

Full Length Research Paper

Living in bondage: A dream deferred or a promise betrayed for Igbo linguistic and cultural renaissance?

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When the seminal home video movie, *Living in Bondage*, burst into the market and Nigerian homes in 1991, it literally hit the ground running! It was such an instant hit that it caused a revolution in the Nigerian movie industry akin to the literary revolution set off by Chinua Achebe with *Things Fall Apart* fifty-six years ago. One aspect of the novelty, mystic, charm and great promise of the great movie was that it was rendered in Igbo language with English sub-titling. It triggered a rash of home video productions in several Nigerian languages notably Igbo, Ibibio, Edo, Hausa and Yoruba in English subtitles. For the Igbos and their language – still to recover sufficiently from the debilitating effects of the Nigerian civil war, the Biafran War – that seminal movie seemed to herald the beginning of a much awaited linguistic and cultural renaissance. But that was not to be. The Nigerian home video industry did grow from its humble beginnings in *Living in Bondage* to become a world renowned industry called Nollywood – named and rated third after the Indian Bollywood and the American Hollywood. Unfortunately, the Igbo language component of the revolution soon petered out like a flash in the pan – an unfortunate victim of the dictate of the profit motive and yet another evidence of the free fall of the Igbo language from its previous position of strength in the era of Tony Ubesie, hailed as ‘probably the most gifted and accomplished Igbo writing fiction today in any language’ (Emenyonu, 2001:33).

INTRODUCTION

Dream Deferred

What Happens to a Dream Deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Great works of art are classics which provide impetus for the growth of their kind within a milieu. They provide intellectual and cultural stimulation to a whole generation of consumers of the work and spurn a significant replication of themselves by other artists. Is this not why

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Things Fall Apart (TFA) is such a great cultural icon and delight, giving rise to the African Writers Series of Heinemann Publishers and to African Literature as a body of world literature? If we have to shift our attention to the movies, can we not say the same of *Living in Bondage*, the chart-bursting movie that triggered the home video revolution and created Nollywood in Nigeria? But we shall revisit this aspect in a moment.

To put this study in sharper relief, let us briefly examine the film as an artistic medium with a boundless capacity for cultural and linguistic transformation of societies.

The Encyclopedia Americana (2004) evaluates the film as a tool for research and education, noting that the motion picture has unique capabilities. Films can record cultures, and they can treat social or political issues and other aspects of societies to capture relationships difficult to communicate by other means. Films allow the scientist to see aspects of the world that are difficult or impossible to observe with the naked eye. The motion-picture camera can record bacteria and other microscopic objects, as well as star systems whose light is too faint for normal viewing (Encyclopedia Americana, 2004:506).

Film or motion picture is indispensable to the contemporary world. Scholars have been wondering why movies create everlasting impression. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson say:

No one knows the full answer. Many people have speculated that the effect result from "persistence of vision", the tendency of an image to linger briefly on our retina. Yet if this were the real cause, we'd see a bewildering blur of superimposed stills instead of smooth action. At present, researchers believe that two psychological processes are involved in cinematic motion: critical flicker fusion and apparent motion (2).

Mankind has known the benefits of films since the first magnetic recording was first patented by the Danish engineer Valdemar Poulsen (1869-1942) in 1900 - a crude method where sound was recorded on a steel wire. From the silent movies of Charlie Chaplin of the 1930s to the modern day Hollywood, Western, Chinese and Indian movies (now Bollywood), the film medium has become the most powerful tool for cultural dissemination and the possession or lack of possession of effective control over this medium is highly indicative of where each country or society stands in the new world information order of the globalized world.

Similarly, within a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, the level of development of any cultural and linguistic group in this medium of communication is indicative of their overall cultural and linguistic strength. If half of the efforts and resources committed to conferences on Igbo language, culture and civilization had been ploughed into Igbo language movies, a better result would have been achieved. All that talk about redressing Igbo linguistic and cultural decline will make sense when an answer can be

found in the movie, as Hubert Ogunde did in "Yoruba Ronu". The high cultural and political marks scored by that movie and its spin offs have placed the Yoruba language and its people on a much more solid footing in the League of Nations. Although Ogunde has passed on, his works and his disciples live and carry on the message of linguistic, social and cultural resurgence. The recent declaration of the Osun shrine as a world Heritage Site by UNESCO and the setting up of UNESCO cultural centre in Oshogbo could have been influenced in part by the early success of the Yoruba language films. Of course, Nigeria as a country failed to achieve any significant height in the celluloid film industry partly because of the sophisticated and expensive technology involved and the lack of vision of the post-independence leaders to invest in that area.

A brief history of the film in Nigeria

Onyero Mgbejume, in his seminal work, *Film in Nigeria – Development, Problems and Promise* (1989), provides a lot of insight into the growth of the film in Nigeria. In his account, the cinema birthed in Nigeria on Monday, August 12, 1903 when the first 'cinematograph exhibition' was screened at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos by Messrs Balboa of Spain under the management of an enterprising Nigerian, Herbert Macaulay. This was seven years after the emergence of cinema. On his departure a month later, a certain Stanley Jones filled the gap by commencing screening of 'living pictures' in the same Glover Hall as from November of that year. Among his staple movies were *The Great Fire Scene*, *Bobby Whitewashed* and *Saturday Shopping*. His greatest hit of that period was a film shown on the 3rd of August, 1904 that showed the Alake of Abeokuta on a visit to England.

For the next three and a half decades, the film became popular as different expatriate investors set up shop and screened movies in different parts of Lagos. In 1946, an office of the Colonial Film Unit, which had been established in England in 1937, was set up in Nigeria to fast track educational development and value reorientation of the colonized peoples, explain government policies and provide news from England. Using 16mm films, the unit deployed cinema vans with local interpreters to rural communities. One important objective of the Colonial Film Unit, which was renamed the Federal Film Unit by legislation in 1947, was to train natives in various aspects of film making and commentary. The Federal Film Unit and its state counterparts today have always been into documentaries, but their activities clearly impacted on the growth of the local feature film industry in Nigeria by the 1970s.

By 1951, there were many commercial theatres showing 35mm movies in Nigeria to large audiences, with estimated annual attendances of 3,500,000 (Mgbejume,

1989: 55). As the same Mgbejume notes, the first Nigerian to make a notable feature film was Sam Zebba, who made **Fincho** in 1958. He also chronicles the attempts by different German, Italian and British film makers to film Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* in the 60s that were thwarted by the Federal Government which saw the novel event as decadent, a veto that received Wole Soyinka's tongue lashing then. **The Swamp Dwellers** a movie based on Wole Soyinka's play of the same title was produced in London in 1967 with an all Nigerian cast. Then came the 1970s and early 1980s, the golden era of indigenous Nigerian feature film industry.

Shaka (2002) surmises that although Hubert Ogunde and his Yoruba traveling theatre had made attempt at film making in the past, it was not until the 1970s that Ola Balogun, Eddy Ugboma, Sanya Dosumu, Francis Oladele, Jab Adu, Adamu Halilu, etc. made real attempts at film making in Nigeria. The chronicle include: Ola Balogun's *Alpha* (1974), *Amadi* (1975), *Ajani Ogun* (1976), *Music Man* (1977), *Black Goddess* (1978), *Cry Freedom* (1981) and *Money Power* (1982); Eddy Ugboma's *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* (1979), *The Boy is Good* (1979), *The Mask* (1979), *Oil Doom* (1980), *Bolus '80* (1982) and *Death of a Black President* (1983); Jab Adu's *Bisi*, *Daughter of the River* (1977) ; Sanya Dosumu's *Dinner with the Devil* (1975) and Adamu Halilu's *Shehu Umar* (1976), *Kanta of Kebbi* (1977) and *Moment of Truth* (1978); (Shaka 2002:11-30). It is worth noting that *Amadi* by Ola Balogun was the first movie in Nigeria to be shot in an indigenous language, Igbo, (Mgbejume, 1989) but *Living in Bondage* was the first in an indigenous language with English sub-titles. It was also the very first notable film in the home video technology, which it popularized in Nigeria and beyond as a film medium.

The Rise of the Home Video Films and Nollywood in Nigeria

The history of the home video is naturally much more recent than the celluloid era in Nigeria and elsewhere. As technology opens new pages for mankind, fast thinking man is caught in its webs. Given the highly portable and relatively inexpensive profile of video cameras that inundated Nigeria in the late 1980s and its extreme popularity in capturing social and cultural events, the experimentation with home video films soon gained ground. A lot has been attributed to the roving Yoruba theatres which were managed by family members. The scenario was such that most of these family members identified with it as it was their main source of livelihood. And as Oni and Yerima observed, "The producers/directors were heads of large families while their wives, children and other relations made up the troupes" (Oni and Yerima, 2008:5).

In their study of why the celluloid era collapsed in

Nigeria, Adesanya (1997), Haynes (1997) and Shaka (2002 and 2003) attributed it to a number of factors. The first was that the colonial administration did not lay a stable foundation for the film industry in Nigeria to thrive. But as mentioned elsewhere in this paper, there is a greater burden of guilt on the immediate post colonial governments of Nigeria, which should have invested massively in the sector given its strategic importance to nation building. The second reason advanced by the writers in question was the general insecurity and the decline of urban night life at the end of the civil war which impacted negatively on the cinema world. The third reason canvassed was the dilapidation of cinema theatres from lack of patronage and - in the South East - as a result of the war, which led to many of them being converted to places of worship and warehouses. The fourth factor presented was the control of the cinema by expatriates, mostly Lebanese and Indian companies, which screened foreign films to the detriment of local films and their production. Another point raised was the rapid expansion of the television at a time the film was struggling to find its footing in Nigeria. The unrestricted airing of foreign movies on these televisions was a disincentive to the cinema culture. The seventh point advanced by the writers under review was the cash squeeze occasioned by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced by the President Ibrahim Babangida administration. This made foreign exchange difficult to obtain to fund the celluloid production equipment (Oni and Yerima, 2008: 4-5).

The game changer occurred when Kenneth Nnebue, seeing the gap created by the dearth of the Nigerian celluloid movies, produced Sola Ogunisola's Yoruba film, *Aiye ni iya mi*, in home video format with the token sum of N2000, "and made quite some profit" (Oni and Yerima, 2008: 5). Nnebue then followed this success up with the chat bursting *Living in Bondage*, which opened the floodgate to hyperactive productions in the new format. Quite remarkably, his effort saw to the exodus of star artists from the television to the film industry which had become more prestigious and lucrative.

Gabriel Okoye followed Nnebue's lead with *Battle of Musanga* and *Nneka the Pretty Serpent*. Although Alade Aromire had produced a film, *Ekun* (1987) in celluloid but *Living in Bondage* acquired a particular popularity that defined the stage. A steady stream of feature films on home video format in Nigerian languages with English sub-titling followed, riding on the impetus created by *Living in Bondage*. These were in Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Edo and other languages. The enthusiasm heralding its entry notwithstanding, strong criticisms followed the new industry in its preliminary years. In assessing Nollywood, Victor Akande has this to say:

Nollywood, the nomenclature for the Nigerian motion picture industry has been variously described as a

phenomenon. This is because the format was a sudden and successful vehicle that has consistently driven the visual entertainment wing of the industry at the expense of cinema, television series, and perhaps stage play----- While film makers from Nigeria are still basking in the euphoria of the UNESCO rating, which in 2009 proclaimed Nollywood as the second largest film industry in the world, critics stressed again that the UNESCO rating was based on quantum and not quality (Akande 2010:8-9).

On return on investment, the new industry has been a soar away success. Both the producers and actors/actresses have been smiling their way to the bank. Hear Shaka:

With little investments, producers rake in millions of Naira, with much of it going to the financiers/executive producers who are basically motor spare parts dealers or electronic merchants either at Idumota Lagos or at Onitsha Main Market. These traders moved into the industry basically because of its high yielding profit (Shaka, 2002: 16)

However, Gbemisola Adeoti is more positive in his assessment of the impact of the industry. He says:

Largely, home video is a product of the increasing tendency across the world to appropriate products of modern scientific inventions and technological revolutions to interpret, propagate and disseminate indigenous cultures... It has provided jobs for script writers, distributors, marketers, advertisers, poster-makers, hoteliers, transporters, and proprietors of video clubs. Investment in the industry is worth about 650 billion of Naira as it has benefited tremendously from the expansion in the industry and technological breakthrough in the field of electronics (Adeoti, 2007:3).

Stories in Nollywood are rehashed from the bowel of the Nigerian society. Some portray interesting historical events. A good number emanate from our belief systems and our tendency to attribute most things to, not ill-luck or any fault of our own but the evil machinations of wicked people. Many others focus on the get rich schemes of people today and its evil concomitants. Yet others portray the good life of ordinary Nigerians, their love and romance as well as their disappointments and pains.

Living in Bondage: A Promise and a Revolution

Living in Bondage is not necessarily the first home video film in Nigeria or the first Igbo film for that matter. Such others like *Amadi* came before it. What is indisputable is that it is the first to draw serious attention to the medium and stories told through it. It is the classic that took the

industry thus far and gave Nollywood the name it bears proudly today. It is the first Igbo language and Nigeria film to set the stage for an industrial movie revolution in Nigeria that will engulf the entire world. Perhaps its director, Chika Onu and script writer Kenneth Nnebue never set out to embark on this great mission, but their accomplishments have ricocheted all around the globe. Living in Bondage after its debut has established itself as the most widely watched Igbo movie, nay Nigerian movie ever.

A lot has been written about late entry of the Igbo in the cinema world in Nigeria. Edward Ossai while reviewing the situation says of it –

A study of the Igbo culture and worldview is most likely to reveal that the Igbos had almost everything it takes to start a viable cinema earlier than they did, but for fear of venturing into the unknown. They have a rich culture, lots of myths, legends, and folklore to tap from and adapt into screenplays. They are recognized as very good dancers, acrobats, singers, and storytellers. The ingenuity of the Igbo made him to realize, late though that much could be made from the filmic world and evolve what appears to be a new genre. That is, ritual films or what the European audience classify as "horror" -----It is no wonder, therefore to hear people refer to Nigerian films as ritual films" (Ossai, 2006:11-12 in Sokomba and Ossai, 2006).

While the fear of venturing into the unknown is not, to our knowledge an attribute of Igbos, part of what makes Living in Bondage an epic Igbo and Nigerian movie is that it is in Igbo language with English sub-titles. But the story itself sells as well. It attempts to capture the Igbo spirit as perverted in a new comer to the city. Andy Okeke suffers terribly under the weight of city life and later succumbs to its allurements by seeking bloody wealth. Its makers tried to accommodate a compelling story and a good theatre sense told in Igbo language in a time of dwindling economic fortunes of Nigeria in the late 1980s and beyond by experimenting with the video cassette.

In some way, Living in Bondage is the story of Ndigbo (Igbo People) and the consequences which the civil war had imposed on them. Faced with overwhelming poverty, Andy Okeke seeks to break away from the strangulating hold that it has placed on him in his Igbo village. The protracted civil war made a sound education a mirage for Andy. As a village Champion, his inability to possess the woman of his dream drives him to seek his fortunes elsewhere. To cross the Rubicon, he escapes to the city, but reaching there is not a guarantee of success. Andy defines for himself the meaning of choice, value system, ambition and goal. The modern Nigerian State of the 1970s and 1980s makes true the Machiavellian principle that the end justifies the means. This is what the movie condemns. It is a morality tale. Andy's life-style is not a reflection of all Igbo young men. By telling the story in

Igbo language, the producers brought the reality of contemporary Nigerian city life starkly to Igbo young men and women. But the English subtitling also makes it at the same time the archetypal Nigerian, African and world tale that it is, with the story and its morality applicable to people of all linguistic background.

Thematically, *Living in Bondage* is like Cyprian Ekwensi's experiment in *Jagua Nana* and *People of the City* and Chinua Achebe's second novel, *No Longer At Ease*. Once the character enters the city, he loses his innocence and the devil in the city devours his conscience. A particular feature of *Living in Bondage* is its inclination towards the occult. This wave and the light it inflamed will hunt many films that were to come after it. Today, the common criticism against Nollywood is its penchant for the occult which spreads the idea that the Nigerian society is a personification of occultism. Since art is often that which it prefigures or mirrors, then this criticism can be sustained.

The unbridled copying of *Living in Bondage* occultism by successive film producers sent a deadly signal that the level of moral decadence had reached alarming proportions. It was not therefore surprising that these movies were followed by another rash of Christian inspired movies that sang the opposite tune; attempting to create a sense that all is not lost as a mighty God will soon come for recompense. Like the wildness associated with the spread of gospel songs after Path Obasi's *Nwa Mami Water* in the early 1980s, the new generation pastors have tended to see Christianized home video movies as an extension of their divine mission.

However, it is in its choice of language that *Living in Bondage* made its boldest statement. By using Igbo language – not the rustic, localized but pure dialect of any of the numerous large Igbo clans with substantial sprinkling of the famous Igbo proverbs, but an easy going, almost deodorized modern day Igbo of the urban settlements – it generated an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm amongst Igbo speakers the world over. It showed that Igbo could be a modern language used in modern, contemporary movies. To make matters even more profound, the film caught on tremendously amongst non-Igbo speakers in Nigeria and Nigerians overseas. It was all the rage as it became the sure topic of every conversation in local bars and pepper soup joints in the country. It even became the subject for editorials and Sunday sermons in churches as witnessed by one of these writers in Ibadan. For him, the defining moment of the canonization of *Living in Bondage* as a Nigerian epic film in Igbo language was when a Yoruba Catholic priest based his entire Sunday sermon at the Seat of Wisdom Chapel of the University of Ibadan on the film. Even as the Monsignor struggled with pronouncing some of the Igbo names and words, the feeling of Igbo language having arrived on the national scene – or having re-arrived on the scene two decades after it had been

pushed out at the end of the Biafran war – was palpable.

Overnight, he and many other Igbos living in the cosmopolitan Yoruba city of Ibadan became crash-programme tutors of Igbo language for hordes of enthusiastic non-Igbo speakers who were desirous of learning sufficient Igbo to better appreciate the riveting story. Among Igbo speakers, catch phrases from the movie like “Andy a kowasikwaalu m ya ofuma” (Andy did not explain the implications to me) caught on quite fast and easily distinguished those who had watched the film from the fast diminishing number of those who had not. Perhaps for the first time since the end of the tragic Biafran war, Nigerians of all linguistic backgrounds were celebrating a Nigerian project of Igbo language coloration. It was a landmark that pointed to a possible renaissance of the Igbo language and culture, even politics.

The rise of the Nigerian home video not only created wealthy Nigerians but produced Igbo stars as well. While analyzing the developmental trend, Oni and Yerima (2008:11) opined that “Since the financial control of the industry is in the hands of Igbo businessmen, it has been easy for executive producers to raise video film stars of Igbo extraction. It is not surprising then that a greater number of the “selling faces” in the industry are Igbo.” One may wonder then why the same financial controllers and executive producers did not keep Igbo language in the hub of the films they made.

A Dream Deferred!

That the home video industry in Nigeria blossomed after *Living in Bondage* has been well acknowledged internationally. So is its coined name, Nollywood, taken in honour of the acclaimed leaders of the world film market, Hollywood. What certainly did not blossom is the use of Igbo as the linguistic medium of high profile films. The producers, directors, actors and investors grew astronomically as the volume of films increased, many of them of Igbo extraction. Yet the promise, the excitement and the necessity of continued patronage of Igbo language was largely put aside. How and why did this happen?

In an interview with Chika Onu, the acclaimed producer of the epic, every inch an Igbo man, he has more than enough light to throw on the issues in this cryptic, terse passage. Says he:

The home video is not about morality but about giving the people what they want to see. The film maker is in business and that defines his goal. We can only revive the Igbo image if we shun materialism and collectively and financially work towards promoting Igbo films with sound cultural values. Adequate funding is the only solution to this image redemption. We have the professionals. The need for international standardization

saw the not too literate Igbo marketer losing out. Other factors like rivalry, personality clash, lack of concerted effort, refusal to adhere to directional dictates, reluctance by the educated Igbo industrialists to invest also played their ignoble role.

(Interview, February 5, 2009).

This is the horse talking strait as hearing from the horse's mouth goes! Once their movies crossed the borders and became widely acceptable, the stakeholders decided that they could make much more money by making their films in the English language and reaching a wider audience directly. Also, as other movie makers of non-Igbo orientation came on the scene, the market became more competitive and the Igbo folks felt they should not allow others to dominate the English language medium where they were already holding sway as the Yoruba folks – quickly crossing over from celluloid where they reigned virtually unchallenged in the 70s- were clearly dominating the Nigerian language home video market. The implications of the above comments from Mr. Onu should not be lost on any one.

The first clear implication is that *Living in Bondage* was not based on a sound, long-term philosophical underpinning as far as the choice of Igbo language was concerned. Yet it may not have been an accident either. If anything, and going by the brazen pecuniary ethos enunciated by Mr. Onu above, it may have been a choice based on shrewd market segmentation principles adopted by the makers of the film. Spelt out very clearly, it could be that having noted the sheer dominance of the celluloid medium in English and especially Yoruba language and seeing that they could not dabble into that medium for reasons already discussed, Onu, Nnebue and crew decided while experimenting with Home Video to also use Igbo as a means of harnessing that hitherto untapped market. In other words, using Igbo at that time made more economic sense than using English.

The second clear implication was that having by design or by accident made fame, proven the efficacy of home video as purveyor of films and having awakened the hunger of consumers for Nigerian stories acted by Nigerians, our heroes did not feel bound to stick with one of their agents of success – the Igbo language. On the contrary, they found it the most expendable variable in the whole marketing mix of the new order. With their new found wealth and fame, they still could not try celluloid because of cost and lack of expertise. They also could have confirmed from their successful experiment that with rising insecurity in the Nigerian cities and countryside, night life was hitting the rocks and the home video was it. Indeed, there was virtually no cinema culture left in the entire South East after the Civil War while Odion Cinema and other public cinemas were booming in the South West and open air cinemas in the North. So if by ditching Igbo language they would make more money in Nigeria

and internationally from their films, so be it. In other words, the commitment to the language was never there, right from the beginning. It was a mere expendable tool in the service of business lucre.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, film as a medium occupies a unique place in the propagation of language, culture and civilization. If the Igbos really think they want to revive their civilization, then they must continue from where makers of *Living in Bondage* abandoned their revolution. Here is another example of the potential for linguistic resurgence of Igbo language that lies in the film medium. In 1992, almost four years after the screening of the film version of *Things Fall Apart* in English and Igbo languages, one of these two researchers here was doing a survey of children's programming in the electronic and print media. He found to his amazement that children rated *Things Fall Apart* higher than many decidedly children's programmes such as *Tales By Moonlight* and *Sesame Street*. The Igbo version of the film was even more popular in the Igbo speaking states surveyed (Emejulu, 1992, 2004).

We are already familiar with the increasing plight and crisis of survival facing the Igbo language. The practice of shunning Igbo for English when members of the tribe meet in family and village circles is a great disservice to the promotion of Igbo language and culture. The declining study of the language in secondary schools and universities in Nigeria and around the world is another. The reluctance by Igbos in public offices to speak the language or respond in it when a visitor speaks to them in the language is a version of the same problem. The decreasing number of books written in Igbo is highlighted regularly in conferences. The absence of Igbo language programmes in any of the international news media – BBC, VOA, RD, RFI – is an urgent case in point. All of these symptoms underlie a language in danger of atrophy – a fact highlighted by UNESCO recently.

It is here then that Nollywood Igbo producers and directors must take over. They have to teach Igbos that there is nothing shameful about their language and culture as Chinua Achebe had done, though using the English language medium. It is for this reason that *Things Fall Apart* is being celebrated and taunted as a classic. *Living in bondage* gave some hope of a big revolution for the Igbo language but it was not built on a long term strategic vision of the Igbo people and their place in the world, and so the revolution was aborted. Admittedly, they must acknowledge the limited vision of those who gave them that momentary euphoria, but they must go back to the drawing board to reclaim and refine the vision, replant it and pursue it.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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