RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fiat speech, fiat infrastructure

The semiosis of anticipatory transformation in Timor-Leste's emerging oil economy

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Abstract
In 2011 the independent government of Timor-Leste initiated a controversial oil and gas infrastructure project. To persuade Timorese citizens to embrace their vision of the future based on oil and gas, supporters of the project employed narrative strategies conventionally reserved for ritual authorities. Their scaling of ritual speech to the level of the nation hinged on establishing iconic links across different event-worlds (chronotopes). "Fiat speech" was, like infrastructure, designed to bring named realities into being through anticipation. To analyze this process of prolepsis, the concept of "anticipatory transformation" allows us to understand how oil infrastructure became not just a symbol of modernity and development but an index thereof.

KEYWORDS
animism, anticipation, chronotopes, infrastructure, oil and gas, ritual speech, semiotic ideologies, Southeast Asia, temporality

How can words and infrastructure bring social, political, or economic realities into being? What are the semiotic and temporal processes that make speech and infrastructure effective media of transformation? These questions are key to the following analysis, which examines the planning and partial implementation of a massive oil and gas infrastructure project in Timor-Leste. In this study, we will see how infrastructure and modes of ritual speech can bring about transformations by anticipating a named reality.

This approach differs from that of recent studies of infrastructure, especially in relation to oil, which emphasize oil's potency as a symbol of progress and modernity. My analysis of oil and gas in Timor-Leste goes beyond symbolism in its understanding of infrastructure—including the promise of infrastructure, the plans for its implementation, and the spectacles surrounding its announcement. It shows that infrastructure can serve not only as a metonym for modernity, prosperity, and development, but also as an index of these. Thus, infrastructure does not just *stand for* visions of the future (as symbols do; Peirce, 1982, p. 56); it can index such visions as on the cusp of being realized.

To examine this process, which I call "anticipatory transformation," I bring together two domains: Peircian semiotics (as

developed by Munn [1986], Keane [2007, 2018], and Robbins [2001]) and ethnographic approaches to Bakhtin's (2008) concept of chronotopes, or "space-time" (as developed by Wirtz [2016] and Stasch [2011]). Drawing on these literatures, I show how through prolepsis, that is, by representing an act as if it were already accomplished, infrastructure and ritual speech can transform reality. Crucially, "anticipatory transformation" does not necessarily involve the successful implementation of infrastructural plans. This has been the case for the Tasi Mane project, an oil infrastructure development scheme on the southern coast of Timor-Leste, which I examine here. Although the project has repeatedly been suspended and postponed, it has nonetheless had concrete political and social effects (cf. Weszkalnys, 2008). In this analysis, infrastructures thus emerge as media of transformation, which, like certain speech acts, may create a reality they evoke.[1]

Rather than examining how global forces affect local relations and sociality, as many studies do, this article focuses on how people evoke local techniques and effect transformations of global reach and significance. Decentering Anglo-American perspectives (Ribeiro, 2014) on the global oil economy, this article shows that the Timor-Leste government tries to create oil wealth by harnessing the oil infrastructure's semiotic power

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as an index, and by combining this with modes of ritual speech that I call "fiat speech," in the sense of a decree or order that produces what it names.

Supporters of the project, including Timor-Leste politicians and oil company officials, employed fiat speech and its narrative strategies, conventionally reserved for ritual authorities, as a means of encouraging Timorese citizens to embrace their visions of the future based on oil and gas development. They used at least three strategies: mobilizing the sacred potency of the land; communicating with nonhuman beings ("metapersons"; Sahlins, 2017); and invoking logics of debt, suffering, and sacrifice, which are connected to Timor-Leste's struggle for independence (Palmer, 2022; Silva, 2010). In using these strategies, political leaders set out to persuade the public to support the Tasi Mane project, which is estimated to cost from US$12 billion to $US20 billion (McDonald, 2020). The project would, as politicians imagine it, propel Timor-Leste into the future as a prosperous middle-income oil nation.

Although other strategies of persuasion, such as monetary inducement, were employed to entice affected communities to accept the Tasi Mane project, my focus here is on the semiotic strategies employed by those implementing the oil project—that is, how they tried to encourage affected communities to accept the project by establishing iconic connections between national leaders and ritual speakers, thereby appropriating the latter's techniques. The semiotic efficacy of these political speech acts depends on the speakers' ability to cultivate iconicity by using fiat speech. Focusing on these strategies allows us to do two things: to analyze structural similarities between "fiat speech" and "fiat infrastructure," highlighting the performative nature of both, and to examine how the scaling of ritual speech to the level of the nation transforms the very entities it evokes.

The first section lays out the main theoretical argument about the "anticipatory transformation" of speech and infrastructure, showing how one can productively examine the semiosis of anticipation using a combination of insights from semiotics and the anthropology of time. The second section introduces the details of the Tasi Mane project and the challenges of implementing it, describes some of the main criticisms of the project, and highlights the indeterminacy of oil. The third section takes a closer look at ritual speakers' fiat speech, or narrative strategies aimed at bringing about the realities they name. I discuss these narrative strategies alongside narratives of public persuasion employed by political leaders and oil company employees, narratives designed to persuade the affected populations to accept the oil project. The concluding section analyses the performative dimensions of fiat speech and fiat infrastructure, outlining the way leaders indexically communicate that a specific state has been achieved.

ANTICIPATORY TRANSFORMATION

In 2011 the government of Timor-Leste launched its Strategic Development Plan, which sets out the country's development trajectory for the next 20 years. One aspect of the plan is the Tasi Mane development project, which would transform the country's thinly populated southern coast by installing a high-modernist state-planned oil and gas infrastructure. Among subsistence farmers affected by the scheme, opinions varied, though many supported it and looked forward to the improved living standards it would bring. Initially, the project was opposed by community leaders in Suai-Camenassa—a region along the southern coast near the border of Indonesian West Timor. They especially opposed the government's request for a land donation.

The government invested heavily in convincing these leaders of the project's benefits, organizing a paid holiday for them to visit similar projects in Indonesia and Malaysia. In the end, different initiatives convinced different leaders, but one account is told frequently about the moment of persuasion—namely the visit to the town of Suai by politician Xanana Gusmão. Gusmão is a charismatic politician, poet, and former leader of the armed resistance against the Indonesian occupation. After independence, he became Timor-Leste's president (2002–7) and later prime minister (2007–15, 2023–present). I was told that Xanana, as he is popularly known, had dreamed about an oil pipeline to Timor while he was "in the jungle"—that is, while he was taking part in the guerrilla struggle against the Indonesian military occupation (1975–99). In the early stages of the Tasi Mane project's implementation, Xanana visited Suai to persuade the residents to agree to the oil project.[2]

When he met the elders of the landowning "house groups" (which trace their ancestral origins to these sites), they told him directly that they were unwilling to give up their land. The visit was usually recounted as follows: The meeting with Xanana was held outdoors. It had been a long day, and everyone was tired. Then, suddenly, dark clouds emerged in the sky. Everyone knew it was about to rain, and they assumed the meeting would be over. As the first raindrops started to fall, however, Xanana put on the red headband often worn by ritual speakers. He stood up and looked into the dark sky. Gazing upward, he said in a commanding tone, "Stop!" (*Para lai!*).[3] Immediately the clouds withdrew, and the rain stopped. Xanana had controlled the rain; he had "commanded nature" (*manda natureza*), people would say. This incident, I was told, is what led the elders to agree to Xanana's proposal. They were so impressed with his ability to command nature that they consented to give away 1,113 hectares of land to the government for the Tasi Mane project.

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This account of Gusmão's visit to Suai frames the political leader as a ritual expert who can manipulate the visible and invisible powers of the environment. These powers are usually connected to specific local sites and to territorially emplaced house groups via a multitude of origin stories. The stories might tell, for example, of how, in the distant past, ancestors arose from sites in the landscape, or a group of crocodiles moved from the sea onto the land and transformed into human beings. The stories are guarded and recounted by ritual speakers, who are also expert mediators between the world of humans and the world of "metapersons" (Sahlins, 2017).

As illustrated by the example of Xanana's stopping the rain, several national leaders—many of whom are also former independence fighters—tried to garner support for the oil and gas project by drawing on the techniques of ritual speakers. By

doing so, however, they scaled territorially rooted notions of power and potency up to the level of the nation and thereby transformed the very entities they were seeking to mobilize. Drawing on animist and ancestral techniques to manipulate the environment is, of course, not the only strategy employed by national leaders to gain acquiescence from the local population to implement the project. But I will focus on this approach here because it highlights the structural similarities between ritual speech and infrastructure as modes of anticipation that seek to bring about realities that they are said to index. I will proceed by combining semiotic approaches with insights from anthropological studies of time.

In their book on the anthropology of the future, Bryant and Knight (2019) set out the notion of temporal "orientations," one of which is anticipation. Unlike "expectation," which strongly draws on the past, and thereby thickens the present, anticipation "contains the sense of thrusting or pressing forward" … "thereby pulling the future towards the present" (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 28). According to this definition, we can understand anticipation as an action that seeks to bring the future into being.

This resonates with Munn's (1986) seminal work on the Gawan *kula* exchange. In Munn's analysis, an apparently simple act, such as giving food to overseas visitors, can effect highly significant *spatiotemporal transformations*. Giving food to visitors initiates a process of reciprocal transactions with the visitor, a process that is intended to be of benefit in future travels in which food hospitality might be reciprocated. Food gifts directly influence the minds of the visitors, transforming them in the process and initiating the outward transformation of the self; one might say they pull the "future into the present."

It is in this process of outward and forward expansion that self-other relations are constituted and transfigured—in an act of what I term "anticipatory transformation" (combining Munn's ideas with those of Bryant and Knight). Anticipatory transformation is at the heart of accounts about Xanana's ability to stop the rain. Stopping the rain is a quali-sign—understood as the "embodied qualities of certain signs" (Munn, 1986, p. 17)—of his ability to create prosperity for the nation by transforming crude oil into wealth. Thus, oil development and state-building are closely connected (Bovensiepen & Nygaard-Christensen, 2018; Coronil, 1997). My proposal is to modify and expand Bryant and Knight's approach to anticipation by examining the *semiotic ideologies* (Keane, 2018) that are implicated in practices aimed at enacting the future.

Semiotic ideologies, according to Keane (2018, p. 64), refer to the "underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs serve, and what consequences they might produce." These assumptions shape how people draw boundaries between words, things, and subjects (Keane, 2007, p. 4). To develop this approach, Keane draws on Peirce's distinction between three types of signs: icons, which signify by virtue of an imputed resemblance; indexes, which imply a relationship of causation or contiguity; and symbols, which signify by virtue of social convention (Keane, 1997, p. 19; Peirce, 1982). To study the semiosis of anticipatory transformation, this article uses two of Peirce's categories: iconicity, which is cultivated across different event-worlds, and indexicality, which, by imputing

causality, promotes the performative dimensions of speech and infrastructure.[4]

While the Tasi Mane project was being implemented, my interlocutors depicted speech acts as having concrete effects on the world, such as by stopping rain or causing crocodile attacks. This resonates with Silva's (2010) analysis of the performative power of Xanana's speeches during the 2006 political conflicts in Timor-Leste. My argument in the context of the Tasi Mane project is that the semiotic efficacy of these speech acts derives from their ability to establish iconic links across different event-worlds. More specifically, politicians' persuasive speeches established a resemblance with speech acts usually performed by ritual speakers. For example, the account of Xanana stopping the rain creates iconic connections between his capacity to "command nature" (as a ritual expert would), his role as commander in chief of the resistance, and his legitimacy as a leading political figure in the new nation. Hence, national narratives are modeled on local rituals, which are usually performed by territorially emplaced customary authorities. These political speech acts are persuasive because they cultivate an iconic connection between vastly different event-worlds, or *chronotopes* (cf. Stasch, 2011).

Developed for literary analysis, Bakhtin's (2008, p. 84) concept of the chronotope (lit. "time-space") seeks to capture "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships." This concept has been interpreted in various ways: as epistemological category, as ground for representation, or as referring to event-worlds that open possibilities of human action while being conditioned by locality and social situation (Steinby, 2013, pp. 105, 107, 122). Chronotopes are implicated in semiotic ideologies because they "order the sign relationships that organise our experience" (Wirtz, 2016, p. 348). The concept thus allows us to analyze how subjective experiences of place and history (and the future) appear through semiotic processes (Wirtz, 2016, p. 343). The emphasis here is not just on the "manifold interdependencies between a present … and … futures" (Zeitlyn, 2020, pp. 495–96)—"futuricity"—but on the ways we apprehend the future through semiosis.

But how exactly does "anticipatory transformation" work? For this it is helpful to turn to studies of the performative dimensions of ritual communication. Linguists and anthropologists have long highlighted the illocutionary dimensions of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Rappaport, 1999; Robbins, 2001; Silva, 2010; Tambiah, 1985). Austin's (1962) classic discussion of speech acts distinguishes between constative utterances (which describe the world) and performative utterances (which change the world). He emphasizes the illocutionary (performative) force and perlocutionary (transformative) effects of speech acts, and this has been taken up by anthropologists interested in the performative nature of ritual (Rappaport, 1999; Tambiah, 1985).

Mobilizing Peirce's (1982) distinction between icon, symbol, and index, Robbins (2001, p. 594) argues that "because rituals, in their performative capacity, cause certain states to exist, those states become indexical signs that communicate that the ritual has occurred." Performance does not just effect a certain transformation; according to Rappaport (1999), it communicates indexically that a specific state has been produced.

An index, according to Peirce (1982, p. 56), describes a direct physical connection, a "correspondence of fact" between object and sign; this is often understood as a causal link, for example, smoke and fire. A declaration of marriage, for example, both transforms individuals into spouses and communicates that the marriage has been brought into being. As Robbins (2001, p. 610) argues, "In effect, Rappaport is here making the cause an indexical sign of its effect." So a ritual brings about its effect though performance, yet, simultaneously, participants are indexically connected to the effect as part of the cause. Not only is this insight relevant in ritual contexts, but it also helps us understand how "anticipatory transformation" underlies the media of speech and infrastructure along the southern coast of Timor-Leste.

As we will see, infrastructure planning and "fiat speech" also realize specific states by making these states indexical signs of their effect. They do this by performatively producing what they anticipate—pulling the future into the present. It is through this semiotic technique that speech and infrastructure can be more than just media of representation, but media of transformation.

THE INDETERMINACY OF OIL

Xanana is no ordinary politician. He is a highly charismatic leader and the former commander in chief of the Timorese resistance against Indonesia. As such, he has dominated politics in Timor-Leste since the country regained independence. Having united the resistance, Xanana was imprisoned in an Indonesian jail, and after independence he initially led what seemed like a coalition of nonideological nationalists (McDonald, 2020). He also became one of the fiercest champions of onshore and offshore oil and gas infrastructure development in Timor-Leste.

Initiated in 2011, the project was set out to stretch over three clusters, each to be connected by a 160-km multilane highway. Plans include the building of a supply base, several airports or airport expansions, an oil refinery, ports, a plant to process liquefied natural gas (LNG), and, possibly, three artificially designed administrative cities. The project was to be completed by 2020, but it has suffered repeated delays and suspensions.

Although the government has obtained considerable land for the project, only a few structures have been built so far: a power plant in the village of Betano, an airport extension in Suai, and parts of the highway (though a landslide has blocked part of it). The Tasi Mane project has stalled for a number of reasons, including lack of interest from investors; concerns about the project's technical and economic viability; changes in government; and the cancellation of the supply base contract awarded to the Korean company Hyundai, after Timor-Leste's Audit Chamber rejected it (La'o Hamutuk, 2019).

The Tasi Mane project is at the heart of Timor-Leste's postcolonial politics and its complex configurations, which are marked by political rivalries going back to the resistance period. In July 2020, changes in government led to the appointment of a new minister of petroleum and minerals; a new head of the national oil company, Timor Gap; and a new head of the national petroleum and mineral authority. The new minister, Víctor da Conceição Soares, from the opposition party

Fretilin, was initially skeptical of the Tasi Mane project and suspended the project until it undergoes an independent feasibility study (McDonald, 2020). During the national election campaign in May 2023, however, none of the political parties (not even Os Verdes, the Greens) outlined a vision of the future beyond developing oil and gas, and none of them explicitly opposed the Tasi Mane project or the plans to construct a gas pipeline to Timor-Leste's shores (Cardoso, 2023). But there have been severe criticisms from civil society, focusing on the adverse social impact of hydrocarbon-fueled development, as well as on the broader economic and political consequences of oil dependency (e.g., La'o Hamutuk, 2019; Scheiner, 2021).

Timor-Leste's nonpetroleum economy is very small, and its state budget depends heavily on a petroleum fund established in 2005 for the surplus wealth produced from the country's oil and gas economy. Timor-Leste is one of the most oil-dependent countries in the world. Since few investors have shown interest in the Tasi Mane project thus far, the state may carry most of the cost, significantly reducing the petroleum fund. Amid growing calls for diversifying the economy, the government has justified its strong financial investment in large infrastructure projects by arguing that "front-loading" capital expenditure will produce social, economic, and financial benefits in the long term (Menon, 2018).

The government's drive to fuel national development through investment in oil and gas has produced warnings that Timor-Leste might be subject to the "resource curse" (Scheiner, 2015) and that government institutions are starting to suffer from some of the democratic deficits common in rentier economies (Neves, 2018). Others have emphasized the potentially detrimental environmental impact of onshore oil development (Fundasaun Mahein, 2013), the risk of intercommunal conflicts (Crespi & Guillaud, 2018), and social problems of joblessness and landlessness that often characterize oil infrastructure development (Cryan, 2015). Finally, the Tasi Mane project has long depended on the outcome of boundary negotiations with Australia. While the project envisages the construction of an oil refinery and an LNG plant, Timor-Leste did not (yet) possess economically viable oil and gas resources to be produced by these infrastructures in 2011, when the Tasi Mane project was initiated.

Offshore fields currently in production are close to depletion. There are oil seeps across the southern coast—but results about their economic viability had not been published by 2023. Employees of the national oil company told me in 2015 that it can take several years for onshore exploration to assess economic viability of potential resources. And Timor-Leste's share in a group of gas and condensate fields called Greater Sunrise, the most promising remaining offshore fields, was subject to a lengthy legal dispute with Australia.

The historical situation is complicated and cannot be discussed here in detail. It will suffice to note that, in 1972, while East Timor was still a Portuguese colony, Australia negotiated a seabed boundary with Indonesia. The western part of the island of Timor—previously a Dutch colony—by then formed part of Indonesia. Shortly after (in 1974), oil and gas deposits were discovered in the Timor Sea (between Australia and Timor). If the seabed boundary had been extended all the way to Por-

tuguese Timor, it would have placed the oil and gas fields of Greater Sunrise in Australian waters. Portugal objected to this agreement and insisted that boundaries be drawn based on the median-line principle (following the laws of the sea), which would mean Greater Sunrise would belong to Timor.

In 1975, Indonesia invaded and occupied Timor for 24 years. Because Australia hoped Indonesia would extend the boundary such that the oil and gas would belong to Australia, it had a "multibillion-dollar interest in an Indonesian takeover of Portuguese Timor" (McGrath, 2014). Political commentators have argued that it is because of the oil and gas in the Timor Sea that Australia turned a blind eye to the severe human rights abuses that Indonesia committed in occupied Timor. When Timor-Leste regained independence in 2002, the boundary issue resurfaced. After initially agreeing to a 50-50 share, Timor insisted on a median-line agreement, meaning Greater Sunrise would fall largely in Timorese sovereign waters. The boundary issue was extremely contentious and involved years of negotiations between Australia and Timor-Leste, requiring the involvement of the International Court of Arbitration at The Hague (Leach, 2018).

The Tasi Mane project is directly related to this conflict with Australia because it entails building a pipeline from Greater Sunrise to Timor-Leste's south shore. The Tasi Mane project is hence associated with Timorese sovereignty over resources and national borders. International observers, however, initially found it unlikely that Australia would give in, since it was in a much stronger bargaining position.

Why did the Timor-Leste government invest so heavily in the Tasi Mane project? It was, after all, a project shrouded in uncertainty and deemed unviable by many experts—a project that might depend on *importing* oil and gas from other countries, as well as on resolving a boundary dispute with Australia. This is in addition to all the other political and economic risks and social problems commonly associated with extractive industries, especially those involving onshore infrastructure. Several key dimensions are necessary to understand this puzzle, including Timor-Leste's struggle for independence and the related desire for resource sovereignty, dynamics of willful ignorance within the oil industry, and the performative power of infrastructure. Here, I focus on how infrastructure planning seeks to bring about a future of high modernity, resource sovereignty, and oil abundance. This allows me to examine how oil infrastructure can be used to bring about a reality it is said to index.

The distinct properties of oil and gas are crucial here, because they mean that oil infrastructure is both riskier and potentially much more financially rewarding than other forms of infrastructure development. In fact, questions about the presence or absence of oil and gas are not as straightforward as one might imagine. In interviews with geologists in Timor-Leste, I learned that oil abundance is a deeply uncertain geological matter. For example, the many oil seeps along the southern coast of Timor might indicate that the oil reserves have been damaged and that they are *not* economically viable. In this case, the presence of oil might indicate its absence in economic terms.

As Weszkalnys (2015) has argued, oil is as much a "material" as it is an "imagined" matter. It is a composite of economic probabilities, technological feasibilities, and geological potentials, and thus subject to intense speculation. At the heart of petroleum production's indeterminacy are the geological particularities and risks of oil exploration, especially in deepwater offshore reserves, as well as the massive volatility of oil prices. This can keep entire populations in a state of expectation and suspension (Weszkalnys, 2015, p. 631).

Through the techniques of fiat speech and fiat infrastructure, the Tasi Mane project's supporters in the government try to overcome and control the indeterminacy of oil. In conversations and public statements, they downplay the uncertainty surrounding the Tasi Mane project. In 2015, I heard an example of this, after members of civil society had criticized the project for years. A senior minister who supported the project was furious. His biggest worry, he told me, was that people's critiques would "scare off investors." When I challenged him about the project's uncertainty, he suggested that the actual presence and ownership of oil and gas were irrelevant. The real goal, he argued, was "to attract investors"—illustrating the performative dimension of economic activity (Callon, 2007). Once they had invested in the country and helped build oil and gas infrastructure, Timor-Leste could always import hydrocarbons to produce. Like some of the project's other proponents, he alluded to secret documents that would prove that Timor-Leste was in fact extremely rich in natural resources—a rumor that had been circulating and was nourished by a sense of injustice associated with past colonial and neocolonial occupations.

The orchestration of the Tasi Mane project was thus aimed at producing oil and gas abundance, but it had to do so by creating the impression that such abundance already existed. This could be done only by projecting confidence in the availability and economic viability of oil and gas, thereby overcoming oil's inherent indeterminacy.

FIAT SPEECH

In the story of Xanana's visit to Suai, his control of the rain shows that he can communicate with, mediate, and even direct or control features of the lived environment. This power is commonly associated with ritual speakers, or "custodians of words" (*lia-nain*). In this section, I will discuss three other cases in which manipulating the environment via speech became relevant in the context of the Tasi Mane project. In these three cases, speech—as a medium for controlling the environment—is progressively scaled up from the local to the national level. The first case is that of a ritual speaker in Betano who calms the sea; the second case is that of an employee of the national oil company in Suai who recounts using the powers of speech to protect himself from the Indonesian military; and the third case is that of a national politician who says he has used speech to communicate with and command crocodiles in the southern region.

What makes these narrated speech events effective means of persuasion and transformation? How do they pull the future into the present? In these three cases, each of which involves a different chronotope, the future is enacted by establishing dialogic interactions across event-worlds. Their efficacy turns

on the way they cultivate iconicity across chronotopes (Stasch, 2011, p. 1).

Case 1: Chronotope of "ancestral immanence"

In 2014, in anticipation of the Tasi Mane project, a large electric power plant was constructed in Betano. The government planners had asked a ritual authority to carry out a ceremony asking the land for permission to construct the power plant. But when the construction was complete, I was told, the sea started to rise, and seawater entered the power plant, threatening total lockdown. In some accounts, the earth started to shake and almost collapsed into the sea.

This, several residents suggested, was because government officials had asked the wrong person to conduct the ceremony. The waters retreated only once the residents had identified and solicited help from the correct ritual speaker, a man from a house group whose members trace their origin to the sun. Drawing on local practices to legitimize the project meant that national leaders inevitably became caught up in local politics, because identifying the ritual speaker responsible for a piece of land also legitimized his (and by extension his entire house group's) claims to authority and landownership.

When the correct ritual speaker was eventually consulted, he carried out another ceremony, sacrificing an animal to the land and performing ritual speech. I was told that the waters receded immediately. When I spoke to the ritual speaker himself about this event, he explained that only *he* knows the correct words to speak to the land because he is the direct descendant of the original population (*rai-nain*), who were the first human beings on earth. In the past, he added, the rocks, the trees, and the land could all speak. But when his ancestor came into being, the natural environment lost this ability to speak. Today, only humans "own words," while the rocks and trees remain silent.

This first account configures what I call the chronotope of "ancestral immanence," describing the way the dead continue to act in the present by speaking through their descendants (Wirtz, 2016, p. 346).[5] In this event-world of ancestral immanence, the environment has agency, and the dead ancestors act through the living. As has been observed elsewhere in island Southeast Asia, this ritual speaker shores up his textual authority by drawing on words passed on to him by privileged forebears; it is under their auspices that he claims to have calmed the seas.[6] This was done by creating an indexical link between himself and the one he describes as the region's first ancestor, who descended from the sun and founded the "house of the sun." There is a double immanence here: the copresence of the living and the dead, and the (primordial) consubstantiality of people and place, which continues to animate certain sites and renders them "potent" or "sacred" (*lulik*; Trindade, 2011).

The speaker's authority is further reinforced by the possibility of failure, an aspect that Keane (1997, p. 8) describes as an inherent part of representational economies. The felicity conditions necessary for speech to be persuasive or to have "force," according to Austin (1962), can include the identity of the speaker. In this case words to calm the sea are effective only if conducted by the correct person. This second speaker's actions are particularly authoritative given that the previous speaker had apparently failed to establish a respectful relationship with the land and the sea.

Case 2: Chronotope of "revolutionary time"

The second account frames events in relation to the era of resistance against the Indonesian occupation. This event-world is configured in the narratives of a man I call Adão, who convinced the national oil company, Timor Gap, that appropriate rituals had to be carried out ahead of any construction work in the region.[7] Adão was not just working for the national oil company; he was also a ritual speaker and former member of the resistance against the Indonesian military occupation. He told me that the ancestors had given him the authority to speak: they "put words into my head, they put their spirit [*espiritu*] into my head."

Adão explained that his ancestors were the first humans on earth, having emerged from a sacred site near the airport. From the ancestral origins in the land, Adão deduced the right of his house group to the land of the region, establishing, as in the previous example, an indexical link between the present and the event-world of the mythic ancestors. Moving into the time-space of Catholicism, he described the origins of his ancestors as a "miracle" (*millagre*). They were brought into existence through a voice that named them—he likened this event to human genesis described in the Bible. As the voice named them, they emerged directly from the land, producing ancestral immanence within a Catholic chronotope. Following his ancestors, he said, he also had the skill to bring things into existence through words: "I say it, and it is" (*Hau hatete, iha*).

Adão explained that there are other ritual speakers in his house group who also have this skill, which is why people fear them. One in particular is known for being able to kill people with his speech—"he says a person is dead, and he dies" (*Koalia ema mate, nia mate*). Adão said that when he or other ritual experts speak, the ancestors speak through them. When he puts on his red headband, the words he utters are no longer his own: "I am not myself, I am the ancestor" (*Hau laos hau, hau avo*).

During the Indonesian occupation, Adão had supplied money and medication to guerrilla fighters hiding in the forests and mountain areas. Eventually, the Indonesian military found out about his involvement, but before they could arrest him, he fled to the forest to join the guerrillas. Later, when Adão told me about his escape and his eventual arrest and torture, he invoked this experience to explain the power of words. When the Indonesian military was looking for him in the forest, he used the "strength of culture" (*kultura nia forsa*) to fight them. When they were close, he recited words of ritual speech, and the bullets they tried to shoot at him did not fire. Cultivating dialogical interactions (Wirtz, 2016, p. 343) between Catholic, ancestral, and revolutionary event-worlds, he moved from stating that it was the performance of ancestral words that saved him to proposing that it was his special relationship with God.

According to Adão, many other Timorese used the power of ancestral words during the resistance against Indonesia, but

Xanana was better at this than anyone else. He told the story I had heard so many times, about how Xanana persuaded local elders to support the Tasi Mane project by stopping the rain. The revolutionary chronotope gained efficacy through dialogical and constitutive interactions with ancestral and Catholic event-worlds.

Ritual speech was commonly described as the "words of the ancestors" (Bovensiepen, 2014; Kuipers, 1990), and some ritual speakers were considered so skilled that their words could bring about the reality they named: killing a buffalo, making rain, or raising an army of land spirits from the ground. From my ethnographic research, I cannot say that "bringing a named reality into being" is recognized locally as a separate speech register; it is, however, reemerging as a theme in some ritual experts' descriptions of their relationship with ancestral words. A voice, Adão argued, brought about his ancestors who emerged from the land, and he compared this to the biblical *fiat lux* ("Let there be light"). In doing so, he explicitly connected the origins of his ancestors to the genesis of all humanity.

Case 3: Chronotope of "national transcendence"

In 2015 and 2016, I participated in consultations in which members of the government and the national oil company shared information about the Tasi Mane project with impacted communities. In attendance were political leaders who supported the Tasi Mane project, several of whom were fluent English speakers educated abroad. But there were also political leaders who were not educated abroad and who tended to stress their closeness to local people and their role in the armed resistance against the Indonesian occupation. Their speeches appealed to tradition, nationalism, and the powers of the land, at times asserting privileged access to or even control of these powers. A recurring feature in speeches during community consultations, and in interviews I conducted, was an individual's claim to have mobilized *lulik* potency—associated with the land and the ancestors—as a resistance strategy during the Indonesian occupation, thus dialogically interacting with the chronotopes of ancestral immanence and revolutionary time. Cultivating iconicity between oil and *lulik*, some political leaders maintained that it was precisely their privileged relationship with these autochthonous powers that put them in the ideal position to implement the Tasi Mane project.

During a community consultation in Betano, a leading politician who strongly supports the Tasi Mane project gave a powerful speech about how oil development would liberate the people (*liberta povu*) in the same way that the fight for self-determination had liberated the nation. When I interviewed him afterward, he spoke at length about the connection between self-determination and the Tasi Mane project, focusing specifically on *lulik* powers. Through my analysis of this account, I trace the construction of the chronotope of "national transcendence," which hinges on the depiction of the nation as a sacred (life-giving) transcendent entity, to which its citizens are indebted (Silva, 2010; Traube, 2007).

Some of the farmers who would be affected by the oil refinery's construction were concerned that sacred ancestral sites would be disturbed. He explained to me why, in his view, the farmers' concerns were unwarranted:

> The nation of Timor is sacred [*lulik*], even more sacred than it was at the time of our ancestors.[8] […] It is more sacred because people died for it between 1975 and 1999 [the period of the Indonesian occupation]. The land requires the blood of dead people in order to make the nation sacred and to strengthen it [*halulik haforte nasaun*]. […] The nation is more sacred because the land contains the blood of Timorese people and the bones of the Timorese people. […] It is because of this that I shouted at people. They were scared, because I told them that the nation is more sacred [*lulik liu*] than their sacred houses [*uma lulik*].

The textual authority of this account is cultivated through iconic links between the blood of the resistance heroes who make the nation sacred, and the customary practice (often carried out at sacred sites) of sprinkling the blood of sacrificed animals or betel juice onto the ground or an altar stone. Through the resistance heroes' actions, the nation was constituted as a life-giving entity, just as the land/sun gave life in previous accounts, bestowing on its descendants a debt that must be continually repaid. For this political leader, concerns that oil infrastructure will disturb sacred sites were unwarranted because it was in the interest of the nation to implement the project; the nation was the most sacred (*lulik liu*) entity, whose power outweighs that of individual plots of land or named sacred houses. Constituting a chronotope of nationalist transcendence, he posited the nation as a sacred entity superseding individually emplaced sacred sites or houses. He presented himself (and other national leaders) as *national* ritual experts whose authority supplanted that of local authorities. He did this through an eclectic mix of biblical allusions and references to well-known local taboos (such as harming crocodiles, considered Timor's oldest ancestors). He continued,

> When I spoke to people in Betano about the land […], I also shouted at the crocodiles, because a crocodile had attacked [bitten/eaten] a person. I told the people that I had sent this crocodile that attacked him. […] Crocodiles are scared of my words [*lafaek tauk ha'u nia liafuan*]. […] One person is in charge because God gave him the power to rule. This person can rule over the people, over the land, over stones, over the water. He can rule over the fish in the sea, over wild animals, and over tame animals. It is this power that in the past God had given to Adam and Eve. […] Xanana can stop [the rain], but I can also do it. […] I can order the winds to stop, I can send the crocodiles away, I can catch crocodiles that attack [humans]. I can order the rains and the winds to stop, and the rivers to drop.

Unlike the potency of the ancestral landscape, the power of "high modernity" is not chronotopically represented in everyday action. Yet, by connecting utopian ideas about the potency of the land with the magic promise of oil, high modernity becomes a tangible possibility. As Biersack (1999) has shown in

the case of Papua New Guinea, where a gold mine was erected in the territory of a totemic python, giving rise to millenarian visions of imminent riches, capitalist and indigenous logics can be evoked to reinforce each other.

In the account above, there is a connection between the ability to manipulate and control the lived environment and the Tasi Mane project. The politician's authority is shored up by his self-comparison with ritual speakers, whose skills he claims to exceed. This is accompanied by an implicit threat, taking responsibility for a recent crocodile attack in Betano. Several house groups along the southern coast claim direct ancestry to crocodiles; their ritual speakers can communicate with crocodiles, and they might at times be able to stop an attack. By arguing that he can order crocodile attacks and prevent them, the politician cultivated an iconic connection between his skills and those of customary authorities, while simultaneously making it clear that his authority and power go far beyond the power of local ritual experts.

The ability to predict, stop, or start rain through ritual speech, and the simultaneous coordination of material objects (such as the spilling of palm liquor, or making a small sacrifice at an altar stone) is commonly ascribed to ritual speakers. Certain ritual authorities are considered to have the skill to influence the weather and the elements. In that sense, the politician's boastful claims are not unusual. They are, however, unusual in their scope and generality. Speaking skills are usually closely connected to *one particular place*, so that a ritual speaker might be able to regulate the rain in the region near his home but not in other places. Skills are strongly localized, and ritual authorities frequently stress that they cannot speak on behalf of other places. Drawing elements of the chronotope of ancestral immanence into the event-world of nationalist transcendence, this political leader argued that his abilities to influence nature through his "shouts" apply to the nation as a whole and thus supersede the localized techniques of individual experts. It is relevant here that he describes his words as "shouting" (*hakillar*) rather than "speaking" (*koalia*) or "praying" (*hamulak*), which is how ritual speech is usually presented: perhaps speaking at the larger scale of the nation requires a louder tone of voice. It may also represent a way of casting himself in the idiom of a warrior.

Ritual authorities often claim that their powers and knowledge are better and stronger than those of ritual experts in other regions. Yet this political leader took this form of claim-making to a new level. Drawing on well-known origin narratives from across Timor-Leste, he finished the interview by explaining to me that while some Timorese descend from crocodiles, others descend from snakes, rocks, or the land. But then he added that some descend directly from God, implying that he was one of them. He said God had given him the power to rule over the land.

This account, like the second case study, draws heavily on the chronotope of Catholicism, albeit in different ways. The second case merges Catholicism with ancestral immanence via the iconic identification of the Virgin Mary with the sacred powers of the land. In this third case, Catholicism is incorporated into the configuration of national transcendence via the cultivation of iconic indexicality between God and national heroes.

The indexical link this politician established between himself and God laid the foundation for the argument that he could take the land from people for the oil project.

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A few observations follow from these three cases, illustrating what makes narrated speech events effective means of persuasion and transformation. First, these examples highlight how anticipatory transformation is strongly shaped by experiential effects, on which my interlocutors relied, such as Xanana stopping the rain, the sea levels rising in the power plant, or the threat of crocodile attacks. Anticipation is also a particular way of *experiencing* the present (Stephan & Flaherty, 2019), one that is connected to "how our *experience* and thus subjective *feel* for history and place [chronotopes] emerge through semiotic processes" (Wirtz, 2016, p. 34). Supporters of the Tasi Mane project drew on this experiential dimension to make their speeches persuasive. The sensory and affective modalities through which interlocutors brought about transformative changes are implicated in (sometimes differing) semiotic ideologies (Keane, 2018, p. 65; Naidu, 2018).

Second, the performed utterances (and metapragmatics) about the future highlight the representational vicissitudes (Keane, 1997, p. 8) of anticipatory transformation and how uncertainty conditions the semiosis of anticipation. In the first account, for example, the ritual speaker who calmed the rising seas took significant risks, seeing that his predecessor had failed to establish appropriate relations with the spiritual landscape, which had been disturbed by the power plant. Adão's ability to stop the bullets from the Indonesian military through godly intervention and ritual speech is similarly conditioned by the massive uncertainty that shaped the era of the Indonesian occupation and is constituted by the anticipation of independence that sustained the resistance. Although the Tasi Mane project can mobilize future-oriented tropes via its almost messianic promise of oil-related wealth, the project is implicated in uncertainty connected to the indeterminacy of oil and gas resources.

My third observation relates to Keane's (1997, 2007, 2018) emphasis on the importance of considering the materiality of semiotic forms. A key insight has been Keane's (1997, p. 8) argument that the performative dimension of representation is not reducible to words. Instead of privileging language, he highlights the importance of gesture and materiality; words, things, and performances must be coordinated together in order to be media of authoritative action. Both ritual speech and the political speeches by political leaders were accompanied by material practices. For example, in both Adão's and Xanana's cases, the performance of words was accompanied by putting on a red headband, signaling the immanent presence of ancestral spirits. Another example is the cultivation of iconic resemblance between the blood of the resistance heroes who made the nation sacred, and the animal blood that is sprinkled onto the earth during ritual sacrifice. To be efficacious, anticipatory transformation requires not only conditions of uncertainty and risk, but also the coordination of words, things, and gestures.

While the same gesture can take on different meanings in different representational economies (Keane, 2018, p. 68),

their efficacy in these cases derives precisely from the way they establish iconicity (likeness) across chronotopes—and thus across representational economies. As this section has shown, fiat speech is efficacious not just because it coordinates words, things, and gestures, but because it can draw connections *across* chronotypes. This temporal dimension might be productively added to Keane's definition of semiotic ideology, to include not only how people draw boundaries between words, things, and subjects (Keane, 2007, p. 4), but also how they do so across different spatiotemporal domains.

Finally, persuasive speeches alone did not persuade affected populations to give up their land for the Tasi Mane project, though many cited those speeches as influencing their decision. A few research participants mentioned that they felt pressured to agree to the project because of the implicit threat of violence they felt because of the widespread presence of former resistance fighters, or "veterans," during events aimed at informing affected residents about the project. The most crucial aspect in persuading residents to agree to the Tasi Mane project was, however, monetary inducement, in the form of financial compensation for loss of land. As with persuasive speech, the efficacy of infrastructure planning depended on several material transactions.

To explore the similarity between fiat speech and fiat infrastructure in more detail, I now turn to the final section.

FIAT INFRASTRUCTURE

In this concluding section, I will relate the three cases to a fourth chronotope: extractivism. The event-world of extractivism is constituted not just by establishing an iconic resemblance between oil and spiritual potency, and between customary authorities and national leaders, but also through dialogical interaction with voices from the opposition parties.

Highlighting the temporality of infrastructure, Appel et al. (2018, p. 17) suggest that infrastructures are themselves chronotopes—spatiotemporal projects that can have radically different social and political effects. The growing anthropological literature on infrastructure has examined how its "poetics" intersects with its "political" dimensions (Larkin, 2013), and how infrastructures perform and thereby bring into being specific visions of the future (e.g., Cross, 2014). In an expansion of Larkin's argument, my focus here is not just on the promises embodied by infrastructures, their planning, and announcement, but on their *transformative* effects.

For good reasons, existing studies tend to focus on the many inevitable failures of infrastructures—how the promises of modernity, wealth, and development they embody often remain unfulfilled. This may also happen in Timor-Leste, given that the realization of the Tasi Mane project has been continuously suspended; and even if it is realized, it is unlikely to fulfill the promises of jobs, development, and prosperity. So, in what ways has the Tasi Mane project been a medium of anticipatory transformation?

As I noted earlier, when the Tasi Mane project was initiated in 2011, Timor-Leste did not legally own the oil and gas that was supposed to be produced by it, because of the uncertain-

ties surrounding onshore resources and the legal dispute with Australia. The dispute concerned particularly the offshore fields collectively known as Greater Sunrise, which Australia was claiming. Very few people believed that the dispute would be resolved in favor of Timor-Leste, because of Australia's powerful geopolitical position. Yet the Timor-Leste government invested millions of dollars into the early stages of the Tasi Mane project's implementation. While state planners claimed to build an oil infrastructure because the country is rich in oil, the Tasi Mane project in fact aims to pull an anticipated future oil wealth into the present.

In Robbins's (2001) argument (developed via Rappaport, 1999), ritual brings about its effect though performance, connecting its participants indexically to the effect as part of the cause. This is helpful here. The Tasi Mane project is construed not as a *symbol* of prosperity and oil wealth, but as an index thereof, imputing a causal relationship between its planning and the existence of oil. By planning to build an oil refinery and an LNG plant—even when there are abundant warnings about the problems of viability—state planners were communicating indexically that a specific state had already been achieved. This infrastructure project—like many other projects that promise to fulfill a modernist vision—was used to communicate that Timor-Leste is a resource-rich nation. Tasi Mane, the thinking went, would in turn attract financial investment and shore up the country's bargaining position in relation to the Australian government.

To some extent, this approach has been successful. After years of negotiations between Australia and Timor-Leste, in March 2018 it was announced that the two countries had resolved the boundary dispute. Xanana played a key role in this, and his authority and charisma were reinforced by his ability to negotiate this agreement. The boundary is now to be set along the median line, and this means that Timor-Leste will receive an 80 percent share of profits from Greater Sunrise (Leach, 2018). There are many complex reasons why the dispute was resolved, but its resolution supports the argument that the Tasi Mane project was not the utopian dream that many observers had initially claimed—it presents a technique that performatively created a reality it was set to index.

This performative force (and perlocutionary effect) of the Tasi Mane project maps onto the performative dynamics of "fiat speech" described in the previous section—again creating iconic links across chronotopes. This performative effect is epitomized in Adão's statement "I say it, and it is," but also in Xanana's ability to stop rain, or in the description of a voice bringing ancestors into being from the land. In the origin narratives of several house groups in Timor-Leste, words do not just transform people; they are thought to bring them into being—speech is both cause and effect. In Adão's account, a voice brought humans into being by saying their names. Speech in these instances is a medium of transformation that produces what it anticipates—in Bryant and Knight's (2019) words, it pulls the future into the present.

If Xanana's ability to control rain came to be seen as a quali-sign of the ability to produce oil wealth, a similar dynamic played out when the senior politician mentioned in case 3 sought to present his ability to control the environment through

speech as evidence of his capacities to transform the nation. He construed the crocodile attacks in Betano as effects of his speech; his speech became an indexical sign of its effect. Further, by establishing this connection, he constructed an iconic link (of resemblance, or "likeness"; Peirce 1982, p. 53) between his skill to order crocodile attacks, and his ability to transform Timor-Leste and its natural resources into a wealthy oil economy. Infrastructure—and the Tasi Mane project in particular—became a key medium for enacting this form of anticipatory transformation.

Yet infrastructure is more than a medium of transformation; it is also a form of communication, one whose performative effects are like those of fiat speech. As a medium of anticipatory transformation, however, infrastructure is connected to the constitution of *different* kinds of subjects. Territorially emplaced groups are transformed into national citizens—who are in a relationship of debt, not to the land but to the nation and its resistance heroes. Political leaders emerge as the nation's ritual speakers, whose sacrifices have made the nation sacred and whose direct ancestry, as some argue, connects them directly to God. The notion of a transcendent God combines well with claims to the sacredness of the nation, allowing certain politicians to position themselves in a similarly omniscient and transcendent position. While ritual speakers mobilize the powers of the land to produce prosperity for house groups, some politicians have come to use infrastructure to bring about oil wealth. They do this by anticipating an outcome they seek to bring about, pulling the future into the present and thereby transforming it.

The chronotope of extractivism embodied in the Tasi Mane project has been construed in dialogical interaction with the chronotope of ancestral immanence—two event-worlds that seem diametrically opposed as they assume radically different relations between subjects and objects, people, and place (Keane, 2007, p. 4). Leading politicians, however, sought to convince Timor-Leste citizens of the merits of the Tasi Mane project by cultivating iconic resemblance between extractivism and other chronotopes—including animist, ancestral, and revolutionary practices that embody utopian promises of radical societal transformation and improvement.

Fiat speech was efficacious because, via its connection to the spirits of the ancestors and the revolutionary heroes, it legitimized the Tasi Mane project in the eyes of many residents. The fact that Xanana successfully managed to negotiate a substantial share in the profits from Greater Sunrise further shored up his magical authority, strengthening his reputation for his ability to produce oil wealth for the nation.

But the efficacy of the Tasi Mane project as a wealth creator or index of oil wealth was not universally recognized. In the effort to produce oil and gas from Greater Sunrise, multiple actors are involved, including both local firms and multinationals. And the global design of this fiat infrastructure made it difficult for local techniques to effect global transformations. Despite the Timor-Leste government's successful negotiation with Australia, there were severe disagreements over how and where resources from Greater Sunrise should be produced (Scheiner, 2021). The Tasi Mane project envisages constructing a gas pipeline across the 3000-m-deep Timor Trench from Greater Sunrise to Timor-Leste's shores. To summarize complex discussions, the Australian government and the project's operator, Woodside Energy, by contrast favor the option of processing resources in an existing LNG plant in Darwin, Australia. These disagreements are part of why the Tasi Mane project has been delayed and suspended. The inability of the project to attract international investors illustrates the failure of fiat infrastructure in this respect.

Even though there are currently few political visions for the development of Timor-Leste beyond oil (Cardoso, 2023), Víctor da Conceição Soares—the minister of petroleum and minerals from June 2020 to September 2023—was skeptical of the Tasi Mane's technical and economic viability. Soares is a member of Fretilin, the political party in opposition of Xanana's CNRT party. Perhaps identifying the strategy of "pulling the future into the present" via anticipation, Soares accused the previous administration of using technical studies to justify a predetermined decision, "putting the cart before the horse" (McDonald, 2020).

During the 2023 national election campaign, the Tasi Mane project again became a central focus of political debates. Visiting the south coast during this period, I was struck that enthusiasm for the project among affected communities had not waned. Bringing the ancestral and revolutionary spirit to their extractivist vision, the CNRT's election campaign poster portrayed Xanana as both a ritual authority with traditional ceremonial headgear and a resistance hero in military uniform. Many south coast residents told me they would vote for Xanana's CNRT because "Xanana will bring the pipeline to Timor-Leste." Oil and gas infrastructure had become synonymous with "development" and "independence." In May 2023, Xanana's CNRT party won the parliamentary elections. As I complete this article, Xanana has returned to power as prime minister, and Francisco Monteiro has been installed as the new minister of petroleum and minerals. As the former president of the national oil company (2011–20), Monteiro is less skeptical than his predecessor of the south coast oil development plans. This means there will be new energy behind the Tasi Mane project, once again providing political leaders the chance to prove their ability to effect transformation through anticipation.

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ENDNOTES
[1] This is "transformation" in Sanchez's (2020, p. 70) sense of changing not only people's "future actions and desires" but also "imminent substances and objects."

[2] In the remainder of this article, I adopt my interlocutors' habit of referring to Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão as "Xanana."

[3] All direct quotes are in Timor-Leste's national language Tetum and were translated by the author. Nine months of fieldwork were conducted in Dili, Suai, Betano, and Beaço in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2023.

[4] As one reviewer pointed out, iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism can be copresent in any sign, although the relative force might not be equal.

[5] Here, I follow Wirtz's (2016, p. 360) description of "spiritual immanence" as the copresence of the dead and the living.

[6] Ritual speech in this region is often characterized by high levels of "entextualization," the (apparent) detachment of words from their pragmatic context (Keane, 1997; Kuipers, 1990), which displaces the source of agency from the speaking self (Rutherford, 2003).

[7] I use pseudonyms for all research participants.

[8] Despite its multiple meanings, including "potent" and "taboo," I have chosen to translate *lulik* as "sacred" when used in a nationalist sense.

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