

The Soninke People: A Small Population in West Africa with a Significant Role in Regional History

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Abstract

The Soninke people are widely dispersed across West Africa and are often associated today with long-standing patterns of labor migration, particularly to France. However, beyond their contemporary migratory profile, the Soninke occupy a central position in West African historiography as the founders and rulers of the ancient Ghana Empire. The objective of this article is to highlight the major historical contribution of the descendants of Diya to the political, economic, and cultural development of the sub-Saharan region. This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on documentary analysis and unstructured interviews, drawing on oral traditions and historical narratives. The findings demonstrate that the Soninke possess a rich and complex historical heritage and were responsible for establishing the first large-scale and centralized political entity in West Africa. As the founders and rulers of the Ghana Empire, known in Soninke oral tradition as *Wagadu*, the Soninke people played a decisive role in shaping early West African state formation and trans-Saharan exchanges. Their contribution, therefore, constitutes a foundational element of West African historical consciousness and regional historiography.

Keywords

Soninke, West Africa, Historiography, Ghana Empire, Wagadu, State Formation

1. Introduction

The Soninke people are among the oldest historical populations in West Africa. Today, they are primarily concentrated in the Senegal River Valley, traditionally regarded as the core of the ancient Ghana Empire. Administratively, the Soninke

population is distributed across several modern nation-states, notably Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali, with significant communities also found in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire. This wide geographical dispersion reflects both historical mobility and contemporary migration dynamics, positioning the Soninke as a transnational population within sub-Saharan Africa (Manchuelle, 1997).

The Ghana Empire, known as Wagadu in Soninke oral tradition (Bathily, 1975), is among the most famous and powerful precolonial states in West Africa. Celebrated for its vast gold resources (Al-Bakrī, 1857), the empire occupied a key position along trans-Saharan trade routes connecting North Africa to the western Sudan. Medieval Arab merchants and geographers often called Ghana the “land of gold” (Ard al-dhahab in Arabic), highlighting its economic significance and political stability (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000; Levtzion, 1973). This wealth enabled the rise of a centralized political authority capable of controlling trade routes, managing taxes, and sustaining military strength.

Despite their relatively limited demographic presence in contemporary West Africa, the Soninke people occupy a central place in the region's early political, economic, and cultural history. As the founders and principal actors of Wagadu (commonly referred to as the Ghana Empire), the Soninke established one of the earliest state systems in West Africa, characterized by centralized authority, long-distance trans-Saharan trade, and complex socio-political organization. This empire played a decisive role in shaping regional power relations and early forms of governance in West Africa (Levtzion, 1973; Conrad, 2005).

However, dominant historical narratives, largely shaped by colonial and Eurocentric historiography, have tended to marginalize or obscure Soninke agency by privileging external influences, diffusionist models, or later political formations. As emphasized in the literature, colonial scholarship frequently downplayed indigenous state-building capacities and relied on fragmented interpretations of Arabic sources while neglecting African oral traditions. In contrast, African-centered historiography and recent interdisciplinary studies highlight the epistemological importance of oral history, collective memory, and indigenous knowledge systems in reconstructing Africa's past.

In contemporary West African societies, this historiographical imbalance is reflected in prevailing social perceptions. The Soninke are often viewed by neighboring groups, such as the Wolof and Serer in Senegal, the Bambara in Mali, and the Moors in Mauritania, primarily as migrant communities associated with economic mobility and commercial activity. Such reductionist representations obscure their historical role as foundational political actors and contribute to a collective amnesia regarding their contribution to early West African civilization.

This disjunction between historical evidence and contemporary perception reveals a significant epistemic gap rooted in the dominance of colonial historiography and the marginalization or minimization of Soninke oral traditions, particularly *Wagadu tarikhu*. Addressing this gap is essential not only for restoring

Soninke historical agency but also for advancing a more balanced and African-centered understanding of West African history.

1.1. Research Questions

- 1) How has colonial and postcolonial historiography contributed to the marginalization of the Soninke people's role in the history of early West African state formation?
- 2) In what ways does the Empire of Wagadu (Ghana Empire) illustrate the political, economic, and cultural significance of the Soninke in West African history?
- 3) What is the role of Soninke oral traditions, particularly *Wagadu tarikhu*, in reconstructing historical memory and affirming Soninke identity?
- 4) To what extent can the Wagadu period be considered a golden age of Soninkara civilization, and what enduring legacies did it leave in West Africa?

1.2. Research Objectives

1.2.1. General Objective

The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate the significant political, economic, and cultural role played by the Soninke people in the history of West Africa, with particular emphasis on the Empire of Wagadu (Ghana Empire), while addressing the historiographical factors that have obscured this role.

1.2.2. Specific Objectives

- 1) To critically examine the historiographical processes, particularly colonial and postcolonial narratives, that have contributed to the marginalization or minimization of the Soninke historical contributions.
- 2) To analyze the Empire of Wagadu as a major political and economic power in precolonial West Africa, highlighting its structures, influence, and regional impact.
- 3) To explore Soninke oral traditions and collective memory as mechanisms through which historical knowledge and identity have been preserved and transmitted.
- 4) To assess the historical significance of the Wagadu period to evaluate its status as a formative or “golden” age of Soninkara civilization and its enduring legacies.

Knowledge of the Ghana Empire has come down to us largely through the writings of Arab chroniclers—al-Bakrī, al-Masʿūdī, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and Es-Saʿdī among them—whose accounts offer valuable, if external, perspectives on the empire's organization and wealth. During the colonial period, European scholars relied heavily on these Arabic sources, frequently reading them through Eurocentric interpretive frameworks that further distanced the empire from its own historical actors. Soninke oral tradition, meanwhile, followed a separate epistemological path: narratives surrounding the founding ancestor Dinga and the epic of Wagadu preserved an indigenous historical memory that Arab and colonial scholarship largely bypassed, offering an alternative foundation for understanding the empire's ori-

gins and development.

This article brings Soninke perspectives and oral tradition into direct dialogue with the written historical record, reassessing the central role the Soninke played in founding and governing the Ghana Empire. In doing so, it pushes back against the long-standing marginalization or minimization of oral tradition in the historiography of Wagadu, and argues for an African-centered historiography as essential, not supplementary, to reconstructing the political history of early West Africa.

2. Historiographical Review

The historiography of the Soninke people and the Ghana Empire (*Wagadu*) occupies a foundational place in the study of early West African history. However, historical interpretations of the Soninke role in regional state formation have been shaped by external sources and ideological frameworks that often obscured their agency. A critical examination of medieval Arab chronicles, colonial-era writings, and modern African scholarship reveals both the recognition and the marginalization or minimization of the Soninke's central contribution to West African civilization.

2.1. Medieval Arab Sources and the Early Recognition of Soninke Power

The earliest written references to the Ghana Empire appear in medieval Arab geographical and historical texts, notably al-Bakrī's *Description de l'Afrique Septentrionale* (1911/1068), which is a highly detailed manuscript about Ghana. Although al-Bakrī never visited the region, his account confirms the existence of a powerful, centralized state in the western Sudan, characterized by political authority, military organization, and economic prosperity based on trans-Saharan trade. These descriptions implicitly attest to the historical significance of the Soninke, who were the founders and rulers of this polity. None of the Arab chronicles visited Ghana. They were based on secondhand information.

Nevertheless, Arab chroniclers focused primarily on Wagadu's observable external features, royal splendor, gold wealth, and trade routes, while offering little insight into its internal political institutions, social organization, or cultural foundations. Key Soninke elements, such as the symbolic and religious role of the *Biida*, are mentioned only superficially or omitted altogether. Linguistic distortions, such as the rendering of *ngana* as "Ghana" and *Tunka Menin* as "Tenka-menin," further reveal the chroniclers' limited engagement with Soninke language and worldview (Lam, 1997). Their accounts belong to a tradition of Arab travel writing that fed into the broader Islamic historiography of the Western Sudan, one in which Soninke oral tradition was structurally marginalized. The very term "Ghana" is arguably itself evidence of that exclusion: the Soninke called their kingdom Wagadu, a name inseparable from its own founding narrative, the *Wagadu Tarikhu*.

Es-Sa‘dī’s Ta‘rīkh al-Sūdān (1964) illustrates the same tension from a different angle. Its claim that Ghana was ruled by forty-four kings reinforces an image of a long, stable political tradition, yet the lack of chronological precision or political analysis behind the figure undermines its historical reliability. What the chronicle does offer, however, is a sense of continuity: writing centuries later within the Sudanic Islamic scholarly tradition, *Es-Sa‘dī* situates Ghana as the ancestral polity behind Mali and Songhay, showing how Wagadu’s memory was transmitted and reinterpreted by West African historiography long after its political disappearance—a contribution more about reception than about verifiable fact.

Other medieval Arab authors, including Ibn Ḥawqal, Al-Mas‘ūdī, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (see **Table 1**), also recorded valuable information on the Ghana Empire. Although their accounts constitute important historical sources, they should be interpreted with caution because they were produced from the perspective of external observers rather than members of the Soninke community. Consequently, their descriptions may reflect the limitations associated with second-hand information, cultural distance, and the historical context in which they were written.

Despite the limitations, Arab sources remain significant as the earliest external recognition of Soninke political dominance in West Africa, even where they fail to capture its full depth and complexity.

Table 1 provides an overview of the principal medieval Arabic sources relating to the Ghana Empire. It outlines the nature of each source, the historical evidence it offers on the empire, its contribution to the historiography of *Wagadu*, and its limitations within the context of this literature review.

Table 1. Some principal medieval Arabic chroniclers on the Ghana empire (*Wagadu*).

Books & Authors	Nature of the Source	Evidence on the Ghana Empire/ Wagadu	Historical Contribution	Limitation
Al-Mas‘ūdī (c.896-956 CE), <i>The Meadows of Gold</i> —in Arabic, <i>Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar</i> .	Indirect source, compiled from travellers and merchants	Describes Ghana as the richest on account of the huge amount of gold it had and the flourishing trans-Saharan trade.	One of the earliest Arab chroniclers to emphasize Ghana’s wealth and regional influence. It confirms the empire’s prominence in the 10 th century.	Based on second-hand information to describe the Ghana Empire / Wagadu, its wealth and prominence.
Al-Bakrī (1014-1094 CE), <i>Book of Roads and Kingdoms</i> —in Arabic, <i>Kitāb al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik</i>	Indirect source	The book provides the most comprehensive accounts of the Ghana Empire. It describes the Ghana Empire’s administration and military organization, the dual capital (royal and Muslim towns, the king’s wealth and authority, the trans-Saharan trade, religion, and justice).	It is an essential medieval source used in studies of the Ghana Empire/Wagadu. It describes many aspects of the first powerful political establishment of West Africa.	Based on second-hand information. Al-Bakrī had never visited the Ghana Empire/Wagadu.

Continued

Ibn Hawqal (c. 943-977 CE), <i>Configuration of the Earth</i> —In Arabic, <i>Ṣūrat al-Ard</i>	Indirect source	The book describes Ghana as the major commercial state integrated into the trans-Saharan trade. It emphasizes the export of gold and exchanges between North Africa and West Africa in the framework of business at that time.	Ibn Hawqal demonstrates the integration of Ghana in international trade and its economic prosperity.	Relied on primarily Arab merchants' account rather than observation.
Ibn Said Al Maghribi (1213-1286 CE), <i>Bitab Bast al Ard</i>	Indirect source.	The book portrays Ghana as a former great political power renowned for its wealth and commercial prominence. It highlights its historical prestige.	Ibn Said demonstrates Ghana's reputation in the Islamic world in the 13 th century.	Largely relied on Arab geographical traditions.
Ibn Batutta (1304-1368/9), <i>The Travelers</i> —In Arabic, <i>Al Rihla</i>	Primary source for the Mali Empire, but second-hand for the Ghana Empire	Ibn Batutta visited Mali after Ghana's decline. He confirms the commercial and political continuity of Western Sudan's traditions from the former Ghana Empire	<i>Al-Rihla</i> confirms the continuity of powerful political establishment after the decline of Ghana/Wagadu. Mali arose from the ruins of Wagadu.	It does not offer a direct description because the Ghana Empire had already disappeared as a dominant political power.

2.2. Colonial and Postcolonial Historiography and the Marginalization of Soninke Agency

Colonial-era scholarship played a decisive role in shaping modern interpretations of the Ghana Empire and its founders. Authors such as Delafosse (1912) and Monteil (1953) contributed valuable descriptive material but operated within Eurocentric paradigms that questioned African historical consciousness and minimized indigenous agency. The absence of written archives was often interpreted as evidence of historical inferiority, leading to skepticism about the capacity of African societies to produce complex political systems independently.

Within this framework, the Soninke were frequently portrayed as passive actors (Bérenger-Féraud, 1879) or as beneficiaries of external influences (Delafosse, 1912) rather than as architects of an original and enduring state system. Such interpretations obscure the Soninke's pioneering role in early West African state formation, long-distance trade regulation, and political centralization.

Charles Monteil's work on the Wagadu legend (*La Légende d'Ouagadou et l'origine des Soninké*, 1953) represents an important but incomplete attempt to engage with Soninke oral traditions. While Monteil faithfully transcribed the epic narratives surrounding Diña, Diabé Cissé, and the *Biida*, he refrained from analyzing their historical significance. His skepticism toward the *geseru*, the custodians of Soninke genealogical memory, prevented him from recognizing oral tradition as a legitimate historical source capable of illuminating Soninke political ideology and migration history.

As for Delafosse, he acknowledged the existence of the Ghana Empire as a highly organized political entity. However, his interpretation tended to minimize

Soninke historical agency by attributing the emergence of the empire to external cultural influences. Influenced by the diffusionist framework that characterized colonial scholarship, Delafosse suggested that the development of such a sophisticated political organization was linked to Judeo-Christian and other non-African influences rather than to indigenous Soninke historical processes. This interpretation reflected a broader colonial assumption that complex state formation in sub-Saharan Africa was primarily the result of external influences rather than the achievements of Black African societies themselves.

Similar perspectives can be found in the works of other colonial authors, including [Bérenger-Féraud \(1879\)](#), [Clapperton et al., \(1829\)](#), and [Binger \(1892\)](#), whose interpretations were likewise shaped by the colonial intellectual framework of their time. In general, these scholars gave limited consideration to Soninke oral tradition and indigenous historical perspectives. Even though some authors consulted the Soninke oral tradition, they did not consider it as a valid historical source. Methodologically, this constitutes a significant limitation, as every society possesses its own mechanisms for preserving and transmitting its historical and cultural heritage. Excluding these indigenous knowledge systems from historical reconstruction inevitably produces an incomplete interpretation of the past.

Another prominent postcolonial scholar, P. J. Munson, proposed a significant theory based on archaeological excavations conducted in southern Mauritania, the region generally associated with the ancient Ghana Empire (Wagadu). According to Munson, the origins of Ghana can be traced to the Late Neolithic Dhar Tichitt civilization. He reconstructed the development of this civilization into four chronological phases: the Naghez Phase, the Chebka Phase, the Arriane Phase, and the Akjinjeir Phase, linking the emergence of the Ghana Empire to the final phase of this sequence. [Munson \(1980\)](#) further argued that contacts with, or incursions by, Libyco-Berber groups played a decisive role in the cultural evolution of the Soninke people. Consequently, although his interpretation was grounded in archaeological evidence rather than colonial ethnography, Munson, like several earlier scholars, viewed the formation of the Ghana Empire as having been significantly influenced by external populations.

Raymond Mauny (see [Table 2](#) below), a prominent postcolonial historian and archaeologist, adopted a multidisciplinary approach by combining archaeological evidence with oral traditions and documentary sources to reconstruct the history of the Ghana Empire. While this methodology represented a significant advance over earlier accounts based solely on written records, Mauny placed greater analytical emphasis on archaeological findings than on Soninke oral traditions, which preserve collective memory, historical narratives, and culturally embedded knowledge. Consequently, the interpretive potential of indigenous historical traditions remained comparatively underutilized in his reconstruction of the Soninke past.

[Table 2](#) provides an overview of essential works on the Ghana Empire by colonial and postcolonial authors.

Table 2. Some colonial and postcolonial works.

Authors and Books	Nature of the Source	Evidence on the Ghana Empire	Historical Contributions	Limitations
Charles Monteil, <i>La légende de Ouagadou et l'Origine des Soninké</i> (1953).	Firsthand information collected from a Soninke <i>gesere</i> (griot), Tundo Yaressi	Monteil's work refers to Ghana as a political establishment in West Sudan. It recognizes the existence of Wagadu.	This book constitutes an important source for understanding the Ghana Empire and the ethnogenesis of the Soninke people. It documents key elements of Soninke oral tradition, including the legend of Dinga, the ancestral founder of the Soninke, the organization of Soninke clans, and the myth of Biida, the sacred serpent associated with the foundation and prosperity of Wagadu.	The language barrier may have constrained the interpretation of Soninke oral traditions, resulting in a relatively superficial treatment of the oral evidence. In addition, the study reflects the diffusionist and colonial assumptions that shaped much of the historiography of the period.
Maurice Delafosse, <i>Haut-Sénégal-Niger (Soudan français)</i> . Première série. Tome II: L'histoire (1912).	Second-hand source (Arabic chronicles) + oral traditions	This tome recognizes Ghana Empire's existence as a political power in West Africa in the precolonial period.	The book constitutes an important historical source on the Ghana Empire (Wagadu). It explores the empire's origins, geographical setting, political organization, and the historiographical debates regarding the location of its capital.	Delafosse's analysis is influenced by the colonial intellectual framework, which explains the foundation of Wagadu through external influences while minimizing the evidentiary value of Soninke oral tradition.
Raymond Mauny, <i>Tableau géographique de l'Ouest africain au Moyen Âge</i> (1961); "The Question of Ghana" (<i>Africa</i> , 1951); Koumbi Saleh excavations with P. Thomassey (1949–51)	Systematically cross-reference including archaeological excavation, secondary source, and oral tradition	Collectively, these three works constitute important documentary evidence for the existence of the Ghana Empire (Wagadu) as a centralized and influential political power in medieval West Africa.	<i>Tableau géographique de l'Ouest africain au Moyen Âge</i> indicates that Mauny has produced a methodologically rigorous study of the Ghana Empire by triangulating archaeological evidence, medieval Arabic chronicles, and historical geography.	The reconstruction relies predominantly on archaeological and written evidence, giving comparatively less consideration to Soninke oral tradition as a historical source.
J. P. Munson, <i>Archaeology and the Origins of the Ghana Empire</i> , <i>Journal of African History</i> 21 (1980)	Archaeological excavation	Munson confirms the existence of the Ghana Empire as a political establishment whose site is located in southern Mauritania	It constitutes a significant contribution to the historiography of the Ghana Empire by expanding the evidentiary framework from primarily textual sources to systematic archaeological evidence.	Munson's study relies predominantly on archaeological excavations, giving comparatively limited consideration to Soninke perspectives and oral traditions.

2.3. African-Centered Scholarship and the Reassertion of Soninke Centrality

In contrast, modern African scholars have emphasized the necessity of reassessing both Arab and colonial sources through African-centered methodologies. Scholars such as Bathily (1989), Diop (1981), and Lam (1997) argue that Soninke oral traditions, when critically analyzed and corroborated with linguistic and archaeological evidence, reveal a coherent historical narrative of migration, state formation, and political legitimacy.

This body of scholarship highlights the Soninke as key actors in the emergence of one of the earliest centralized states in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ghana Empire was not a peripheral or accidental formation but a deliberate political construction rooted in the Soninke social organization, cosmology, and economic strategy. By controlling gold production and trade routes, the Soninke laid the foundations for subsequent West African empires and influenced regional political models.

2.4. Positioning the Present Study

Building on this African-centered perspective, the present study seeks to move beyond externally imposed narratives by foregrounding Soninke agency in West African history. By carefully integrating oral traditions as a primary source and critically analyzing written sources, this research demonstrates that the Soninke were not merely participants in regional history but central architects of early West African civilization. Their role in founding and governing Wagadu constitutes a decisive contribution to the political, economic, and historiographical development of sub-Saharan Africa.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in an African-centered historiographical and epistemological framework that interrogates how historical knowledge about the Soninke people has been produced, transmitted, and marginalized, particularly by colonial and postcolonial authors. The framework brings together three interrelated dimensions: historiography, sources of historical knowledge, and historical representation and legacy.

First, the framework situates the study within the debate between colonial/Eurocentric historiography and African-centered historiography. Colonial historical narratives have often minimized indigenous African agency by emphasizing external influences, diffusionist theories, or Arab mediation, while neglecting African oral traditions and internal dynamics. Some postcolonial studies predominantly relied on archaeological excavation. In contrast, African-centered historiography emphasizes indigenous political organization, oral tradition, collective memory, and endogenous state formation. This tension provides the epistemological lens through which the historical role of the Soninke is critically re-examined.

Second, the framework recognizes historical sources as a central axis of

knowledge production. Two main categories of sources are considered:

- Written sources, including Arabic chronicles and colonial-era historical accounts, and
- Oral traditions, particularly *Wagadu tarikhu*, which preserve Soninke historical memory, political ideology, and identity.

Rather than privileging one source over the other, the framework adopts a complementary approach, treating oral tradition as a legitimate historical archive that challenges and enriches written records.

Third, the framework focuses on historical representation and legacy, examining how the Soninke and the Empire of Wagadu are portrayed in academic discourse, educational narratives, and contemporary social perceptions. This dimension links past historiography to present-day understandings, explaining why the Soninke are often viewed primarily as migrants (Timera, 1996; Manchuelle, 1997) or economically driven communities despite their foundational role in early West African state formation.

Within this framework, the Empire of Wagadu functions as the central analytical case through which Soninke political authority, economic organization (notably trans-Saharan trade), and cultural influence are assessed. By reintegrating oral traditions into historical analysis and critically reassessing dominant narratives, the framework seeks to restore Soninke historical agency and reposition them as central actors in West African history.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the historical role of the Soninke people in West African history using both written and oral sources. Data were collected using two complementary methods: documentary analysis and unstructured interviews.

The documentary component comprised a critical review of primary and secondary sources, including medieval Arab chronicles, colonial-era writings, and contemporary scholarly works on the Soninke people and the Ghana Empire (Wagadu). These sources were analyzed to identify dominant narratives, historiographical biases, and recurring themes concerning Soninke political organization, state formation, and regional influence.

In parallel, unstructured interviews were conducted with selected members of the Soninke community who were recognized for their knowledge of the *Tarikhu* (history of Wagadu), particularly traditional historians, griots, elders, and other custodians of Soninke cultural heritage. The unstructured interview format allowed participants to recount historical narratives, genealogies, and symbolic traditions related to the origins of the Soninke people and the Ghana Empire.

Oral testimonies were analyzed through thematic interpretation, with attention to internal coherence and consistency across narratives. Where possible, these accounts were compared with written sources to identify convergences and diver-

gences. This triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed for a more nuanced reconstruction of Soninke historical agency.

3.2. Profile of the Informants

Table 3 presents the profiles of the selected informants, including their estimated ages, community roles, geographic origins, and areas of expertise.

Table 3. Profile of the informants.

Informant	Age	Gender	Community Role	Geographic Origin	Basis for Selection
I1	85	Male	Traditional historian (<i>marindaano</i>)	Gande, Bakel, Senegal	Recognized custodian of Wagadu oral traditions and family genealogies.
I2	...	Male	Elder, Soninke researcher	Diawara, Bakel, Senegal	Specialized in Soninke lineages and the transmission of noble family histories.
I3	...	Male	Religious scholar	Manael, Bakel, Senegal	Widely consulted during community ceremonies for historical accounts of Wagadu.
I4	...	Male	Religious scholar, Researcher	Mali / Senegal	Preserves migration narratives, family histories, and ceremonial songs.
I5	...	Male	Griot, local historian	Guidimakha Region, Mauritania	Combines Islamic manuscripts with Soninke oral historical traditions.
I6	...	Male	Blacksmith and oral tradition specialist	Diawara, Bakel, Senegal	Preserves specialized historical knowledge transmitted within artisan families.
I7	...	Male	Community elder and storyteller	Dakar, Senegal (originating from Bakel)	Active in Soninke cultural associations and historical preservation.
I8	...	Female	Cultural educator and oral tradition bearer	Manael, Bakel, Senegal	Recognized for transmitting Soninke legends and migration narratives to younger generations.
I9	29	Male	Student in Egypt	Manael, Bakel Senegal	Authority on precolonial political organization and clan histories.
I10	...	Male	Genealogist and community mediator	Tuabou, Bakel Senegal	Maintains extensive genealogical records of Soninke families across West Africa.
I11	...	Male	Retired professional and independent local historian	Diawara, Bakel Senegal	Longstanding researcher of Wagadu traditions and Soninke historical narratives.
I12	...	Male	Local historian	Tuabou, Bakel Senegal	Coordinates documentation and preservation of Soninke oral heritage and historical memory.

During the interviews, participants were not asked to state their exact ages, as age is considered a sensitive topic by many members of the community and some are reluctant to disclose it. Consequently, ages were estimated based on the informants' own descriptions, community knowledge, and the researcher's observations. The estimated age range of the participants was approximately 30 to 85 years. The youngest informant was in the same generation as the researcher. The

older participants were more willing to provide or approximate their ages. These estimates were considered sufficient to characterize the demographic profile of the informants without compromising cultural sensitivity or rapport during the interviews.

The participants in this study were selected based on their recognized knowledge of the Wagadu Tarikhu (the history of Wagadu). They included custodians of Soninke oral tradition, genealogists, community elders, and other Soninke individuals with a demonstrated interest in and knowledge of *Wagadu Tarikhu*, the history of the Ghana Empire. Their familiarity with Soninke historical narratives, genealogies, and cultural traditions provided valuable oral evidence for examining the historical role of the Soninke people in West African history.

3.3. Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the participants. This non-probability sampling technique was considered appropriate because the study sought people with historical knowledge of Wagadu of Soninkara rather than a representative sample of the Soninke population in West Africa.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Knowledge of *Wagadu Tarikhu* (history of Wagadu);
- Familiarity with the Soninke oral traditions and genealogies;
- Willing to participate in the study.

The sampling strategy ensures that the data are obtained from knowledgeable informants capable of providing valuable and reliable evidentiary materials significant for this study.

Of the many Soninke informants interviewed across the upper Senegal River valley and in Dakar, only 12 were retained, selected for the coherence and reliability of the information they provided. The language used during the interviews was Soninke.

3.4. Data Collection

Primary data were collected through unstructured interviews in some Soninke villages in the Upper Senegal River, principally in Bakel. Some other informants were met in Dakar. The interviews focused on the origin of the Soninke people and the history of the Ghana Empire (Wagadu), the legend of Dinga (founder father of the Soninke), and *Biida* (the deified serpent). The information was documented in notes.

3.5. Data Analysis

The study used a qualitative thematic approach to analyze the data from the unstructured interviews. The recurrent historical narratives were recorded first and then organised into major themes:

- Noble Origin and Political Legitimacy;
- Antiquity of the Soninke community;

- Identity of the empire;
- Nilotic Origin;
- Economic power of Wagadu;
- Sacred cosmology;
- Decline of Wagadu;
- Dispersion of the Soninke (after the collapse of the Ghana Empire).

Table 4 presents the principal themes generated through the thematic analysis of the unstructured interview data. These themes reflect recurring patterns, shared perspectives, and salient issues identified during the qualitative analysis.

Table 4. Thematic analysis.

Major theme	Oral-history codes	Oral meaning (interview synthesis)	Historical significance
Noble Origin & Political Legitimacy	Nobility · Royal lineage · Governance	Soninke remembered as a noble people destined to rule	Confirms Soninke sovereignty and political legitimacy in Wagadu
Antiquity of the Soninke Community	Ancient settlement · Founders	Soninke described as among the earliest peoples in the region	Places Soninke at the center of early West African civilization
Identity of the Empire	Wagadu · Indigenous naming	Empire consistently called <i>Wagadu</i> , not “Ghana”	Reclaims indigenous historiography; challenges external nomenclature
Nilotic/Egyptian Origin	Assouan · Egypt · Diña/Dinja migration	Origins traced to Assouan through ancestral migration	Supports Afrocentric and transcontinental origin frameworks
Economic Power of Wagadu	Gold · Trade networks · Prosperity	Wagadu recalled as immensely wealthy, especially in gold	Explains Wagadu’s geopolitical influence and trade dominance
Sacred Cosmology	<i>Biida</i> · Sacred serpent · Ritual pact	Prosperity ensured through a spiritual covenant	Reveals cosmological foundations of political economy
Decline of Wagadu	Death of <i>Biida</i> · Rupture	Collapse linked to the killing of the sacred serpent	Oral explanation of decline beyond material causality
Dispersion of the Soninke	Migration · Diaspora · Diffusion	Soninke scattered after Wagadu’s fall	Accounts for Soninke presence across West Africa

3.6. Thematic Analysis Procedure

The data from the unstructured interviews were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurrent historical narratives of the informants. The thematic analysis followed a systematic and iterative process to ensure that repeated themes accurately reflected oral testimonies.

First, the words and expressions related to the origin of the Soninke and Wagadu’s history were documented in notes. Thus, the codes were derived from the relevant historical accounts to allow a thematic analysis grounded in oral testimonies.

The coded data were then systematically synthesized into broader thematic categories by identifying patterns of shared historical significance and conceptual coherence among the codes (see **Table 5** below).

Table 5. Codes & themes.

Codes	Themes
Nobility, Royal lineage, Governance	Noble Origin and Political Legitimacy
Early settlement, Ancient traditions, Continuity of community	Antiquity of the Soninke Community
Ghana Empire, Wagadu identity, Political structure	Identity of the Empire
Assouan, Egypt, Diŋa's migration	Nilotic Origin
Gold trade, Commerce, Agricultural wealth	Economic Power of Wagadu
<i>Biida</i> (serpent deity), Rituals, Spiritual beliefs	Sacred Cosmology
Internal conflicts, External invasions, Loss of power	Decline of Wagadu
Migration, Diaspora, Cultural transmission	Dispersion of the Soninke People

Finally, the themes derived from oral testimonies were systematically compared with evidence from written sources, including medieval Arabic chronicles, colonial and post-colonial writings, archaeological studies, and linguistic research, to ensure the reliability of the thematic analysis. This triangulation process enhanced the credibility of the historical reconstruction from the Soninke perspective and provided a transparent, rigorous foundation for the findings presented in this study.

3.7. Research Positionality and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation. As a member of the Soninke community, the researcher possessed linguistic, cultural, and historical familiarity with the subject under investigation. This insider position facilitated the identification of knowledgeable custodians of the *Wagadu Tarikhu*, promoted trust during interviews, and enabled a deeper understanding of Soninke oral traditions and historical narratives.

Recognizing that insider status may also introduce interpretive bias, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach throughout the study. Interview questions were designed to be open-ended and non-leading, allowing participants to express their perspectives freely. The researcher continuously reflected on personal assumptions and critically examined the interview data during analysis. To enhance the credibility of the findings, oral testimonies were triangulated with medieval Arabic chronicles, ethnographic, historical, archaeological, and linguistic sources. Reflexive field notes were maintained throughout the research process to document methodological decisions and analytical reflections. Together, reflexivity and triangulation strengthened the transparency, credibility, and confirmability of the study by ensuring that interpretations were informed by multiple complementary sources of historical evidence.

3.8. Reliability/Rigor

The reliability and rigor of this study were strengthened through the careful selec-

tion of participants, the systematic thematic analysis of the interview data, and the triangulation of multiple historical sources. Critical thinking and analytical skills were applied throughout the interview process to evaluate the consistency, coherence, and historical plausibility of the narratives collected. These skills served as a filter to distinguish the most reliable information and ensure that the analysis was based on credible historical accounts.

To enhance analytical rigor, data from the unstructured interviews were systematically coded and grouped into recurring thematic categories. The principal themes identified were noble origin and political legitimacy, the antiquity of the Soninke community, the empire's identity, the Nilotic origin tradition, the economic power of Wagadu, sacred cosmology, the decline of Wagadu, and the dispersion of the Soninke people. The recurrence of these themes across participants' accounts strengthened the consistency of the oral evidence and provided a structured framework for interpreting the Soninke people's historical role in West African history.

3.9. Ethical Considerations

All participants had provided their consent before the interviews. In accordance with Soninke traditional protocols, the objectives of the study were clearly explained to them. The participants expressed pride as they recounted the Soninke history, covering themes such as origins, Wagadu, Dinga, and *Biida*. Respect for Soninke cultural values was treated as a central ethical principle throughout the research process. The participants narrated their historical accounts freely and without interruption.

3.10. Limitations of the Study

During the research conducted in the Upper Senegal Valley, some individuals expressed reluctance and declined to share their knowledge of Soninke history. The researcher leading the study is a member of the Soninke community, which may introduce certain biases shaped by a sense of belonging and shared identity. Additional sources of bias, such as colonial perspectives and an overreliance on archaeological excavation, are also acknowledged as real concerns. Taken together, these factors have the potential to influence the outcomes and interpretations of the study.

4. Findings

The findings are organized around the major themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the unstructured interview data. This thematic organization is intended to make clearer the role the Soninke played in the West African region.

The findings highlight the relationship between Soninke oral traditions, as reported by participants, and historical interpretations established through the triangulation of documentary, archaeological, and linguistic evidence. Oral traditions are presented as expressions of Soninke historical memory and collective

identity. Where these accounts converge with other sources, the study treats them as corroborated; where they diverge, the oral narratives are regarded as testimonies of the community's perspective. The Soninke people are not amnesiac of their historical heritage.

4.1. Analytical Narrative

The thematic analysis of Soninke oral testimonies reveals a coherent, structured historical consciousness articulated through eight interrelated themes.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was noble origin and political legitimacy. Participants consistently described the Soninke as a noble people tracing their rule to the adventurer-ancestor Dinga, whose son Diabe Cissé founded Wagadu. This legitimacy is further reinforced by an emphasis on their antiquity.

Another significant theme is the antiquity of the Soninke people. Participants' narratives place the Soninke among the earliest settled communities in West Africa and affirm their foundational role in regional history.

The informants also highlighted the identity of the Ghana Empire. The empire's name is preserved through the persistent use of the indigenous name *Wagadu*, a choice that implicitly contests colonial historiography and external designations (Bathily, 1989) such as "Ghana." This reclamation of nomenclature reflects an internally grounded historical framework.

Similarly, narratives of Nilotic/Egyptian origin, another prominent theme, tracing ancestry to Assouan through the migration of Diṇa (Dieterlen & Sylla, 1992), articulate a transcontinental memory that aligns with Afrocentric interpretations of African civilizations. Most participants consistently asserted that the Soninke people originated from Soni, a former name of Assouan.

Economic recollections of Wagadu form another rich theme. Participants consistently described its wealth, particularly in gold, as extraordinary, recalling Wagadu as a major hub within the trans-Saharan trade networks that connected West Africa to the wider Islamic world (al-Bakrī, 1857; Levzion & Hopkins, 2000).

Sacred cosmology also emerges as a central theme, symbolized above all by *Biida*, the serpent deity whose ritual pact with Wagadu's founders was said to guarantee abundance and political stability (Monteil, 1953; Dieterlen & Sylla, 1992). Most participants treated the legend of *Biida* as foundational to Wagadu's history, recounting how, according to Soninke oral tradition, the serpent ensured the kingdom's abundance in both gold and rain.

The decline of Wagadu forms another prominent theme. Most participants attributed the empire's collapse to the death of *Biida*, explaining it through a cosmological rupture rather than through purely military or economic failure, a framing that reveals a distinct epistemology of historical causality, one in which the breaking of a sacred pact, not conquest or decline in trade, is the operative historical cause.

Finally, the interviews recalled the dispersion of the Soninke following

Wagadu's fall. This migration is remembered as both a historical rupture and a process of cultural diffusion, carrying Soninke identity and tradition outward even as the political center collapsed.

Taken together, these themes suggest that Soninke oral tradition constitutes a sophisticated historical system in its own right, one that affirms the Soninke's central role in West African history and challenges narratives that minimize indigenous agency.

4.2. Representative Quotations from the Informants

Three representative quotations were selected to illustrate the principal themes that emerged from the interviews: the origin of the Soninke people, the relationship between Wagadu and the Ghana Empire, and the historical identity of the Soninke. These excerpts reflect recurrent narratives shared by multiple informants and are presented as illustrative evidence of Soninke oral historical tradition.

The first quotation concerns the origin of the Soninke and the foundation of Wagadu. According to Soninke oral tradition, Dinga migrated from the East in search of a suitable territory where his descendants could establish a kingdom. This tradition links the origins of the Soninke people with the emergence of *Wagadu*.

I2 stated:

"According to our ancestors, the Soninke originated in Egypt, particularly in the region of Aswan. From there, they migrated westward and established the kingdom of Wagadu, which later became known as the Ghana Empire."

The second quotation addresses the meaning of the term *Ghana*. Several informants explained that *Ghana* derives from the Soninke term *ngana*, which they interpret as meaning "courageous" or "warrior." According to this oral explanation, *ngana* was originally a royal title borne by the ruler of Wagadu and was later adopted and phonetically modified by medieval Arab travellers, who used it to designate the kingdom.

I5 explained:

"The name 'Ghana' comes from the Soninke word ngana, meaning 'courageous' or 'warrior.' It was originally a royal title borne by the king of Wagadu. Arab travelers adopted and slightly altered its pronunciation, and eventually the entire kingdom became known by that title."

The third quotation highlights the historical identity of the Soninke and their perception of their contribution to the history of West Africa. For many informants, the legacy of Wagadu constitutes an important source of cultural pride and collective identity.

I4 remarked:

"The Soninke are a great people. Our history is rich, our traditions are ancient, and our ancestors laid the foundations of one of the earliest and greatest kingdoms in West Africa."

Taken together, these three quotations illustrate how the Soninke preserve and

transmit their collective historical memory through oral tradition. These narratives sustain knowledge of their ancestral origins, the historical legacy of Wagadu, and their perceived contribution to the political and cultural development of West Africa, thereby reinforcing a shared sense of identity and historical continuity. When considered alongside medieval written accounts, archaeological evidence, and contemporary historical scholarship, these testimonies constitute valuable qualitative evidence for understanding Soninke historical consciousness and identity. They also help illuminate the historical significance of a people whose contributions to West African history remain insufficiently recognized beyond their own communities.

4.3. Triangulation of Sources

The findings of this study are strengthened through the triangulation of oral traditions, historical narratives, medieval Arabic chronicles, archaeological evidence, linguistic studies, and contemporary historical scholarship. Although these sources differ in nature and methodology, they converge on one fundamental point: the existence of the Ghana Empire (Wagadu) as a major political establishment in precolonial West Africa (Al-Bakrī, 1857; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000; Levtzion, 1973; Mauny, 1961). The convergence of independent sources enhances the credibility of this historical reconstruction and especially demonstrates the significance of *Wagadu* in the political, economic, and cultural development of the western Sudan.

The interviews conducted with Soninke knowledgeable of the *Wagadu Tarikhu* indicate that the history of *Wagadu* continues to occupy a central place in Soninke historical consciousness. Participants consistently recounted narratives concerning the foundation of the empire, the genealogy of its rulers, the legend of Dinga, the history of *Wagadu*, and the dispersion of the Soninke following the empire's decline. These narratives constitute an important body of indigenous historical knowledge that has been preserved through successive generations. While oral traditions should not automatically be regarded as established historical facts, they provide indispensable evidence of collective memory and historical identity when critically examined alongside independent documentary and archaeological sources (Vansina, 1985; Ki-Zerbo, 1981).

A recurrent observation emerging from the interviews concerns the indigenous designation of the empire. Participants consistently referred to the empire as *Wagadu* and explained that the term Ghana originated from the Soninke word *ngana*, meaning warrior, chief, or courageous leader, which medieval Arabic writers reportedly adopted as the royal title before extending it to designate the kingdom. Although this interpretation reflects Soninke oral tradition, the distinction between the indigenous name *Wagadu* and the externally transmitted designation Ghana is supported by historical scholarship. Bathily (1989) notes that exonyms used by foreign observers often become more widely known than the endonyms employed by local populations. Similar linguistic phenomena occur elsewhere in

the world, where countries are internationally recognized by names that differ from their indigenous designations, such as Deutschland (Germany), Nihon/Nippon (Japan), Miṣr (Egypt), and Bhārat (India) (Kadmon, 2000).

The triangulation of sources also highlights the close association between the Soninke people and the Ghana Empire. Neither the oral testimonies collected during this study nor the major historical literature identifies another ethnic community that claims *Wagadu* as its historical homeland. Furthermore, numerous Soninke scholars have examined the history of *Wagadu* through historical, linguistic, and anthropological approaches. Although their interpretations sometimes differ regarding the origins of the Soninke people, they consistently recognize *Wagadu* as the historical kingdom of the Soninke (Bathily, 1975; Monteil, 1953; Lam, 1997).

Finally, the interviews reveal a strong sense of historical pride among Soninke participants, many of whom described their ancestors as a noble people who established one of the earliest states in West Africa. Such expressions should be interpreted primarily as manifestations of collective historical memory and cultural identity rather than as independent historical proof. Nevertheless, the prominence accorded to the Ghana Empire in medieval Arabic chronicles and the sustained scholarly attention devoted to Soninke history collectively corroborate the historical importance of the Soninke in the political, commercial, and cultural development of precolonial West Africa (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000; Levtzion, 1973; Mauny, 1961). Together, these complementary sources provide a more comprehensive and balanced reconstruction of the historical role of the Soninke people than could be achieved through reliance on a single category of evidence.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the significant historical role played by the Soninke people in the early development of West Africa. The convergence of oral testimonies, medieval Arabic chronicles, archaeological research, and contemporary historical scholarship indicates that the Soninke occupied a central position in the emergence and development of the Ghana Empire, known in Soninke oral tradition as *Wagadu* (endonym). Historical evidence consistently identifies *Wagadu*/Ghana as the earliest major political formation in the western Sudan, preceding the Mali and Songhai empires and contributing to the evolution of state formation, political organization, and regional integration in medieval West Africa (Levtzion, 1973; Mauny, 1961; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000).

The oral testimonies collected during this study demonstrate the persistence of a coherent historical consciousness among Soninke communities. It means that the Soninke people are not amnesiac of their historical legacy. Participants consistently recalled the origins of *Wagadu*, the genealogy of its rulers, its political organization, economic prosperity, and its eventual decline. These narratives reveal the importance of the *Wagadu Tarikhu* as a repository of collective memory through which historical knowledge, cultural identity, and social values continue

to be transmitted across generations. These oral traditions provide indigenous historical perspectives that, when examined alongside documentary and archaeological evidence, contribute substantially to the reconstruction of Soninke history.

One of the most consistent findings concerns the indigenous designation Wagadu, which participants used exclusively when referring to the empire. This observation supports the view that the term “Ghana” is an exonym which originated primarily from external sources, particularly medieval Arabic authors, whereas *Wagadu* represents the name preserved within Soninke historical tradition (Bathily, 1975; Monteil, 1953). The continued use of this indigenous terminology illustrates the resilience of Soninke historical memory and highlights the importance of incorporating local historical perspectives into the historiography of West Africa.

The interviews also revealed a widespread tradition linking the origins of the Soninke people to Assouan (Aswan) through the migration of Diṇa (Soninke founding ancestor). This migration narrative constitutes a central component of Soninke oral history and corresponds to the Nilotic hypothesis advanced by some African scholars (Siré-Abbâs-Soh, 1913; Lam, 1997). Nevertheless, the present study distinguishes between oral tradition and historically corroborated conclusions. While the Assouan tradition reflects a coherent and enduring element of Soninke collective memory, its historical reconstruction requires continued interdisciplinary corroboration through historical linguistics, Egyptology, and other independent sources.

Similarly, participants unanimously associated the prosperity of Wagadu with the sacred covenant embodied by *Biida*, the deified serpent. Within Soninke oral tradition, this cosmological framework explains both the empire’s prosperity and its decline following the rupture of the pact. Medieval Arabic chronicles and archaeological research, however, emphasize additional historical factors, including the transformation of trans-Saharan trade, political fragmentation, environmental change, and shifting regional power dynamics (Levtzion, 1973; Mauny, 1961). Rather than viewing these explanations as contradictory, they may be understood as complementary: oral tradition preserves the symbolic and cultural interpretation of historical events, while documentary and archaeological evidence illuminate their broader historical context.

Another important finding concerns the contemporary historical identity of the Soninke. Although the Soninke are widely recognized today for their long tradition of regional and international migration (Manchuelle, 1997; Timera, 1996), the interviews reveal that their collective memory remains deeply rooted in the history of Wagadu. Generally, the Soninke presented migration not as their defining feature of identity but as a historical consequence of the empire’s decline and the subsequent dispersion of its population.

By integrating Soninke oral traditions with medieval Arabic chronicles, archaeological evidence, and contemporary historical scholarship, this study demonstrates the central role of the Soninke people in the historical development of West

Africa. Despite the extensive historiography on the Ghana Empire (Wagadu), public knowledge of the Soninke's historical contribution remains limited. In many West African countries, particularly Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, The Gambia, and Guinea, the association between the Soninke people and the foundation and governance of the Ghana Empire is insufficiently recognized in both public discourse and educational narratives. Although students in Senegal and elsewhere are introduced to the history of the Ghana Empire, they are rarely taught that the empire was established and ruled by the Soninke according to converging evidence from oral traditions and historical sources.

Beyond reaffirming the identification of Ghana with Wagadu, the principal objective of this study is to restore the Soninke people to their rightful place in West African historiography. It argues that the Soninke should not be viewed merely through the lens of contemporary migration, but rather as one of the principal historical communities that shaped the political, economic, and cultural foundations of precolonial West Africa. In doing so, the study contributes to a more balanced and historically grounded understanding of the region's past.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Soninke should not be regarded as a small or historically marginal community in West Africa, nor should they be defined solely by their contemporary migration patterns, as is often the case in the perceptions of neighbouring communities such as the Wolof, Moors, Bambara, and Pulaar. Although the Soninke are now geographically dispersed across several West African countries and beyond, this distribution reflects long-term historical processes, notably the decline of Wagadu and subsequent waves of migration, rather than historical insignificance (Bathily, 1975; Levzion, 1973). Evidence from historical records, archaeological research, and Soninke oral traditions consistently points to the central role of the Soninke in the formation of early states in West Africa. These complementary sources identify them as the principal inhabitants and ruling community of the Ghana Empire, known in Soninke tradition as Wagadu (Levtzion, 1973; Munson, 1980). Recognizing this historical contribution provides a more accurate understanding of the political, economic, and cultural foundations of precolonial West Africa and helps to restore the Soninke to their appropriate place within the region's historiography.

The findings also show that the Soninke have preserved a strong historical consciousness through a rich oral tradition. The *tarikhu* of Wagadu, transmitted across generations by oral historians and griots, has played a fundamental role in safeguarding collective memory, political identity, and cultural values. While oral traditions require critical interpretation and corroboration with archaeological, linguistic, and documentary evidence, they remain an indispensable source for understanding Soninke perspectives on their own history (Vansina, 1985). These traditions portray a society characterized by structured political institutions, extensive commercial networks, and a coherent social and cosmological order, re-

flecting the complexity of Soninke civilization during the medieval period.

Beyond their historical legacy, the Soninke continue to demonstrate remarkable cultural resilience. Their long-standing engagement in trade, entrepreneurship, and transnational migration reflects patterns of economic adaptation that have historical roots in the commercial traditions of Wagadu (Bathily, 1975). At the same time, sustained initiatives to preserve and promote the Soninke language and cultural heritage illustrate a continued commitment to maintaining their historical identity in changing social contexts. The international recognition of the Soninke language by UNESCO, notably through the designation of 25 September as the International Day of the Soninke Language, further highlights the importance of this heritage within both African and global cultural landscapes (UNESCO, 2024).

Overall, this study affirms that the Soninke occupy a significant place in the history of West Africa. Their contribution to the development of early political organization, long-distance trade, and cultural traditions has had a lasting influence on the region (Levtzion, 1973; Munson, 1980). Although aspects of their early origins remain the subject of scholarly debate, the evidence synthesized in this study demonstrates that the Soninke constitute one of the principal historical communities of the western Sahel. Consequently, any comprehensive reconstruction of West African history must recognize their enduring contribution to the political, economic, and cultural development of the region.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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