



## Exploring The ‘Self’: Ethnicity, Identity and Food

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**Abstract:** What we eat is who we are. Many a times we do not ponder much upon what we eat, with whom we eat, or how we eat, as it is an everyday mundane affair. However, the concept of food, what we eat, how we eat (cooked or raw) when we eat, and with whom we can eat is a social and cultural construct that has different contexts and connotations attached to it. Food works as a social construction as it varies from one society to the other. Societal norms dictate food. What is considered sacred food for one society might be profane for another. Food within the context of a society, the way it is being cooked or served, sacred or profane, can be perceived as a process of identity and symbolic value creation. Taboos and restrictions come into effect, as to how one ought to partake food or carry it from one space to another.

As an autoethnographic account, this article would look at what ‘I’ eat that defines my identity as an *Axomiya* Muslim and explore the importance of *Axomiya* cuisine in my day-to-day food. To understand the concept of in-group and out-group within an ethnic boundary I would draw from the food cooked in my maternal and paternal grandparents’ house. Taking the journey of food forward, I would also dwell on the variations in the perceived ‘Islamic food’ that I experienced as I traveled to places outside Assam. Within the autoethnographic context of food, the humble attempt would be to explore how identity is created through food and becomes an ethnic marker.

**Keywords:** *Axomiya* food, *Axomiya* Muslim, ethnicity and identity

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## Introduction

The earliest anthropological discourse on food is ‘Meals and Manners’ (1888) by Garrick Malley. While exploring the world of food, the anthropological lens had taken into account an array of avenues. Mintz and Du Bois had

examined classic food ethnographies and came up with six subsections that anthropologists had looked at food: (i) “single commodities and substances; (ii) food and social change; (iii) food insecurity; (iv) eating and ritual; (v) eating and identities; and (vi) instructional material” (2002:99). Lectures on the Religion of the Semites (1889) by William Robertson Smith contains an important chapter on food, Zufii breadstuffs (1920) by Frank Hamilton Cushing and Franz Boas’s exhaustive treatment of Kwakiutl salmon recipes (1921) are some of the early works. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1965) and Mary Douglas (1966) work contributed to the understanding of the structuralist interpretation of food and eating. Jack Goody’s book *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (1982) was considered as a turning point in the study of food, followed by many other works (Mintz and Du Bois 2002).

Food studies have looked at food not only from the perspective of its nutritional value and as a biological need, but have delved into the social and cultural construct. The concept of food deals with what we eat, how we eat (cooked or raw) when we eat, and with whom we can eat. It delves deep into what might seem like a mundane everyday need for food to deconstruct different contexts and connotations attached to it. Food works as a social construction as it varies from one society to the other. Societal norms dictate food. What is considered sacred food for one society might be profane for another. Food within the context of a society, the way it is being cooked or served, sacred or profane, can be perceived as a process of identity and symbolic value creation. Taboos and restrictions come into effect, as to how one ought to partake the food or carry it from one space to another.

Within the context of North-East India and Assam some of the works on food were by von Fürer-Haimendorf (1962, 1962), Majumdar (1980), Cantlie (1984), Medhi (1989), Gogoi (2006), Zaman (2011), Marak (2010, 2014), Gohain (2014) and Humtsoe (2015). Marak’s (2014) work though based on her own community does not carry an autoethnographical account. While Humtsoe’s work was based on the autoethnographical perspective. My work herein deals with my personal experiences and narratives of food and how it has led to the construction of my identity, thus, falling within the realm of autoethnography.

### **The Autoethnographical Lens- Method**

The ‘other’ has been the anthropological gaze since its inception. With time the gaze slowly turned to the ‘self’ where the anthropologist explored the lived experiences, and personal accounts that led to writing evocative autoethnographies. The exploration of the ‘self’ in writing auto-ethnographies

began in the early 1980s as a protest against the colonial writings and the methodologies that presented the 'other'. Such writings were contested with autoethnographic accounts where the 'natives' as researchers started writing about the 'self' focusing on subjectivity rather than on objectivity. Building upon the emotional connection between the 'self' and the field, autoethnography, is aimed at presenting the lived experiences in an evocative dialogue, defying the conventions of disinterested and impartial analysis. Autoethnography, 'instead points their inquiries toward "acts of meaning" associated with the lived processes of creating and managing identity, making sense of lived experiences, and communicating it to others' (Ellis and Bochner 2017: vii).

As an autoethnographic account, this article would look at what 'I' eat that defines my identity as an *Axomiya* Muslim<sup>1</sup> and explore the importance of *Axomiya* cuisine in my day-to-day food. To understand the concept of in-group and out-group within an ethnic boundary I would draw from my experiences of food cooked in my maternal and paternal grandparents' house. Taking the journey of food forward, I would also dwell on the variations of the perceived 'Islamic food' that I experienced as I traveled to places outside Assam. Within the autoethnographic context of food, the humble attempt would be to explore how identity is created through food and becomes an ethnic marker. It would take into account a few of the stereotypical presumptions of what confirms being a Muslim in India and relate it to my experience of being a Muslim from Assam with emphasis on food. Taking cues from the anthropological works on identity my endeavour is to understand the identity of the 'self' in the context of ethnic identity. The argument here is that there has been a stereotypic construction of a 'Muslim identity' and recounting my personal narratives of food, herein I explore how the ethnic identity at times overshadows the stereotypical Muslim identity. The humble attempt herein, is to negotiate ethnic identity through my personal experiences of food as a cultural and social construct.

### **Self: Identity and Ethnicity**

In this autoethnography, I would legitimately start with an introduction of my tryst with food and the need to pen this autoethnographical account. To build up the evocative memory I would narrate two incidences as to why I felt as a Muslim I was not fitting into the 'image of a Muslim' that others had. The earliest instance when I felt that I was being marked as 'different' is a memory from my hostel days when I had moved to Delhi, the capital city of India, as a young researcher some two decades ago. One of the experiences that left a mark happened in the Hostel Canteen when I joined Delhi University in 2000

for the Masters in Anthropology programme. The canteen in-charge refused to sell 'samosa' (a fried pastry with a filling of onions, mashed potatoes, peas mixed with spices), a food item that is relished across Indian states to me as he couldn't understand what I meant when I said 'char *singhora* de do' (give me four *samosas*). In *Axomiya* language 'samosa' is '*singera*' which I had translated as '*singhora*'. Thereafter, I pointed out to the oven and showed him that he was selling them. He was flabbergasted when he saw what I wanted and he was the one to teach me the Hindi word for '*singera*'. It was a harrowing and demeaning experience when initially I felt he was refusing to sell the '*samosa*' to me, and later it dawned that it was a communication issue, that stemmed from my inability to speak the Hindi Language. My mother tongue is *Axomiya*, and at home we speak the *Axomiya* language unlike Muslims from Delhi and other Northern and Central Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana etc., who speak either Urdu or Hindi. It was not like I had not learned Hindi, as in school we had learned Hindi till the seventh standard as a compulsory subject. Understanding Hindi was not the issue, however, I lacked fluency and found it difficult to converse in Hindi, as the language is not in everyday usage.

The second instance which made me stand apart was the food 'Biryani'<sup>2</sup>. In the Indian context when one utters the word 'Muslim', in relation to food the first thing that flashes in the mind is 'biryani', and the taste buds get stimulated. The roots of Biryani are still uncertain and many trace it to Persia, however, historians also differ in view when some say it originated in the Mughal royal kitchen. The Biryani dish within India is cooked in many different styles and there are variations, named such as Hyderabadi Biryani, Lucknowi Biryani, Kolkata Biryani, etc. From the prefix before Biryani, like Hyderabadi, or Lucknowi we can trace the origin of the dish to which region it belongs. However, among the *Axomiya* Muslims '*Akhni pulao*'<sup>3</sup> was the traditional food that used to be cooked and served during rituals and festivals instead of 'biryani'. So in Delhi I learned to cook biryani and that's when I was asked, 'are you truly a Muslim?' Thus, food works as a social construction as it varies from one society to the other, more so in the context of space that defines ethnicity and identity.

These interactions where I was asked 'why don't you know Hindi or Urdu?' or 'are you really a Muslim?' made me feel different. I could comprehend and it became apparent that I was not fitting into the perceived stereotypical image that the 'others' had of Muslims. This at times made me question my identity as a Muslim. It thus becomes pertinent to understand the history of Islam in India to relate to the diversity of Muslims residing in India contesting the presumed

stereotypical image of a Muslim. However, as I have already deliberated on the aspect of migration in my earlier writings (Zaman 2015, 2016), herein, I shall just share a brief account in this article as and where necessary, as the emphasis of this article is on food.

When I speak about 'the self' in the context of the 'other' herein I am taking into account both Muslims and non-Muslims who is not affiliated with the *Axomiya* identity. I emphasize the *Axomiya* identity as the 'self', as I was born and brought up in Assam. A space where we had lived for generations, though originally, both my parents' families had migrated from other spaces. This part of the migration has been stated in brief in the section on in-group and out-group. During my childhood days living in Assam, there was never a question on my identity as a Muslim or an *Axomiya*. Nor had I ever been asked 'are you a practicing Muslim?'. My reflection on the 'self' stemmed from the interactions with these 'others' who were not aware of the *Axomiya* culture. 'Why don't you cook biryani?' or 'why can't you speak in Urdu?' were some of the questions that I was frequently asked when I had moved out of Assam, it thus urged me to pen this article and explore my identity through food.

### **Axomiya: Identity and Food**

*'Food is not just a symbol but the reality of love and security. In the animal kingdom, human beings are the only ones who cook their food, and thus, cooked food becomes the very symbol of our sociality and also denotes our place in society'* (Fox: n.d.). Let me begin with what food is cooked every day in an *Axomiya* Muslim household. The everyday food is similar to what is cooked in every other *Axomiya* household. Some of the common preparation that are local delicacies cooked in *Axomiya* Muslim households are; *khar* (which is made from the ashes of dried banana peel and soaked overnight in water, this is mixed with papaya and dal, which adds alkalinity) *masor tenga* (fish cooked with elephant apple, or tomatoes, or bamboo shoot that gives a sour and tangy taste), *pitika* (boiled and mashed potatoes or burnt eggplant or tomatoes with a dressing of raw mustard oil, raw onions, and green chilies), *poita bhaat* (soaking and fermenting cooked rice overnight in water) different types of leafy vegetables only available in Assam like *dhekia xaak* (fiddlehead ferns). While the festival foods of *laru* (ladoos made of sesame or coconut), *til* (black sesame) and *narikol* (coconut) *pitha* (*pitha* is made out of rice flour mixed with water and spread on a cast traditionally made on a potter's plate now a days on iron cast, the filling either of *til* or *narikol* is stuffed and rolled) etc., are also made during Bihu<sup>4</sup> festivals. These local *Axomiya* food items which are a part of my everyday cuisine are not eaten by

Muslims in other parts of the country. Thus, 'what we eat' becomes the symbol of 'who we are' and that becomes our identity. Among other cultural markers, language and food are the two imperative cultural aspects that the Muslims of Assam share with their counterparts and thus, they claim the *Axomiya* ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity is not only about sharing cultural similarities, it is also about differences. This fact- the differences in terms of cooking is much evident in the dishes that are served in an *Axomiya* Muslim household during festivals and rituals that follow the Islamic calendar. The *akhni pulao*, chicken/mutton korma (*korma* or *qorma* is a dish originating in the Indian subcontinent, consisting of meat or vegetables braised with yogurt, water or stock, and spices to produce a thick sauce or gravy), *phirni* (*phirni* is a creamy slow-cooked sweet pudding made with ground rice or *suji* (granulated wheat), sugar, milk, almonds, saffron, and cardamom powder), are some of the exclusive dishes that earlier used to be served in *Axomiya* Muslim household. However, with times these dishes have also been adopted by the other communities living in Assam. But for a long time, these dishes were referred to as *Axomiya* Muslim food in Assam.

### ***What we eat becomes our identity: In-group versus Out-group***

The cultural differences in ethnic interactions create definite boundaries that define in-groups and out-groups. Within, the same ethnic boundary there exist multiple identities, these identities reflect and manifest in everyday interactions. Herein, I would like to present my experiences of food in my maternal and paternal households. Both ancestries claim to be *Axomiya* Muslims yet, there is a tug of war when it comes to identity. This is seen in the banter that take place when it comes to food. Amma (my mother) would always say during Eid, "so we are cooking *butor dali* (yellow split peas) to round off the Eid delicacies".

*Butor dali* used to be a gibe at Abba (father) who hailed from Goalpara district of western Assam. The district of Goalpara in western Assam (now divided into four districts), which before the colonial era included Garo Hills region (now in Meghalaya), was part of the Mughal province of Bengal and came under the control of East India Company according to the Mughal Emperor's *Firman* of August 12, 1765 (Baruah 1999: 24). Thus, Goalpara was already under the British occupation before it was merged with the newly formed colonial province of Assam in 1874. Goalpara area thus, being closer to the borders of West Bengal, food is much akin to Bengali cuisine, as seen in other aspects of culture like language. Legends have it that my father's family originally were Kashmiri Pandits. They had first settled in a space called

Boitamari and later moved to Lakhipur and finally to Goalpara owing to my grandfather's job. While my mother's family belongs to eastern Assam, their family migrated to Assam from Awadh and the earliest ancestor who was an army general was married to one of the nieces of the Ahom<sup>5</sup> King (see Zaman 2015, 16 for more details).

As both the families had different migratory history, thus, the influence on food by the locals is also seen. Dried fish is one item that is much relished in my mother's family though rarely prepared at my father's ancestral home. *Akhni pulao* is cooked in both the household, however, some of the sweets that are prepared are different. One of my sweetest memories of food at Dadi's (paternal grandmother) house was the 'boulder biscuits' (basically rusk, but it used to be hard as a rock, thus, nicknamed as a boulder) served with morning tea and the '*bakharkhani*' (spiced flatbread which is part of the Mughal cuisine, but I remember the texture as more on the sweeter side) for breakfast.

When we are discussing 'self' identity one has to take into account collective identity too. Self-perception, or the image, that a group holds of itself, is responsible for the molding of both individual and collective identity (Ashmore, et al cf. Petkova, 2015:27). In the above section I explored food as a construct within the *Axomiya* Muslim community, and how it defines identity that further creates the concepts of in groups and out-groups. The gibe if analysed has its roots in the long-standing contestation between western and eastern Assam to prove their ethnic ancestry. People of eastern Assam project their supremacy in terms of being the more authentic *Axomiya* population. This is also reflected in the nomenclature that is used locally to refer to the people belonging to *Ujoni Axom* (Upper or Eastern Assam) and *Namoni Axom* (Lower or western). However, I have refrained from using the local terms as they are used more in a derogatory reference. The other reason could be that for long Sibsagar had been the seat of the Ahom Kingdom- a political and cultural hub. The cultural tradition of the Ahoms had highly influenced the local traditions of eastern Assam as the Ahoms had ruled Assam for 600 years before the Britishers annexed Assam and made it a part of British India in 1826. As stated earlier my mother's family related more to the culture of eastern Assam because of their association with the Ahom royal family, thus, projecting themselves as the in-group. While in western Assam more so in Goalpara, Dhubri and the other adjoining areas the influence of the Bengali culture is seen, thus, being projected as the out-group. The concept of out-group has also been fueled by the immigration issue that marred the state of Assam during the 1971 War of Liberation that created Bangladesh (East Pakistan) from Pakistan. There is

more to this debate on ethnicity and the question of identity that has been centre stage in Assam. However, as this work primarily focuses on food, I shall refrain from elaborating on the on-going contestation of ethnicity and identity issue in Assam.

### ***Ritual Food: Purity and Pollution***

As stated earlier societal norms dictate food. What is considered sacred food for one society might be profane for another. Food in a society, the way it is being cooked or served, sacred or profane, can be perceived as a process of political-economic and symbolic value creation. An apple is a must inclusion in everyday food intake or diet, as prescribed by doctors and dieticians, owing to its nutritious values. However, if the same apple is a part of an offering in a temple as *prasad* (ritual food that is first offered to the Lord in a temple and later distributed among the devotees) or as part of *tabarruk* (ritual food mostly sweets that is distributed after prayers) in a dargah, it enters the realm of sacred food. Thus, the properties of being blessed make it divine, which adds holiness to the already existing nutritious value of the food. Once a food becomes sacred, the pattern of consumption also changes. Taboos and restrictions come into effect, as to who can cook it, how it needs to be cooked, how one ought to partake the food or carry it from one space to another.

In my family, be it my maternal or paternal side there are no restrictions on cooking food for rituals. On many occasions, my mother has cooked the *sinni* (food that becomes blessed after recitation of *duwas*) for prayer meetings or ritual food on the occasion of death. On the death of my paternal grandmother, my mother had cooked the *suji phirni* that was distributed as '*sinni*' after the '*gor jiyaraat*' (prayers performed at the graveyard). Likewise, on the death of my maternal grandmother the '*sinni*' for the '*gor jiyaraat*' and also the food served on the 10<sup>th</sup> day and '*chalisa*' (40 days after the death) were cooked by my mother and her brothers. In caste-based societies, ritual food is always cooked by a person belonging to the Brahmin caste, particularly a male. Whereas in the *Axomiya* Muslim families any family member can cook provided the '*niyaat*' (intention) and '*yakin*' (faith and belief) for the cooking is pure.

How we eat? with whom we eat, and when we eat, is part of food etiquette. Keeping in line with the *purdah* system among Muslims, in religious gatherings commensality follows a strict pattern. Males and females eat separately. After the '*fatihah*' (a prayer where the *suras* (verses) from the Holy Quran is recited) the elderly male members along with the *maulvi* are the first ones to partake the food. Thereafter, it is the turn of the elderly ladies and children. However, in

our family, the related kins eat together and there is no distinction between men and women. Though the maulvi is always served separately. The strictness of purdah during gatherings in terms of eating and serving food is slowly ebbing away. In most *Walima* (marriage receptions) owing to the paucity of space in the wedding halls and the trend of the buffet system serving food separately is not possible anymore.

### ***Food Experiences Beyond Axomiya Cuisine***

The concept of food for me as an ethnic marker became much more evident when I came to Delhi. Some of the local food much relished in Northern India has never been a part of our palate like; *chole-chawal* (chickpeas and rice), *rajma chawal* (kidney beans and rice), and *kadhi chawal* (a preparation made of gram flour and sour curd served with rice) among others. Some of these North Indian delicacies has been included in my everyday preparation, however, some I could still not develop the taste for, like *kadhi chawal*. In our university hostel, every Tuesday *kadhi chawal* used to be on the lunch menu. For many of us who came from North-East and Eastern India, curry chawal was not palatable, and thus, on this day I used to skip hostel lunch. We used to flock to the hostel canteen for lunch. Even the sweets prepared at festivals and other occasions vary much. I remember from my hostel days when we used to wait for the *besan ki ladoos* (gram flour sweet balls) that were being served on National Holidays like Independence and Republic Day. South Indian food has always been a part of our cuisine back home. Going out on a treat meant going for south Indian food like *idli*, *sambar*, and *dosa*. Yet, when I came to Delhi going out for a treat would be for momos (dim sums) or Chinese food. I used to crave *Axomiya* food during the hostel days. Anyone traveling from home, the most precious food items as gifts would be *kaji nemu* (lemon), fried fish, *narikol laru*, *til pitha* and *narikol pitha*. Thus, if we look at the concept of food and identity- who we are and how we cook rolls down to being identified as belonging to a particular ethnic group and becomes our identity.

### **Summary**

Perceptions of the 'self' and the 'other' form the core of cultural identity (Petkova, 2015:27). Identity is manifested and shrouded in symbols within a culture. However, an ongoing process of comparison of the 'self' and the 'other' simultaneously takes place, leading to the borrowing and assimilation of cultural identity. In the case of *Axomiya* Muslims, this aspect of cultural borrowing is very much evident in terms of food. One might wonder why

the Muslims in Assam have so much variation in terms of food. Herein, reference from the Muhammedan chronicler Shihabuddin, who visited Assam with the Mughal invading army led by Mir Jumla during 1662-63, noted that the Muslims settled here had assimilated themselves to such an extent that except for the name nothing was left of Islam with them (Gait, 1981; Neog, 1985). This results from the fact that the Muslims had migrated here mostly during the Mughal invasion on Assam. When the army settled in Assam, the soldiers married within the local *Axomiya* population and thus, acculturation was a major factor that influenced not only food and language but other cultural norms and traditions. However, with the coming of Shah Miran<sup>6</sup> and other saints to Assam, the *Axomiya* Muslims had imbibed much of the Islamic rites and rituals that are followed worldwide in terms of life cycle rituals.

In this autoethnographical account, I had negotiated my identity born in an *Axomiya* Muslim family in Assam and tried to reflect on the implication of being a Muslim in India with ethnic diversity where each region has its own cultural connotations and an imagined 'self' of being a Muslim. My food experiences have brought to light that within the context of Islam and being a Muslim, ethnic identity plays an important role in shaping cultural norms. Thus, in this autoethnographic account, I reflected on my identity through cultural markers in everyday life- food that resonates my ethnic affinity. I had presented herein, how within the context of food, identification of who we are and how we cook rolls down to being identified as belonging to a particular ethnic group, religion, or class. The food itself has an ethnic flavour to it and at times can be the medium of expression for underlying ethnic conflicts too as reflected in the narration.

Writing autoethnography can be therapeutic, a way to cope with intense emotions. Penning down the events and memories makes it easier to understand and tackle the dilemmas as the story unfolds. An autoethnographic account is not just a mere story as herein I as the researcher have used the tools and techniques that are a part of anthropological fieldwork. The lived experiences can also provide an understanding to others who might be in the same situation, a sense of solidarity where one feels "I am not alone". Some of the questions that have come my way 'are you a practicing Muslim?' 'Are you really a Muslim?' when I had introduced myself as an *Axomiya* Muslim, I was not alone to face them, many of my cousins faced the same questions, as we did not conform to the stereotypical image of a 'Muslim' woman. Experiences of the self can be an assurance to others which helps to cope better. Autoethnography might not be

the ideal way to deal with advert situations but can be a guide where others can learn, feel the pain, and understand from your experiences.

## Notes

1. **Axomiya Muslim:** I use the term *Axomiya* to refer to the people and communities living in Assam. It is also to be noted that the language spoken in Assam is also referred to as *Axomiya* by the locals though in the Indian Constitution it has been recognized as Assamese. Herein, *Axomiya* Muslims refers to those Muslim communities in Assam who regard *Axomiya* as their mother tongue and has imbibed the traditions and cultures of Assam.
2. **Biryani-** *Biryani* is derived from the Farsi Persian language word “brishtah” (برشته) meaning fried onions, because the dish was made by flavoring rice with fried onions and meat, besides mild spices. Another theory states that it originated from *birinj* (Persian: برنج), the Persian word for rice. Yet some state that it is derived from *biryani* or *beriyani* (Persian: بریان), which means “to fry” or “to roast” ([www.http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biryani# Etymology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biryani#Etymology)). Basically, it is a dish that is made of rice and meat cooked separately, mixed in a pot by layering rice with fried onions followed by the meat preparation.
3. **Akhni Pulao:** In this preparation, the onion is first deep fried, rice and meat are added and cooked together. The layering part in biryani is not there. It can be called a one-pot meal also. The spices used is lesser as compared to biryani where typically 56 varieties of spices are used.
4. **Bihu:** Bihu in Assam comprises of three major festivals that revolves around cultivation. ‘Rongali’ or ‘Bohag Bihu’ observed in April before the fields are ploughed and made ready for sowing rice seeds, ‘Kongali’ or ‘Kati Bihu’ is observed in October when the fields have to be guarded against pests as the paddy is about to ripe, and ‘Bhogali’ or ‘Magh Bihu’ is observed in January after the harvest and the granaries have been stocked with rice.
5. **The Ahoms** are an ethnic group in Assam. They originally migrated from Mong Mao, a small kingdom, related to Shan, in present day Yunnan Province of China, along with Prince Sukapha in the year 1228 see Zaman 2015, 2016.
6. **Shah Miran:** A Sufi saint also known as Azan Pir became popular for his devotional songs and *Azan* i.e., the call for namaz/salat (prayers). He came to Assam in the 17th century from Baghdad and helped revive Islam. He settled in Sibsagar area of eastern Assam. It is believed that the followers

of Azan Pir who converted to Islam were given the surname of Syed (the direct descendants of Prophet Muhammad) for more information see Zaman 2015, 2016.

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