Chapter 5

GOOD NEIGHBOURS AND BAD FENCES: EVERYDAY POLISH TRADING ACTIVITIES ON THE EU BORDER WITH BELARUS

Aimee Joyce

The first time I encountered the Polish–Belarusian border I passed beyond it without realising. The marker was in the demesne of a church and something about its haphazard placement in the landscape did not resonate with my expectations of an international border. I had fallen into the trap of thinking of borders as they are drawn on maps: absolute, clear lines across space and place. But they are not. They are – as this book proposes – grey zones, blurred and imprecise, nebulous, difficult to locate, contradictory and insecure. The border is a physical place and also a process, one which has multiple inputs often called 'conceptual borders': history, landscape, economics, governance and culture (Kaneff and Heintz 2006; Paasi 1999). In my fieldsite in eastern Poland understanding the border as a place and process resonated strongly. Each of the conceptual borders above had their own boundary line and together they ensured that the frontier on which my fieldsite stood was far from unchanging. The marker on the church lands was just the latest in a number of signs intended to draw a clear line where none existed. In what follows I posit that one of the processes destabilising the idea of a singular, static and timeless border in my fieldsite was that of alternative, supplementary and peripheral trading practices. How these practices were undertaken and discussed was part of a constantly constructed, refined and reconstructed border grey zone where the concept of the 'inside' remained potent (Green 2005; Perera 2007, 2009).

My particular approach to grey zones emerges from the work of anthropologists interested in corruption and informal networks, particularly Wolf (1966) and Robertson (2006). In an article called 'Kinship, friendship

and patron–client relationships in complex societies' Wolf explores the resources and organisations that exist in those zones perceived as the 'grey areas of the map' by the 'key centres of control' and the relationships between these two categories (1966, 6). Robertson draws on the existing literature on moral ambiguity and grey zones (Levi 2013 [1986]), approaching corruption as an 'epistemological puzzle' that, despite ethnographic inquiry, is 'still adrift in Cartesian ambiguities', caught unproductively in discussions of legality/illegality or formal/informal networks (2006, 11). His tentative solution to the puzzle seems to hinge on a renewed anthropologically engaged and body-aware approach to the areas that corruption operates within, an approach that privileges how people undertake and speak about corruption and do not seek to impose discursive categories in a top-down manner.

This chapter situates itself between Wolf's interest in how informal structures can run parallel to the state while concurrently shaping and being shaped by it, and Robertson's call to focus on processes and practices, and not just the relationship between the informal and formal (Wolf 1966; Robertson 2006). To achieve this I look at the stories of traders and local residents and some of the practices of trading that were employed in a constant drawing and redrawing of the 'inside' group. Of specific interest is my respondents' frequent use of the word *dobrosąsiedztwo* (good neighbourliness) when discussing cross-border trade with Belarus and Ukraine. If the border is a dialectical process, constantly being formed in the interaction between conceptual and literal boundaries (Kaneff and Heintz 2006), what role do ideas of neighbourly relations with non-EU states play? Bruns and Miggelbrink define small-scale trade and smuggling as primarily depending on the 'exploitation of differences in prices and exchange rates over time and space via circulation activities' (Williams and Baláž 2002, 323, cited in Bruns and Miggelbrink 2012, 2). I intend to demonstrate that of equal importance is the creation and maintenance of social and kin relations across time and space, which are at the centre of cross-border trade in the Polish–Belarusian borderlands. In doing this I will also be asking if trading practices based on a refusal to recognise the validity of the new EU border are proof of simple alienation from the project of state maintenance in Eastern Europe, or if they represent an attempt to overcome a state-led production of border-space.

Methodological Considerations

Haller and Shore begin their edited book on corruption with the assertion that few anthropologists start fieldwork intending to research corruption. Instead the anthropologist begins to research corruption as it is of interest to their respondents or a practice they encounter as part of their day-to-day life in

the field (Haller and Shore 2005). This was most certainly the case with my own focus on cross-border trade. While conducting my primary research on religion and landscape I met and got to know people involved in cross-border trade. Alongside this, despite the fact that most of the town's residents were not involved in trading, smuggling was a practice that was widely talked about.

This chapter is based on data collected during a year of fieldwork (2011–12) in a small town located between two of the official border crossings from Poland to Belarus. The research is broadly based on the anthropological long-term participant observation model (Russell Bernard 2006). Throughout my time in the village I conducted interviews and attended the various events that created the cyclical rhythm of the town. I also interviewed members of local government and studied the town's history. However, when it came to researching cross-border trade and smuggling my methods were more haphazard. Most of the interviews were conducted around the kitchen tables of my respondents or their acquaintances. While I frequently observed and talked to people when the goods arrived in the town, I never managed to observe the journey across the border. The traders I knew felt uncomfortable with the idea of my presence, firstly because I was a researcher and secondly because I was someone without any of the practical skills of a trader. I did frequently travel to the large open-air market near to the train station and border crossing in Terespol, as there I was able to meet and speak with traders about their practices. I decided against researching the legal aspects of cross-border trade in this area, instead basing my discussions of legality on what interviewees and respondents said and practised. As such, throughout my face-to-face interviews I made a point of not asking people if they were legally or illegally transporting goods. I was interested in how people understood the relationship between trading, the border and the state from the perspective of day-to-day life in the town.

The topic of this chapter has also impacted how I have presented my data. As Robertson makes clear, the legal status of corruption is often an obstacle to writing up the research we do (2006). I have made the decision to obfuscate where the information presented was gathered. The people quoted and discussed have been anonymised, no real background on how we met is given, and frequently when I found myself writing about people who were too easily recognised, I combined aspects of their narratives with those of other respondents to ensure that they are unidentifiable.

Some Theoretical Considerations

What first encouraged me to pay closer attention to the stories and practices of importing goods in my fieldsite was the ordinariness that suffused the

topic. Growing up in an Irish harbour village I had heard tales of smugglers before, but they were steeped in the heroic folklore tradition. I was in the town to research everyday religion and I found myself confronted with a kind of everyday smuggling, conceived of as cross-border trade by my respondents. When I speak of 'the everyday' I am not just concerned with the ordinary. The phrase contains implicit references to the cyclical nature of the ordinary, to the uncatalogued, habitual and routine nature of life, how so much of what we do is left unexamined or is almost impossible to grasp outside of its context (Elden 2004; Lefebvre 2008a [1947], 2008b [1961], 2008c [1981]). Cross-border trade was deeply embedded in the habitual activities of the town. People smoked Russian cigarettes and drank Belarusian vodka when they visited one another's homes. The local Eastern Orthodox church had hymn books from Ukraine and the clothes in the town's small second-hand shop had Cyrillic tags. A positive local attitude to the ideal of a borderland identity was apparent in the ubiquity of non-Polish goods in the town. Cross-border trade was not an issue of legality or illegality; it was about *dobrosąsiedztwo*, good neighbourliness. In this case the neighbours were Belarus and, sometimes, Ukraine. Defining these countries as neighbours implies they are part of the same community and discreetly challenges the demarcation that defines both as outsiders (to the EU and to the Polish state).

When the idea of a 'fieldsite' was first challenged by many, including Gupta and Ferguson, there was a call for a focus on borderlands and other 'hybrid' or marginal spaces (1997). This seemed to hark back to the work of Barth (1969), who in approaching the study of identity and ethnicity in transborder regions helped to spur the initial interest in borderlands. Approaches to border studies have continued to multiply recently. Donnan and Wilson (2012) created a companion guide to border studies that asked for approaches to the border which saw it as a process as much as a product. Kaneff and Heintz have also drawn attention to the dialectic nature of the border, stating that 'literal borders and conceptual boundaries [are] complementary processes that sometimes reinforce each other, sometimes subvert each other' (2006, 8). More recently Mezzadra and Nielson (2013) have used this struggle over the production of the border as a method to explore questions of global capital. This focus on the border as a process, production and method agrees with my own understanding of borderlands, which initially grew from Pine and Pina-Cabral's *On the Margins of Religion* (2008) and Sarah Green's *Notes from the Balkans* (2005). Pine and Pina-Cabral's understanding of marginality as a dynamic process and of the capacity for peripheral practices to become hegemonic or to disappear altogether prompted them not to speak of borders but of grey zones (2008). Green's work focuses on how marginality is

constituted and understood in borderlands and their grey zones from the perspective of those who live there (2005). She brings the importance of 'indeterminacy' to the fore: how a place can be fractal, lacking edges, beginnings or ends (Green 2005, 135). Her dual focus on the ordinariness and the ambiguity of borders was particularly applicable to my own data on the border and interest in everyday life. Such approaches remind us that the state still has a controlling role in the maintenance of the 'nation', but that its project is incomplete when lived as a part of everyday life (Mezzadra and Nielson 2013).

This idea of 'ordinariness' is at the centre of my discussion of cross-border trade. The trading researched here was an everyday practice. As I stated earlier in this section, I tend to avoid discussions concerning trade law in Poland and the EU to avoid replicating the unhelpful binary of illegal/legal. I opt instead to explore the nuanced relationships embedded in trading practices (F. von Benda-Beckman, K. von Benda-Beckman and Wiber 2006; Hart 1973). When I use the term legal in this piece it is as an emic term and its meaning changes dependent upon the context in which it is used.

Traders' Relations to the Border

Tomasz has an eventful past, which includes a position in the Russian Soviet Army, a short and brilliant career as an entrepreneur in East Germany, and a rebirth in the 1990s as a travelling trader. Finally, now older and ostensibly retired, he has returned to Poland. When I met him during my fieldwork he was getting by through an assemblage of erratic, short-lived construction jobs and trading. His experience as a trader in the initial postsocialist period was serving as a valuable inroad for his latest, even more questionably legal profession. In late June the weather is glorious in this part of Poland, and everywhere is saturated with pastoral greens and blues, which attract hundreds of tourists every year. I am sitting on the bench under the apple tree with my landlady and Tomasz, who is talking to us about the local economy. Earlier in the week I had been palmed off by the provincial council secretary when I asked her about the formal economy of the *gmina*.[1] As we sit in the sun trying to enumerate the spheres of economic interest within the town, Tomasz begins to expound on his favourite subject, Poland after the fall of socialism. The narrative is pure 'Wild West', trading and cheating your way to the newfound wealth the opening up of Poland had made available. There are stories of madcap midnight car journeys down back roads to avoid official border crossing. Not to mention Tomasz's ability to recollect perfectly the comparative prices of goods in Poland, Belarus and Ukraine at the time. It is an idealised

past, which for Tomasz means one free of government interference (Boyer 2010). Tomasz's nostalgia, his contradictory longing for something lost and desire to return to it (Boym 2001), is not for socialist Poland but a very short-lived and specific period just after 1989, when gaps in governance allowed a vast grey zone to develop where semilegal economies flourished. He sees this period as a time when the future seemed newly opened up to opportunity and the ease with which goods moved through the town was an example of a new way of living. Now that is gone, Tomasz's nostalgia for this time is recognition that it is an 'impossible past', a comment on current Polish politics and a tacit acceptance of the politics of post–EU accession Poland (Creed 2010).

Poland's eastern border has a long history of movement. After World War II the decision was made to run the new postwar state border of Poland along the River Bug. To run the border along such a long-standing environmental divider makes it appear a natural and organic boundary. But as stated before, the Polish border has not always been here; it has shifted east and west. The Polish state disappeared completely in 1795, again in 1848 and once more between 1939 and 1945 (Snyder 2003). The border is not just a state border: it is also presented as a religious one. The perception that Poland is the 'most Catholic country in Europe' (Puhl 2012) is reiterated by the official promotional state website of Poland, which states that 'the Catholic Church in Poland is an institution which has always been associated with the concept of Polish statehood' (Polska n.d.). This reiteration has the effect of drawing a border around Poland that separates it from the Orthodoxy of Ukraine and Belarus, this border being especially clear on the eastern side. Again, the official website tells us that the Orthodox in the country are concentrated in the east and represent a Belarusian minority. Newspapers and official television stations (most recently Poczobut 2013) also draw a 'democracy' border along the east of Poland, contrasting Poland to the dictatorship of Łukaszenka in Belarus and the disharmony and corruption in post–Orange Revolution Ukraine. This was a particularly obvious during my fieldwork, when TVP Info, the public broadcast news station, was filled with stories of Yulia Tymoshenko's imprisonment,[2] along with the secret execution of two suspects in the Minsk Metro bombings.[3] Then there is the border of Europe, first imagined in the medieval period after the first Polish king converted his subjects to Christianity in 966, and again a popular motif since Poland joined the EU in 2004 (Zarycki 2007, 2011). It is among all these borders that the locals of my fieldsite have tenaciously built an identity as *po granica*, meaning 'from (or on) the border'. There have been, historically, official attempts to counter this tendency and Polonise the area, such as the 1947 Akcja Wisła (Operation Vistula), which transported a large number of Orthodox and Ukrainian Poles to the west of

the country (Misiło 2012). Despite these actions, the town and surrounding area remain religiously diverse, and throughout my time there many people emphasised to me their connections to Belarus and occasionally to Ukraine. The practice of smuggling or grey zone trading was strongly associated with the idea of the border by many of my respondents. Trading and travelling traders have a long history in this part of Poland, and the ways people shared this history draws our attention to how locals chose to orientate themselves to an imagination of the borderlands that defied state control and alienation (Hobsbawm 1969). At first glance the local cross-border traders appeared to have much in common with Hobsbawm's 'social bandits'; they seemed to be antistate rebels supported and celebrated by the peasants they continued to live alongside (Hobsbawm 1969). In nomenclature this resistance to the 'outside', whether Polish, European or 'Russian', was apparent. My respondents referred to themselves frequently and playfully as *tutujszki*, meaning 'from here'. They did not use the term *kresy* (simply 'borderlands') often applied to this region, because it was negatively associated with areas of high sectarian tension on the border, and with Ukraine (Naumescu 2007; Hann 2009).

Talking and Practising Cross-border Trade

The local economy was an ad hoc assemblage of market exchange, house holding, barter, cross-border trading and gifting. Yet the apparent cacophony seemed to be ruled by a set of shared principles. The first of these was that the area was special and those perceived to be 'inside' or 'local' were fortunate.

Gifting was a significant part of the local economy, and was based on notions of kinship and neighbourly relations that extended beyond the strict geographical confines of the town. Family members in the big city, especially sons and daughters, were incorporated into this gift network. In this way the 'inside' of the town was extended to include those kith and kin separated by distance but considered relationally close. This strengthening of kinship ties in the face of economic uncertainty has also been observed by Pine (2001, 2002) in central and southern Poland. There were a number of minibuses that made daily or weekly journeys from the town to the local small city and from there on to the large cities of Poland. When the buses pulled into the town there would be a queue of women holding bulging, well-packed boxes and bags of foodstuffs, 'Russian' (a catch-all term for any former Soviet country) cigarettes, homemade decorations and small luxury items. For a nominal fee the driver would pack these gifts into the back of the bus and under seats. When he arrived at his destination he would be met by the intended recipients. I often asked the women I knew why they sent these gifts and was always told it was because the food from the town was better than anything you could

buy in the big cities (see Pine 2002), or that the recipient did not know how to make a palm or other decorative object, or that Russian goods could only be purchased in the borderlands. This generation of women far from the centres of the Polish economy were concerned with helping their kin to live well. In the cities young people had come to rely on the baskets from the countryside, resituating the family as a vital form of social security (see Harboe Knudsen 2012, who has explored outcomes of this generational aspect of reliance on kin structures in Lithuania). The gifts circulating out into Poland tucked under the seats of minibuses did more than just build a safety net, they incorporated their recipients back into the town and reinforced the knowledge that the town was a source of nourishment not matched in the outside world.

Likewise the import of goods across the border drew on ideas of family and neighbours, but there were two separate discourses about trading linked to the different actors and methods of trafficking. The one I was most familiar with was small-level cross-border trading. This type relied on having a family member or close friend who lived in Belarus. On New Year's Eve I took a break from party preparations to stop for tea in a house that was eagerly awaiting the arrival of Belarusian kin. They appeared mid-afternoon, two older ladies laden with bags of all kinds, dressed in the recognisable *babcia* (grandmother) style. Over sweet tea, even sweeter Russian cakes and a variety of alcohols they began to unload their bags. Packed under tights and undergarments, wrapped carefully in old socks, were packs and packs of Russian cigarettes. Next they took out innocuous-looking water flasks and began to decant them into empty vodka bottles provided by their host. Finally, from the bottom of a bag filled with cheap plastic toys, they pulled out a bottle of expensive Belarusian liquor carefully deposited in the back of the packaging of a baby doll.

Getting to observe this arrival of goods happened late in my fieldwork when I knew the women involved well. The manner in which people closely guarded their methods of bringing goods over the border was reflected in the ambiguity around the legality of this trading. Traders never discussed the law unless directly asked. Even then there were a range of answers, but most told me you could bring in as much as you liked as long as you went to the right customs official. While this was a purposefully flippant response, it indicated how specialised a field the traders operated in. The skills they utilised had been built up over years, and although sometimes passed on by word of mouth, vitally, they were not widely known. It was commonly recognised that I was an anthropologist and as such sharing a skill or technique with me would render it useless as I might write about it. Conversely, because this grey zone trading was associated with a high degree of cunning, people loved to tell me stories about it. I was told how old women would tape the cigarettes to their waists and wear woolly jumpers to hide the bulges, or

hide bottles of alcohol wrapped in undergarments among other 'unmentionables'. Even the trains were subject to this clever hide-and-seek operation. Cushions were pried off seats and hollows cut in the foam to hide bottles. Doors were broken so that they could be opened mid-journey. It is hard to tell how many of these examples were exaggerated. I was never on a train as it crossed the border at Terespol, though I frequently sat on trains heading there with doors flung wide open. Through speaking with my respondents, especially those not involved at all in this kind of trade, I began to see that the methods and stories I heard about were likely the kinds of trading practices widely known and practised only when customs officials were unlikely to be encountered. Once techniques were common knowledge it had to be assumed that border officials, often from the local area, were aware of them too. So using certain techniques required a combination of skill and a willingness to take a gamble. Approaching the right border official sounds straightforward, yet it is hard to imagine how you would know what 'approach' meant, or even how to figure out whom the 'right kind of official' was, without further knowledge or skill. Grey zone trading was a delicate act of conceal and reveal, and the story telling and exaggerated tales were part of this performance.

My favourite example of an exaggerated trading tale was about the smuggling of vodka. Twice I was told by respondents, with straight faces, that during the high summer vodka bottles were shoved into wooden barrels and floated down the River Bug. To make sure they did not stray they were tied to a rope that occasionally was tied to the Polish riverbank; at these points a man would sit fishing, and as the barrels arrived he would take out the correct number of bottles and send the barrel off down the next section of the river. When I repeated this story later I was roundly ridiculed for taking it seriously. There is undoubtedly an element of the comic to these stories, and whenever I heard them I thought of coyote or fox, those cunning but flawed tricksters of myth and proverb, who as often as not come out poorly in the stories told about them. The grey zone cross-border trade that some of the townspeople were involved in seemed to be morally understood as a playful and necessary act. I hesitate to call it smuggling, as such a title stresses its illegality, an aspect that I found was barely discussed by my respondents.

The jovial tales of traders stopped when people discussed large-scale smuggling. According to my respondents, these men were cut-throat operators. Stories of 'bad smugglers' were rarely told; they lacked the thick description and the gender equality of local-level efforts, with the perpetrators (always male) and their methods even more vaguely alluded to. It was hard for me to know whether people knew of the bad smugglers or if they simply spoke of them according to commonly recognised narratives of bandits from outside the local area. There was a very clear line drawn between the morality

of cross-border traders who worked for the interests of local people and the town, and those who worked without regard for it. Often local animosities crept in to tales of outsider smugglers; they were not Polish and Belarusian smugglers, but Russian and Ukrainian ones. This delineation of traders based on ethnic origin also demonstrated that there was a nested understanding of outsiders and insiders, with the Russians at the very edge. No one knew what goods they smuggled; the borderlands were not the destination, merely a waypoint. Previously I had taken my newly inherited ancient Russian-made bike on a five-hour trip to a nearby beauty spot, only to return to an anxious chastisement from my landlady. 'What road had I used?' she asked, and looked visibly relieved when I told her I had taken the main roads only. 'Good, don't go by the forest roads,' she commanded, 'only use those roads in the tourist season.'[4] When I asked why, she informed me that the forest roads were used by smugglers in the winter and I did not want to see anything by accident.[5] I began to imagine these men as the 'big bad wolves' to the residents' 'cunning foxes'; they carried guns, hid in the forests and attacked unfortunate townsfolk.

This division of fox and wolf, which I make here, was expressed by my respondents through an insider/outsider discourse. In reality such a division is a crude line separating practices that often blur into one another and lose their clarity. Between the kindly *babcie* and the gun-carrying people traffickers are a range of other traders of differing shades of morality. Even those people who slot neatly into the archetypes are not necessarily fully contained by them. But that sense of getting one over on the authority figures included in the insider/outsider binary is important. The town was presented as the centre of rude health and good fortune. Those inside the town physically and relationally were proffered as clever and adept at getting around outside forces threatening them, trying to curtail them or merely hampering them with unnecessary rules and regulations. The inside was a porous concept. It stretched beyond the town and into Krakow and Minsk, and it also excluded many of the inhabitants who did not fit certain criteria. The inside was constantly shifting and reshaping itself in relation to who was involved and what activities were undertaken. For cross-border trading the inside relied on the concept of the borderland. The town straddled the edge of the Polish state because of its physical location. Officially its interactions with those east of the River Bug were defined and controlled through the state's border practices. Engaging in illegal activities to overcome these practices does not directly challenge the alienation they beget. Rather the illegality of such acts moves the actor even further from the idea of the state and the citizen. In taking this alienation seriously we can see the traders are not social bandits in any significant sense. The rationale for cross-border grey zone trading was not a direct challenge to the state's power; the traders

I researched were not the rebel peasants of Hobsbawm's book (1969). Instead cross-border trading was motivated by a sense that those areas of Belarus close to the Polish border were closer to the town than the governments in Warsaw or Europe. This whole borderland region was one large grey zone, insecure and ambiguous. When I began to pay attention to trading I was surprised to find that my respondents had clearly oriented themselves to the East and not to the EU. This was despite the fact that many children and grandchildren now worked in EU states and that Poland was drawing closer and closer to 'Europe' at a national level. But the town's traders still considered the inhabitants of the Belarusian and Ukrainian frontiers their true neighbours: part of a borderland community, kith and kin relations that grew in the shadow of the state borders even as they expanded beyond them. All trading in the town was associated with *dobrosąsiedztwo*: good neighbourliness. The further you felt from the nation and its political and administrative centres the closer you felt to your neighbours, the cousins in Minsk and the childhood friends just the other side of the Terespol border crossing. While my respondents may remain removed from or subject to the Polish state's practices of bordering, the kind of grey zone trading discussed here enabled them to form closer ties to borderland neighbours and served to emphasise the primary importance of these ties. It is such closeness and the refusal to see the border as a division, instead making it part of a shared transnational borderland identity, that begins to challenge the state's bordering practices.

Conclusion

In light of the effects of the Balcerowicz Plan, Polish accession to the EU was presented not just as a mark of success: it was also envisioned as a way to guarantee economic stability and security (Hann 1994). However, this was not the reality for the people on the Polish border. Rather, it was continued poverty, large levels of youth emigration and a new set of regulations making legal cross-border trade more difficult. Despite recent efforts to encourage investment in the region, increasingly it is on the edge of the officially preferred centres of economic activity. Joining the EU meant money was to stay in the EU, even if this required people to buy the more expensive Polish goods. Such a situation is easily disempowering. However, as always in periods of economic insecurity, cross-border trade has become a way to avoid the uncertainty of poverty through the cultivation of neighbourliness, a way to mobilise social relationships against impersonal economic forces. When I asked respondents directly about the morality of trading in these grey zones, I was frequently told Belarus was a neighbour, and when dealing with money you ought to trust your neighbours.

Notes

1 *Gmina* roughly translates as 'municipality' or 'commune'.
2 Tymoshenko, the former prime minister of Ukraine and coleader of the Orange Revolution, was imprisoned in October 2011 for abuse of power. The trial was condemned as politically motivated by outside observers such as the Helsinki Committee on Human Rights. Throughout 2011 and 2012 the media reported frequently on Tymoshenko's ill health and ongoing trials.
3 After the 2011 Minsk Metro bombings two young men, Dmitry Konovalov and Vladislav Kovalyov, were quickly arrested. Belarusian authorities convicted them on problematic evidence and confessions that activists, including Konovalov's mother, claim were the result of torture. Both men were executed by a shot to the back of the head. Their families and the media were informed only after the executions were carried out.
4 '*Dobry. Nie jedź przez drogi leśna. Możesz używać tej drogi tylko w sezonie turystycznym.*'
5 From my personal fieldnotes, May 2012.

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