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Traditional Arts and the State: the Scottish case

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Abstract

Since Scottish devolution from the United Kingdom in 1999, throughout the New Labour years and subsequently, there has been a sustained and growing commitment to Scottish traditional music, storytelling and dance, collectively defined in Scottish cultural policy as the 'traditional arts'. The public policy discourse of traditional arts is at once politically related to a growing Scottish confidence and intimately bound into a personal and national politics of identity. Today, in this transitional time around the referendum on Scottish independence, the potential for Scottish traditional arts to make a substantial and more sustainable contribution to cultural life in Scotland is within reach, but there are some underlying problems that need to be addressed by the community of policy makers and artists. In this paper I first examine the commodification and professionalization of Scottish traditional arts in broad terms, and then go on to use this as a means to understand the recent emergence of a national cultural policy of intrinsic worth for the traditional arts since 1993 and finally, to consider the possibilities and opportunities for a more robust cultural policy for the Scottish traditional arts post-referendum. In recognizing that traditional music has entered a new and self-conscious period of commodification today, we open the door for a debate about the ways in which traditional arts in contemporary society, can be performed and supported in a more equitable national cultural policy.

Introduction

The traditional arts of Scotland are distinct from the arts *in* Scotland and the adjective ‘traditional’ in this phrase has come to mean a set of practices, materials, performances and sources that reference a sense of indigeneity and ethnic authenticity.¹ As conceived of in cultural policy, the term ‘traditional arts’ in Scotland effectively represents three overarching strands of creative practice: traditional music, storytelling and dance (D. Francis, personal communication, September 26, 2013) including traditional song, music, dance, poetry, storytelling, drama and instrument making (The Scottish Government, 2013a). In the last twenty years, the traditional arts have emerged as a ringfenced area of national public funding, benefitting post-devolution from political prioritization by the New Labour dominated Scottish executive (1999-2007) and subsequent SNP Scottish Government (2007-today). Today, in this transitional time around the referendum on Scottish independence, the potential for Scottish traditional arts to make a substantial and more sustainable contribution to cultural life in Scotland is within reach, but there are some underlying problems that need to be addressed by the community of policy makers and artists. In this paper I will first examine the commodification and professionalization of Scottish traditional arts in broad terms, and then go on to use this as a means to understand the recent emergence of a national cultural policy of intrinsic worth for the traditional arts since 1993 and finally, to consider the possibilities and opportunities for a more robust cultural policy for the Scottish traditional arts post-referendum.

Commodification of traditional arts in Scotland

In recent decades, the commodification of music and the arts in general has moved rapidly to shift the public conception of the value of music from the private, emotional and affective domains towards the public, economic and social forms of capital. Hesmondhalgh summarizes the shifting value of music, emphasizing the move towards economic and instrumentalist conceptions of music in public life (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 3).

In Scotland, the traditional arts, and particularly Scottish traditional music,² has benefitted from a resurgence stemming from the revival of the 1950s and ‘60s which has produced not

¹ ‘Authenticity’ is a complex and plural term that has been particularly problematic in scholarly discourse; however, I use the term to describe a process of social discourse by a particular cultural community seeking internal consensus about nature or characteristics of shared values in their creative practice. For further reading around this complex term and its meanings in the traditional arts see (Bohlman 1988; Boyes 2010[1993]; Gelbart 2007; Knox 2008; McKerrell 2011; McLaughlin 2012; Storey 2003).

² Following the policy literature, I include the performance of song in the description of ‘music’.

only increased social and economic capital for those engaged in the traditional arts, but that has also shifted the value of traditional arts practices from the domain of shared social practice much further towards the commercial and professional. In Scotland, traditional music in particular began to emerge as a commodity of exchange value even during the folk revival that began in the 1950s. The folk revival in Scotland brought in a new generation of young, urban, middle-class activists, that were largely left-leaning, nationalist and ideologically motivated (see for instance Cowan, 1991; Henderson, 2004; McVicar, 2010; Neat, 2009; Symon, 1997). The revival in the 1960s first of Scottish folk songs and the subsequent blossoming of instrumental Scottish traditional music in the 1970s created a community of revivalists who began to explore the orally transmitted repertoire of authentic Scottish songs often directly drawn from the travelling community. In the 1970s and 1980s, the core repertoire and performance practices were adapted and hybridized with innovative musical and artistic practices adapted from popular music (McKerrell, 2011). This led to the emergence of a network of folk clubs, an educated audience and the rapid growth of commercial recordings and cassette culture, supporting a small market and a growing number of professional performers. This marketization has been ideologically complex (McLaughlin, 2012), yet it is true to suggest that the accumulation of capital and expertise in this case pushed production towards individual recording labels, and professional artists, thus gradually eroding the informal public stake in the production and mediatization of Scottish traditional music. The distance between the audience and performer, once indivisible, has been growing steadily in the past thirty years.

Significant also, and as pervasive as the commodification of the sonic aspects of traditional music, has been the commodification of the social relations of production. Today, there are very few pub sessions today that do not involve a financial exchange, and a concomitant and clearly defined social hierarchy of musicians, publican, audience that has emerged as a newly commodified product for the tourist market both here and in Ireland (Kaul, 2007; Kneafsey, 2003; Stevenson, 2004). Group classes now stand in place of personal teaching relationships or local musicians, young musicians measure success in terms of financially rewarded gigs and tours (often overseas). The only social context that really remains free of financial exchange, and thus commerce, is the family or ceilidh contexts. But this move towards financial exchange value and commodification of traditional arts is to be welcomed in publicly funded traditional arts. Various festivals, individual artists and organisations demonstrate that there is great merit in achieving a degree of commercial and independent financial success, where decisions taken irrespective of state funding allow

professional artists and organisations to prioritize the creative work and educational goals they feel are important for within their community of practice. In my view, and experience as a professional musician, the commercialization and commodification of traditional arts is wholly compatible with authentic creative practice and transmission. We should therefore encourage an analytical framework for cultural funding that encourages the capitalization of traditional culture. As David Francis suggests, professional musicians and artists have become adept at packaging up the same authentic source material (for example, performances of tunes, songs, storytelling etc.) in different ways, depending largely on the context for communication and exchange:

“I think we have a continuum of activity that professional musicians work along. So, at one end of the continuum you've got that highly commoditized image; the packaging up of the cultural objects...tunes and songs and so on. So people are doing that, but the same people that are up on stage at Glastonbury are also to be found working in community settings with people who are learning music, so that those musicians are actually the conduit from the well of heritage to the community and the public-at-large. There is a commitment from a significant majority of [traditional] musicians to see what they have, not as an individual possession, but as a collective possession, that they happen to commodify in that moment, but that doesn't mean that they can't use that material to share in an informal setting” (D. Francis, personal communication, September 26, 2013).

Ironically, the ideological commitment to *communitas* and social action remains a potent part of the cultural milieu for traditional arts. However, that ideological mythology has not been manifested in the practices of production and consumption of traditional music and therefore, I would argue that it is a weak ideology rather than a strong one, not reflected in economic models of production and distribution. Throughout the world, digitalization, deterritorialization and a growth in regional identity politics have been fuelling local revivals of traditional arts with global reach. It is this process of commodification in traditional music that marks a change in the social relations of the traditional arts, and therefore is constitutive of their entry into mainstream national cultural policy. If one subscribes to the Bourdieuan view that both cultural, and the more prevalent, social capital are bound up together and crucially interconnected with social inequality (Bennett & Savage, 2004), then clearly commodification as a cultural process must be important in the cultural (and social) life of Scotland today. The crucial point is that this fundamental shift from aesthetic or ‘use’ value (Gray, 2000) towards an exchange value for traditional arts, has rapidly moved traditional

arts into a comparable political and socio-cultural space as the other publicly funded art forms in Scotland. This commodification and professionalization of traditional arts has developed in parallel with the increasing managerialism and ‘instrumentalisation’ (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p. 8) in UK arts policy since Thatcher’s election in 1979, which signaled a wholesale shift in cultural policy (Alexander, 2007; Gray, 2007). It therefore follows, that it is now necessary for any culturally meaningful debate around the distribution of power, aesthetics, social relations (and money) for the arts *in* Scotland that policy acknowledges the mediated and distributed nature of inequalities in Scottish society in considering the distribution of support and the type of support across art forms. One implication of this is that cultural policy cannot be formulated simply upon an idealist or imagined sense of communal participation or enrichment which has become an unexamined creed in the traditional arts, nor can funding adopt purely intrinsic or instrumentalist justifications. We must recognize that increasingly unequal power relations in contemporary society demand better forms of evidence for any equitable national cultural policy.

Cultural policy for the traditional arts in Scotland

The history of the Scottish Arts Council and the impact of devolution are documented elsewhere (Galloway & Jones, 2010; Hibberd, 2009; Orr, 2008). Along with the establishment of the arms length Scottish Arts Council in 1994³ and devolution, came the emergence of the traditional arts as a new area of Scottish cultural policy. The first policy document to really raise the ‘traditional arts’ in Scotland as a key area for policy was the Charter for the Arts in 1993 (The Scottish Arts Council, 1993; see also Francis, 2010, p. 9) although traditional music had been identified in passing as early as 1984. In the 1993 report the public importance of the traditional arts is explained by the “[challenge] by the powerful revival of interest in Scottish traditional art forms, both as an aspect of heritage and as a dynamic and evolving element in Scotland’s contemporary culture” (The Scottish Arts Council, 1993, pp. 33–34). Indeed, what is particularly interesting in the early 1990s is how the national policy for the traditional arts emerges as part of a wider questioning of arts funding in Scotland, and this report repeatedly emphasizes the complexity of this task. The report also firmly places the funding principles in the camp of intrinsic aesthetic value of the arts, supposedly as a way of alleviating anachronistic conceptions of cultural value. This is evident, for example in a clearly defined principle at the very beginning of the document:

³ Although it has been working independently of government, established by Royal Charter in 1967.

“Cultural achievement must be assessed on the basis of quality of work not on traditional assumptions about the relative value of different art forms or about the status of the artist” (1993:5).

All this changed with the rise of instrumentalism, New Labour and devolution. This was important for Scottish traditional arts because of the key influence in Scotland and the UK of Matarasso’s move towards a more instrumental account of the value of the arts. Initially there was a significant report for the SAC emphasizing the social impact of the arts (Galloway, 1995). Which was followed by Matarasso’s 1996 specific examination of the social impact of Fèisean nan Gàidheal (1996),⁴ which came only one year before his highly influential ‘Use or Ornament’ report (Matarasso, 1997). In his report on the social impact of the traditional arts fèisan, Matarasso describes how young children, “...become more confident through the fèisan” (1996:18). He goes on to describe in this way other socially-beneficial aspects accruing to both the participants and their communities emphasizing a narrative around the instrumental benefit of traditional arts that led to participants claiming a cultural right to their empowering experiences.

Since the time of that report in 1996 there has been a substantial uplift in funding for Gaelic arts and traditional music in Scotland. This can partially be explained by the recognition that the traditional arts community only emerged in the 1990s within the cultural policy discourse and by the emergence of collective organizations that enabled traditional musicians, artists, dancers and crafts-people to actually engage with formal mechanisms for funding.

In 1999 along with devolution came the first really comprehensive report into the traditional arts. The report authored by David Francis (1999) makes a strong case for the Scottish Arts Council to ringfence funding for the traditional arts, justified on the grounds of their intrinsic national importance. Much of the report details exactly how there is a willingness to support traditional music in Scotland yet the underlying lack of institutionalization of the music undermines this in local communities through a lack of key educational and information resources. In short, the report demonstrated that Scottish traditional music up until devolution in 1999 had been largely a non-state supported art form with performance, tuition and development taking place within a dedicated community of

⁴ Fèisean nan Gàidheal (lit. ‘Festivals of the Gaels’) is a national Scottish movement that exists to provide and promote Gaelic arts tuition mainly for children, see <http://www.feisean.org/en/>.

practice. Recognising that traditional arts are as deserving of state support as any other, Francis built upon previous consultations to propose further means of development of education, information and advocacy as the three key strands earlier identified for the development of traditional music in Scotland. Following this influential report there was a surge in funding for the traditional arts in Scotland, evidenced simply in the following table of ringfenced funding for the traditional arts from The Scottish Arts Council (SAC) (figures beyond 2009 from the newly establish *Creative Scotland* are not comparable given the substantial changes to the funding remit between the SAC and Creative Scotland):⁵

Year	Traditional Arts drawn from annual reports	Total SAC grant expenditure ‘total support for the arts’ (excluding lottery spending)
2001	0	30,260,000
2002	348,000	34,092,000
2003	387,000	34,883,000
2004	333,000	42,325,000
2005	504,000	52,698,000
2006	463,000	54,022,000
2007	0	64,365,000
2008	n/a	48,792,000

This support throughout the noughties was in line with the major uplift in the UK arts sector generally and was the first time there had ever been major state support for the traditional arts in Scotland. As can be seen in the table, the ringfenced funding for the newly established area of traditional arts remained relatively stable until 2007 when amid some controversy, ringfenced funding for traditional arts and ‘flexible funding’ for ‘43 out of 106’ arts organisations in Scotland were cut (Cornwell, 2008). This was met with demonstrations in Edinburgh by various organisations in the traditional arts such as the Scottish Traditional Music and Song Association (TMSA) and the Scots Music Group and an additional £300,000 was quickly made available for a number of arts organisations, including several key

⁵ All figures drawn from Scottish Arts Council Annual Reports and Accounts, available: <http://www.scottisharts.org.uk/1/information/publications/annualreportsandplans.aspx?p=2>.

traditional arts organisations. Major awards throughout the noughties tended to be centred upon organisations not individuals and privilege both Gaelic-medium traditional arts and professional cross-genre musical projects. Less money has been directed towards the amateur and smaller regional projects for various reasons, including their lack of visibility within the policy-making arena.

It was only after the 2010 Traditional Arts Working Group Report that traditional arts ringfenced funding emerged again as a protected area of spending in Creative Scotland.⁶ Given that Creative Scotland moved towards cross-cutting themes for grant awards, which was one of the highly controversial aspects of the initial operation of the organisation; the retention of ring-fenced funding for traditional arts, is evidence of the usefulness of the 2010 working group report (Francis, 2010). The total state sponsorship for Scottish traditional arts is now broadly in line with that spent on commissioning, creating and supporting artists and organisations in the early noughties, and stands at £440,000 in 2013/14, when one takes both the traditional arts commissioning budget together with the £120,000 divested to *Enterprise Music Scotland*⁷ to distribute in small grants. What is problematic is that the bases for these decisions are rooted in the personal opinions of expert practitioners and policy makers in closed rooms. That is to say, that there is no transparency now, or during the tenure of The Scottish Arts Council, as to how qualitative judgements about selective funding decisions are made, other than the publication of the various committee members on the website and in reports. It is unclear at this time how for instance evidence from the Scottish Household Survey or from audience research is being used by Creative Scotland. In my view, for any equitable distribution of state funds across different genres of the arts, audience figures, household survey data and other empirical evidence should form *a part* of the decision-making process.

Consider for example that in the 2011 census, 58,000 people spoke Gaelic fluently at home compared to about the same number who use Polish (54,000). In the same year, the comparable figure for those that reported they spoke Scots language at home was 1.5 million (30% of the population of Scotland). Although simplistic, these figures of linguistic culture suggest some significant inequalities in the current state sponsored arts funding. Further

⁶ This paper deals only with national state sponsored arts funding for the traditional arts in Scotland. Local Authorities currently account for approximately 30% of total cultural spending in Scotland (Mark O'Neill, personal communication, 10/04/2013).

⁷ *Enterprise Music Scotland* is a body funded by Creative Scotland (and formerly The Scottish Arts Council) to distribute funding to voluntary groups for music tours, concerts and educational groups, in the main focusing upon funding workshops and concerts of classical music, see <http://www.enterprisemusicscotland.com>.

revealing relationships between empirical evidence and state sponsored funding are now possible in broad terms. Consider for instance that based on 2012 data published in the Scottish Household Survey: 31% of those surveyed had attended a live music event; 29% a museum; 19% a gallery; 12% street arts; and only 7% attended classical music or opera in the last 12 months (The Scottish Government, 2013b). This significantly calls into question the *relative* level of funding for the national performing arts companies, or ‘glamorous megafauna’ (Hazledine, 2011), whose budgets are directly allocated by the Scottish Government and are grossly disproportionate to that spent on other art forms via the arms length Creative Scotland. In 2011/12 the national performing companies were directly allocated funding of 23.53 million⁸ from central government, and Creative Scotland’s grant allocations totalled £66 million in the same year (Creative Scotland, 2012). Furthermore, the national performing companies currently exclude key groups such as the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland or the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra from access to guaranteed directly allocated state funding. The approximately half a million which is ringfenced for traditional arts funding is in this context, perhaps too small a spend for the artistic endeavour that arguably is most crucial to Scottish identity, tourism and trade.

A vigorous and confident report authored by the Traditional Arts Working Group reported back to the Scottish Government in 2010 and made numerous recommendations for pushing traditional arts more firmly into the core of Scottish policy and cultural life (Francis, 2010). Given the rapid change in digitalization of culture and globalization achieved through the growth of the internet, the report clearly distinguished between the native or indigenous traditional arts and those of other cultures now present in Scotland. The key issues identified in this report included both a systematic undervaluation and lack of public esteem for the traditional arts; a lack of cohesiveness between organisations, individuals and government undermining possible opportunities for the development and access; a consistent lack of attention in the media; and, uneven local authority provision. Interestingly, this report specifically identifies a preference for resource allocation in the media and education towards classical music over traditional music (Francis, 2010, p. 8).

The recommendations were numerous and ambitious (see Francis 2010: 40–43) and progress against these has been slow and partial. If comprehensively implemented, the recommendations in this report would have the power to transform the traditional arts into a

⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/04/7232/3>

central aspect of Scotland's cultural sector that would make Scottish cultural policy distinct from UK cultural policy in a sustainable way. Echoing the 1999 report, the 2010 one emphasises the collective, local and community basis for traditional arts in Scotland that underpins their value in Scottish cultural life. The Corporate Plan for Creative Scotland 2011-14 however, only mentions traditional arts in passing, but in general places more emphasis upon the economic impact of the arts. This could be taken as a sign of increasing instrumentalism, but the balance of intrinsic and instrumentalist policy for Creative Scotland will emerge in the near term as a newly formed senior management team develops its priorities and relationship with government post-referendum.

Most recently, the formation of the *Traditional Music Forum* by key actors in the traditional arts represents the establishment of a ministerial-facing lobby group set up amongst other things to be, '...a credible and authoritative advocate for traditional music'.⁹ This organization has now teamed up with other lobby groups to create the overarching umbrella group *TRACS* – Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland, formed in 2012 whose political clout is gradually emerging. The emergence of a lobby group, and ringfenced funding for traditional arts is one of the only significant differences between Scottish cultural policy and that of the wider United Kingdom, where the 'creative economy' and instrumentalism are increasingly central priorities in the policy discourse.

The future for traditional arts in Scotland

There has been almost unchallenged support for the small ringfenced funding of traditional arts in Scotland throughout the noughties. The future funding for traditional arts in Scotland is in a crucial position at this time of intense political transition leading up to, and beyond, the referendum on independence. The traditional arts sector has done well in the last fifteen years; the emergence in cultural policy of a distinct and ringfenced traditional arts sector is welcome despite the relatively small investment from public funds. However, the argument for state support of the traditional arts has largely been an intrinsic one, emphasizing the national importance of indigenous and historically authentic cultural material, but often in contemporary form. There are three dangers of continuing this approach: 1) Whilst the SNP government are in power traditional arts have a sympathetic ear, if they lose power, then there would be a great deal more uncertainty around continued financial commitment to the traditional arts in Scotland. 2) The cultural policy discourse both

⁹ TRACS website: <http://www.tracscotland.org>

in Scotland and the UK has been shifting gradually over twenty years now towards instrumental evaluation as justification for arts funding (Gray, 2007; McCall & Playford, 2012). If we do not begin to address the evidence for social and economic benefits in the traditional arts, traditional arts will be disadvantaged against other, more instrumentally evidenced, arts in Scotland, and will consequently lose out on an equitable share of public funds. 3) Thirdly, the commodification, formalization and professionalization outlined in the first part of this paper is a legacy of the revival in traditional music, storytelling and dance in Scotland. Evidencing the cultural, social and economic value of Scottish traditional culture in the public domain, means convincing those beyond the traditional arts community of their holistic worth not just in terms of cultural identity but in terms of the socio-cultural benefits they can, and could provide, to communities across Scotland. To expand the audience, opportunities and reach of traditional arts, a stronger and more robust case that it is the national interest to do so will need to be made.

One avenue to potentially achieving this is through the UNESCO socio-legal route of formally promoting the Scottish traditional arts as ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ (ICH) in Scotland (see McCleery, McCleery, Hill, & Gunn, 2008; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Stefano, Davis, & Corsane, 2012).¹⁰ There has been some success in using this approach for better preservation and promotion of traditional music notably in Asia (Howard, 2012). Much of the work in the Scottish context to date in this area, however promising, has focused upon how best to provide a policy and legal framework to safeguard and provide access to ICH based upon the UNESCO rights-based approach.¹¹ Therefore it has largely been a paper exercise and has not yet provided any direct impact upon the funding or status of traditional arts in Scotland. The potential for this initiative to provide a cultural policy framework that does in fact lead to state policy and funding exists, but there is evidence from Vietnam for instance that shows that implementing this policy framework can shift and limit the contemporary social significance of an indigenous artistic tradition to purely nationalistic significance (Norton, 2013). It would take careful and substantial work to gain any traction in the political and policy arena in Scotland, and will ultimately depend upon the relationships between Scotland, the UK and UNESCO which in turn hinges upon the independence referendum in September 2014. Furthermore, if the policy framework surrounding ICH in

¹⁰ See the definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage and a range of case studies on their website at: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00002>.

¹¹ One of the recommendations of the final report was that the inventory be housed in a wiki. This has been established http://www.ichscotlandwiki.org/index.php?title=Intangible_Cultural_Heritage_in_Scotland, however, it remains in neonatal form.

Scotland is to move forward in any meaningful way over the next decade, it will have to engage the local authorities which were identified as the key actors for the implementation of ICH in Scotland (McCleery et al., 2008, p. 42), ideally through access to ringfenced state funding. However, if the issues around the eligibility and indigeneity of ICH can be clearly resolved and funded, it offers one avenue for internationalizing and justifying a more robust cultural policy framework for Scottish traditional arts based upon their national intrinsic value.

Traditional arts do play a special role in constructing national identities. But they do a lot more than this.¹² Traditional arts are as vital a creative practice, with as legitimate a claim on the public purse, as any other form of publicly disseminated creative practice in Scotland. However, there is in my view, a legitimate and *special* claim that there are elements of traditional arts practice that are important not only as creative practice, but as part of our shared national cultural heritage not shared or supported by other nations. Therefore, there is a case for increasing ringfenced funding for those aspects of the traditional arts that justifiably form a part of our shared national cultural heritage. The justification for this rests upon the idea that both for their intrinsic national value to the Scottish people specifically, but also for the importance for social and cultural cohesion, the diasporic relationship to home and the particular indirect economic impact (food, drink, ticket sales, accommodation etc.) associated with tourism from the Scottish traditional arts. Therefore, where the traditional arts can demonstrate value beyond excellent creative practice and some value to the national cultural heritage, those projects could be eligible for separate ringfenced funding. Other projects or initiatives that are simply instances of creative practice should be more transparently judged alongside the other forms of art we currently benefit from in contemporary Scotland, through the state supported funds administered by Creative Scotland. It will be useful to establish the clear justification for the special value of safeguarding, access and creative practice in the traditional arts that should benefit from ringfenced funding, on the grounds of intrinsic *and* instrumental value as national cultural heritage. But policy makers and the community of practice also need to urgently improve the data gathering, analytics, and evidence for the instrumental benefits of traditional arts as one genre of creative practice amongst many in the contemporary world. Only by improving the

¹² See for instance the instrumentalist arguments for the funding of traditional arts from Indonesia (Yampolsky, 2001).

research and evidence of the benefits of Scottish traditional arts will they be able to ensure that they attract new audiences, and bring equitable cultural policy benefits that reflect the vital and important contribution of traditional arts to Scotland's past and exciting future.

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