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'Not getting what you ask for' from rapid appraisal surveys: A new model to assess Bible translation needs

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The decision to initiate a Bible translation project in any community has profound implications. In logistical terms, Bible translation projects can be expensive and taxing on their donors, initiators and other stakeholders. However, they can also have positive transformative effects on the communities that benefit from the translation. Therefore, the decision to translate should be carefully considered. In many cases, a rapid appraisal survey is conducted to determine the remaining Bible translation needs in a given situation. This article assessed the validity of rapid appraisal surveys using the Yaawo context of Mozambique as a case study and cautions against their use when performed in isolation. A new model is proposed based on the object metaphor of a beaded necklace that, although it involves more time and resources, will result in a more appropriate response to the needs (or lack thereof) for Bible translation in each context. Supplementing the beaded necklace model for determining Bible translation needs, insights from narrative frame theory are highlighted as they were applied recently to the complex Yaawo context in Mozambique. These insights are presented to demonstrate that initiating a Bible translation project is not just a sociolinguistic decision but a contextual one as well.

Contribution: The translation of the Bible is a complex process. This article demonstrates that narrative framing is a useful tool for managing the complexity around a new Bible translation project by offering a new model for stakeholders and initiators to assess and manage the context of a new Bible translation situation.

Keywords: Yaawo people; Ciyaawo; Bible translation; narrative framing; complexity thinking; *Skopostheorie*; Mozambique; language survey; translation model; Bible translation management.

Introduction

The decision to initiate a Bible translation project in any community has profound implications. In logistical terms, Bible translation projects can be expensive and taxing on their donors, initiators and other stakeholders. However, they can also have a positive transformative effect on the communities that benefit from the translation. The motivation behind many Bible translation projects is often the belief amongst stakeholders and initiators that engagement in it will produce community-level transformation. Therefore, the decision to translate in the first place is not one to be taken lightly but should be carefully considered.

In many cases, a rapid appraisal survey is commissioned to determine the remaining Bible translation needs in a given situation. Unfortunately, however, the risk of rapid appraisals is that they may not *really* give us what we want or what we think they can give us. They form only part of the picture of what needs considering before embarking on a project in an undoubtedly complex and dynamic context. In this article, a rapid appraisal survey of the Ciyaawo language in Mozambique that was conducted in 1996 is discussed. It is concluded that, despite its own claims, this survey was inadequate for assessing Bible translation needs in that context. An alternative model is introduced that takes a beaded necklace as an object metaphor to represent the interconnectedness that exists in relation to narrative frames and loyalty to the source text. This model also shows why rapid appraisal surveys should therefore not be the only tool utilised to assess remaining Bible translation needs. The model is then applied afresh to the Yaawo context of Mozambique to show that initiating a Bible translation project is not just a sociolinguistic decision but a contextual one as well.

Rapid appraisals and the 1996 'Yao' survey

The first part of the title of this article, 'Not getting what you ask for', alludes to the similar title of Catherine Showalter's conference paper and revised article: 'Getting what you ask for' (Showalter 1991, 2008). In that article, Showalter discusses the questions in sociolinguistic questionnaires and how things can go wrong in formulating this part of a language survey. Good surveys, according to Showalter (2008), make sure that we ask the right questions 'in order to find out what we need to know' (p. 344) because 'the results of a sociolinguistic survey are only as good as the questions used in the survey' (2008:338, in abstract). It is highlighted in the current article that, when it comes to assessing Bible translation needs, rapid appraisal surveys are inadequate on their own. Indeed, even more comprehensive sociolinguistic surveys can be insufficient if Bible translation needs assessment is the primary goal and when the survey is not adequately prepared to cover all the objectives.

This article follows the notion that the goal of a rapid appraisal survey is 'to gain a broad understanding of the language situation in an area with relatively little time, expense or special training' (Parkhurst & Parkhurst 2008:91). Ted Bergman (1991) says that the term 'rapid appraisal' is used 'to describe an approach to obtain a quick initial assessment of the need for language development in a region' (p. 3). Note that Bergman here does *not* say, 'to assess Bible translation needs'. Language surveys, including rapid appraisals, produce valuable data for the language documentation situation, but their usefulness is limited when it comes to Bible translation needs assessment. In this sense, criticism is not directed at rapid appraisals as a tool, but for surveys to serve Bible translation needs, we should be asking more than just sociolinguistic questions. We need to have the right tool for the job by making use of other instruments in our research. We should therefore be designing our surveys so that we can learn enough from them to understand the situation in its full complexity or as close to it as possible. This includes the impact of history, religion, politics, communication means and literacy and other aspects of culture. When looking specifically at issues of Scripture engagement, for example, Dye's (2009) 'Eight Conditions' model might be useful. This model is centred around the notion that there are certain 'conditions' that must be met in a situation for there to be Scripture use. These conditions include 'appropriate language, dialect and orthography', 'appropriate translation', 'accessible forms of scripture', 'background knowledge', 'availability', 'spiritual hunger', 'freedom to commit' and 'partnership between translators and other stakeholders' (Dye 2009:91). It is better to take extra time and effort early on than to, for example, waste financial and other resources on a Bible translation project that missed the nuances of the actual context on the ground. Perhaps even worse than such wastefulness of resources could be dismissing the need for a Bible translation amongst a community at all because of rapid appraisal survey recommendations.

In 1996, a rapid appraisal of the Ciyaawo language in Mozambique was conducted by SIL International personnel (Bister, Floor & Pettersen 1996) at the invitation of Christian missionaries working amongst the Yaawo (or Yao) people in Malawi. This survey was within a few years after the end of Mozambique's devastating 16-year-long civil war. The unpublished survey report indicated that it was 'preliminary in nature and not conclusive', and so we must be careful not to give it too much weight. However, this survey did still indicate the explicit goal of assessing whether a Malawian Ciyaawo Bible translation would also serve the needs of the Mozambican Yaawo. So, in one sense, this survey was intended to assess Bible translation needs instead of being only a language survey, whether simply 'rapid' or not. Still, even as a rapid appraisal, this survey was remarkably superficial in nature. The report of the survey acknowledged its own limitations, and so it is to be hoped that this critique is not anything new to the surveyors.

The general design of the 1996 survey included only the following instruments: word list collection, group sociolinguistic questionnaires and one interview with a Malawian pastor. As far as data collection for the group questionnaires was concerned, the surveyors visited five sites, two in Malawi and three in Mozambique. For the Mozambican sites, two were rural villages, and one was an urban location. For the village sites, interviews were conducted amongst a group with seven men and no women in one village and five men and one woman in the other village. At the urban location, the surveyors interviewed four men and one woman. A concern about the validity of the results is that the report does not offer responses to all the questions from all the groups. That is, some groups' answers were left out of the final report, or the questions were never asked. The incompleteness of this survey is obvious in statements from the report such as 'there were many questions in the questionnaires that were omitted in most of the interviews' and 'we found our word list files didn't include enough information to make a reliable comparison of our own' (page numbers from this unpublished report are unavailable). Overall, this survey is inadequate to represent the situation in Mozambique amongst the Yaawo. Again, this article does not generally criticise language surveys but encourages those thinking about new Bible translation projects to consider how valid they are when taken in isolation and to be careful about the conclusions in relation to matters of Bible translation.

One of the conclusions of the 1996 survey was that Malawian Bible translation materials would suffice for Mozambican Yaawo. However, this conclusion seems hasty considering the scarcity and nature of data that were gathered. The report also indicated that Mozambicans should be involved in the translation process as 'reviewers and helpers'. Given later testing of Malawian Bible translation materials in a survey conducted by Tobias Houston (2020), it is clear that this kind of input from Mozambique never happened in any significant or consistent way. Overall, it seems evident that this rapid appraisal survey could not serve its intended purpose of

assessing Bible translation needs because of its superficial nature. There are likely good reasons for this, but that does not mean that we can use it to determine the need for Bible translation amongst the Yaawo of Mozambique. This reality is somewhat understandable given the limited resources, personnel and support available at the time. A further hindrance to a more comprehensive survey at that time can be linked to the logistical challenges associated with that part of Mozambique in the aftermath of the long civil war fought there. To emphasise again the positive value of surveys in general, rapid appraisals can be useful for achieving their stated purposes. Still, if the goal is to assess the needs for Bible translation, then more work needs to be done and other supplementary tools utilised.

In contrast to the 1996 survey's limited scope and sample sizes, the survey that Houston (2020) conducted was more comprehensive. The researcher benefited from residing permanently in Mozambique. That reality made more comprehensive research possible because of familiarity with the situation on the ground and with the Ciyaawo language. The instruments used for that survey included lexical and phonological word list analysis, individual sociolinguistic questionnaires, knowledgeable insider questionnaires and Recorded Text Testing of a recent Malawian Ciyaawo translation using a retelling method (Kluge 2006). The purpose of the survey was partly to determine whether the latest Malawian Ciyaawo Bible translation materials were adequate in Mozambique or not and to indicate whether there was a need for a new Mozambican Bible translation from a sociolinguistic perspective (Houston 2020:4). In terms of the sample sizes and content of the instruments, interviews were conducted with 128 individuals (equally divided between men and women) from 16 locations by using a questionnaire of 59 primary questions. Two hundred and sixteen Recorded Text Tests of three different biblical pericopes in 18 locations (including Malawi) were performed amongst an equal number of men and women (Houston 2020:92–93). A word list of 359 items was collected from 19 sites, including Tanzania and Malawi. Every participant for each survey instrument was carefully screened with rigorous criteria applied to the candidates to ensure that each individual was actually representative of their respective communities.

However, even despite the more exhaustive nature of that survey compared to the 1996 rapid appraisal, it is still not enough in and of itself to then determine the needs for a Mozambican Ciyaawo Bible translation. The sociolinguistic results were indeed enough to indicate that a translation was needed, but they cannot guide the translation brief in terms of the exact nature of the required Bible translation project. The overall results indicated that a Ciyaawo translation is needed sociolinguistically in Mozambique, but it differed from the 1996 survey which claimed that any Malawian Bible translation materials would suffice. To clarify the twofold reaction to the 1996 rapid appraisal at this point, the following needs to be mentioned. Firstly, it did not have enough data to

support the conclusions that it made. Secondly, it was not able to say how to proceed from that point. Yet another issue is that 25 years have passed since then, which is a long time if we were to make decisions now based on the 1996 rapid appraisal of Ciyaawo. Therefore, even if the survey was valid in 1996, it surely cannot be valid currently in light of the changing nature of the world in which we live.

The beaded necklace: A preliminary model

As stated at the beginning of this article, deciding to initiate a new Bible translation project in any language or context should be more than just a sociolinguistic decision. We must also engage adequately with the complex contextual realities of the people for whom the translation is done.

Hopefully, the preliminary model presented below will get us closer to what Bible translation initiators and stakeholders actually want from both rapid appraisals and more comprehensive language surveys when assessing Bible translation needs. This article assumes that initiators and stakeholders of a project want a Bible translation and product that is functional (Nord 2018:26–28), that is, a Bible translation that intentionally fulfils a specific purpose as outlined in a carefully prepared translation brief. The model proposed here is serious about acknowledging and responding appropriately to the contextual realities of a Bible translation situation. This means that, rather than treating the 'religious situation', 'population', 'history' and 'culture' sections as worthy of only an introduction in a survey report, they should each be treated within their own narrative frame alongside the sociolinguistic considerations inherent in the language survey component. These factors must come into the decision-making process just as much as the sociolinguistic data gleaned from a language survey.

With the assumption that context is important at the forefront, it is crucial to elaborate on the notion of narrative framing. Some scholars talk about narrative frames using synonymous terms such as 'contextual frames' (Harding 2013:108; Wendland 2008:1). This article accepts Mona Baker's (2010) concise definition of narrative as 'the stories we tell ourselves and others about the world(s) in which we live' (p. 4). That is, one can view 'narratives' as the ever-changing human experience within a given context and situation in both the personal and corporate spheres. Narratives are crucial for humanity because they both represent and constitute reality (Harding 2013:106).

Mona Baker (2006:28, 2010:4) identifies different types of narratives, including the following: personal, public, conceptual and metanarratives. Personal narratives relate to an individual's life experience and history, and they can include both famous individual figures and those within one's own relationship networks. Public narratives are broader than any one individual and include such aspects as religious and educational institutions and structures.

Conceptual, or disciplinary, narratives can refer broadly to an 'object of enquiry' in an academic field (Baker 2010:5). Metanarratives are 'particularly potent public narratives that persist over long periods of time and influence the lives of people across a wide range of settings' (Baker 2010:5–6). The different types of narratives sometimes overlap with one another, and so the boundaries between them are not firmly settled.

The model proposed here is based on the idea and metaphor of a Bible translation being a beaded necklace (see Figure 1). The necklace comprises three principal elements. The first element is the centre pendant, or source text, and it is the most important of the elements because it is the focus point of the necklace or, in other words, the basis of a translation. The second element is the beads, which are to be imagined alongside the pendant. These other beads are the narrative frames and can include the sociocultural frame, the religious frame, the historical frame, the language and communication frames, cognitive frames and the organisational frame (Wilt & Wendland 2008:107). The number of beads is not fixed and depends on the situation and depth of analysis. For example, in the Yaawo people's situation, the overarching sociocultural frame includes smaller frames such as identity and culture (*who* the Yaawo are, including *where* and *how* they live). The religious frame consists of the realities of the Yaawo people being both Muslims and adherents of African traditional religion. The historical frame encompasses the past efforts at Bible translation in Ciyaawo and what has or has not worked. The language and communication frame includes not only sociolinguistic data but also aspects such as orality in terms of being the dominant communication means of Yaawo people in Mozambique. The third element is the string on which the pendant and beads are strung, representing the functionalist loyalty notion.

Loyalty as a theoretical concept in the beaded necklace model is entwined not only with the source text, as in Christiane Nord's model of *Skopostheorie* (Nord 2014:93–94, 2018:115), but also with the other narrative frames of a given Bible translation situation. This notion of loyalty holds all the beads and the pendant together into a functional and complete necklace (translation) that can be
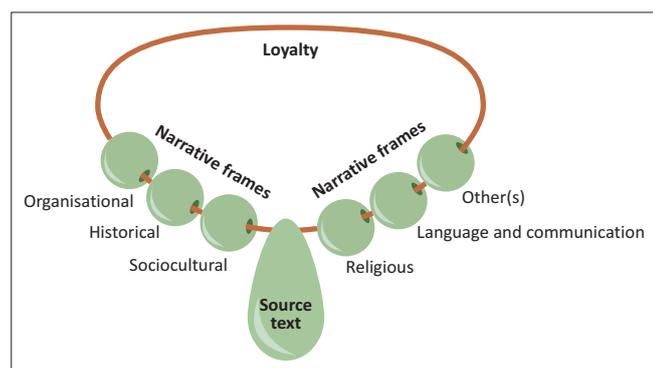

FIGURE 1: The beaded necklace model.

worn and used. If any of the beads are missing, the necklace becomes lopsided and incomplete. If the string is missing (that is, if there is no loyalty), then the entire necklace falls apart and is unable to be worn. It is essential for this model that loyalty permeates *all* the beads and the pendant (the narrative frames and the source text). A Bible translation must be loyal to the source text *and* the recipient situation in all its complexity. This commitment to loyalty means that a Bible translation must not disregard the realities that an investigation into the narrative frames reveals, such as an Islamic identity, orality dominance or whatever else may be encountered in each context. A Bible translation must be loyal to those narrative frames just as much as it is loyal to the source text and must seek to respond adequately to each.

Practically speaking, what does the beaded necklace model do? Simply put, it organises complex contextual realities in concrete terms that stakeholders can then utilise in planning and undertaking a new Bible translation (if one is needed) in any situation, including those dominated by Islam or other religions. It is vital to consider the beads on the necklace (the narrative frames of the situation), because by avoiding them, the functionality of the necklace (the translation) is compromised. The need to consider all these frames is essential because without the 'string' of loyalty running through each, the end translation (necklace) is unbalanced and will ultimately be inadequate. Indeed, the whole thing can fall apart and become unwearable. In practical terms, if planners and organisers of a Bible translation project forsake the 'beads' of their situation and only follow the sociolinguistic advice of a rapid appraisal survey, then the translation will likely be imbalanced. Purely linguistic information is insufficient. This model is preliminary and leaves plenty of room for growth and for details to be ironed out, but it is a helpful beginning.

When it comes to rapid appraisals and even more comprehensive surveys for assessing Bible translation needs, it is crucial to investigate the socioreligious and communication frames as far as is possible. What is meant by this is that surveyors should discover the religious and social realities and identities and what communication means the people rely on. Such an investigation can even be included in the survey design and does not just happen in the office. Importantly, this investigation culminates in more than just a paragraph in a survey report's introduction but should result in an appropriate response to what is learnt. For example, if there are existing Bible translations from related dialects, they should undergo testing via such instruments as the Recorded Text Test. As mentioned, religious identity and environment are important. That is, who do these people say that they are? Are they already Christian? Are they Muslim? Something else? This is crucial when stakeholders are aiming for a new Bible translation with a clear and specific function in mind. Without this mental clarity, there is the risk that the translation will be a big confusing mess and not what any of the stakeholders

desire at all. The lack of proper contextual understanding may be a significant reason for the sad reality that the fruits of many Bible translation projects around the world are gathering dust on shelves.

The beaded necklace model applied: A brief Yaawo case study

Coming back to the Yaawo situation as an example, how was this model applied? What was learnt in applying this model to the Mozambican Yaawo context? Some of the 'beads' identified that come into play include religion, and more specifically Islam, orality, history, sociolinguistics and organisational influences. It is noteworthy that discovering these realities can be an added part of a survey design that also incorporates all the linguistic information that surveys usually focus on. With these realities in mind, the beaded necklace model requires answers and adequate responses to, for example, these questions:

> In light of X, what does that mean for Bible translation in this context?
>
> Given the reality of Y, what does this mean practically? Or, in concrete terms, considering the predominance of Islam and that the Yaawo people identify primarily with Islam, what does this mean for a Bible translation in the Yaawo context?
>
> In view of the Yaawo people's reliance on oral means of communication, what does that mean for a Bible translation in that context and the medium of it?

We need to move beyond only identifying the context to appropriate responses to these narrative frames. Considering the need to hold all these realities (beads) in tension and be loyal to them, what was the practical outcome and the response to these questions in the Mozambican Yaawo context? To answer succinctly, a Mozambican Ciyaawo (responding to sociolinguistic and historical frames) oral Bible translation project (responding to orality frame) that takes the Yaawo seriously as Muslims (responding to the Islamic frame) is currently underway. Although there is no space now to go into all the relevant 'beads', a brief discussion regarding these frames of orality and Islam in the Yaawo context follows here.

Considering orality

When the Mozambican Yaawo situation was considered, it became clear that orality is one of the 'beads' on the necklace. For this discussion, orality is defined as dependence on verbal language for communication instead of written language (Lovejoy 2008:121–122). It is less about a preference for one communication style over another but more about which is predominantly relied upon in life. Ernst Wendland's (2013) definition is also applicable here:

> [T]he term 'orality' refers generally to the characteristic modes of thought and verbal expression in societies that depend for communication essentially upon the spoken word, accompanied by various associated non-verbal techniques, such as gestures, facial features, and body movements. (pp. 12–13)

This article affirms these definitions. Therefore, in these senses, we can state broadly that, like many other African cultures, the Yaawo people are dominantly an oral people. So, when it comes to Bible translation amongst the orally dominant Yaawo, it is true that any project will involve translators that rely on orality. It also means that the audience of the translated product is an orally dominant people and would benefit from an orality-friendly Bible translation product in this context. In other words, 'by presenting the scriptures and scripture-based products in oral form, we reach a much broader audience by sidestepping the literacy barrier' (Kroneman 2017:51). In the context of this article, it means that the new project begins with orality by working on an oral Bible translation project in Mozambican Ciyaawo. Oral Bible translation is an approach to translation that utilises oral means throughout the entire process. Although the steps used are very similar to more traditional, literary-based translation, everything from translation itself to community checking to consulting is done orally. The hallmark of oral Bible translation is a determined focus on internalisation as core to the process. When internalisation is done well, there is no loss of accuracy and a distinct improvement on naturalness and clarity (Toler 2020:99). These three characteristics (accuracy, naturalness and clarity) are the commonly used classic criteria for a 'good' translation of the Bible in contexts like the Yaawo of Mozambique (Barnwell 2020:29–30). It is important to recognise, however, that a good translation must be measured by more than just these equivalence criteria but also by the adequacy of the translation in accordance with the desired function outlined in a translation brief (Nord 2018:33–35), after careful consideration of the narrative frames associated with the context.

Considering Islam

It is evident that Islam is another of the 'beads'. The Yaawo are a primarily homogeneous people group and, aside from minority Christian Yaawo populations which are mainly to be found in urban areas, they identify primarily with Islam. A Bible translation that seeks to be sensitive to Yaawo culture must pay attention to the Islamic reality. This is not to say that it is the only frame or even the most important one, but in the new sociolinguistic survey mentioned above, for example, out of 204 Mozambican Yaawo male and female respondents of the Recorded Text Test component across 17 distinct locations, 199 individuals identified themselves as Muslim (i.e. over 97%). That the Yaawo in Mozambique are predominantly Muslim is an unmistakable reality. One can probably say with confidence that for many, to be Yaawo is to be Muslim. Islam is undoubtedly important and ignoring it will not result in successful Bible translation in the Mozambican Yaawo context, particularly if one measures success per the fulfilment of a translation brief that came into being through appropriate consideration of the actual context. A Bible translation intended only for Yaawo churches will likely only reach 3% of the population at best, and that without considering other narrative frames. That said, an analysis of the Yaawo situation can still involve

church communities in the process of translation and distribution, particularly those sympathetic to the majority Muslim population. In responding to Islam amongst the Yaawo, the Bible translation project now underway amongst the Mozambican Yaawo is not usually talked about as a 'Bible translation' using Christianised terminology in general discourse. Although the reality of it being a Bible translation is not hidden, it is rather referred to as a translation of the 'Word of God'. Even then, keeping the word 'translation' in a description can be problematic because translation can be considered unfavourable in Muslim circles. Typically, for example, translations of the Qur'an into languages other than the original Arabic are known as 'interpretations' and not 'translations'.

For rather pragmatic reasons, the Mozambican Ciyaawo translation project has begun with the book of Genesis because it is not something entirely new for Yaawo Muslims but already somewhat familiar to them because of some shared themes and characters. Genesis was, therefore, the natural and most acceptable choice to be the first biblical book translated into Mozambican Ciyaawo. It did not make sense to begin anywhere else when the Islamic Yaawo context was considered alongside the lack of other suitable Bible translation materials. Furthermore, the name of the book is '*Ndaandiidilo*', which means 'beginnings' and therefore reflects some of the meaning about origins and beginnings behind the Septuagint title 'Genesis' and the Hebrew '*Bereshit*'. So far, in its relatively early days, far greater comprehension and enthusiasm for the product is being seen than anything previously seen from Malawian literary-based material during the language survey component of the research indicated above. The *Mozambicanness* of the new Genesis product helps to a great extent because of attitudinal issues, but also because of the choice of familiar vocabulary which is less impacted by influences from other languages such as Chichewa. Another way that the project has responded to the Islamic frame is to produce a printed version of the oral translation because of a Yaawo Muslim expectation for written Scripture as the true authority, even though most Yaawo people will be unable to read it at present.

Conclusion

In conclusion and summary, this article indicated that rapid appraisal surveys are unsuitable for assessing Bible translation needs when performed in isolation. The 1996 rapid appraisal of Ciyaawo in Mozambique illustrates this point, and it was claimed here that this survey did not really achieve what it was used for in assessing Bible translation needs. That is, even though it claimed otherwise, it was not actually able to assert whether there was a need for a Mozambican Ciyaawo Bible translation or not. A new model based on the beaded necklace object metaphor was introduced to get us closer to what we want from surveys for assessing Bible translation needs. This model maintains loyalty to the source text and the recipient situation. This model was designed to help initiators and stakeholders

think through what needs considering when initiating a new Bible translation project. An example of this model applied to the Mozambican Yaawo situation was then given by highlighting orality and Islam in that context. Concerning future directions and limitations of this study, further work on the beaded necklace model should be carried out in conjunction with developing its effectiveness in other Bible translation situations.

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Author's contributions

T.J.H. is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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