

Religion and the Civilizational Process:  
The Civilizing Role of Religion in the  
Socio-Political Decision Making Process in  
Pre-colonial Ibo Community of Nigeria

(Agama dan Proses Ketamadunan: Peranan  
Ketamadunan Agama dalam Proses Membuat  
Keputusan Sosio-Politik dalam Kalangan  
Masyarakat Pra-kolonial Ibo di Nigeria)

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the role of religion in the socio-political decision making processes and the organization of the Ibo community - in a rational or systematic way - along this line, before the incursion of the colonial masters into their community, as well as the enforcement of these decisions through religion and its relevance to the contemporary time. Using the historical and analytical method, the paper delved into the history of the Ibos the arrangement and organization of the community from the little unit of the family setup to the complex whole of the community and how they are managed by those saddled with authority as well as the decision making processes in a democratic way right from the family unit to the complex whole of the larger community. The role of religion in this whole process and how it helps cement and enforce the rational organization and decision making processes of the community was also analyzed. Finally, the paper contrast this process with that of the present modern time in which religion has been relegated to the background and removed from the civilizational processes of the contemporary time. Thus, it concludes that religion, despite the negativity that is ascribed to it today in the modern world, could be a useful tool in any civilizational process because, when properly harnessed by the people, it serves as a stabilizing force in the society and, contrary to popular belief, it is not opposed to scientific and rational processes.

Keywords: Ibo, religion, civilization, decision, Nigeria, colonial

## ABSTRAK

Dalam makalah ini, penulis melihat peranan agama dalam proses membuat keputusan sosio-politik dan juga tentang organisasi masyarakat Ibo dalam cara yang rasional atau sistematik sebelum serangan penjajah ke dalam masyarakat mereka, serta penguatkuasaan keputusan ini melalui agama dan hubungannya dalam konteks masa kini. Makalah ini mengupas dan menganalisis sejarah masyarakat Ibo meliputi aspek struktur dan organisasinya -- bermula dari unit keluarga yang kecil hinggalah kepada seluruh masyarakatnya yang kompleks dan bagaimana mereka diuruskan oleh pihak berkuasa termasuklah tentang proses membuat keputusan dengan cara yang demokratik bermula dari setiap unit keluarga ke seluruh masyarakat yang kompleks. Tulisan ini turut melihat peranan agama dalam seluruh proses ini dan bagaimana ia membantu mengikat dan menguatkuasakan proses membuat keputusan dalam masyarakat. Akhirnya, makalah ini membandingkan proses ini dengan apa yang berlaku pada masa kini yang serba moden apabila agama disisihkan dan dikeluarkan dari proses ketamadunan masa kini. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahawa agama, walaupun dilihat dengan cara dan sifatnya yang negatif pada hari ini dalam dunia yang serba moden, tetapi boleh menjadi alat yang berguna dalam mana-mana proses ketamadunan kerana, apabila dimanfaatkan dengan betul oleh masyarakat, ia berfungsi sebagai daya menstabilkan dalam masyarakat dan, bertentangan dengan kepercayaan popular -- bahkan agama tidak bertentangan dengan proses saintifik dan rasional.

Kata kunci: Ibo, agama, ketamadunan, keputusan, Nigeria, kolonial

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore the civilizing role of religion in a traditional African society as a counter argument against the prevailing view in the present time which views religion as an outdated anti-civilizational phenomenon.

The issue is that, in the contemporary time, religion is being look upon by many as a problematic phenomenon and an antithesis of civilization. The thinking in many quarters is that religion has caused and continues to cause many problems in the human societies especially as it is apparent in the ideological conflict between religion and modernism which is further brought to the fore by the event of nine eleven (9/11) in the bombing of the twin tower in the United States of America.

However, many forget that great civilizations out of which the modern world derives its inspiration were laid and built by religion. From the Egyptian

civilization to the Chinese civilization, Indian civilizations and Islamic civilization, religion plays a very important role in the civilizational process and its civilizing role in the decision making process of these civilizations are also of utmost importance in the creation of a civilized people and society.

It is in the light of the above that this paper intends to look at the civilizing role of religion in the decision making process of a religious people whose religion before the coming of the white-man with Christianity could be said to be traditional and native to them yet important in the sense of the cohesion it provides for the people in that society. Although, this society is not as complex as we have it today in the modern world, none the less, one sees a society which is well organized and democratic in all sense of the word while religion serves as the pole that holds it together – helping it to cement its decisions, implement its laws and affirms the principles on which the society is based. In other words, while the modern world pride itself on the basis of its implementation of democratic principles and on which basis religion is relegated to the background and viewed as an obstacle to civilization and freedom, this paper intends to show a religious society with its own democratic principle similar to what is obtainable in the present time and yet religion serving as the catalyst that helps advance their civilization and democratic freedom.

In carrying out this study, the paper first gives a general introduction of the Ibo people, their origin, economic and agricultural enterprise and their linguistic alignment. The paper further looks at the socio-political arrangement of the Ibo community right from the family to the village and town levels and the mode of authority of each office holder. It then looks at the decision making process in their society as well as how this decision is cemented and carried out by religion. The paper then makes a brief analysis of all the above and, finally, makes a conclusion based on the facts laid out in the above.

#### THE IBO PEOPLE OF SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

Generally speaking, the Nigerian federation is usually said to be composed of three major tribes, the Yorubas, the Hausas and the Ibos. However, within these three major divisions, there are other ethnic groups which are considered as minority groups and which together with the three major ethnic groups formed about 360 ethnic language groups in Nigeria. The Ibo people, which is subject of this research forms one of the important major tribes in Nigeria and their contribution and position in the Nation is significant in the geographical landscape called Nigeria.

No one really knows the origin of the Ibo people and how they came to occupy their present place. Their historical origin is thus a subject of speculation.

This is further compounded by the fact that in all their local tradition, there is no clue as to where they came from. Like most Africans, they do not have a written record of their ancestors or ancestral origin. It is because of this obscurity that some early western scholars have labeled them as ‘a people without history’ (V.C. Uchendu, 1965: 2). However, according to Obiego, this view is erroneous and it has been criticized by critics who argued that “a people with a culture are a people with history” (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 34). In other words, since the Ibos have a culture, they must also have a history which the historians of culture have to piece together in order to make out their history. Moreover, archaeological findings have revealed that the Ibo land has been under continuous occupation since about 3,000 years ago and “that her people have developed an ancient civilization a thousand years ago” (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 35) – which points to the fact that many years of oral transmission of their history to their children might have made it to be obscure and lost in the course of time.

Moving on, however, economically, the Ibos are farmers and traders. They are the most mobile group in the Nigerian nation trade wise and they can be found in virtually all the nooks and crannies of the country doing their business. Referring to this, C. O. Ojukwu says “the Ibo uncommonly among the Africans, have been success oriented; egalitarian but individualistic, they have thought it an essential aspect of the ‘right and natural’ that talent should lead to enterprise, and enterprise to promotion, and promotion to privilege. They have consistently stressed social mobility” (C. O. Ojukwu, 1969: 13).

As for their agricultural enterprise, the Ibos cultivate yams, coco-yam, maize, cassava and palm oil trees which serve as one of Nigeria’s export commodities in the sixties and early seventies before the oil boom. They are also involved in bronze-casting, iron work and pottery using domestic technology since the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E., as indicated by the *Ibo-ukwu* archaeological findings (M. A. Onwuejeogwu, 1975: 178).

Linguistically, the Ibo people speech community falls into the group classified as the *kwa* sub-family of the Niger-Congo family by Greenberg. Their cultures, social setup, economy, political and ritual practices are all the same thing with little variation and differences among them (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 32). Politically, unlike their Yoruba counterpart in the south and their Hausa neighbor in the north, who both have the institution of kingship, referred to as Oba and Emir respectively, as the supreme head of their political organization before the coming of the colonial masters, the Ibo people political organization is a unique one which has nothing like that of their neighbors. The Ibo political system was based on dispersal of authority, as power was not concentrated in a person but group of persons like a legislative body. This Ibo style of governance has been referred to as variously as ‘gerontocracy-*ohachi*’, village-democracy, a

‘tenacious and intricate’ system etc., which lack cohesion like that of the “highly centralized monarchies and states of the western pattern” by different scholars (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 37-38). This political setup of the Ibo people also explains the difficulty that the British colonial masters had in implementing their system of indirect rule in this part of Nigeria when it was under their occupation. The Ibos never knew anything like a king nor had an institution of kingship prior to the coming of the colonial masters and this explains their resistance to the imposition of kings on them by the British (Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Arrow of God*, is very instructive and useful on this issue. As he depicted this in the character of Ezeulu, the chief priest, who refused to become the king of his community when he was requested to be so by the white man).

This Ibo political system is said to be both socio-political and socio-religious in nature. It is socio-political because it was built, traditionally, on kinship and it had a body of elders who made laws and oversaw its enforcement. It is also said to be socio-religious because the laws that the people followed, which, collectively, are called “*Omenala*” or “*Odinani*”, are believed to have passed down from God, *Chukwu*, to the people’s ancestors through the earth spirit *Ala* (*Ana*). Thus, the Ibo law, *Omenala*, draws its origin from the ancestors and the cult of the Earth-spirit, and finally to the cult of God. However, when there is a need to make a new law, and when it is eventually agreed on, the elders ratified it by giving it a divine sanction through the invocation of the approval of their ancestors (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 38-39).

In other words, from the above, generally, one can say the Ibo people operates a political system of government which is based on the decentralization of power and delegation of authority to the holders of the staff of authority, *ofò*, who, combined together, are called “*Umunna*” – that is, council of elders. Among the institution utilized by the Ibo as instruments of government are the Age-Group Associations, which contain all the people born at the same period of time not exceeding five to ten years. Another is the Title-making Societies, which stands for those who hold one title or another in the society. Others are: the *Dibia* Fraternities, which are the priestly and medicine-men’s association; the Secret Societies, like *egwugwu* and *aro* cult which are exclusive to matured male in the society and *Aluse*, which are the powerful spirits institutionalized by the community to serve as a medium of knowledge for things which are hidden to the community and also as a medium of knowing and ascertaining the divine will. This last one also serves as the last resort in settling disputes when human tribunals have failed. However, it should be noted that the roles that each of these institutions plays differ from one another and from a given Ibo village to another (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 39-40).

There were two layers of socio-political structure in the Ibo community: village and village-group or town. Direct democracy, autonomy and sovereignty operate at the village level, while representative with equal rights operates at the village-group level and all these also applies in the decision making processes of the community. However, in order to better understand this political process and its decision making process as well as the role of religion as civilizing agent in these whole processes, it would be worthwhile to do a thorough explanation of these two structures starting from the single family unit.

#### THE IBO SOCIO-POLITICAL STRUCTURE

In the Ibo community, the nuclear family is made up of the husband and wife (wives, as the case may be), their children, and their dependants, if any. The man, as long as he is alive, is regarded as the traditional head of the family and its spiritual head. He represents his family both collectively and individually in the social unit. He makes sacrifices on their behalf and blesses them every day he prays to his ancestors. The symbol of his authority, which is both political and religious or spiritual (priesthood), is the *ofo*-staff, which he acquires immediately he establishes his own household – though he acquires more of this as he progresses in his social placement as a result of his achievements in the society (E. Ilogu, 1964: 234-235). “Thus, every paterfamilias combines two offices in one person [political and religious/spiritual offices]. At his death, the family may or may not break up. If the adult members of the family fail to agree among themselves they will partition the family land according to Ibo law and custom” (S. N. C. Obi, 1963: 17 & O. Dilim, 1965: 32).

However, when a member of a nuclear family reaches the age of puberty, he too will have to marry and establish his own family, thus, in this way, the nuclear family becomes an extended one and this is what is called *Obi* (*obu, ovu, ezi*) in Ibo terminology. So also, it was called a compound, a hamlet or ward, as in those days, they all lived in a closed and vast walled-in fence which encircled all their houses together with one big entrance at the front and a tiny outlet at the back. Though these people of the same lineage and their dependants live together, each family unit is strictly independent on its own economically, as each man or woman, who is a widow, is a householder and provides for his/her family. But, all together, there is a person – a man – who is considered as the head of this compound and he is the eldest living male descendant of the eldest son of the first nuclear family. He is called *Okpala* (*Okpara* or *Diokpa*). He has a lot of rituals that he performs on behalf of the whole members of the compound.

He has both moral and legal rights and obligations that he performs in this compound. He settles disputes among the members of the compound,

he represents them in their external dealings with other social units in the community, and if any member of his compound commits an offence, he is the first to be informed before anything is done to the member, and vice versa if any member of his compound is offended by anyone, he is informed and he takes the necessary step either for revenge or sanction on the offending person in conjunction with the *Okpala* (that is, his counterpart) on the opposite side i.e. of the offending person. In return for all these duties, he is respected and revered by all the members of the compound, who, sometimes, give him some token of gift as a sign of their appreciation of what he is doing. The symbol of his authority and priesthood is the *ofo*. The amount of power that he wields and respect accorded to him depends a lot on his personal achievements, quality, charisma, sagacity, wealth and wisdom in dealing with his people (S. N. C. Obi, 1963: 17 & O. Dilim, 1965: 32).

At a higher level than the compound is what is called the *Umunna* units. According to Obiego, this term, *Umunna*, 'is a fluid term in Ibo language' and "its narrowest referent is the children of the same father but different mothers, that is, in contrast to *Umunne* (children of the same father and mother or of the same mother but not of the same father)" (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 43) at this level of *Umunna*, the family has become so large that it can no longer be refer to as an extended family. Rather, it is made up of all the compounds which has the same lineage or which can trace its lineage to the first nuclear family and whose members are forbidden from marrying one another or having any sexual relation together, which is a taboo if done and which requires ritual purification before forgiveness is accorded. However, what is certain here is that the ancestral line is so long that it comprises of cousins and nephews and possibly, it may have some immigrant elements among it that have become part and parcel of the *Umunna* as a result of long years of mixing together and close relationship (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 43-44).

Though every compound has its own *Okpala*, the most important person also in this *Umunna* setup is the *Okpala*, who is the eldest living male member of the eldest son of the original founder of the first nuclear family. He may not be the oldest person alive, but since he belongs to the senior branch of the *Umunna* and he is the eldest male alive from that branch, he automatically becomes the *Okpala*. The *ofo* is also his sign of authority and priesthood. He is regarded as the intermediary between the living members of the *Umunna* and their ancestors. All his duties are in line with what had been enumerated above concerning the *Obi* or compound head, *Okpala*, and he is consulted on matters that affect all in the *Umunna* (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 43-44).

Higher than the *Umunna* unit is the village, *Ogbe* or *Ebo* or *Aba*. It consists of a number of *Umunna* units and it is founded on a number of common ties,

interests and “claim of an ultimate common descent” (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 43-44). Though like the *Umunna* unit, no one is able to trace how long their common ancestors lived, but their occupation of a common territory, same spoken dialect, same religious practice and guardian spirit, and common economic activities form their unifying factors and points to the same ancestry. Since a village is an off-shot of a common ancestral tree – that is, a unit founded by one of the sons of the original founder of the village-group/town, the villagers sometimes use the term *Umunna* to address one another.

This village, however, like the *Umunna* unit, “has its senior branch, the subdivision which represents the descendants of the eldest son of the founder of the village-group” (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 45-46). Again, the eldest son of this branch holds the senior – village – *ofò* and he is the *Okpala*, even though he may not be the oldest in the village. Succession to this post of *Okpala*, however, ‘follows the adelphic principles’ (C. O. Obiego, 1984: 46). The *Okpala* does not pass from father to son, but rather, from brother to brother. For example, if Okafor and Okonkwo are brothers, and *Okafor* is the eldest of the two, when their father dies, he becomes the *Okpala*. After his death, his brother, Okonkwo, takes over as the head, and after the death of Okonkwo, Okafor eldest son takes over the *Okpala*. After him, Okonkwo eldest son takes over as the *Okpala*. After, Okafor grandson takes the *Okpala* and after him, Okonkwo grandson also takes over the *Okpala*. This is how it continues. However, even with this principle of succession, a person does not automatically become the *Okpala* of the village unit. Before he can be chosen, they will have to look at his character and moral standing in the village. If he is found wanting, he may not be installed and another person, his junior brother, may be chosen if he is found to be of better character and morally upright than his senior brother.

The last stratum of the Ibo socio-political setup and which is higher than the village is the village-group/town, *Obodo*, *Mba* or *Ala* in Ibo language. This socio-religious village group is founded on some principles among which are: its inhabitants occupy a common territory; it is like a mythical kinship, as many of these villages that make up this town have legendary account of how the founder of their unit arose and begot their children and how it took its original name. the name of the town is usually that of the founder and the villages that made up the town/village-group are that of the descendants of the founder of the village-group/town – though there might have been some others who are strangers and who have mixed with them and have become part of the village-group/town since they too usually have their own village unit (S. N. C. Obi, 1963: 12; O. Dilim, 1965: 33 & M. M. Green, 1964: 11).

Thus, all the above are the political organization of the Ibo people before the coming of the colonial masters and in this organization, as it is apparent,



religion plays a significant role because the *Okpala* as explained above, is not just a political leader, he is also a religious leader at once and the same time. Moreover, his being a priest of his compound/village/village-group helps solidify his commands and orders as we shall explain below as we turn to the decision making process of these different level of the political units.

#### DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN PRE-COLONIAL IBO COMMUNITY

When it comes to the process of decision making, starting from the compound, although he is the head of the compound, the *Okpala* does not take unilateral decision nor act unilaterally; rather, he holds consultation with the council of elders of his compound (*ozo*-title-holders), age grade (*ogbo* or *otu*) and masquerades (*egwugwu*) before decisions are taken and actions carried out (S. N. C. Obi, 1963: 12; O. Dilim, 1965: 33 & M. M. Green, 1964: 11). In other words, consultation is very important in the decision making process at this level so that whatever decision is arrived at, or any action that is taken on a particular issue reflect the general will of the people of the compound and this decision or action is further given weight by the invocation of the spirit of the ancestors of the compound to come and help them in fulfilling this decision/action and making it a success and not a thing of regret.

Likewise at the village level, when it comes to decision making, all the male adults of the village meet at a place called the *Amala* – usually an open place where all the paths of the village converge – for a general assembly and here, everyone is allowed to contribute to the discussion on ground. After all have been given a chance to talk, the heads from each *Umunna* now leave the gathering to consult together (*izuzu*). After this *izuzu*, a person who has a very good and loud voice and an oratory talent is chosen to deliver the decision of the elders. After this, it becomes the duty of each of the head of the *Umunna* to go back and explain this decision to his people in detail (V. C. Uchendu, 1965: 2).

In the same vein, at the village-group level, there is equal representation of each village unit when it comes to decision making and all these representatives have equal rights and privileges. No decision can be taken on a village whose representative is not present at a general assembly. At the same time, whatever decision is reached must be unanimous in order for it to be workable and implementable in all the villages. Although some of the adult male may participate in the deliberations of the meeting of the village-group, the final decision on any issue rest on the elders whose age group are in power at that point in time.

However, it is important to note that these meetings at the various levels are not a regular one. Rather, they hold these meetings when there are urgent issues to be discussed or to settle quarrels among members of the compound/village/village-group as the case may be. They also hold the meeting when there is need to prepare for war against another town which has offended them or to send emissaries to another town for retribution/compensation for harm(s) done to them or member(s) of their town (V. C. Uchendu, 1965: 2).

Consequently, in this social setup, when the ad hoc general assembly meets, it does so in order to settle disputes and restore solidarity among the people and for the peace and progress of their community/town. When a person is offended, he appeals to the head of the compound of the offender. If the dispute cannot be settled at that level, he appeals to the respected titled men and if it is not reconcilable at that level too, he takes it to the *Dibia* fraternity or the age-group. But if all these human tribunal failed to settle the dispute, it is then taken to the Oracle as a final resort and the decision of the Oracle is final and binding on all parties concerned because disobedience could have very serious repercussion which could even lead to death and tragedy to any of the parties that disobey (V. C. Uchendu, 1965: 2).

Finally, it is important to point out here that all these deliberations, decisions and actions reached at these meetings are usually given a legal backing by the invocation of the ancestral spirit(s) of the land. In this way, these decisions or actions agreed on are given a religious connotation and it becomes not just a mundane activities but a religious one which has to be carried out by all. Likewise, by invoking the spirit(s) of the land and the religious symbol of the compound/village/village-group, it is believed that the gods will be on their side in carrying out this duty and the gods will help them in achieving their objectives and making it a success. Thus, religion becomes a very important unifying factor and a legalizing tool in the whole process (V. C. Uchendu, 1965 & C. O. Obiego, 1984).

## ANALYSIS

From all the above, it is apparent that in the Ibo socio-political decision making process, religion serves as the civilizing agent and a unifying factor in their society. Starting from the family unit, one can see that religion gives legitimacy to the position of the head of the family because apart from being the father of the house, he has religious duties and responsibilities which he carries out on behalf of his house hold. He is the medium of connection between the spiritual world and the physical and this explains his priesthood which is symbolized by the *ofo* which he holds.

The above also applies to the Okpala at the village level, his position also involves priesthood and religious duties are incumbent on him too for the whole village. He also serves as the medium of connection between the physical world and the spiritual world on all religious matters that concerns the village. His commands and orders, especially when he is well respected and have had merits as a result of personal achievements, are seen as divine and carrying weights which bother on the spiritual ala religion. In the same vein, all decisions that are made at this level also involve religion because they are legitimized by invoking the spirits of the ancestors of the village. Thus, religion here also is a unifying force.

At the village-group/town level, the guardian spirit of the land or the Oracle of last resort as explained above in the decision making process and dispute settlement, serves as the final arbiter of all decisions and activities in the land. This religious symbol is believed to be the one that helps the village-group and serves as its guardian thus preventing evil from befalling the village-group and helping it to overcome its enemy. Thus here too, one sees that religion is the most important unifying force in the village-group and it is the one which restore the village-group solidarity when all human tribunal fails. This, therefore, shows that the role of religion as a civilizing force in this society is very important and it is in fact the source of peace and harmony in the society.

Finally, what the above means is that religion when harnessed and used in the right way is indeed a source of civilizational progress, peace and harmony. In other words, religion could be used as a functional entity in a civilizational process and when it fails or it is used in another way, then religion cannot be said to be the problem but human beings themselves. That is to say, "*religion is not the problem but man*". The uses or the functional way in which man uses religion determines what religion is and it could be civilizational as seen above in the Ibo society or savagery as we are witnessing in some part of the world in the present time. But to lay the blame on religion and to reject it on this basis is to be unjust to it because it is not the *problem* but man. Man is the one who is to blame when religion fails because inherently, religion is a good phenomenon.

## CONCLUSION

From all the above, we have been able to look at the political arrangement of the Ibo community before the coming of the white man and the decision making process of this political organization as well as the role of religion in the whole process. The investigation reveals that, at every stage of the political arrangement and the decision making process, religion plays a vital role in legalizing and solidifying the whole process in the Ibo society.

In each of the level of political division i.e. from the family unit to the compound unit and finally to the town unit, each person plays a dual role of the temporal and spiritual head of the family/compound/village or village-group units. Each political post is given a stamp of authority by the religious role attached to it. In addition, the holder of each post serves as a medium of connection between the spiritual and physical world which in essence points to the importance of religion in his duty.

Likewise, in the decision making process, the research shows that religion serves as the stamp of authority and restorer of solidarity among the people especially when all human avenue to peace and harmony fails and the society is at the brink of a crisis. Religion returns the society to normal and restore the peace and harmony hitherto enjoyed by the people by being the final arbiter where human effort have been exhausted to no avail.

Thus, looking at all the above, the research found that the problem that is associated with religion at the modern time is actually that of humanity and the lack of respect modern man has for religion and religious functionality. When religion is respected and accorded its rightful place in the society, it serves as a civilizing agent and a dispersal of peace and harmony in the society. But when it not accorded the necessary respect it deserves and relegated to the background, it falls to wrong hands and in this case it could be misused by man as an agent of destabilization in the society. In this case, therefore, this research concludes that religion is not the problem but man.

In other words, since man is capable of using religion as a functional entity, the misuse of religion is not the problem of religion but that of man and man is squarely to blame when religion fails not religion itself.

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