were filtered out and placed in separate 'correction camps'. 11,000 Tamil Tiger suspects were held for years without trial, many of them with only a very loose connection to the LTTE (Harrison 2012).

Escape to a foreign country

In the wake of the escalation of the conflict in Sri Lanka in 1983, Tamil refugees fled to neighbouring countries (India, Malaysia), but also to Europe, North America and Australia. In Switzerland, more than 58,000 Sri Lankans applied for political asylum (up to 2018), of which only just under ten per cent were recognised as refugees. A further 37 per cent were granted a residence permit due to the 'humanitarian unacceptability' of being deported back to the crisis region. Today, around 60,000 people with Sri Lankan roots live in Switzerland. Almost ninety per cent of Swiss Tamils are Hindus, around 13 per cent are Christians, and there are a few hundred Muslims.

Traumas

In view of the thousands of people injured and traumatised in the civil war in Sri Lanka, Tamil trauma expert Dr Thaya Thiagarajah speaks of collective trauma. Many people in Sri Lanka suffered both massive physical injuries and psychological wounds during the war.

Trauma is psychological suffering caused by experiences of violence and loss of control. A person can be traumatised by a direct personal experience or secondarily traumatised as a witness to other people's experiences of violence. The symptoms are PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), anxiety disorders, depression, suicidal tendencies, addiction and psychosomatic disorders, which are expressed in a culture-specific way. Damages caused by humans are more traumatising than natural events. 'Powerlessness is catastrophic for our sense of control,' explains trauma expert Dr Lindorfer. It is typical of PTSD that memories of the past suddenly resurface – sparked by a smell, sound or a specific event – and trigger a strong stress reaction. This leads to avoidance strategies, including apathy, to evade the feelings associated with the trauma. Therapy involves looking for the trigger and how the person could free him- or herself from the victim situation. 'Ultimately, it is not helpful to hold on to the victim role. Freeing yourself from it is already a sign of healing.'

The stories of traumatised people are fragmented and can trigger strong emotional reactions in them. It also happens that they tell their personal stories in ever-changing versions. The protagonists of this film are also affected by this.

Thoughts on the realisation of the film

As I worked exclusively with female protagonists, I met them in a crew made up mostly of women (director, camera, interpreter, trauma therapist). On the one hand, this allowed for more closeness, on the other hand it was less conspicuous. As women, we hoped to be of no interest to the Sri Lankan secret service. It was crucial for the film work to exclude any danger to the protagonists. That's why, after the first shoot in autumn 2019, I gave up the plan to film former Tamil Tiger fighters in Sri Lanka. An ex-fighter contacted on location strongly advised against it. I then searched for female fighters who had fled to Europe. Thanks to a Tamil acquaintance, I found them in Switzerland.

The film is inspired by the observational method of Direct Cinema. However, it was not possible to plan long observation periods, as the crew's family commitments in Switzerland did not allow for longer absences. At the same time, I realised that the protagonists were uncomfortable being the focus of the camera for more than three days at a time. They felt disturbed in their everyday routines and were occasionally happy to receive instructions. I orientated these towards their everyday routines and wishes. Moreover, to the costs and the Covid19 epidemic – filming in Sri Lanka started in autumn 2019 and then had to be interrupted until spring 2022 – and also because individual protagonists suddenly went into hiding, it was not possible to develop micro-stories.

Unlike the clear distinction between perpetrators and victims in other films, here some of the protagonists combine both aspects and communicate from one perspective or the other. In contrast to Wim Wenders' documentary 'Invisible Crimes' (2007) about traumatised women in the Congo, the film does not concentrate solely on the protagonists' stories on-screen, but also tries to show their everyday lives and allows the women to reflect off-screen. A 're-enactment' of the war experience, as seen in Oppenheimer's 'The Act of Killing' (2014), was avoided in order to prevent re-traumatisation. Nevertheless, the recollection was accompanied by strong emotional reactions in some of the protagonists.

By filming in a small team and responding to the wishes of the protagonists, authentic events and emotions could be recorded and unexpected experiences were possible. The women portrayed and their context were at the centre of all phases of filming. The director and the film team remained in the background and do not appear in the film. In a reflective commentary, the women talk about their lives and the civil war. The colourful splendour of tropical Sri Lanka offers a stark contrast to the themes of violence, trauma and loss.

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