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► **To cite this version:**

Yannick Fer. Charismatics without authority? Informality and commitment in charismatic small groups in Moorea (French Polynesia). *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2022, 28 (4), pp.1252-1269. 10.1111/1467-9655.13819 . halshs-03876236

**HAL Id: halshs-03876236**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03876236>**

Submitted on 28 Nov 2022

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## **Charismatics without authority? Informality and commitment in charismatic small groups in Moorea (French Polynesia)**

Yannick Fer

The island of Moorea, thirty minutes by ferry from Tahiti, has a population of 18,000. Pentecostalism developed there relatively late with the 1989 opening of a church of the Assembly of God (the main Pentecostal denomination in French Polynesia, established locally in the late 1970s). Today, this church has about sixty members, most of whom come from historical Protestantism (the Ma ō'hi Protestant Church, EPM). Despite this modest presence of Pentecostalism, in the early 2000s 'there were prophets who saw lights here and there in Moorea',<sup>1</sup> and several small charismatic groups have emerged on the island under the combined effect of internal dissent within local Pentecostalism<sup>2</sup> and the rise – from the 1990s onwards – of a global charismatic economy structured in international networks around personal 'ministries' of entrepreneurs known as 'apostles' or 'prophets'. From time to time, these apostles and prophets visit the small groups of Moorea, whose participants are receptive to the practices and imaginary elaborated by these networks, inspired by a theocratic politico-religious ideology and the promotion of personal authority in opposition to institutional regulations.

The actions of these believers take place both within a given local space, which determines conditions and effects to a large extent, and within a larger process whose transposition – or realization – can be observed in the Polynesian terrain. This 'bifocality' of religious experience (Besnier 2011: 113) connects participants in such small groups to a 'globalized, charismatic Protestant "public", whose boundaries of adherence may be ambiguous, but which involves the cultivation of a sense of mutual awareness and interaction among dispersed evangelicals' (Coleman 2000: 115). [1253]

Several studies have described how the imaginary of spiritual warfare focused on the battle between God and territorial demons (Holvast 2009) functions as 'a vehicle for raising awareness of political and social issues and agendas' (Gonzalez 2014: 260). Because it intends to take 'more seriously the worldviews of non-western traditional societies' regarding supernatural entities linked with territories (Ediger 2004: 268), this ideology has found a particular echo among 'southern Christianities' (Marshall 2016: 101). Less attention

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Aimata in Moorea, 24 January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the history of Pentecostalism in French Polynesia, see Fer (2005).

has been paid to the local patterns of sociability and authority that accompany the rise of this global charisma, no doubt because the high visibility of apostles and prophets on the charismatic scene leads to the assumption that their claims to legitimacy coincide with the actual beliefs and practices of those who constitute their audience.

Drawing on the case of the small charismatic groups in Moorea, I intend to show that the emphasis on the personal must be understood here in the register not only of personal authority (as far as the claims of charismatic entrepreneurs are concerned) but also of personal autonomy (as embraced by the believers themselves). Charismatic deregulation thus produces both authoritarianism and informalization, in ways that vary according to local contexts and the personal dispositions of believers. It is one such variation that I analyse in this article through a group of about twenty people known locally as 'Jean's group', which I encountered in the early 2010s as part of a larger ethnography of religion at home in Moorea. This group can be seen as a site, conceptualized as 'not just the location where social actions takes place but also the context whose ideological and structural configuration authorizes specific forms of social actions, and the latter in turn reinforces the ideological scaffolding of the site' (Besnier 2011: 17). Following a presentation of the fieldwork, I analyse first the personal itineraries of several group members, including Jean himself, and then a 'prophetic' march organized by the group in 2012 in Moorea. These biographical and ethnographic approaches help to specify how global charismatic culture circulates locally, as well as to illustrate the particular forms of authority developed within these local small groups.

### *From church to home: an ethnography of Pentecostalism in Moorea*

Pentecostalism has grown significantly in most Pacific Islands over the past four decades (Ernst 2006), but it still represents a tiny minority (about 2 per cent of the population) in French Polynesia, where it has been present since the early 1960s. After members of the Chinese community in Tahiti were reached by a charismatic Chinese-American Baptist pastor, they opened the first local Pentecostal assembly, the Alleluia Church, in 1967. The arrival of French missionaries initially appointed by the Alleluia Church led to the establishment and growth during the 1980s of the Assemblies of God (AoG) of French Polynesia, which attracted a larger audience, mainly composed of indigenous Polynesians.

It was within the frame of fieldwork conducted from 2000 to 2002 for my Ph.D. dissertation (Fer 2005) that Gwendoline Malogne-Fer and I met with several members of the AoG of Moorea for individual interviews at the end of 2000. On our return to Moorea in 2009 for further research, we naturally asked for news of the people we had met nine years earlier. What had become of them? Were they still attending church? It turned out that many of them had left the church and, we were told, were now staying 'at home'. We went in search

of them, shifting our observation from the church to the home and other less formal spaces. Focusing on worship and institution as the most emblematic places of religious life tends to distort the analysis of religion (Wood 2018) [1254] and to overestimate the role of those believers who practise most visibly. The exploration of religion at home opens up a wider field of research on the 'new geographies of religion' (Kong 2001), particularly from the angle of public/private relationships and the various scales and forms of production of religious space (Knott 2008), linked in this case to the rise of the global economy of charismatism.

In Moorea, we found that some former church members, while still defining themselves as Pentecostals, were content with traditional practices such as the *purera'a fe ti'i*, a family prayer and reading of Bible verses. Others had joined a breakaway church known as 'Faith of the Christian Church' and led by a former pastor of the local AoG and two brothers who served as prophet and apostle.

Émilie,<sup>3</sup> a teacher in her mid-fifties, had a more complicated itinerary. When we met her in 2000, she explained how she had converted from family Protestantism to Catholic Charismatic Renewal and then to the AoG. During the 2000s, she followed the dissident faction 'Faith of the Christian Church', then left it to join several small charismatic groups, ultimately creating her own prayer group. Émilie's profile in terms of cultural and religious capital, personal autonomy, and social position is characteristic of the new groups that emerged during the first decade of the twenty-first century in Moorea.

I had already come across a few small groups during my initial fieldwork in Tahiti, nine years earlier, formed mostly in the wake of the international network Youth With a Mission (YWAM), active in French Polynesia since 1985. YWAM was founded in 1960 by Loren Cunningham, who was then in charge of youth activities in the Los Angeles district of the AoG (Fer 2010). This is a large missionary youth organization, like others that contributed in the second half of the twentieth century to the worldwide dissemination of new patterns of commitment outside church walls, and to an evangelical youth culture defined by Turner as 'modern conservative' (2008: 145). Several small groups rapidly emerged and meetings were regularly held at the homes of missionary couples. In these groups, attended mostly by young Protestants, people sang and prayed in an informal atmosphere: the framework of 'small group' sociability was then established. This sociability was ruled by a kind of 'friendly' authority emblematic of the YWAM strategy, which relies on fraternization and proximity of age to create personal links between missionaries and future converts.

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<sup>3</sup> Except for Eudaldo Cicéro, names have been changed, for the sake of anonymity.

While adopting this same type of sociability, the small groups formed in the 2000s in Moorea attracted a different audience, with dispositions quite similar to those of the already converted Pentecostals described by Lindhardt (2016) in his analysis of affiliation changes within Chilean Pentecostalism. Often better endowed with cultural capital than the average AoG member, and less concerned with social respectability than with religious virtuosity, they also wished to escape the institutional control that these churches exercise over personal lives and to live new experiences 'with the Holy Spirit': a second step seen as an opportunity for personal development. At one time or another in their itineraries, most had crossed paths with Eudaldo Cicéro, a central figure in the local charismatic milieu whose role of 'broker' highlights the 'critical junctures or synapses of relationships which connect the local system to the larger whole' (Wolf 1956: 1075, quoted by Ketterer Hobbis & Hobbis 2020: 6). Eudaldo was raised in a Catholic family and in 1979 converted to the 'charismatic revival', a movement which then brought Protestants and Catholics together around an intense experience of 'the action of the Holy Spirit'. He attended the AoG in the south of France for several months before he left for Tahiti in 1981 to do his military service. There he joined the Alleluia [1255] Church, became involved in youth activities (serving as summer camp director), and followed his own brother-in-law, Pastor Levant, to help found the first AoG in Papeete. But as Eudaldo soon realized, 'I needed something else, I needed a change of scenery, to live a much more exciting experience, because it began to be a bit ... how could I say that? Serving, serving God, but without feeling either renewed or ... without a real passion in my heart'.<sup>4</sup>

In 1986, he went to Oklahoma to study at Oral Roberts University, an evangelical college established by a charismatic pastor. After earning a bachelor's degree in New Testament studies (option 'Mission'), he did a master's degree at the Fuller Theological Seminary, an institution regarded in the 1980s as the ideological laboratory of 'spiritual warfare' theology. In 1992, he was appointed by the evangelical association Wycliffe Bible Translators, dedicated to translating the Bible into minority languages. He returned to French Polynesia in 1994 with plans to work on a new Tahitian translation of the Bible. At the end of 1997, he participated in the creation of the Full Gospel Church, a charismatic church planted in Tahiti by Earl Thurner, an American missionary and former pastor of the First AoG in Maui (Hawaii). In 2000, Eudaldo opened the 'New Wine' bookshop in Papeete, where local believers could find shelves of books and DVDs devoted to 'revival' or to 'spiritual warfare', but also children's books, counselling for married life, Bible reading methods, t-shirts, stickers, evangelical music, and so on.<sup>5</sup> In 2006 he founded the association 'Vision of the Harvest', which notably aims to 'welcome ministries' and organizes local visits of

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Eudaldo Cicéro in Papeete, 17 November 2001.

<sup>5</sup> The bookshop closed around 2010, for financial reasons, at a time when high-speed internet connections allowed local believers to directly access such resources as were previously available only at the bookshop.

charismatic apostles and prophets. Also in the early 2000s, Eudaldo and his wife gathered at their home in Moorea a group of fifteen believers, among the first small groups on this island.

In a series of fieldwork expeditions from 2012 to 2017, Gwendoline Malogne-Fer and I explored all these small groups, attending their meetings on the decks of family houses and conducting interviews with their participants. Jean's group was the first we met. This is also the group where, at first sight, authority appears the most elusive, while the themes of spiritual warfare are particularly prevalent. The deck generally occupies more than a third of the floor-plan of Polynesian houses, and it plays a specific social role at the intersection of the intimate and the collective. What is done or said on the deck can be seen and heard in the neighbourhood, in a society of interconnaissance (Maget 1955) where each person lives largely under the gaze of the other. By occupying the deck, small charismatic groups do not simply withdraw their religious practice into the private sphere. Rather, they inscribe it in a liminal space, a place of sociability that is both part of the home and a common space, open to the immediate social environment. The presence of anthropologists on decks where small groups meet must be considered through this perspective, and such presence implies long-term familiarity and a form of 'confidentiality': 'namely, exercise of the license to penetrate another's informational preserve', in the words of Goffman (1971: 192). This is immediately understandable in the eyes of local participants, anthropologists being seen as people who are 'interested in matters of religion', insofar as the deck is the very place where such 'research' can be collectively carried out in an informal way.

### *Jean and the 'charismatic process'*

Jean is in his sixties. The son of a Polynesian primary school teacher and a French civil servant, he comes from the upper class of the local society. He himself is a technician at the Office of Post and Telecommunications; his wife, also a civil servant, works in the financial department of the High Commissioner in Papeete.<sup>6</sup> The family owns a [1256] comfortable house in a residential neighbourhood on the west coast of Tahiti. During the 2008 municipal elections, Jean held a good position on a 'civil society' party list led by a renowned photographer (the list garnered 4.3 per cent of the votes).

From childhood, Jean had the opportunity to travel: every three years, his family spent holidays in France. His father is a non-practising Catholic, his mother a Protestant, and Jean grew up in the Bethel congregation in Papeete. As the only French-speaking congregation in French Polynesia, Bethel occupies a special place in the local Protestant milieu. It was originally established to accommodate English and American sailors, and it was led from

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<sup>6</sup> The High Commissioner is the highest representative of the state in French Polynesia.



1863 to 1990 by French ministers from the Société Évangélique des Missions de Paris and the CEVAA.<sup>7</sup> A few Chinese families also joined Bethel: Cantonese Protestants who came to Tahiti at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as Hakka families converted to Pentecostalism in the 1960s, who left the Protestant church a few years afterwards. Jean's maternal grandmother was of Chinese origin. It was also at Bethel that the YWAM missionaries were active from 1989 to 1996.

Jean and his wife were at that time Sunday School instructors. Their family was going through a difficult time: Jean was seeing apparitions ('a woman with half a body, there were no feet'), and the couple were told that their children suffered from a genetic disease that produces severe kidney failure. Bethel was led by a Neo-Caledonian minister, and later by a pastor from France: 'a man of faith, he had a charism for healing'.<sup>8</sup> But this pastor's stay was curtailed 'due to problems in the church': some deacons and church members refused his 'way of doing things'. Jean encountered YWAM at a troubled time, with mixed feelings of discouragement and strong religious expectation (a miraculous healing), amid tensions in Bethel as well as in the EPM due to the development of the cultural movement. 'There was the emergence of this current of thought, turning the Eternal into a Tahitian God, Tahitianized. It started back then', Jean recalls.

Jean and his wife joined the meetings of groups that were set up around the YWAM missionary couple and were soon 'converted', at a time when they had decided to 'step back from [church] structures' by retreating into a smaller, more intimate community of three families: 'There was no pastor, no preacher or leadership, nothing, it was just about feeling good together. And I believe this was a shift, regarding the ... what we usually call the charismatic process'. In January 1994, after a series of teachings on 'the dynamic of the Spirit' given by visiting American missionaries, Jean and his wife experienced the 'baptism in the Holy Spirit'. The following June, they took part in a 'March for Jesus' (combined with a 'playful trip') on the Tahiti peninsula, organized by a small charismatic group. It was there that Jean was baptized by immersion by one of the leaders of this group:

On our way back, we stopped at Vaima, the spring, you know, in the district of Mataiea. I was standing there, around 4, 5 p.m., the end of the day, I was looking at the water and made a short prayer, saying, 'Lord, when are you going to baptize me in the water?' Because there is the baptism in the water, and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. And at this very moment, there was a brother walking behind me, and he has, you know, what we call an anointing for words of

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<sup>7</sup> The CEVAA, or 'Community of Churches in Missions', associates the United Protestant Church of France with national Protestant churches stemming from French Protestant missions.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Jean in Papeete, 24 December 2001.

knowledge ... He was walking behind me, he said: 'When am I going to drop your head in the water?' It made me smile because there was a concrete answer to my prayer.

Small groups might thus perform church rituals like baptism – or forms of collective mobilization disseminated by global charismatism, like the March for Jesus – outside of any institutional framework, and in a 'playful mode'.<sup>9</sup> Such experiences provide landmarks in a process of religious re-socialization. They contribute to a shift [1257] from personal concerns to a commitment to others by strengthening the sense of commitment 'with God'. Along with other members of his group, Jean began to pray for the sick in the hospitals and, after meeting Eudaldo, he reformulated his charismatic experience in terms of 'revival':

Eudaldo used a word I had never heard before: revival. It challenged me, I liked it. What did 'revival' mean? He explained it to me. At that time, it was something ... vague. But surely, this brother, who received a theological education in the US, had a spiritual maturity that we didn't have. He knew about all these things that you know, what you talked about earlier, South America, Africa, etc. And then, I was challenged by this word 'revival', he explained it to me, and the idea has gained ground.

This concept of revival implicitly refers to the agenda of the 'restorationist' movement which aims to 'restore' the charisms of the primitive church and the authority of the Bible as the foundation of social order. But Jean primarily perceived it as a higher level of initiation (associated with a higher level of knowledge, 'a theological education in the US') and interpreted it in the enthusiastic register of a new 'outpouring of the Holy Spirit':

It's about making what's in the heavens now becoming a reality here on earth. It's like ... the dynamic of the third heaven which manifests here. People get a foretaste of it, they receive concrete answers, there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It's about letting the Holy Spirit do what he wants to do and use us as clay vases to manifest the full glory of God. In fact, it's very, very easy to understand. If you take the Book of Acts, there is the revelation of the primitive church, the dynamic of the primitive church. The Eternal wants to do the same thing now, and it's the Holy Spirit at work.

Jean's charismatic itinerary began outside religious institutions but intersected twice with the history of local churches. First, he came to know the church of Good News, established in 1982 in Faa'a (Tahiti) by American AoG missionaries. In the 1980s, this church, being distinct from the local mainstream Pentecostalism (the AoG of French Polynesia, long run

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<sup>9</sup> In his sociological analysis of 'New Age' groups, Wood links this playful dimension of some channelling workshops to a specific kind of authority. He remarks that the game register (understood as 'a map with a feigned referent – in other words, play is pretence') enables the establishing of boundaries within which the pretence of the channellers as strong leaders was temporarily accepted (Wood 2007: 109). The circumstances of Jean's baptism can similarly be interpreted as a 'playful' time during which decisive authority strong enough to rightfully perform the ritual of baptism can be established.



by French missionaries), offered an alternative Pentecostal place and brought together many of the participants in the 'small groups'. Its video library played a key role in the dissemination of a 'homemade' Pentecostalism: there everyone could borrow books or videotapes, and many of these circulated widely through friends and family networks. Jean also attended Good News 'from time to time', and it was there that in 1997 he met Pastor Thurner, who had been invited to preach. It was quite an unusual message: Pastor Thurner practised 'slaying ministry', a laying on of hands that produces fainting or 'resting in the Spirit' in believers; and he also preached charismatic 'revival'. There followed a crisis within the church, and the departure of many members who under the impulse of Pastor Thurner and Eudaldo formed the Full Gospel Church, the first charismatic church in French Polynesia.

This overview of Jean's itinerary helps to specify the common background of several members of his group. Its initial core was formed after 2005, at a time when the Full Gospel Church had been weakened by repeated refusals from the French administration to grant a permanent resident visa to Pastor Thurner. These initial core members share distinctive social properties that incline them to adopt the codes of a charismatic culture (Coleman 2000: 6), combining three main elements: a quest for virtuosity and a willingness to 'learn more', expressed by believers already endowed with cultural capital; informality of behaviour – they can 'take the liberty' of experiencing things that others don't dare do for the sake of social respectability; and what Besnier describes in Tonga as a 'cosmopolitan ease' (2011: 216), a personal ability to feel at ease in various social and geographical spaces.

[1258] Laetitia, for example, received a Protestant education at Bethel before leaving Tahiti to spend twelve years in the United States and in the wealthy western suburbs of Paris. There, she accompanied friends ('a naval officer, five kids, they're all named Marie-Clothilde, Marie-what's her name, you know') to the Catholic church, but she found the faithful 'uptight' and 'rather hypocritical'. Once back in French Polynesia, she was invited by a friend to the AoG in Moorea, at a time when she was going through a romantic breakup. Then she attended an AoG of Orovini, in Papeete. But soon she felt she was 'craving for more' and joined the Full Gospel Church (where I first met her):

I believe it's part of your life journey, of your intimacy with God, it depends, because in this journey, there are times when you are craving for singing, or for having a ball, you are craving for expressing what you feel, you know ... I really liked Orovini, really. But after a while, I came to the point where I was *fiu* [fed up] of 'let's praise, sit down, stand up'. You see what I mean? I was craving for more, and that's what I found here, in this church: freedom. Free to worship, free

to praise, free to ... free to show what you feel, to express your feelings, especially among Tahitians, you don't usually express all this.<sup>10</sup>

Jean-Yves and his wife Annie don't show as much ease as Laetitia and come from a more modest social background. They, too, lived in France for a long time before settling in Tahiti in the early 1990s, then in Moorea. At that time, they 'did almost everything', including attending the Mormon Church, where Jean-Yves 'was about to be baptized'.<sup>11</sup> He is Tahitian, from a Protestant family; she was born in France to Catholic parents. They got to know the small groups around YWAM before joining the Full Gospel Church. Their enthusiasm for charismatism is, according to their own account, partly the cause of a social downgrading, which they interpret in terms of 'spiritual warfare': Jean-Yves ran his own business for a time but quickly squandered the company's funds in the service of his 'calling' to mission and a 'gift' of healing ('I could afford it, so I spent it all'). 'Even our business got attacked', he explained. 'I was so focused on God that my own workers misappropriated my business. Then afterwards, I was attacked and had to sell my company'.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to this initial core, the group has incorporated more or less long-term believers with very different profiles, like Marthe, a young woman who has gone through many personal difficulties. In 2012, she was coming out of a messy separation from the father of her children and worked as a home-based seamstress. She had been 'in Christ' for only one year (without any church affiliation) but had attended several 'trainings' organized by Eudaldo, and she regularly joined Jean's group. This sort of shortcut is a significant characteristic of the small groups: new converts suddenly enter a space of virtuoso religious sociability, which results from a process of differentiation internal to the local Pentecostal field, but of which they know practically nothing. This is also the case for Aimata, another woman in the group. Her itinerary helps in measuring the consequences of this kind of shortcut in terms of (de)regulation of authority structures.

### *Aimata, 'the first eagle'*

Aimata was born in the 1960s, to a Catholic Reunionese father and a 'half-Tahitian' mother from a large Protestant family. Until the age of 7, she received a Catholic education: 'I used to go to the Catholics, me personally, and I was passionate about it, even as a child'.<sup>13</sup> But following a divorce, Aimata's mother took her two daughters to live with their maternal grandparents, and Aimata had to attend the Protestant Sunday School. 'It was not easy for

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Laetitia at the Full Gospel Church in Arue (Tahiti), 31 March 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Informal interview with Annie and Jean-Yves in Moorea, 5 November 2013.

<sup>12</sup> When I met Annie and Jean-Yves at the end of 2013, they had recently mounted a rotisserie-chicken kiosk across from the ferry dock in Moorea.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Aimata in Moorea, 24 January 2012.

me', she recalls, as this change of church also implied a change of language: she spoke French at home but had a poor command of Tahitian, and still [1259] today she feels less legitimate speaking that language. Her husband, Didier, whom she met at the age of 18, was born in France and has a Catholic family background but no religious education:

As Didier is Catholic, for me, my three children had to be Catholic. I took it back, I took my religion back. I stayed Catholic, I never made a total conversion to Protestantism ... Today, I am no longer saying that it's religion that saves you, it's Christ himself, that's all. So, when I am asked 'What is your religion?', it's true that I took a step among Pentecostals, but I call myself a Christian, and that's it, no denomination.

Her 'step among Pentecostals' occurred in the mid-1990s: a worker installing a septic tank at her house told her of a pastor who 'prayed for healing', at a time when she was worried for her daughter's health; a few months after, she met Émilie, whose husband is a contractor who was then building a housing estate near Aimata's home. Her itinerary highlights a series of predisposing factors in the search for an alternative, non-institutional religious sociability. First, as in Jean's case, an internal crisis within the AoG of Moorea produced disenchantment with the church: 'I saw there was a clan within the church', Aimata says, referring to dissensions which led a few years later to the creation of a dissident church. Then there were tensions with her partner: although he had previously 'met Christ', after returning from a stay with his family in France, Didier no longer wanted to hear about Pentecostalism, which he now regarded as a cult. Ultimately, Aimata was hired as a cleaning lady at the agricultural high school in Moorea, and her working hours were hardly compatible with church activities.

In the early 2000s, Eudaldo and his wife Aline 'started to set up a cell group, a prayer group, and more specifically intercession prayers'. Aimata met Aline at the AoG in Moorea. She accepted an invitation on the occasion of a visit from a foreign minister, then she joined the group. She was baptized two years later by Pastor Lebrun, who leads a charismatic church in Cergy, near Paris, and who regularly comes to Polynesia, where he's closely linked with Eudaldo. It was in this group, at first mainly attended by 'new souls' (people who had no prior experience of Pentecostalism), that a 'shortcut' occurred, marking the beginning of Aimata's complicated itinerary in the local small groups. For her, joining Eudaldo's group already meant the transition to a higher level: 'Someone told me one day, "We didn't dare come because you were too high, too strong"'. Rapidly, Amaita came to be recognized as an 'intercessor', a new status that she interpreted as a personal calling. Prayer of intercession consists of intervening with God to influence the course of events, based on 'revelations' which she generally 'received' at night and most often concerned the personal situation of someone. This calling was confirmed in her eyes by two successive consecrations, in

accordance with a dominant pattern in charismaticism: an internal consecration by Eudaldo, and in 2002 an external one, by a 'prophet' visiting Moorea.

God took me out of [the AoG] to be with Eudaldo ... for spiritual training, and there I saw many things, the Holy Spirit used me. As Eudaldo said, 'I've been asking the Lord for fifteen years for an intercessor', and now he had an intercessor in front of him, it was me. And a prophet came, he saw we were like baby birds that God was feeding so that they would become eagles. And when I became the first eagle released by God – because all this is spiritual, revealed things – well, I had to tell Eudaldo that I had to leave him ... often ministers don't understand why a member of their church has to leave ... And a lot of people, seeing that I was about to leave, wanted to follow me, but I told them: no, I am the one God chose to send.

In fact, the 'prophet' who confirmed her calling has instilled strong uncertainty regarding the authority claimed by Aimata. Achille, a Polynesian who after a career [1260] in the French army spent three years at the biblical school of Pastor Lebrun's church in Cergy, was in his 'practical training' when he visited Eudaldo's group. Achille is convinced that he has received an 'apostolic calling': 'The Spirit of God directly taught me revelations, I received them, preachers came and said, "You've an apostolic calling, God is calling you to be an apostle"'.<sup>14</sup> But in Polynesia, his authority was quickly questioned, notably by Eudaldo.

Aimata's charismatic career began in a small group led by Raoul, a brother of Achille. In Raoul's group, the atmosphere was more Polynesian than in Eudaldo's, and even if the use of Tahitian language weakened Aimata's self-confidence, she felt 'in [her] element' from the start: 'I came to this group to prophesy, a higher dimension'. But the group 'didn't know about intercession, spiritual warfare, no one spoke in tongues', and she quickly came up against a 'spirit of competition and disobedience'. After one year, she left the group and stayed 'quiet at home' for a while. Then she joined another small group, but this group eventually merged with Raoul's and, once again, Aimata had to leave. In the mid-2000s, the dynamic of dispersion reached its peak in Moorea. At this point of Aimata's itinerary, she found Jean and his wife (as well as Annie and Jean-Yves), whom she had already met in a previous small group. She became a regular participant in group meetings in Tahiti, and then in Moorea, at Annie and Jean-Yves' house or on the deck of her own home until 2012. She then began to distance herself from Jean's group and saw them only from time to time. She went through 'a time of desert' focused on her conjugal life, with only a few praising evenings at home, accompanied by her husband on guitar. A series of gaps distinguish her from most of the group's participants. They allow themselves what she herself doesn't dare, and they are reluctant to recognize her authority to the level of her expectations, mainly

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Achille in Moorea, 16 November 2013.

because they profess an indifference towards authority that she can't share. When asked whether she would define herself as a 'free Christian', she replied:

Yes, definitely, I am totally free. But, well, my journey with God is not finished, God reveals things to me, and there are things that are still important in life, there's a hierarchy, there are structures that are still important, you can't just have fun being free, free, and then you never know where you're going, you need to be careful too.<sup>15</sup>

### *Antonio, a pastor seeking employment*

A third figure rounds out this exploration of the forms of religious authority within Jean's group and sheds light on an apparent paradox: while infused with a charismatic culture full of prophets and apostles, the group is itself practically devoid of any formative authority. Antonio is the pastor of the group, its 'spiritual umbrella', according to Aimata. Antonio's rather improbable itinerary – his maladjustment to the structure of the local Pentecostal-charismatic field in which he is trying to find a position – provides clues for measuring the decline of the pastoral function in charismatism over the last two decades.

In the early 2000s, the reference to a local church still made sense. Eudaldo Cicéro was then the assistant pastor of the Full Gospel Church while leading a prayer group at his own home in Moorea. His involvement in a local church echoed the worldwide dissemination of the concept of 'territorial commitment' introduced in 1992 by the theorists of 'spiritual warfare', who turned local churches into strategic actors in the 'spiritual liberation' of territories: 'God would give strategic information to a practitioner of Spiritual Mapping only if he exhibited a special commitment to the area of his local church' (Holvast 2009: 101). The pastor was therefore the one who [1261] led the local church in that battle. But eleven years later, Eudaldo was no longer a pastor: he now called himself a reverend, 'ordained' by the international missionary organization Christ's Mandate for Missions. He no longer exercised this authority in a local church, but rather in connection with networks of 'ministries' claiming a special 'divine anointing'.

Caught off guard by such evolutions, Antonio began his pastoral training in France at the beginning of the 2000s in an evangelical conservative milieu, far from North American charismatism. His parents are Tahitians, and he was raised in the EPM. He made his confirmation in 1991 'and then started, at the age of 15-16, to follow [his] father who, as an evangelist in the church, ... went door to door to evangelize'.<sup>16</sup> A good student, he obtained a technical-scientific baccalaureate in 1996, but his main dream was to become a professor of theology. This scholastic logic focused on university degrees (he wanted to 'immediately

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Aimata in Moorea, 24 January 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Antonio in Tahiti, 16 February 2012.

begin a bachelor's') dissuaded him from the EPM theological school, which does not offer such a degree and gives access to French universities only after a 'classic course' of pastoral training in Tahiti. On the advice of a French military chaplain stationed in Tahiti, Antonio's mother (who worked in the army administration) steered him towards the Free Faculty of Reformed Theology in Aix-en-Provence, an evangelical faculty founded in 1974 by an 'orthodox' evangelical Calvinist (Fath 2005: 196). So Antonio studied in Aix-en-Provence, making his first contacts with the French Polynesian AoG in 1997 through an uncle converted to Pentecostalism: during holidays in Tahiti that year, Antonio was baptized at the AoG in Taravao, on the Tahitian peninsula. For his master's studies, he went to the Free Faculty of Evangelical Theology in Vaux-sur-Seine, an institution close to fundamentalist Baptists which aims to give French evangelism academic credibility by raising the 'level' of pastoral training (Fath 2005: 189-90).

At the end of his academic studies, in 2002, Antonio found himself over-endowed in educational capital, and at odds with the vocational paths in force within the local AoG. Indeed, in that church, accession to the pastorate is based not on academic level but on a long process of 'discernment', leading from the fidelity manifested within the local church to years of 'on-the-job training' and official recognition, in a constant relationship of personal dependence on the church hierarchy (Fer 2010). Antonio also failed the secondary school teacher's exam in Tahitian-French, after a year of university preparation in Tahiti. At the time he joined the AoG, that church was entering a period of deep crisis in which the pastoral council eventually split into two irreconcilable camps over issues of power. Antonio became the assistant to Pastor Poroi, who left the AoG in 2006 to create his own dissident church with around fifty followers in Papeari, on the west coast of Tahiti.

A series of maladjustments thus put Antonio in the uneasy position of an unemployed pastor, seeking a place where he could convert his educational capital into religious legitimacy. His personal disposition towards erudition led him to regard local charisma as an opportunity to access a higher level of knowledge and experience; late in 2004, he met Eudaldo at a 'prophetic conference' given by Pastor Lebrun. But this charismatic milieu was even less likely to yield a pastoral position, a classic register of authority often replaced here by prophetic and apostolic registers. Finally, in 2011, Antonio joined Jean's group:

Sharing with Jean, I realized we agreed on our vision of the church, about freeing people, enabling them to enter their calling, to participate, encouraging various vocations, and not just a pastor [1262] orchestrating everything. So, we started to work together ... We agreed that it's not a church, people should therefore be able to come and feel at ease, spend time together and pray, worship the Lord in a less formal way, be relax.



Antonio's own role doesn't imply hierarchical authority over the members of the group; he is understood to be an expert in biblical matters and teaching who guarantees that the group would not deviate from the Bible.

### *Taking position: redeeming the land*

On 11 January 2012, Jean, Aimata, Laetitia, Jean-Yves, Annie, and Marthe participated in a march along the coastal road in Moorea. About two dozen people walked towards the ferry terminal on the island. Accompanied by a guitar and ukulele, they planted small flags here and there, wooden sticks with scraps of paper onto which they'd copied biblical verses: 'Prophetic verses that announce things', explained Jean.<sup>17</sup> The sound of a shofar resonated from time to time. This was inspired by a 'vision' received one year earlier by Aimata. But she didn't fully recognize herself in the way Jean had translated her vision into a 'march of intercession'. The implicit critiques she has addressed at Jean ('I didn't fully understand his approach personally') highlight the ambivalence of the power relationships between Aimata, who associates her gift of vision with a position of authority, and Jean, who dissociates the exercise of spiritual gifts from the stakes of authority, while imposing himself *de facto* as the one who elaborates the legitimate meaning of this march.

Jean is the one who took this initiative, following the vision I received, I don't remember when exactly ... In this vision, I saw ... The Lord took me to Vaiare, where I saw heaven open over Mau'a Puta, the pierced mountain, and heaven was wide open. Well, I saw the army of God, the army of God and mankind, people walking from Teavaro – roughly where you joined us, where we started. So there, and maybe a little ahead on this road, I saw men walking one after the other, and it filled up the whole road. Heaven was open over Mau'a Puta and on each side, angels were blowing the horn. This army was going to heaven. And it was really clear, you know. So, Jean wanted to ... I didn't fully understand his approach personally, but thereafter he absolutely wanted us to do this ... he prepared little paper scraps of prayer with verses and so we walked, and we had to plant each paper scrap all along, up to the harbour, and there we stood in front of where I saw heaven open.<sup>18</sup>

An identical ritual was performed for each little flag: someone poured out a handful of salt, oil, and wine. The 'salt of the earth' is used to purify, one participant told me, while the oil is an anointing by the Holy Spirit, and the wine represents the blood of Christ, 'to clean up: like a Kärcher [pressure washer]!' According to Jean, what happened that afternoon 'in heaven' went back to 'Jericho, the walls are falling down, alleluia!' All along the march, he regularly spoke out, punctuating the reading of the verses with 'amen', 'glory to God', 'alleluia', or short proclamations like this: 'We proclaim your royalty, your seigneurie, your

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<sup>17</sup> Informal interview with Jean in Moorea, 11 February 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Aimata and Mimi in Moorea, 24 October 2013.

glory, your power, alleluia! The unique, the creator! Omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent! Glory to the Eternal, alleluia!' A woman responded, in the same exalted tone: 'God of glory!'

One participant read Ephesians 3:20, 'Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine' ('Amazing, this verse!', said Jean); then Chronicles 2, 1:10, 'Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?' ('Hmm, the father's wisdom!'); Psalms 42:5, and Numbers 10:9, 'When you go into battle in your own land against an enemy who is oppressing you, sound a blast on the trumpets. Then you will be remembered by the Lord your God and rescued from your enemies'. Here Jean proclaimed 'the presence [1263] of the Holy Spirit. So strong! Blood of Christ, pure blood, no human part could have contaminated that blood! Blood that redeems, amen!', and he concluded by evoking the need to 'redeem the land'.<sup>19</sup>

The practices implemented during this march were inspired by the theology of 'spiritual warfare': they aimed to 'redeem' the land of Moorea and claim the 'sovereignty of God' in this territory, where his authority is supposedly challenged by 'demonic' forces, both political and religious. This charismatic worldview was elaborated within the School for World Mission at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena (California), an institution founded in 1947 by American evangelical fundamentalists (Marsden 1987). In the late 1960s, its director, Donald McGavran, first conceptualized the notion of a 'homogeneous group': that is, the need to evangelize communities rather than individuals, based on the idea that 'men like to become Christians without having to cross racial, linguistic, or social barriers' (quoted by Smith 2005: 13). Two teachers of the Fuller Theological Seminary trained in anthropology, Alan Tippett and Charles Kraft, then strove to give these reflections of managerial inspiration their full 'spiritual' dimension, leading to a 're-articulation of the longstanding anti-modernism of pre-millennial fundamentalists of the 1920s and 1930s (Sutton 2014), with a new global twist' (Marshall 2016: 99). Tippett, a former missionary in Fiji, 'developed the notion of "power encounter" to evoke the confrontation that arises between the biblical God and the pagan deities'. Kraft, for his part, established a correspondence between

animism and the biblical worldview, which would share a similar understanding of reality as populated by angelic and demonic entities invisible to the Cartesians that we would have become in the West. Just as the animist would use spiritual techniques to manipulate these entities, so the Christian is invited to open himself to this dimension of reality (Gonzalez 2014: 257).

This theology of spiritual warfare, systematized in the 1990s by C. Peter Wagner (the new director of the School of World Mission), focuses on the ontological link between spirits,

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<sup>19</sup> All verses are from the New International Version of the Bible.

lands, and identities. It therefore grants indigenous peoples a specific status as 'gatekeepers' of the lands where God has placed them (Fer 2016; McAlister 2016), with indigeneity understood as an original and authentic identity based on the covenant between God, a people, and a land. Ryle has shown how this charismatic representation of indigeneity can be locally appropriated and inspire new rituals. In the village of Navuso, where the Methodist missionary John Baker was murdered in 1867, indigenous charismatic Fijians reinvested the traditional belief in collective belonging to the land and ancestral spirits. They reoriented it towards practices of 'reconciliation' that no longer aim to appease these spirits but seek to defeat them by 'purifying' the land of the sins inherited from history (Ryle 2012). The All Pacific Prayer Assembly, a network founded by the Salomon pastor Michael Maeliau,<sup>20</sup> carries the same charismatic imaginary and proclaims the need for truly 'Christian' (i.e. evangelical) national governments. 'Spiritual warfare' theology has produced a re-territorialization of the charismatic worldview and contributed to the worldwide dissemination of new repertoires of action, in particular 'spiritual mapping' practices (Holvast 2009). The patterns of these charismatic practices are easily recognizable everywhere but always shaped by local contexts. Gibbs thus describes the 'Prayer Wall' operation conducted in 1999 in Papua New Guinea, which saw teams of 'intercessors' going to pray in strategic places such as government departments and Parliament, while another team flew along the border with Irian Jaya, 'praying that God would release power in the heavenly realm [1264] to impact on the earthly realm and protect the nation from evil' (Gibbs 2005: 18, quoted in Jorgensen 2005: 449). In 1994 in Singapore, 140 ministers similarly 'travelled to the "four major gateways of the nation" ... to claim the city for Christ'. As Goh remarks, 'The effect has been to make Christians conscious of the nation *as place*, infusing otherwise highly urbanized space instrumentalized for capitalist competition with the significance of collective ownership and heritage' (Goh 2010: 79, original emphasis).

The march in Moorea expressed in its own way this reinvestment of nation as place and a willingness to 'take position': each believer is called to engage in the ongoing battle, on which the spiritual salvation of the nation depends (see also O'Neill 2010: 96). Through this march, the group articulated a distinctive position (Handman 2015: 14-15) by expressing critiques against other local expressions of Protestantism as well as its own indexical connection to a global religious imaginary. Above all, the march was indeed considered a symbolic response to changes occurring in local Protestantism. Since the late 1980s, a movement for cultural contextualization has developed within the EPM, which over time has taken the form of a theology of the land, rooting the identity of the Ma'ohi people, their

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<sup>20</sup> The creation of this network in the early 1990s was inspired by a vision 'received' in 1986 by Maeliau – a deep sea canoe that travels through five successive scenes: a great cloud originates in the Solomon Islands before floating as a 'mighty current' over the South Pacific, then America, from where it crosses the Atlantic Ocean, and finally reaches Jerusalem (Timmer 2012: 205-6). In 2011, the network was renamed All Peoples Prayer Assembly (see also Fer 2012).

relationship to God and their destiny – both religious and political – in the native land, *te fenua*. This movement promotes the use of distinctive cultural features in church services (flowers, musical instruments, local dress), the ‘Tahitianization’ of the Lord’s Supper (replacing bread and wine with coconut flesh or breadfruit and water), and the modification of several words used in the liturgy, especially those referring to God (Malogne-Fer 2016). The march, Jean explains, was undertaken ‘in relation to history, to present things and the future’.<sup>21</sup> It took place in Moorea because ‘the Gospel spread from here’, a reference to the founding of the Society Islands Mission (Vernier 1986: 26-33). The goal was therefore to ‘claim’ once again this land ‘for Christ’.

The ‘present things’ mentioned by Jean refer both to the particular context of Moorea and to specific political circumstances. Local Protestant parishes have been in the forefront of the cultural movement, under the impulse of members of the church theological commission native to the island and of ministers trained at the Pacific Theological College in Fiji, the epicentre of contextual theologies in the Pacific Islands (Malogne-Fer 2007: 453).<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, the march expressed a reaction against the ‘heresies’ of the cultural movement, and it was mainly conceived by former members of the EPM, now converted to Pentecostalism, who see themselves as faithful custodians of the ‘true’ Protestant tradition.

Second, this march enabled participants to translate to ‘the spiritual realm’ their hostility towards the political commitment of the EPM in favour of independence for French Polynesia. The march occurred a few months after the re-election of separatist leader Oscar Temaru as President of the local government, in April 2011. His return to power followed a long period of political instability, caused by his initial election in 2004 and its overturning by a vote of censure three and a half months later. This period was also marked by the first steps taken to put French Polynesia back on the UN list of territories that should be decolonized.<sup>23</sup>

The practices of Jean’s group reveal the incorporation of a set of representations and repertoires of action disseminated by global charismatism, expressed in several registers: the martial proclamation of the power and sovereignty of God (a metaphorical expression of the theocratic horizon that inspires the ‘spiritual warfare’ agenda), coexistent with a more ecstatic kind of experience, as when the group gathered [1265] after the march to pass the night in a local parish house. There, songs continued to evoke a sovereign God (‘Lord, you’re the king, the king of kings’), but above all the slow rhythms and repetitions fostered a feeling of euphoria. There was much laughter, and women danced and waved multi-

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<sup>21</sup> Informal interview with Jean in Moorea, 11 February 2012.

<sup>22</sup> The church often chose to send pastors fluent in English to Moorea parishes so that they might communicate more easily with the few English-speaking tourists attending the Sunday service.

<sup>23</sup> In May 2013, French Polynesia was placed back on this list.

coloured banners. Other members of the group sat or chatted in the kitchen. 'Oh, that feels good!', exclaimed someone in the midst of an hour or more of continuous singing, accompanied by guitars, ukulele, and djembe. 'Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, amen, amen, amen. Drunk with you, Lord! Let us be drunk with you! Children of God! Amen! Thank you Lord for this joy!' Speaking in tongues spontaneously blended with laughter and song throughout this evening.

A third register is evident in practices and songs, connecting what is done in 'the world realm' to what happens in 'heaven': this is what the members of Jean's group call prophecy. This prophetic dimension can sometimes raise issues of authority, as in the remarks by Aimata on the implementation of her vision by Jean, which seemed to her misinterpreted. Prophecy also produces collective commitment by linking the intensity of personal experience to more political representations. Because charismatics largely see religious commitment as a 'self-surrender' to God, they tend to correlate the degrees of personal involvement with parallel variations in 'God's presence'. A 'strong' presence of God (indicated by 'evident' acts of the Holy Spirit, such as healing and prophecies) logically corresponds to an equivalent personal involvement/surrender, and vice versa (Fer 2015: 59).

This correlation generates a major dissonance between the politically motivated discourses disseminated by charismatic actors and networks (especially those who define themselves as 'prophetic') and the conditions in which believers receive these discourses: that is, as an enthusiastic experience of the 'action of the Holy Spirit' (Gonzalez 2014: 112-13). The same correlation is at the core of 'intercession' practices, which contribute to the elaboration of a commitment to others, based on the subjective experience of a 'personal relationship' with God. In other words, intercession is one of the vehicles through which the shift from the individual to the collective takes place: from personal salvation to political commitment. As an evangelical handbook for 'discipleship' explains, 'The key for intercession is to acknowledge responsibility for fighting the enemy of our souls' (Venditti & Venditti 1996: 138). This is the orientation in which Jean tried to engage the members of his group by organizing the march in Moorea.

### ***Conclusion: (De)institutionalization and commitment***

Although their discourses permeate the practices of the group, the apostles and prophets of the global charismatic economy do not visit the group in person. The group doesn't invite such actors, probably because other local small groups already serve that function, but also because the members of the group maintain a relationship of distance with forms of personal authority. While Jean defines himself as 'rather prophet', this doesn't mean that he

intends to lead the group, but *rather* to 'announce the direction'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Antonio refuses to associate any hierarchical dimension with his pastoral role. The system of authority in this group is primarily shaped by an anti- authoritarian reaction, conceived in contrast to the classic institutional model. It can be defined in sociological terms as 'charismatic', in reference to Weber's original definition of charismatic domination, which is not primarily aimed at the establishment of a supreme authority but 'is on the contrary, for him, situated in the critical impulse [1266] that pushes it to denounce itself as an illegitimate mode of power' (Kalinowski 2014: 51). This type of authority is in affinity with the personal dispositions of the group's initiators – who can afford this informality of authority and self-expression without fearing that they do not know 'where they are going' (unlike Aimata, who does worry about this). It also makes the existence of this kind of group fragile: in 2013, the group encountered some turbulence due to a newcomer, a TV journalist whose strong personality quickly undermined the informal system of authority. The group's activities were then put on hold, before resuming a few years later in a more intimate form.

The kind of authority that Jean's group claims by participating in 'the dynamic of the third heaven' produces no internal hierarchy within the group. But the march in Moorea reveals latent dispositions towards a politicization of religious commitment through the implementation of this 'theology of the kingdom' inspired by a theocratic agenda. It also underlines that the realization of these latent dispositions remains dependent on a set of social, political, and religious conditions at the local level. The disagreement between Jean and Aimata about the implementation of her initial 'vision' sheds some light on the role of social position in processes of politicization, as seen in other case studies (especially in Latin America) which correlate politicization with the broadening of the social base of Pentecostalism to the middle classes (Koehrsen 2017: 323).

Finally, the activities of Jean's group and the profiles of its main participants reveal certain mechanisms involved in the transition from individual concerns to collective commitment. In terms of the charismatic imaginary, this shift from a search for personal healing to 'spiritual warfare' is most often conceptualized through the notion of intercession, which appears as the pivotal point in building commitment to others. Jean distanced himself from his church of origin at a time when he was looking for solutions to a 'demonic problem'. He then entered a small charismatic group, and there he incorporated new personal dispositions that gradually produced his commitment to others: through the animation of a group, as well as intercession practices and the charismatic worldview associated with 'spiritual warfare' theology. Initially concerned for the health of her daughter, Aimata turned to the local AoG to find support, and through this 'step' she entered the local

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<sup>24</sup> Informal interview with Jean in Moorea, 11 February 2012.



Pentecostal-charismatic field, where she quickly converted her personal quest into a commitment to 'spiritual warfare', understood primarily as higher levels of knowledge, experience, and status that imply new responsibilities to others. In all these cases, de-institutionalization is never synonymous with disengagement, and the subjective experience of a 'personal relationship with God' produces no disregard for any collective relationship with the world (Hervieu-Léger 2010: 51): it is in fact the very place from which charismatism builds the collective, by inculcating a duty of commitment to others closely correlated to the intensity of this 'personal relationship'.

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