

SLAVERY AND RESISTANCE ON NINETEENTH CENTURY DANISH PLANTATIONS IN SOUTHEASTERN GOLD COAST, GHANA

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ABSTRACT From the turn of the 18th century to the mid-19th century AD, the Danes experimented with plantation agriculture in the foothills of the Akuapem Mountains on the southeastern coastland of the Gold Coast (Ghana). Enslaved Africans were used by the Danes to cultivate the plantations. The Danish planters imposed controls over the plantation landscape. The enslaved workers reacted to their entrapped situations by resisting the various forms of control imposed on the plantation set-up. In this paper, the socio-cultural relations that emanated from the interactions on the plantations are examined. The paper specifically investigates the dynamics of power manifested in diverse control mechanisms imposed by the planters and the corresponding reaction from the slaves to counteract these impositions.

Key Words: Danish plantations; Akuapem Mountains; Plantation slavery; Enslaved workers; Resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1788 and 1850 the Danes established plantations along the estuary of the Volta River and in the foothills of the Akuapem Mountains in the southeastern Gold Coast and used the labor of enslaved Africans to cultivate them (Bredwa-Mensah, 2004: 203-227; 1999: 25-45; 1996: 445-458; Kea, 1995: 119-143; Justesen, 1979: 3-33; Jeppesen, 1966: 73-98) (Fig. 1). The engine that moved the plantations was slave labor. The world of the enslaved workers on the plantations was always limited by the demands of their masters to render labor related to plantation productivity. The economic and socio-cultural relations on the plantations in southeastern Gold Coast were therefore regulated by planter impositions to regulate both the physical layout of the plantations and the enslaved workers who cultivated them. Slave workers clearly understood the power relations that regulated interactions on the plantations and responded appropriately. This paper examines the dynamics of power manifested in the diverse control mechanisms imposed by the planters and the corresponding reactions on the part of the slaves to counteract these impositions.

DOMINANCE AND RESISTANCE

In recent times, slavery has been central to studies in historical archaeology. Scholars of the archaeology of slavery have investigated diverse aspects of

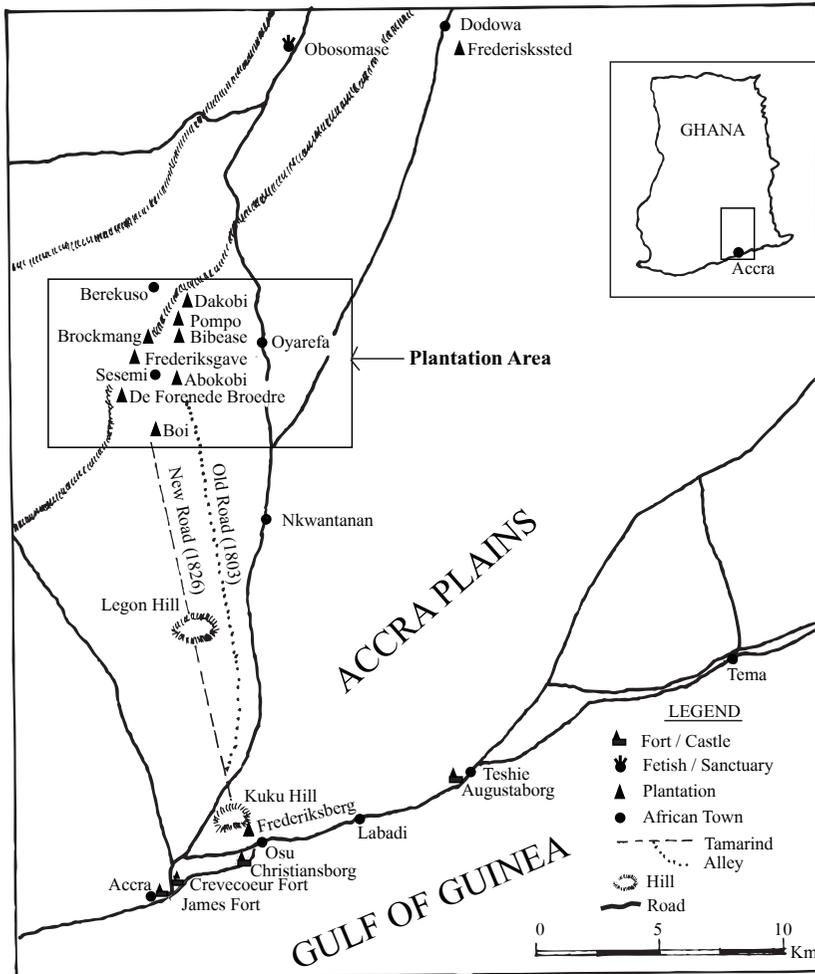


Fig. 1. Map of the Accra Coast, Akuapem Mountains showing Danish Plantations

the subject although the fragile nature of surviving artifacts of slavery in the archaeological record poses a great challenge to these endeavors. Despite the fact that tangible traces of slavery are often difficult to interpret without written and oral sources, the artifacts from sites associated with slavery serve as a compelling testimony to the human socio-cultural consequences emanating from enslavement. No wonder that in recent times, archaeological studies of slavery have focused on the patterns and forms of resistance among slave societies in response to restrictions imposed by slave owners. Slavery was fundamentally inhumane. All systems of slavery sought to oppress and degrade the enslaved. Slavery in any form constrained the enslaved from making a life of their own as human beings. Since actions produced reactions, the truth was that enslaved

people sought to reject their bondage in one way or another. Scholarly literature of the ways in which the oppressed and marginalized groups responded to their entrapment and domination indicates that they employed a wide variety of methods and weapons to cushion themselves against the harsh conditions of the economic system of which they were a part. For instance, Michael Craton (1997: 222) writing about resistance to slavery in the Caribbean noted that:

“Defining slave resistance merely to include plots and acts of overt rebellion is unduly limiting and misleading...it is necessary to define slave resistance to include all forms of resistance short of actual (or proposed) overt action. This proposes a whole spectrum of activities and behavior, shading from covert sabotage, through manifestations of internal rejection and anomie, to forms of dissimulated acceptance and accommodation that were, perhaps, as subversive as other forms.”

This view ties in with that of other scholars who have investigated systems of domination and control. According to Kottak (2002: 604) and Scott (1985: 28-47) imposed controls that tended to oppress, dominate and inhibit the freedom of others ignited potent but disguised reactions, rather than open and defiant forms of resistance. Other scholars (Aptheker, 1971: 161-173; Genovese, 1974: 585-660; Beckles, 1988: 1; Moitt 1992: 136-160; Shepherd, 2000: 896) have rightly shown that resistance among socially marginalized and powerless groups was not only perennial but also multifaceted. They considered resistance as conscious, covert or overt acts of defiance and identified acts of defiance such as false compliance, malingering, foot dragging, feigning ignorance, stealing, running away and sabotage, as commonplace weapons employed by the enslaved and powerless groups to protect their individual and collective interests. These small-scale acts of resistance employed by the oppressed, enslaved, marginalized, and downtrodden to counteract the imposed coercive and hegemonic ideologies of the dominators, masters, elites and planters are what Scott (1985) called the “weapons of the weak.”

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SLAVERY IN THE SOUTHEASTERN GOLD COAST, GHANA

In Ghana, sites related to the slave trade and slave occupation and their research potentialities are known (Posnansky, 1984: 203; Posnansky & De Corse, 1986: 11). Only recently have a number of such sites have been investigated (Bredwa-Mensah, 1996; 1998; 2002; 2004; Bredwa-Mensah & Crossland, 1997; Perbi & Bredwa-Mensah, 2004a; 2004b). One important historical-archaeological enquiry has focused on plantation slavery. Among the issues I investigate in this paper are slave lifeways and the dynamics of power relations on the plantations. I use historical and archaeological evidence here to throw light on the diverse control mechanisms the Danish planters used to keep their enslaved workers in their assigned place in the social structure on the Akuapem plantations and the corresponding reactions employed by the enslaved workers

to counteract these controls.

PLANTER'S CONTROL MECHANISMS

A common control mechanism administered by the Danish planters to regulate the lives of the enslaved workers was the spatial arrangement of the plantation layout. The arrangement of structures and other man-made features on the plantations followed a strict, grid system of linear and geometric configurations, architectural elements that no doubt indicate signs of control. For instance, the villages of the enslaved workers comprised wattle and daub houses arranged in a linear fashion along a straight, tree-lined avenue/alley that linked the plantations to Christiansborg Castle, the Danish commercial headquarters at Osu, on the coast. Portions of the alley exist in the research area especially at Pompo near Dakobi Plantation, on the southwestern slopes of Legon Hill and behind the European cemetery at Abokobi. Balthasar Christensen (1833: 8, 59) in his description of Dsabeng (Djabling), the slave village on the Frederikgave Plantation confirmed the mathematical precision with which the alley was laid in straight lines and the linear placement of slave villages in relation to the alley. He described the slave settlement as:

“A little Negro village composed by the houses of the serf Negro families, which were set up in two parallel rows each of ten houses. Its intervening broad way was planted with a double row of fruit trees which formed a handsome, straight avenue facing the hill where the residence of the plantation owner is projected.”

On all the plantations in the Akuapem Mountains, the houses of the plantation owners were located on higher elevations along cliff surfaces of the mountains, where the planter or overseer had a clear and commanding view of the slave villages and the cultivated fields directly below in the plains. In my view, this afforded the planter or overseer a psychological edge over the enslaved workers. The idea that their master had a clear view of the activities of the slaves both at home and in the fields must have been intimidating, and certainly created a sense of fear and inferior status in the enslaved workers. Again, this arrangement naturally allowed the planters to infringe upon the privacy of the slaves and, as a result, manipulate their behavior in both outright and subtle ways.

Another power control mechanism on the Danish plantations was the rules of the planters. The planters demanded that the slaves work for them four days out of a week. The rest of the days were given to the slaves to attend to their private needs (Christensen, 1833: 8, 35). During the mandatory working hours, the enslaved workers tended the fields and their surroundings to fulfill a variety of tasks demanded by the landscaping rules of the Danish planters. The production processes on the plantations dictated the duties of the enslaved workforce. Generally, the plantations specialized in the production of both subsistence and commercial crops, which were either seasonal or perennial. The major crops culti-

vated on the Danish plantations in the Akuapem Mountains were coffee, cotton and maize. Other crops cultivated included sugar cane, citrus, banana, plantain, cassava and guava (Bredwa-Mensah, 1996: 449; 2002: 117). The required slave duties included bush clearing, planting, hoeing, harvesting and ‘‘smoke-drying coffee beans’’ (Nørregard, 1964: 44-45). Farm tools such as cutlasses and hoes recovered during excavations at the Frederiksgave Plantation confirm the written evidence about some aspects of the required duties of the enslaved Africans on the plantations. Information about the daily work schedule on the plantations indicated that slave labor was performed according to a task system. Under this system, each adult slave was assigned a specific field task for the day. For instance, if a task involved brushing under cultivated crops, a slave was put in charge of a specific number of plants. On the Frederiksgave plantation, it was mandatory for each slave to take care of a thousand coffee plants. The work in the field started very early in the morning at 6 a.m. and continued until 10 a.m. The slaves took a three-hour rest during which time they were permitted to feed themselves, or do whatever they chose. The assigned daily task resumed in the afternoon from 2 p.m. to end at 5 p.m.

The production management on the plantations was under the close supervision of overseers/managers and headmen. The overseers were either Danish or free men brought down from the Danish West Indies to manage the plantations. Not all the plantations had overseers, perhaps due to the high mortality rate of Europeans and the difficulty in recruiting mulattoes from the Caribbean. Where there were overseers, they lived in stone-block houses erected by the proprietors. Grønberg, a mill-builder and a pensioned non-commissioned officer at Christiansborg, managed the Frederiksgave Plantation for several years (Christensen, 1833: 34; Behrens, 1917: 190; Jeppesen, 1966: 87). The supervision of slaves in the field was the responsibility of the headman called a *bomba* or *bombær* (Berg, 1997: 81). He was also a slave and his major responsibility was to ensure that slaves did not mangle in the field.

A patriarchal relationship was used as a control strategy by the planters on the Akuapem Plantations. It was common practice that the Danish planters provided the necessary agricultural tools, flintlock guns and plots of land at no cost to the plantation slaves. In addition, the planters annually issued each slave a piece of cheap, simple coarse cotton cloth called *pantjes*. On special occasions, such as celebrations and festivals, the planters gave out drinks, especially alcoholic beverages, as well as tobacco, as gifts to their slaves. The planters extracted rent from the plantation slaves. The quantity varied from plantation to plantation. On the plantation called United Brothers (*De Forenede Brødre*), for instance, the proprietor, Georg W. Lutterodt received from his 38 slaves an annual food rent in maize, yams, pineapples, plantain (*pisang*) and other crops. In addition, the slaves tapped palm-wine from numerous palm trees on this plantation for which Lutterodt drew some income (Christensen, 1833: 65).

What I wish to emphasize here is that in the design and layout of the plantations as well as in dealing with the enslaved workers, the planters imposed their idealized cognitive representations of eighteenth century rural Danish

manor houses and manorial relations of production on a Gold Coast terrain. The manorial estates of landed Danish gentry were laid out in strict, rigid geometric configurations to signify elegance, superiority and power. In the manorial relations of production, the estate owner saw to it that the farm was supplied with the most necessary means of production while the peasant was obliged to pay a portion of his product as rent to the lord manor (Christiansen, 1996: 129, 162). The Danish planters carried these production ideas and imposed them onto the plantation landscape. The arrangement of the plantations, to borrow from James Scott (1998: 2), “all seemed calculated to make the terrain, its products, and its workforce ... manipulable from above and from the centre.”

SLAVE RESISTANCE

The documentary and archaeological sources indicate that the enslaved workers on the Danish plantations in the foothills of the Akuapem Mountains were dissatisfied with their condition. Accordingly, they pursued a range of actions to resist their enslavement. The resistance on the Akuapem plantations in the nineteenth century was by nature covert, small-scale, individual, equivocal and non-violent, but pervasive and persistent.

A persistent feature of resistance included acts that tended to slow down work on the plantations. One such act, which became perennial, was that the slaves feigned illness and infirmity. In 1843, Edward Carstensen, the Danish Governor at Christiansborg reported on the possibility of growing colonial crops on the Gold Coast and decried the pattern whereby the enslaved workers constantly became ill every year at harvest time so that they were exempted from work. In the said report, he noted that the central problem on the plantations was the annual illness of the plantation workers, which compelled the plantation owners to employ waged laborers hired from the nearby Akuapem, Osu and other Accra towns to harvest the crops. The services provided by waged labourers were expensive. The costs therefore wiped out the profits from the harvests. Concerning this problem in Frederiksgave Plantation, Carstensen wrote (Nørregard, 1964: 46):

“[The] expenses in connection with the harvest have been so high, that the benefits from the rich harvest have been neutralized, so to say. The reason is that a year of abundant harvest means the same as a rainy year; with a rainy year diseases always follow, [in particular the Guinea worm], whereby the plantation workers are prevented from participating in the harvest and thereby forcing the plantation owner to hire people to harvest the coffee beans.”

Another act of resistance was that the enslaved workers refused to render the mandatory four days work as long as there were no European supervisors on the plantations. Instead they worked for themselves. Christensen (1833: 33-34),

made an illuminating observation of this issue and wrote that:

“The Gouvernement [the Danish Administration in Guinea] notes that the plantations can hardly be run perfectly as long as there are no able overseers/managers experienced in colonial cultivation. This lack is felt all the more strongly since no European has been able to remain at the plantations, and the Negro serfs (slaves) cannot be brought to work for anyone but themselves, by overseers from their midst or the Natives, unless there is a European present who supervises them.”

There is no doubt that this behavior of the enslaved workers was an act of sabotage. It was a perennial problem on all the plantations and a major concern to the plantation owners who lived on the coast and were preoccupied with evermore lucrative ventures, such as trade. The planters could not therefore pay the needed attention to the management of their plantations, and the enslaved workers took advantage of this situation.

Another act of resistance that constrained plantation management was desertion. A common anti-slavery resistance culture that permeated every aspect of enslaved life on the Accra Coast and affected the plantations was the practice of slaves running to secure shelter in traditional cult worship centers. Danish documents cite a number of these centers as “powerful fetishes that serve as refuge for runaway slaves.” The sanctuaries included the Kyenku fetish at Obosomase in Akuapem, La-Kpa at Labadi near Accra and others at Berekuso (Akuapem), Odumase-Krobo and Osudoku near Shai. Kyenku, “the one who surrounds,” is the war god and protector of the Akuapem State. The proximity of this fetish to the Danish plantations in the Akuapem Mountains perhaps made it a favorite refuge destination. The Danish surgeon Paul Erdmann Isert (1788 [trans.] 1992: 162) described how runaway slaves to the Kyenku fetish secured their “freedom” in the eighteenth century. He noted that:

“A fetish priest is the caboceer [kabossie] who rules Schentema (Obosomase)... A slave who is not well satisfied with his master makes an effort and comes to this village. Then he goes to the fetish, or the temple of the idol, and seats himself inside on a kind of altar. The fetish priest, who goes there daily to make sacrifices, asks him what he is seeking. He answers, ‘I want to give my body to the fetish.’ The priest, who now understands him perfectly, accepts him, and from then on he is in reality the slave of the fetish priest for the rest of his life without the priest having had to pay a single cowry (the customary payment here) for him.”

However, by the 1820s, the various European, mulatto and African merchant groups on the Gold Coast who owned slaves and therefore relied on the labor of enslaved people challenged this practice. It was not uncommon for armed European officials and soldiers to pursue runaway slaves to their hideouts and, by a show of power, forcibly retrieve them. In 1843, the Danish Gover-

nor, Edward Carstensen in the company of 20 armed soldiers marched to Obosomase in pursuit of two runaway slaves. This happened after the fetish-priest backed by the leading men of the town had refused the Governor's requests for the release of the slaves on two occasions. Carstensen (Nørregard, 1964: 65) described the encounter as follows:

“We arrived at Bosomach [Obosomase] at 6 a.m. when it was already daybreak. The fetish-priest had escaped, but I arrested his three sons plus the Lieutenant of the town and two spokesmen. Not long after, we heard a continuous yelling and shouting from the fetish grove: there were the two runaway slaves who invoked the help of the fetish against us. I entered the grove ahead of four soldiers and there encountered the two slaves armed with guns jumping around like mad. At my order to surrender, one of them aimed at me. In that moment, I fired my pistol and he fell. The other ran out of the enclosure upon which a shot was heard. He had shot himself.”

Later it turned out that the slave who was shot at by Carstensen was not hit by the bullet, but he had remained on the ground and pretended to be dead until the Governor and his men left the town. He was handed over to Carstensen at Christiansborg three days after the incident. The fetish priest was pardoned and the six arrested men from Obosomase were released from custody after a fine was paid by the fetish priest to the Danish Administration at Christiansborg.

The above incident illustrates the nature of European interference in a traditional institution that provided the means for slaves to secure their freedom during the nineteenth century. Again it demonstrates how runaway slaves resisted their enslaved conditions even to the point of defending themselves with guns. It also demonstrates the slaves' preparedness to die rather than submit to the armed power of the Danish authority to be humiliated and brutalized by public flogging.

Archaeologists including McKee (1987) and Fairbanks (1972) pointed out that exploiting plant and animal resources in and around the fringes of plantations by the slaves indicated that slaves subverted the principles of patriarchal control. In their private time, the slaves on the Danish plantations altered the landscapes to meet their own needs. Evidence indicates that the enslaved workers on the Danish plantations created their surrounding world through assigned duties and the activities they pursued in their private time, instead of having it constructed for them. Historical documents and archaeological data provide some important clues about after-hour activities of the enslaved workers. According to Balthasar Christensen (1833: 9, 61), slaves on the Danish plantations were responsible for their own subsistence. To meet their daily food requirements, slaves cultivated the plots of land allotted them by the planters. On the Frederiksgave Plantation for instance, slaves used their so-called free time to cultivate maize, cassava, yams, plantain, and a variety of vegetables for their daily subsistence (Chris-



Fig. 2. Gun accessories (flintstones) from Frederiksgave Plantation

tensen, 1833: 60-61).

Archaeological evidence from Bibease and Frederiksgave Plantation sites provide important insights into the ways the enslaved workers exploited the surrounding landscapes. Faunal remains, gun parts and accessories recovered from the two sites suggest that the enslaved workers on the two plantations adopted a mixed strategy of hunting, trapping, fishing and collecting to exploit a variety of faunal resources such as small game, land snails, freshwater fish, and shellfish. Excavated animal bones represented both wild and domesticated types. The wild animals exploited by the slaves were antelopes, grass cutters, giant rats, ground squirrels, land tortoise, and small birds such as francolins. Among the identified domesticates were cattle, sheep/goats, pigs, chickens, and turkeys. Archaeological evidence strongly suggests that the enslaved workers on the Bibease and Frederiksgave Plantations were acclimated to the natural environments of the plantation complex. Familiarity with the wider plantation environment empowered the slaves to carve out domains and exploit them for their own domestic use.

There are documentary accounts that plantation owners supplied their slaves with flintlock guns. The recovery of parts of flintlock muskets and flint stones confirms that the slaves on the Bibease and Frederiksgave plantations had access to firearms (Fig. 2). They may have used either the flintlock muskets provided by their masters or a variety of traps to obtain the wild animals mentioned. Most of the animal bones excavated were broken and only a few showed butchering marks. Also some of these bones were charred indicating that meat was roasted. These observed conditions of the bones are consistent with the food processing practices in Ghana today. Meat is roasted for better preservation. Bones are often cracked to extract marrow for consumption. Soups probably consisted of a mixture of pulverized vegetables combined with meat, fish, and/or snails. Cooked yams, cassava, plantains, and maize were perhaps



Fig. 3. Alcoholic beverage bottles from Djabing, the slave village on the Frederiksgave Plantation

combined in different ways and eaten with soups, stews, and sauces. The slaves also exploited freshwater crabs, fish, shellfish and two kinds of land snails from nearby Dakobi and Mamman Streams and their gallery forests, about 2 km and 1 km away, respectively. The enslaved workers could have obtained the marine and estuarine resources through trade or barter whenever they visited the Accra Coast.

Archaeological data provide a glimpse of the worldview of the enslaved workers on the Danish plantations. Artifacts such as stone axes, a pair of brass bells, white/gray shell beads and alcoholic drinks recovered during excavations at Frederiksgave, are ethnographically known ritual paraphernalia associated with the African cognitive systems (Fig. 3). Fetish priests and priestesses of traditional cults wear the white/gray shell beads on their wrists and ankles for spiritual protection and identification. Stone axes and brass bells also feature in the healing, divination and protective rituals of these traditional spiritualists. While these may be considered as material expressions of African religious beliefs, it is difficult to identify the specific fetish these were associated with. It is also difficult to tell how the plantation workers used the activities of the fetish as tools for resisting their enslaved situations.

Liquor may have played an important role in uniting and strengthening the social and spiritual worlds of the enslaved people on the Danish plantations. As a socially deprived and marginalized group of people drawn from different ethnic backgrounds into slavery, social drinking among adult slaves or sharing drinks together would have facilitated the building of a bond of social cohesiveness among themselves. Among African societies, alcohol is still regarded

as a powerful fluid that is used to communicate and mediate between the living (the known and present) on one hand, and the ancestral and spiritual world (the future and unknown) on the other. Today, this functional role of alcohol is observed during the ritual performances connected with various rites of passage such as birth and naming, puberty, marriage and death. The enslaved workers may have used alcohol in such ritual situations to bridge the gap between their physical world and the spiritual world of their ancestors. The strong and powerful alcoholic beverages were probably used in libation prayers to strike a harmonious balance between the plantation community and the ancestral (spiritual) world that ruled over individual and collective destinies of the enslaved workers. I do not doubt that the plantation system constrained the African slave workers, yet it allowed them the opportunity to somewhat piece back together their lives. Through social drinking, the enslaved workers on the Bibease and Frederiksgave Plantations probably constructed social groups that provided a strong sense of sharing in a common fate and destiny, while the use of powerful fluids during rituals helped to harmonize the landscapes of the enslaved and the ancestral world.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated how the Danish planters imposed controls on the physical and socio-cultural aspects of the plantations in the Akuapem Mountains. The Danish planters tried to recreate the lordship and manorial estate system in the homeland through rules and spatial arrangement, whereby they sought to impose order on the enslaved. The enslaved workers reacted to their entrapment by seemingly complying with the plantation owners, but resisting the various forms of control imposed upon them. Through their activities in private time, such as hunting and gathering as well as various discreet and subtle sabotages, the slaves resisted, to some extent, the very enslavement on the plantations.

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