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THEMATIC EXPLORATION OF THE GASTRONOMY OF ORANG ASLI PAHANG

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Abstract

The Orang Asli Pahang commemorate their cultural heritage with vibrant cultural gastronomies. These gastronomies, embodying the spirit of community, culture, and nature, are integral to preserving ancestral customs and fostering social cohesion. This study thematize the intricacies of the gastronomy to better understand the inspiration, interrelationships with other domains of cultural heritages and other specifics involved the gastronomy. Purpose: The primary objectives are (i) to document the cultural gastronomy of Orang Asli Pahang, and (ii) to assign themes to the cultural gastronomy widely applicable to all tribes of the Orang Asli in Pahang. Method: Qualitative research method is employed to explore, document and thematize the cultural gastronomies of Orang Asli Pahang. Such methods include content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis. Findings: There exists a rich tapestry of cultural gastronomy that interrelate with other domains of cultural heritage. Cultural gastronomy of the Orang Asli is often inspired by the immediate environment and its natural resources. Indigenous communities often base their cuisine on local plants, animals, and landscapes. This close connection to the environment affects ingredient selection and generations-old hunting, gathering, and preparation methods. Concerning all tribes of Orang Asli Pahang, the cultural gastronomy is thematized under foraging approaches, raw cooking ingredients and name of dish and dish preparation.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Gastronomy, Orang Asli Pahang

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to establish the themes that are widely applicable to the documentation of cultural gastronomy across all tribes of the Orang Asli in Pahang. This study significantly contributes to the ongoing investigation into the field of Intangible Cultural Heritage [ICH], with a specific focus on the indigenous culture of the Orang Asli in Pahang.

In pursuit of documenting and assigning the metadata for the repository of cultural gastronomy among the Orang Asli in Pahang, the primary objectives of this paper are outlined below:

- i. To document the cultural gastronomy of Orang Asli Pahang,
- ii. To assign themes to the cultural gastronomy widely applicable to all tribes of the Orang Asli in Pahang

CULTURAL GASTRONOMY METADATA AND THEMES

Cultural gastronomies are primarily classified under the fifth domain of UNESCO's Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The fifth domain is about traditional craftsmanship. However, the manifestation of any specific ICH is not limited to one domain. Often, the completion of a single cultural manifestation requires multiple ICH domains (Abu Bakar, et al., 2014).

Museums and heritage institutions frequently use various types of repositories to document and manage cultural heritage materials and items. Metadata is essential for the operation of a cultural repository because it allows for the organisation and discovery of cultural materials, ensures consistent standardisation, provides contextual information, and enables preservation and management. This process improves accessibility and interoperability across cultural manifestation archives. Metadata is information that explains and contextualises specific data (Monova-Zheleva et al., 2020). For example, metadata for a cultural manifestation may include the title, location, participants, and materials used.

The critical metadata for cultural gastronomies includes (i) the incorporation of ICH domains and (ii) the identification of themes, which refer to the underlying inspiration and motivations for the gastronomy's manifestation. The incorporation of ICH domains refers to categorising cultural gastronomy based on the domains outlined by UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH, ensuring that they are classified within the existing framework. The identification of themes focuses on the underlying causes that define each cultural gastronomy. This may include marital celebrations and seasonal changes.

With this intention, this study seeks to thematize the complexities of cultural gastronomies to better understand the underlying motivations, interrelationships with other domains of cultural heritage, and other specifics involved in cultural gastronomy of the Orang Asli.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL GASTRONOMY

Gastronomy examines food appreciation, preparation, and enjoyment across cultures. Food's historical, traditional, ritualistic, and customary aspects are examined to determine its role in identity, social cohesion, and values and beliefs. The term 'gastronomy' comes from 'gastro,' meaning cooking, and 'nomi,' meaning rules or laws. The social, cultural, and religious meanings people attach to food-related objects and behaviours make it more than just food preparation and consumption. Food is central to gastronomy research and appreciation. Exploring food involves choosing high-quality ingredients, mastering culinary techniques, understanding diverse flavour profiles, assessing nutritional factors, and acknowledging the profound cultural, historical, and social significance of food production and consumption. Food is also studied in semiotics, which studies food meanings. Besides its physical function, food has cultural and intellectual meanings. It is one of the 'grey zones' of cultural and heritage tourism, along with religion, events, festivals, and architecture (Amir et al., 2017; Abdillah et al., 2020; Rojas-Rivas et al., 2020; Arana & Zúñiga, 2022).

The Orang Asli culture has a rich gastronomic heritage that is deeply rooted in traditional practices, which are inextricably linked to their cultural identity and relationship with nature. Their culinary traditions are a rich tapestry of flavours, cooking techniques, and food-related rituals that reveal profound insights into their way of life and beliefs. The Orang Asli, unlike other ethnic groups, maintain their distinct culinary identity by continuing to rely on traditional cooking methods, such as using bamboo over wood stoves, which impart unique flavours to their dishes and set them apart from other communities (Manaf, Omar, & Mohamad, 2022).

Despite their rich culinary heritage, Orang Asli traditional foods have received little attention on the global stage, with few records documenting their recipes and preparation techniques. Their culinary practices are deeply connected to the environment, with ingredients sourced directly from the surrounding forests and natural landscapes. Like indigenous tribes around the world, the Orang Asli rely on plant resources for survival and nourishment, emphasising the importance of subsistence agriculture in their traditional economy. They grow a variety of crops, including upland rice, millet, corn, yams, bananas, and a wide range of vegetables such as pumpkins, long beans, cucumbers, and okra. These ingredients not only nourish their diet, but also demonstrate their deep connection to and reliance on their natural surroundings. Globally, indigenous communities' reliance on plant-based resources emphasises the importance of sustainable agricultural practices in preserving cultural heritage and ecological balance (Anuar et al., 2023). Gastronomy provides a holistic view of the complex relationships between people, environments, and cuisine. Beyond food, it reflects history, geography, and social dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

This study conducted qualitative research, in particular a thematic literature review driven by the objective formulated, followed by content and thematic analyses to establish existing findings. Multiple resources were utilized, such as books, journals, reports, academic publications, community documentation and scholarly articles on Orang Asli Pahang. The initial findings helped to shape the creation of interview questions and an organization that enabled smooth discourse during the interview sessions with different Orang Asli tribes.

Guided by key themes and sub-themes identified in the initial findings, the semi-structured interview aimed to explore and document the gastronomy of Orang Asli Pahang. The semi-structured interviews were conducted primarily with community leaders, known as *Tok Batin*, or, if they were unavailable, with key representatives of the targeted communities (refer to Table 1). The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for further analysis. The analysis was principally focused on identifying the names of the gastronomies, the involvement of ICH domains, and assigning suitable themes to the cultural gastronomy (refer to Figure 1).

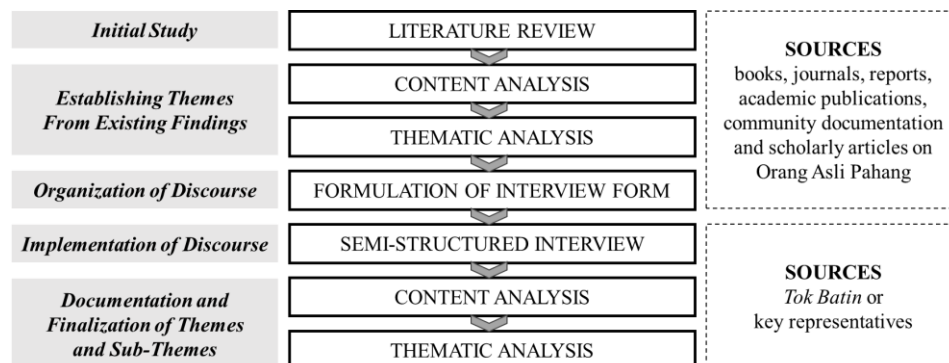


Figure 1: Flowchart of Fieldwork Approach

Table 1: Targeted Community for Semi-Structured Interviews

Targeted Community	Daerah	Tribes
Kampung Kuala Atok	Jerantut	Bateq
Kampung Sungai Pian	Temerloh	Jah Hut
Kampung Kuala Enggang	Temerloh	Che Wong
Kampung Sungai Rening	Cameron Highlands	Semai
Kampung Kuala Boh	Cameron Highlands	Semai
Kampung Sungai Tiang	Jerantut	Semoq Beri
Kampung Pelawan	Bera	Semelai
Kampung Sungai Bot	Bentong	Temuan
Kampung Gumum	Pekan	Jakun

FINDINGS

The gastronomies of Orang Asli Pahang essentially are culturally rooted, using local ingredients and traditional cooking methods.

Transcribed Interview Data

The following sections indicate the summary of cultural gastronomy-related findings from the semi-structured interviews of each Orang Asli Pahang tribe.

Orang Asli Batek

The tribe consume the prey they hunted, including monkeys, squirrels, frogs, wild fowl, moths, freshwater fish, and forest plants like wild yams, tubers, fruits, agarwood, bamboo, rattan, resin, honey, and others. River and forest hunting are the main food sources. The men are responsible to find products with economic value. These animals are killed with bamboo blowpipes. The blowpipe sharp tip or Mata Damak is filled with poison as bullets to kill the prey. Learning to blowpipes begins in childhood where the children will be taught to use blowpipes by tying their stomachs with canes to test their strength in blowing out the evil eye. If the tied cane breaks, the child is qualified to hunt with the adults. In case of poisoning, blowpipe antidote is brought along during hunting.

Orang Asli Jah Hut

The tribe considers rice their staple food. They also consume the prey they hunted daily as side dishes, such as fowl, frogs, and small animals. They also feed on cassava tubers cooked in bamboo by burning. *Kerabu Bunga Betik* using *Perah* Fruit. The elders can make the energy drink by mixing seven types of herbs related to *Tongkat Ali*, namely *Payung Ali*, *Misai Ali*, *Janggut Ali*, *Urat Ali*, *Wali Ali*, *Ubi Jaga* and *Kacip Siti Fatimah*.

Orang Asli Che Wong

The tribe consume the prey they hunted in the forest and rivers. They also consume sago worms as a protein source as well as cassava tubers as starch.

Orang Asli Semai

The tribes consume their crops, such as Huma rice, millet, corn, cassava tubers, banana, caladium and various types of vegetables such as pumpkin, long beans, cucumbers, okra beans. The protein they consume are mainly from the prey they hunted, such as monkeys, fowl, wild boars, birds, lizards, squirrels, and freshwater fish. The tribe practice a traditional economy based on subsistence agriculture. Getting food is typically accomplished by hunting and fishing, which are mostly done by men. Hunting equipment such as blowpipes, snares, *Belatik* and traps are crafted using forest resources.

Orang Asli Semoq Beri

The primary food source for the tribe is the prey they hunt in the forests and fish in the rivers such as wild fowl and freshwater fish. They also consume tuber.

Orang Asli Semelai

Tapioca is the staple crop for the tribe. Other popular foods include Stamp fish, *Tudung Periuk* fish, and oil-free stir-fried yams. *Pulut Kukus Periuk Kera* is a traditional dish consumed by the tribe. This dish is highly unique in that it necessitates the steaming of glutinous rice prior to consumption. In the past, the indigenous community utilised Huma rice, a type of glutinous rice, to steam glutinous rice in a cooking vessel. The intimate relationship between the indigenous community and the natural environment is illustrated by the use of a pot that is derived from a wild plant. During the wedding feast, chicken-based side dishes must be served, while yellow glutinous rice and sweet glutinous rice must be prepared during the circumcision feast (one plate of yellow glutinous rice and sweet glutinous rice per boy). The tapioca and other ready-to-cook foods are served in bowls. Food will be served in bowls and arranged lengthwise. The side dish is placed in the middle while the rice placed on the side of the dish. Food should be served in the order started by serving water to wash hands, then rice and after that side dishes (for example, stew) are served. It is encouraged to arrange the plates kneeling so that it looks more polite. Arranged plates should not be stacked and served in a chipped state. If that is the case occurs then a penalty of RM 80 will be charged.

Orang Asli Temuan

The common staples are boiled or roasted cassava tubers, while *Daun Semomok* is used as replacement for onion. The tribe's culinary preparations typically involve boiling or roasting food over an open flame, and the use of garlic and onions is infrequent. The common staples are boiled or roasted tapioca or *Ubi Kikir* - fermented, dried out in the sun, then roasted until it becomes granulated. Others include *Sambal Bunga Kantan*, *Pucuk Rebung*, the tender shoots of bamboo plants, are commonly prepared by frying them with chilli for enhanced flavour. For protein, the tribe favours jungle fowl, which is marinated with thinly sliced *Daun Semomok*, salt, chilli, and turmeric, stuffed into bamboo, and roasted over fire. Ikan Pais, another popular protein dish, is marinated in *Tempoyak* (fermented Durian), fresh turmeric, and Kulim leaves, which adds flavour and aroma and later wrapped in banana leaf and roasted over fire.

Orang Asli Jakun

For protein, the tribe consume the prey they hunted, including lizards, squirrels, frogs, and wild fowl. *Ubi Sireh* is a traditional food of the Jakun tribe, consisting of a tuber wrapped in *Palas* leaves. *Ubi Kacau*, or stir-fried yam is another traditional food of the tribe made from cassava tubers. The cassava tubers will be

soaked for several days, dried in the sun, and crushed until it crumbles. The crushed cassava tubers will be stirred in a pan on low heat. Stir-fried yam can be eaten with other side dishes, such as bamboo shoots.

Themes of Orang Asli Cultural Gastronomy

Based on the transcribed interview data, three (3) themes for metadata for cultural repository were generated to encapsulate the interview findings:

1. Foraging Approaches: Equipment and Craftsmanship or Skills
 This refers to the method of gathering food and resources from nature, which include hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plants.
2. Ingredients: Carbs. /Starch/Grains, Protein, and/or Vegetables/Fruits.
 These are the unprocessed ingredients used in cooking, such as fruits, vegetables, meats, grains, herbs, spices, oils, and other natural ingredients are used to make dishes.
3. Name of Dish and Dish Preparation
 This refers to the dish's name and its preparation technique, including cooking, seasoning, and presentation.

The themes are applied as metadata to organize the interview data on the cultural gastronomy of Orang Asli Pahang.

Table 3: Foraging Approaches

Tribes	Equipment	Craftmanship/Skills
OA Bateq	Bamboo Blowpipes	Hunting small animals Bamboo blowpipes with <i>Mata Damak</i> (sharp-tipped darts) filled with poison to kill their prey.
	Bamboo Canes	Children are trained from a young age to use blowpipes. They tie their stomachs with canes to test their strength in blowing the darts. If the cane breaks, the child is deemed strong enough to hunt with the adults.
	Poison Antidote	Hunters carry an antidote for blowpipe poison to use in case of accidental poisoning.
OA Semai	Blowpipes, Snares, Traps <i>Belatik</i>	Hunting small animals, such as fowl, wild boars foraging plants and farming (traditional subsistence agriculture)
OA Jah Hut	unspecified	Hunting small animals and foraging herbs
OA Che Wong		
OA Semoq Beri		
OA Semelai	unspecified	Gathering wild plants, hunting wild fowl and other small animals, and fishing freshwater fish, and farming (traditional subsistence agriculture)
OA Temuan		
OA Jakun		

Table 3: Raw Cooking Ingredients

Tribes	Carbs/Starch/Grains	Protein	Vegetable/Fruits
OA Bateq	honey	monkeys, squirrels, tragulus, frogs, wild fowl, rodents, freshwater fish	Cassava tubers, fruits, agarwood, bamboo, resin
OA Jah Hut	rice (staple), cassava tubers	fowl, frogs, small animals	-
OA Che Wong	cassava tubers	sago worms	-
OA Semai	<i>Huma</i> rice, millet, corn, tapioca, tuber, banana, caladium	monkeys, fowl, wild boars, birds, lizards, squirrels, freshwater fish	pumpkin, long beans, cucumbers, okra beans
OA Semoq Beri	cassava tubers	wild fowl, freshwater fish	-
OA Semelai	cassava tubers (staple), stamp fish, tudung periuk fish, oil-free stir-fried yams	<i>Tudung Periuk</i> fish, Stamp fish	-
OA Temuan	boiled or roasted cassava tubers (staple)	jungle fowl, <i>Ikan Pais</i> (type of fish)	<i>Daun Semomok</i> , bamboo shoots
OA Jakun		lizards, squirrels, frogs, wild fowl	cassava tubers <i>Palas</i> leaves,

Table 4: Name of Dish and Dish Preparation

Tribes	Name of Dish	Dish Preparation (Craftmanship)
OA Jah Hut	<i>Ubi Kayu</i>	Cassava tubers is placed in bamboo and cooked by burning the bamboo.
	<i>Kerabu Bunga Betik</i>	Cooked with Perah fruit
	Energy drink	Elders mix seven types of herbs related to <i>Tongkat Ali</i> (<i>Payung Ali</i> , <i>Misai Ali</i> , <i>Janggut Ali</i> , <i>Urat Ali</i> , <i>Wali Ali</i> , <i>Ubi Jaga</i> , and <i>Kacip Siti Fatimah</i>).
OA Semelai	<i>Pulut Kukus Periuk Kera</i>	Glutinous rice is steamed in a cooking vessel derived from a wild plant.
	Chicken-based dishes	Chicken dishes must be served during wedding feasts.
	Yellow/ Sweet Glutinous Rice	These dishes are prepared for circumcision feasts, with one plate of each per boy.

Tribes	Name of Dish	Dish Preparation (Craftmanship)
OA Temuan	<i>Ubi Kayu</i>	Cassava tubers is fermented, dried out in the sun, and then roasted until it becomes granulated.
	<i>Sambal Bunga Kantan</i>	-
	<i>Pucuk Rebung</i>	Tender bamboo shoots are fried with chili for enhanced flavor.
	Marinated jungle fowl	Jungle fowl is marinated with thinly sliced Daun <i>Semomok</i> , salt, chili, and turmeric, then stuffed into bamboo and roasted over fire.
	<i>Ikan Pais Bakar</i>	Fish is marinated in <i>Tempoyak</i> , fresh turmeric, lemongrass and <i>Kulim</i> leaves, then wrapped in banana leaf and roasted over fire.
OA Jakun	<i>Ubi Sireh</i>	Tuber is wrapped in Palas leaves
	<i>Ubi Kacau</i>	Cassava tubers is soaked for several days, dried in the sun, and crushed until it crumbles. The crushed cassava tubers is then stirred in a pan on low heat. This dish can be eaten with other side dishes, such as bamboo shoots.

These findings suggest that Orang Asli Pahang mainly consumes root vegetables like cassava tubers, and *ubi takop*, supplemented by hunting wild chicken and freshwater fish. They also grow tuber plants around their homes and purchase food from stalls in their villages. Further research indicates that some hawkers regularly visit the villages to sell food supplies to the indigenous communities.

Orang Asli demonstrates a diverse range of sophisticated foraging techniques through hunting, fishing, and gathering in their natural environment. They employ snares, traps, and bamboo blowpipes with poison-tipped darts to hunt small animals such as monkeys, squirrels, frogs, sago worms, wild fowl, and freshwater fish. Alongside gathering forest plants such as tubers and bamboo shoots using basic foraging methods, they also practice subsistence farming focusing on cultivating and harvesting starch food, fruits, and vegetables.

These tribes also use many local raw cooking ingredients. Their dishes feature wild plants, forest produce, and traditional fishing and hunting methods, reflecting their close relationship with nature. Cassava tubers, wild fowl, freshwater fish, bananas, pumpkin, long beans, cucumbers, and fruits are common ingredients among tribes. Every tribe has its own cooking style shaped by nature and culture. Energy drinks from Jah Hut contain seven Tongkat Ali herbs. Traditional Semelai food includes *Pulut Kukus Periuk Kera* and steamed

glutinous rice. Temuan cuisine includes boiled or roasted tubers, *Ubi Kikir*, *Sambal Bunga Kantan*, *Pucuk Rebung*, marinated jungle fowl, and *Ikan Pais*.

Orang Asli’s innovative use of natural cooking materials shows their connection to the environment. Bamboo and Periuk Kera exemplify this resourcefulness. Bamboo is strong and versatile, making it a great cooking vessel. Its segmented structure allows rice or glutinous rice to be mixed with water and coconut milk, sealed, and cooked over an open flame or hot coals for a distinct aroma and flavour. *Periuk Kera*, made from gourd fruits, is lightweight but durable. Hollow out the gourds, removing the seeds and flesh, to make a vessel for cooking rice or glutinous rice over a fire, infusing it with flavour. Bamboo and *Periuk Kera* show how natural resources can enhance traditional dishes with unique flavours and aromas.

Data Input Efficiency through Metadata Management

The gathered data is expected to be entered into the cultural repository database based on the metadata as follows.

Table 6: Example of Data Input

Metadata	Input
Name of Dish	<i>Ubi Kayu</i>
Foraging Approach	Foraging/Farming Cassava Tubers (Subsistence Agriculture). The cassava tubers must be pulled out by the roots. If broken, the remaining roots must be pulled out of the soil.
Foraging Equipment	Knife/Machete
Ingredients	Protein : -
	Vegetable/Fruits : -k
	Carbs/Starch/Grains : Cassava Tubers
	Others : Sugar/Chilli (optional)
Cooking Tools	Pierced Bamboo, Fire
Dish Preparation	Peel the skin off the cassava tubers and place them in pierced bamboo. Cook the tubers over a fire. After they are cooked, remove the tubers from the bamboo. Serve with sugar and/or chilli paste and/or spicy anchovies.
Dish Presentation	Serves in Banana Leaves
Tribe	Orang Asli Jah Hut
Location	Kampung Sungai Pian
ICH Manifestation	Cultural Gastronomy
ICH Domain	Traditional Craftmanship
Supporting ICH Domains	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Oral Traditions and Expressions (as vehicle) <input type="checkbox"/> Performing Arts <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Knowledge & Practices (Nature & Universe)

Metadata	Input
Source	Community Representatives
Keywords	<i>Ubi Kayu</i> , Cassava Tubers, Bamboo, Banana Leaves

Transmission of Orang Asli Cultural Gastronomy

Cultural gastronomy falls under the fifth ICH domain, Traditional Craftsmanship. To effectively transmit these traditions, it is necessary to consider multiple ICH domains that encompass various aspects of the cultural heritage. The first ICH domain, Oral Tradition, and Expression, is crucial as effective vehicles to transmit the culinary knowledge. The recognition of ingredients and dish names is the most apparent use of oral tradition, apart from transmitting the culinary method and practices. Passing on culinary knowledge also necessitates the incorporation of the fourth domain: Knowledge and Practices Involving Nature and The Universe. Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events, which fall under the third domain, also play a crucial role in preparing some dishes for specific rituals and gastronomies. Therefore, cultural gastronomy should not be treated solely under traditional craftsmanship; it also encompasses other ICH domains to ensure comprehensive cultural embodiment and transmission.

CONCLUSION

The two objectives of this study are to document the cultural gastronomies of the Orang Asli in Pahang and to assign themes to these gastronomies that are broadly applicable to all tribes of the Orang Asli Pahang. The establishment of existing findings was the first step in the process of documenting the cultural gastronomies. This facilitated the formulation and organization of interview questions, executed at the various locations of the targeted respondents.

Based on the transcribed and coded interview data, three themes were generated and assigned, namely (i) Foraging Approaches focussing on equipment and craftsmanship or skills, (ii) Raw Cooking Ingredients, concerning starch, protein, and vegetables, and finally (iii) Name of Dish and Dish Preparation. Passing on Orang Asli gastronomy traditions reveals a rich tapestry of ICH domains that extend far beyond Domain 5 of ICH, namely Traditional Craftsmanship. Recipe names, and cooking techniques are just a few examples of the many culinary arts that rely on Oral Traditions for transmission. As a reflection their holistic relationship with their environment, Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events (Domain 3) and Knowledge and Practices (Domain 4) also play important roles. Thus, in order to guarantee the inclusive transmission and preservation of their heritage, cultural gastronomy among the Orang Asli interweaves various ICH domains.

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