

# **UNDERSTANDING PLACE NAMES IN SOUTHWEST AUSTRALIA : Katitjin Ngulluckiny Boodjera**

A/Prof Len Collard, ARC Indigenous Research Fellow  
Curtin University Sustainability Policy (CUSP) Institute | Fremantle  
Research and Graduate Studies | Faculty of Humanities Curtin University

# INTRODUCTION

Place names are most commonly used but the history behind how they were created as geographical nomenclature for cities is not always well understood. Most Australian geographic features have been named in one or more of the 260 Indigenous languages spoken on the continent and the relationship between Aboriginal people and the land is as strong today as it was 400 centuries ago (ICSM, 2010). However with the European settlement, “an English-based naming system has developed, creating place names from British or other European sources or from Indigenous words” (ICSM, 2010, p. 3).

The Southwest of Australia is unique as it has the largest share of preserved Indigenous names and more than 50% of the currently used place names are of Aboriginal, namely Nyungar origin (Goodchild, 2011). Furthermore, in 2007 the Western Australian State Government adopted a dual naming policy for places which recognises the importance of Aboriginal heritage and encourages its preservation (Landgate, 2007). There is however a void in the identifying, recording, writing and understanding of the Australian Indigenous history as it relates to the Nyungar meaning of place names.

## INTRODUCTION

European cartographic conventions and systems of boundary-making are not directly or easily transferable into Nyungar systems of naming and land use. Western maps are usually set out in such a way as to imply that places have fixed names over time. Those with even a basic understanding of Nyungar systems of reading and speaking about boodjar (country) would immediately recognise that introduced cartographic conventions are inadequate analytical tools for talking about Nyungar names and land use. It is very much under-researched and often extremely difficult to investigate the history and meanings of the Nyungar names of places.

The area referred to as the Southwest, and also known as Nyungar Boodjar to Nyungar people, is approximately the area west of Esperance, south of Geraldton and west of Nungarin. It is described by the west coast on its western side and a line approximately running from Esperance through Nungarin to Geraldton on its eastern side. It is further divided into separate but interconnected Nyungar language regions which Tindale (1974) identified as: Wudjari, Koreng, Pibelmen, Wardandi, Ngakinjaki, Balardong, Juat, Amangu, Minang, Kaneang, Wilman, Pinjarup and Kaneang.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the sheer size of Nyungar Boodjar, a large amount of the 50,000 place names held by Landgate, the Western Australian agency responsible for land and property information, are of Nyungar origin. The local Nyungar peoples collaborated with European settlers, early surveyors, explorers and government officials, including, police, to establish this knowledge base for the Southwest. This information is now used by the statutory authority to maintain the official State register of ownership of land, however the role of Nyungar people – the traditional owners of the Southwest – is yet to be fully acknowledged.

## **Two specific case studies**

The paper explores two specific case studies describing the origins of place names, namely the work of Ednie Hassell of Jerramungup and Alfred John Bussell of Wallcliffe near Margaret River.

With the incessant development of suburbs and urbanisation of Western Australia's landscape and within the context of reconciliation and native title debates, the ongoing use of Nyungar place names and their meaning will be a continuation of the relationships started in the early part of the 19th century.

## METHOD

The Australian Nyungar heritage is a vastly under-explored area with most of the research being around language and linguistic issues (e.g. Douglas, 1976), history (e.g. Green, 1984; Haebich, 1992), social issues (e.g. the stolen generation, see Haebich and Delroy, 1999) or native title (e.g. Federal Court of Australia, 2006).

There is a sound body of knowledge related to the European naming (from Dutch, French and English origin) of the geographical areas in the Swan Colony (e.g. Rienits, 1971) but little is known about the Nyungar contribution towards the development of the place nomenclature of this area. The interpretation of Nyungar place names can trigger a better understanding of the Australian environment and culture in a unique and genuine way, in addition to the building of Australian identity, sense of place and attractiveness to the rest of the world.

## METHOD

Achieving this is not an easy task taking into consideration how much has been lost, forgotten, hidden or misunderstood and how difficult it is to find a path or build bridges within the rich landscape of geographic features and human words.

There are only a few cultural centres in the region to showcase the local Nyungar culture and provide access to cultural information (Collard et al., 2007). Looking to identify and understand the meaning of Nyungar place names requires a combination of a variety of methods and skills and most importantly, a deep knowledge and association with this cultural heritage.

## **There are two possible approaches to deciphering the meaning of Nyungar place names**

The first one is to investigate each individual name, and is more attuned with the Western logic of exploring the real world by fragmenting it into relatively stable and distinctive units.

However this is not how Indigenous knowledge works.

The second one is to follow the history of a particular place and the way European and Nyungar knowledges have intertwined to create the geographic nomenclature that is used today.



## **There are two possible approaches to deciphering the meaning of Nyungar place names**

This second approach is the one that we have opted for. It also allows us to use case study methodology in order to answer questions as to how and why we now use these particular place names (Yin, 2003).

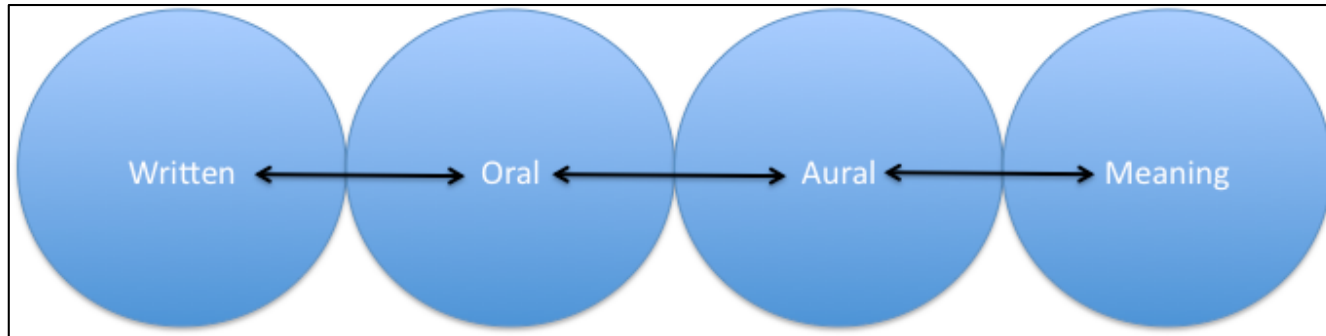
A wide range of literature and archival sources as well as communication with native speakers and Nyungar knowledge custodians have been used to compile the two selected case studies. Each case also has its own specifics and logics in generating the place names requiring the application of a specific technique to understand the history, stories and lived experiences that accompany them.

# TECHNIQUE

The outcomes from the case study research described in this paper have been obtained using the technique represented on Figure 1.

It includes a transition between four stages, each of which involves exploration of a variety of possible sources. The stages are explained below.

***Figure 1: Interpreting the Meaning of Aboriginal Place Names.***



# Written

The written materials used go back in history as much as possible covering the earliest written records through the work of early settlers, explorers, surveyors, colonial administrators and government officials. For example, Landgate (and its predecessors, such as the Western Australian Department of Land and Administration) holds a database and records (often with the original handwriting) that draw from these sources (e.g. The Nomenclature Advisory Committee, 1949). Figure 2 shows an example of the archival material provided by Landgate.

An additional source of written information are the various glossaries, word lists of meaning (see Figure 3) which sometimes accompany part of the source documents. The two case studies are located in the south corner of the Southwest. The first one is based on *My Dusky Friends* by Ethel Hassell about her life in the 1880s (published in 1975). The second one is drawn from using A.J. Bussell's *Dornderup Wongie* published around 1930s which covers Pibelmen and Wardandi Aboriginal languages.

# Oral

The aim of this stage is to get a translation from the written word to the Nyungar sound. The transition from the written text to the oral pronunciation of the words is often challenging as there is no complete match between the Aboriginal sounds and the English-based transcription of the names.

For example, some English letters do not exist as Nyungar sounds, e.g. f, h, s, v and z (Salvado, 1977). In some cases English and other European words are mixed with Nyungar language. The use of native Nyungar speakers is crucial to be able to achieve this stage.



# Aural

The next stage is the interpretive listening of the Nyungar sound(s) of the place names. For example, a particular sound can be associated with different Aboriginal words, such as Nyoongar (person) and Yoongar (kangaroo) may be recorded and pronounced in a very similar way.

Another example is that the sounds k and g; p and b are interchangeable in Nyungar languages. The task of this stage is to listen and explore the multitude of possible Nyungar meanings hidden behind the oral pronunciation. Sometimes it is even the case that once the Nyungar meaning is identified, the actual pronunciation of the place name changes.

# Meaning

The final outcome pursued with this technique is to generate the meaning of the place.

This is not always a linear process and may involve several interactions but the main objective is to achieve the best possible appreciation and interpretation of the Nyungar place name meaning.



We are fully aware of the complexity and limitations of our attempts to understand the origin of the names because of inhibiting factors, such as:

- many Nyungar words exist in different transcriptions due to the ways the early European settlers were recording the sounds they were hearing being pronounced. Examples of this are Pibelman or Bibbulmun or Bibelmen; Wheelman or Wilmen; or even the spelling of Nyungar or Noongar or Noongah or Nyoongar or Nyoongah;
- there are some inconsistencies among the existing geographic maps in relation to the boundaries of the 13 Nyungar language groups. For example, there is inconsistency in the mapping of the Wheelmen/Wilmen Nyungar people on the maps provided by Hassell and Tindale (see Figure 4).
- many Nyungar based place names include abbreviated, shortened or truncated sections of the original Aboriginal words;
- often place names represent a combination of several Nyungar words and it may even be difficult to understand how many words are being amalgamated to form the place name;

- in some cases, Nyungar and words from European origin (e.g. English) have been amalgamated, often with parts of them truncated. A possible example is Wilmen/Wheelman most likely referring to the Wil tribes to the north of Albany which was recorded with the English component for people/men, namely the Wilmen;
- the quality of the interpretation of the place names depends heavily on the ability and willingness of the custodians of the Nyungar knowledge to share it;
- some traditional knowledge has already been lost due to the heavy reliance on English as a naming system for geographical features as well as a dominant spoken language.

# Figure 3: Utilised Glossary Sources (left: Rae 1913; right: A.J. Bussell, 1930).

NATIVE VOCABULARY.  
SUPPLIED BY W. J. RAE, 1913.

...

1 Kobbl, Kawbl or Gobbl	Abdomen.
2 Keep or Manyipp	Little black ant.
3 Kurrat or Krrat	Red ant.
4 Tillill	Sergeant ant.
5 Oilya or Tant	Ankle.
6 Yurning	Aorta.
7 Wiu	Anteater.
8 Banndi	Bream.
9 Niurukk	Brain.
10 Kump	Bladder.
11 Worra	Bad.
12 Ba-bill	Bat.
13 Wit	White ant.
14 Worra Worra	Very bad.
15 Chirt Or Chert	Bird, generally
16 Nurukk	Bird's egg.
17 Baluk or Balluk	Blackboy (Xanthorrea)
18 Dangaruk	Butcher bird.
19 Yup or Up	Blood.
20 Kuta	Bag.
21 Kurti	Bustard.
22 Koili	Boomerang
23 Kuning	Boy.
24 Murring	Bread.
25 Mungait mungich	Banksia.
26 Mungich	Banksia (large cone).
27 Musk	" flower.
28 Banndi	Silver bream.
29 Blimen	Cattle.
30 Billberrokk or Kawnt	Chest (thorax).
31 Kurning	Children.
32 Ngawtum	Collarbone.
33 Chutikk	Cat.
34 Bula or Munga	Crowd of people.
35 Mellgum	Cold.
36 Mannokk or Munnikk	Cockatoo, white.
37 Gagwlek	" white tail.
38 Karrek	" red "
39 Nobb	Child.
40 Ka or Kar	Crab.
41 Wawding or Wording	Crow.
42 Kullkumm	" white.
43 Munaja	Xmas tree.
44 Chukk	Cherry (native).
45 Bulong	Crane.
46 Koyl	Diaphragm (midriff).
47 Twert	Dog ("Twertup" = place of a dog.)
48 Mokles or Yukien	Native dog.
49 Gonnin	Ducks.
50 Nimmrokk or Golumaruk	" Mountain.

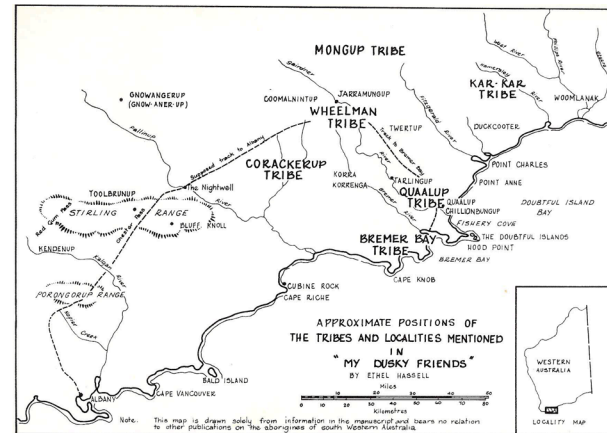
-23-

Bad	Wackign or weendarng
Baq	Kooter
Bank of river or stream	Gab - borduck budgera
Bark of tree	Bunner morba
Bay or harbour	Wattern quaiart
Be (explained before)	Be
Bed	Ngoondin
See	Jilyara
Been	Quadgart - yen
Before, or on front	Quadgart
Bight	Barkage
Best	Quabanyer
Bird	No general name, each kind has its name
Black	Mooarn
Blunt	Jueta
Boat	Jemmer bouker
Born	Coolarngeutta
Boy	Coolarnng
Bring	Yal-burrung or yal garng
Burn	Karl-gookarn
By	Borduck
Camp	Myer or miah
Cat	There were no ordinary cats here till the whites came only the marsupial cat - Ngoolarngeat
Chin	Ngarnitch
Chop	Kodgewa-an
Cling	Deerupburung
Club	Walger or dowark
(their clubs have no nob on end)	
Cock bird	Mooragut
Cold	Ngitign
Cook	Dookarn
Cool	Ngitignuck
Crab	Coreil

**Figure 4: Nyungar Land Maps (left: Tindale, 1940; right: Hassell, 1975).**



MAP 4: Nyungar territories of the southwest based on Tindale (1940).



Each of these factors is difficult to handle on its own, but more often than not the interpretation of a place name involves dealing with a combination of several, if not all, of the above factors. The interpretation of the meaning of Aboriginal names is long overdue and despite these challenges it needs to be carried out to the best of our abilities, as the longer this is left untracked and disengaged, the more knowledge would be lost. The two case studies covered in this research are presented below.

## **CASE STUDIES: Ednie Hassell of Jerramungup**

Moving away from the southwest Cape or Wardandi and Pibelmen boodjarea or lands, we can go to where Ethel Hassell (1975, p. 49) lived in the Wheelman Nyungar boodjar around Jerramungup on the south east coast of Western Australia during the 1880s.

Hassell recorded local Wheelman Nyungar lifestyles, stories, names and meanings of places and customs as told to her by Wheelman Nyungar men and women boordier (landowners) of that country. Hassell created a map out of the local wongi or talk that she had collected from the local Wheelman people. Examples include places and their names such as:

## **CASE STUDIES: Ednie Hassell of Jerramungup**

- Bullah meual (known today as Bluff Knoll) translates as the Great many – faced hill;
- Gnowangerup – the place of the mallee hen's nest;
- Nornalup – the place of norn, the black snake;
- Twertup the place of the dogs or dingoes; and
- Coomal nintup or the place of the possum's tail, the hill where the Hassell homestead was built at Jerramungup.

## **Wheelman Nyungar words for place names**

These are a few examples where local Wheelman Nyungar words for place names and their meanings shape the land place names up until this very day (Hassell, 1975). This is a clear example of Nyungar and wedjela (white people) working together in the early days of the eastern country or boodjar of the Southwest of Australia. This relationship created insights and understandings of the dreamtime narratives, tracks and a sense of these place names and their meanings for all to enjoy today and no doubt into the future.



**There are also numerous examples of double naming of places,  
such as:**

- korra korrenga or Bremer Ranges
- duckcooter or Mt Barren Ranges
- whose Nyungar meaning is yet to be deciphered.

## **CASE STUDIES: Alfred John Bussell of Wallcliffe**

About 200 miles south of the Swan River lands, another wedjela colonial by the name of John Garrett Bussell and other members of his family took up land and settled. They went on to explore the local Wardandi and Pibelmen Nyungar boodjar, on many occasions collecting much local katitjin (knowledge) of the country and its inhabitants from the local Nyungar. They were subjected to the same integration into the local Wardandi (or Ocean) Nyungar social mores as outsiders elsewhere in Nyungar boodjar had experienced. Later John Alfred Bussell, a related descendant of John Garrett Bussell, recounted that (Bussell, 1930, p.4):

## **CASE STUDIES: Alfred John Bussell of Wallcliffe**

... over a hundred years ago, it was about 1831 they (the Aborigines) gave everyone of the party that settled here (Vasse area) an Aboriginal name each, of those Aborigines that had died some considerable time before for instance they gave my father (Alfred Bussell) the name of Mundle, and everyone of the others they gave an Aboriginal name also.

## Nyungar Bidi or the peoples tracks

The Nyungar had created and used tracks between one place and another, long before the Europeans arrived in the Southwest, and continued to use these same roads to guide the wedjelas into their own homelands. These tracks are called bidi (or veins), transverse the whole Southwest and were used by the newcomers as sure roads to the next destination where water, camps and people maybe found (Moore, 1978; originally published in 1884). It ought to be noted that many of the bidi or paths became the highways and byways of the road walkways systems track that are still used today as you travel by foot, bike or vehicle across the Southwest of Western Australia.

An example of this is the Bibbulmun Track – a sequence of bidi linked together to various water holes and other places of interest which is now considered “one of the world's great long distance walk trails, stretching nearly 1000 km from Kalamunda, a suburb in the hills on the outskirts of Perth, to the historic town of Albany on the south coast. It passes through the heart of the scenic Southwest of Western Australia” (Bibbulmun Track, 2011, n.p.).

The name of the Track itself comes from the Pibelmen Nyungar boodjar or the land of many breasts due to the large numbers of women present amongst the clans on the lower Southwest of Western Australia. Another interpretation of the meaning is the land of the many sources of water, the way the human breasts sustain the newborns.

## Nyungar and the wedjela narrative

The relationship of the Nyungar and the wedjela narrative and its documentation generated many positive collaborations that occurred, for example when we look at the Nyungar cartography contribution as evidenced due to its presence in geographical place names.

These meanings can be seen as a clear oral contribution in these colonial relationships of cooperation and conciliation being mediated between the two worldviews into a common language somewhere between the ancient language of the Nyungar and the English newcomers that is still in use today through the names of places.

## Bussells

The Bussells also contributed their English heritage to the naming of places. In the Southwest the town of Busselton got its name after the Bussell family – the early explorers and settlers who took up land in the lower southwest area of the Swan Colony which is now Western Australia.

Similarly Ellensbrook north of Margaret River received its name after the wife of Alfred Bussell; however the local Nyungar have always known it as Mokidup the meaning of which is yet to be identified. In that same locality, Dreamtime stories still remain the only source of place names, such as the Meekabaribee – a waterfall located in a cave 500 metres away at the back of the Ellensbrook Homestead. It is interpreted as meaning 'the holy place of the moon' or 'the moon's bathing place'.

# Bussells

- Further place names in the area where the Bussells settled that are related to the Nyungar language are:
- Cowaramup – the place of the paroquet, these parakeets still inhabit this particular area and can be seen and heard as they squawk and sit in great numbers on the branches of Marri, Tuart and other trees;
- Quindalup – the place of the short nose quinda, a small kind of kangaroo that inhabits the undergrowth in that country;
- Gnoocardup – the place where Gnoocardan, the ancient Nyungar boordier (or warrior) had died;
- Wonnerup – the place of the peppermints, these trees were also used as women's digging or fighting sticks. The digging stick was about an inch and a half thick and measured about five feet long and was pointed at one of its ends. The women used the wonner for digging roots and bullfrogs. They also used it to settle any disputes that arose amongst them.
- Mallokup – situated on the derbal (or estuary) where the Wonnerup Homestead is now located, its Nyungar name means the place of shadows, due to the massive Tuart forest creating the shade in that place.

## DISCUSSION

The Dreamtime creation stories of the land are intermixed with the colonial names of places all around the Southwest, including in and around the City of Perth. Some examples of standing wedjela names of places include Fremantle after Captain Freemantle, or Stirling after the first Governor of Swan River Colony, later known as Western Australia. Wedjela names in the Southwest Wallcliffe, Margaret River, Busselton, Vasse, Bunbury, Esperance and Albany.

This most recent history is easy to understand and interpret. However what is fast fading is the Nyungar meaning of the numerous place names from Aboriginal origin.



## A casual glance at maps and place names of the Southwest

One has to only have a casual glance at maps and place names of the Southwest to see the way that Nyungar names of places from the south and east to the north and western borders of boodjera dominate the country. The Tindale language map gives us a framework for understanding a nomenclature system and confirms that this is indeed the boodjar of the Nyungar, be they Wudjari, Koreng, Pibelmen, Wardandi, Ngakinjaki, Balardong, Juat, Amangu, Minang, Kaneang, Wilman, Pinjarup and Kaneang and all the languages of the Nyungar in between (Tindale, 1974).

This also highlights and recognises that Nyungar as a language group were and still are powerful language contributors to the making of the nation's Southwest the unique place it is, including its place names. The Nyungar are still the knowledge carriers and interpreters of the meanings of all of Nyungar country handed down orally and in written text for all people since kura (a long time ago), yeye (today) and boordwan (in the future) (Collard et al., 2000).

## Trilogy

Trying to interpret the meaning of place names is a complex and challenging exercise that draws on the Nyungar trilogy of knowledge (katitjin), country (boodjar) and people (moort) (Collard and Harben, 2010). These are the three tenants for establishing a Nyungar theoretical research framework that can help put into context how Nyungar knowledge is constructed, passed on and supported.

They are the three primary components that are essential to what it means to be a Nyungar. These three pillars of the theoretical trilogy enable the research structure for creating meaning within the context of Nyungar place names. The three are essentially intrinsic and one cannot apply one without utilising the others. The written-oral-aural-meaning technique (see Figure 1) allows engaging with all three at different level of perception, analysis and interpretation.

## Trilogy

Boodjar (or country) is the first critical theoretical notion and by focusing on a Nyungar country this enables a clear geographical boundary to be investigated. Using moort (or people but also meaning family, kin, relatives) is the second element that links the people from that country to the locality and therefore the place names being investigated. Finally following the katitjin (or knowledges) allows information to be collected in order to make understanding of the place, the people and the knowledge.

Therefore, it is fundamental for researchers investigating Nyungar people, places and ideas to appreciate the content, method and context of Nyungar theory as a basis for this research. Nyungar boordiers (or elders) and leaders play a role as custodians of all knowledges, both theoretical and practical which are to be passed on in oral or written forms. This cultural format continues the intergenerational link between Nyungar and between Nyungar and wedjelas using oral and written sources.

## Trilogy

As demonstrated with the case studies analysed, the knowledge (katitjin), country (boodjar) and people (moort) trilogy is a necessary tool in framing and interpreting the place names nomenclature as well as in navigating between the complexities of place in terms of space, time, history, geography, language and politics.

# CONCLUSION

The history of the relationships between settlers/colonisers and Indigenous Australians abounds with examples of antagonism, attacks, killings, massacres, imprisonments and mistreatment of Aboriginal people during the time of frontier conflict (Attwood and Foster, 2003). This history should be recognised and remembered through various means, including heritage registers of memorial sites (e.g. the Pinjarra Massacre Site in WA, Heritage Council of Western Australia, 2007). There are however examples of collaboration, co-existence and friendliness and they are the ones that should inform and enrich the future of Australia and its population. In fact, the preservation of Nyungar place names has resulted from such cooperation and there is need for much more research to understand what have since become obscure meanings.

All people, be they Nyungar or not, who live, work, visit or have any other connections to Western Australia now, use the Nyungar place names within the cartographic and geographical nomenclature of the Southwest. This is based upon and reflects the original language and terms used to describe the land and other related dreamtime narratives, in this part of Aboriginal Australia. It is used for naming cities, towns, railway sidings, rivers, streams, mountain ranges and any other nature phenomena that needed to be recorded in relation to meaning to a particular place. This is a clear testament to mediation between Nyungar and wedjela relationships of working together using Indigenous language to explore, collect and register the details of place for future generations. This is the foundational basis that created the culture of words in the lower western part of the Australian continent.

The research described in this paper is a small collaborative contribution towards creating what the Nyungar eloquently call our kallip – “a knowledge of localities, familiar acquaintance with a range of country, or with individuals” (Moore, 1978, Descriptive Vocabulary, Part I, p. 39).

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