

# The Pangs of the Ulstermen: An Exchangist Perspective

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Why is Cú Chulainn exempt from the curse of Macha in *Táin Bó Cuailgne*? In the present article, I attempt to resolve the issue of Cú Chulainn's exceptional status by nominating the curse of Macha and the naming of Cú Chulainn pre-narratives to the *Táin* as semantic inverses of each other. Specifically, I argue that the former narrative depicts the breaking of a contract between the third functional group and the combined forces of the first and second functions in Georges Dumézil's Indo-European social taxonomy; while the latter narrative, I suggest, charts the restoration of this same contract. On this basis, I then identify Macha's curse with the spiritual animation that, according to Marcel Mauss, accompanies all violations of social reciprocity.

## Introduction

For some time now the Twins of Macha episode in *Táin Bó Cuailgne* has been the object of a sustained – if somewhat sporadic – tradition of scholarship in Celtic and Indo-European studies. To give only the most representative examples, the pre-narrative sequence explaining the debility of the Ulster Warriors and nobles has thus far been interpreted as the relic of a couvade ritual by Marie-Louise Sjoestedt (1982), as a fertility drama by Tomás Ó Broin (1963) and as an example of magical immobilisation by J. F. Killeen (1974). While it cannot be doubted that all these interpretations have something useful to offer when it comes to analysing both the figure of Macha and her eponymous curse, they all fail, in their different ways, to give a definitive explanation of the phenomenon. In the first two interpretations, the central problem is that no ritualist explanation is capable of dealing with the fact that Macha's curse is clearly punitive in nature. The Ulstermen are cursed because they transgress against Macha, and correspondingly, any interpretation that cites the curse as a sympathetic drama designed to mimic or placate a fertility goddess is clearly at odds with the nature of their

affliction. In the latter case, the magical immobilisation thesis also fails to adequately engage with the target phenomenon, though for different reasons. Specifically, the immobilisation explanation is, on the one hand, trivial, because it is obvious from the outset that the debility of the Ulster warriors is magical in origin; while on the other, by identifying the debility's association with fertility as an "adventitious (and specifically Irish) element in the story" (Killeen 1974: 81), its proponent succeeds in ignoring the very feature that makes the affliction of the Ulstermen noteworthy in the first place.

In view of the failure of the three major interpretations to adequately engage with the debility of the Ulstermen, there is thus a clear opening for an alternative explanation that is sensitive to both the scope and the nature of the affliction. In the present article, I hope to arrive at just such an interpretation by utilising the exchangist framework developed by Marcel Mauss in his seminal work *The Gift* (1990). In particular, my aim is to show that the debility of the Ulstermen can be cognised as an example of the spiritual animation that Mauss identifies as attaching to objects involved in unreciprocated exchanges. In this connection, I will argue that two of the central pre-narrative episodes to the *Táin* – the Naming of Cú Chulainn and the Twins of Macha episodes – can be viewed as situations of exchange, to the extent that the first narrative can be interpreted from a Dumézilian perspective as the establishment of a contract of mutual protection and support between the sovereign, martial and productive categories of society; whereas the second, I will argue, depicts the converse situation in which the contract between the agrarian and the other two categories is violated.

While I expect that the identification of this inverted correspondence between the two relevant episodes will be of significance in its own right, where its real importance lies is in the fact that it allows for the debility of the Ulstermen to be situated in the normative economy that Mauss identifies as attaching to gift exchange. In particular, by cognising the narrative sequence detailing Macha's ordeal as the violation of a contract, it becomes possible to associate the Ulstermen's debility with the potentially harmful 'spirit' of an object that Mauss identifies as purportedly linking the object to its former owner when it is coveted by a third party in a non-reciprocated exchange. In the context of the Twins of Macha narrative, I

will argue that the coveted object corresponds to the productive capacities of Dumézil's third functional group. On this basis, I will suggest, following Mauss, that the debility of the Ulstermen takes the form it does because it evokes the fertility that the Ulster warriors and nobles have appropriated without making commensurate return. Following a similar logic, I will argue that Cú Chulainn's exemption from the curse of Macha is legislated for by his eponymous charter as the defender of the productive class. As the hound of Culann, the artisan, Cú Chulainn's adoption of his warrior-name can be interpreted as an agreement to defend the interests of the third functional group; and in this sense, he is party to an implicit contract where the goods he appropriates are returned by him in the form of services. Along the same lines, I will argue that the Ulster exiles, by allying themselves with Medb after Conchobar reneges on the guarantee of safety he gives to the three sons of Uisnech, place themselves in a similar situation to Cú Chulainn, to the extent that they preserve the contract between the first two and the third functions that is broken by Conchobar's avarice. In this way, I will account for the division between those who suffer from the pangs of Macha and those who do not by showing that the former category are linked to the exploitation of the agrarian caste, whereas the latter are bound to it in an implicit contract of mutual reciprocity.

Before proceeding with this analysis, however, one preliminary issue needs to be addressed – namely, the question of whether or not Dumézil's trifunctional analysis is sufficiently nuanced when it comes to analysing Celtic material. In this connection, it is worth noting that Nick Allen (1999, 1996) and Brinley and Alwyn Rees (1961) argue for a *pentadic* understanding of both Celtic and Indo-European ideology, in which Dumézil's three functions are supplemented by a bi-phasic fourth function that, in Allen's words, "pertains to what is other, outside or beyond, relative to the classical functions" (1999: 411). While it cannot be denied that this postulation of a purported fourth function goes some distance to resolving a number of problematic issues in Indo-European and Celtic scholarship, I will nevertheless forego it in what follows in favor of a traditional trifunctional analysis. This eschewal is not motivated by any *a priori* rejection of modifications to Dumézil's taxonomy, but simply by the fact

that, as Allen himself observes, “experiments with models are only interesting if they relate to the real world, or at least to the texts” (1999: 410). As will be seen below, that which the pentadic approach would postulate as being ‘other’ and ‘beyond’ the social hierarchy – the respective positions of Macha and Culann – is readily catered for by the standard trifunctional model when supplemented by Mauss’s account of exchange. Correspondingly, I do not anticipate that the utilisation of the purported fourth function in the projected analysis would add anything significant to the results; and from this follows my use of the standard Dumézilian framework.

With these preliminary considerations now dealt with, the only remaining task is to begin. In what follows, this will take the form of a brief exploration of the morality of exchange, which will then be followed by an analysis of the Twins of Macha and the Naming of Cú Chulainn episodes. Hopefully, the end result of this will be a more detailed understanding of two narrative sequences that are of central importance to any comprehensive interpretation of the *Táin*.

### **The Debility of the Ulstermen**

As suggested above, the first step in developing an exchangist understanding of the debility of the Ulstermen comes with an explanation of what the logic of exchange actually involves. In this regard, the position I will take here reflects that of Mauss when he argues that exchange is the constitutive act in generating social solidarity. Specifically, I will argue, to use Mauss’s formulation, that exchange is the principal means by which “peoples succeed in substituting alliance, gifts and trade for war, isolation and stagnation” (1990: 105). Considered from this point of view, it can easily be seen that what Mauss terms “the obligation, on the one hand, to give presents, and on the other to receive them” (1990: 17) is necessarily concomitant with the creation of bonds of intra-social solidarity, in that the giving and receiving of objects of value generates a series of transitive links that mutually obligate the involved individuals and groups to one another. While this observation is of obvious importance in its own right, Mauss goes a step still further and suggests that the normative charter governing exchange does not exist solely as an abstract moral precept, but is also reflected in the cosmological partitioning of the world into material and

spiritual substances. This much is implied when he argues that “[exchange] represents an intermingling. Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are” (1990: 25). As will be readily imagined, there is implicit in this account of exchange the notion of a spiritual animation attaching to the objects involved in the exchange. This is adverted to at greater length when Mauss discusses what he terms ‘the spirit of the thing given.’ Paraphrasing a Maori informant, Mauss claims that, for a participant in an exchange,

To retain that thing [the given object] would be dangerous and mortal, not only because it is against law and morality, but also because that thing coming from the person not only morally, but physically and spiritually, that essence, that food, those goods [...], those women or those descendants, those rituals or those acts of communion – all exert a magical or a religious hold over you. Finally, a thing given is not inactive. Invested with life, often possessing individuality, it seeks to return to [...] its ‘place of origin’ or to produce, on behalf of the clan and native soil from which it sprang, an equivalent to replace it. (Mauss 1990: 16)

In this remarkable quotation, it is clear that Mauss is delivering the basis for an anthropological theory of haunting. By outlining how, in pre-mercantile economies, the universal obligation to reciprocate all objects received is legislated for by a purported spiritual link between the donor and the donated object, Mauss identifies haunting with the spiritual animation of that thing or person which has been received but not reciprocated. In this scenario, what haunting corresponds to is the supernatural representation of the debt engendered by the failure to honour the logic of exchange. On this basis, it should thus be clear that, for Mauss, the imputed ontological division between men and spirits is derivable from the intra-social antagonism engendered by unreciprocated exchanges.

While these very general speculations may appear to have little initial application to the *Táin*, my suggestion here is that they express the basic ideological infrastructure that informs the structure of the Twins of Macha and the Naming of Cú Chulainn sequences. In particular, there is a clear emphasis in

both cases on acts of appropriation, where an actor arrogates some good or service in defiance of the generally accepted precepts of social morality. Moreover, depending on whether or not commensurate return is made for the act of appropriation, the actor in question is either tied into a situation of alliance or, alternatively, 'haunted' by the good or service that he has illegitimately appropriated. Insofar as this observation is correct, it thus follows that Mauss's identification of a single normative economy linking haunting, appropriation and alliance has a great deal to offer when it comes to analysing the ideological infrastructure of the *Táin*. Correspondingly, the immediate imperative now lies in going through each pre-narrative sequence in turn with a view to showing how they reflect the logic of exchange.

To begin with the Twins of Macha episode, the first step comes with recalling its salient details. In this connection, it will be remembered that this narrative sequence details how a rich peasant, Crunniuc or Crunnchu, takes a second wife of probable supernatural origin who runs his household with remarkable efficiency and productiveness. Some time later, Crunnchu goes to a fair where the Ulster nobles and warriors are gathered. In spite of his wife's warnings not to speak of her, he nevertheless claims in a moment of boastfulness that his wife is faster than the king's horses. Though heavily pregnant, Macha (who is Crunnchu's wife) is summoned and forced to race against the king's chariot to redeem her husband's boast. At the end of the race, Macha gives birth to twins, and while doing so, curses nine generations of Ulstermen (with the exception of Cú Chulainn, the boys and the women of Ulster) with an affliction that causes them to suffer the pangs of labor for five days and four nights in their times of greatest difficulty. The net result of this is that the warriors of Ulster become incapable of meeting the threat posed by the armies of Connacht when Medb invades in pursuit of the brown bull, and from this follows the relevance of the episode for the action of the *Táin*.

From the perspective of the broader symbolic resonances of this narrative, even the most superficial investigation reveals the most significant characteristic attaching to the figure of Macha is that of fertility. In terms of the internal details of the sequence, the superabundance of food, clothing and wealth during Macha's stewardship of Crunnchu's house

immediately testifies to her association with fertility, as does her pregnant state. Moreover, this association with fertility is augmented further when it is noted that she is pregnant with *twins*. At the most general level, Michael Jackson testifies to the significant role that twins play in mythologies the world over when he observes that “Twins, who are not age-differentiated, are thought to possess extraordinary powers because they are, so to speak, two persons in one” (1978: 345); but Bruce Lincoln perhaps comes closest to expressing the link between twins and fertility in the Indo-European context in his reconstruction of the Indo-European creation myth. For Lincoln, this myth purportedly involves “a primordial act of sacrifice in which the first priest, whose name was \**Manu* (“Man”) sacrificed his twin brother, the first king whose name was \**Yemo* (“Twin”), along with the first member of the bovine species” (1981: 224). While this reconstruction is highly speculative, Lincoln nevertheless succeeds in linking the primordial act of creation with the phenomenon of twinning, and in doing so, he clearly provides a precedent for associating the twins of Macha with the notions of fertility and creation. Moreover, in an equally speculative move, Alan Bruford (1989) argues for an identification of Macha’s progeny with the figures of Fergus and Oengus – two personalities who exhibit the characteristic traits of fertility in almost all of their representations (see Bruford’s own essay for a discussion on Oengus, and Sayers (1985) for a cognate exploration of the figure of Fergus). This notion of fertility is augmented even further when the external details to the narrative are examined. In particular, it is clear that the Macha of the *Táin*, as the third of the three Machas present in the insular Celtic tradition, can be associated with Dumézil’s third functional group, to the extent that the other two Machas are clearly representative of the magico-religious and martial spheres. As Proinsias Mac Cana observes: “Of the three Machas, one is a visionary, another a warrior, while the third is the telluric *materfamilias* who brings with her increase and fruitfulness” (1983: 88). Putting all of this together, what consequently emerges is that Macha can be clearly nominated as the bearer of fertility and all that it represents for an agrarian society.

This leads naturally to the second interesting feature of the Macha narrative, which is the notion of appropriation. From the outset, Macha’s traditional association with horses



equates her with a beast of burden, and consequently with the human exploitation of the animal world; but it is principally in the excessive nature of the ordeal she is put through that the acquisitive character of the Ulster warriors and nobles' actions becomes most explicit. In particular, by recounting how Macha has to run against the king's chariot at a time of conspicuous consumption – a fair – the narrative sequence quite clearly details a partisan appropriation of the products of the third functional group by the other two. In effect, the narrative delineates an act of primal acquisition in which the martial and regal components of the social order combine their forces in order to subdue the productive forces upon which society depends. In this regard, the Macha episode reproduces one of the central motifs of Indo-European mythology – namely, what J. P. Mallory identifies as the 'war of the functions.' As Mallory puts it:

Certain parallels concerning the Roman account of the Sabine War, the Norse myth concerning the war between the Aesir and the Vanir, and the Indic epic *Mahabharata* have proved support for a Proto-Indo-European 'War of the Functions' from which some have drawn important conclusions about the formation of the Proto-Indo-European community. Basically, the parallels concern the presence of the first-(magico-juridical) and the second-(warrior) function representatives on the victorious side of a war that ultimately subdues and incorporates third function characters. (Mallory 1989: 139).

While it is only fair to concede that the emergence of social hierarchies is hardly a specifically Indo-European phenomenon, it is nevertheless the case that the parallels listed by Mallory go some distance towards justifying C. Scott Littleton's claim that Proto-Indo-European society "involved the superimposition of a warlike, non-agricultural people on a weaker but technologically more advanced agricultural one" (1966: 196), even if Mallory himself resists this interpretation. In this context, what thus emerges is that the gratuitous action of the Ulstermen in forcing Macha to race merely for their amusement is not simply a barbaric caprice of the mythic imagination, but can instead be thought of as a local example of a wider Indo-European constellation of ideas relating to social solidarity, its creation and its destruction.



This discussion of the two relevant features of the Macha episode brings us naturally to the issue of her curse and its connection with the morality of exchange. Mauss, it will be remembered, observes that those who appropriate goods without making commensurate return are represented as being ‘haunted’ by the essence of those same goods. In particular, he highlights the magico-religious atmosphere attaching to the notion of contract even up to Roman times when he notes that “Almost all forms of contract and obligation, and a certain number of the forms these contracts take, seem to link up with that system of spiritual bonds created through the crude fact of *traditio*” (1990: 68). While it may seem that the purported war of the functions represents something stronger than just the violation of a contractarian morality, it is nevertheless the case that this is precisely what the nature of Macha’s curse suggests it to be. From an exchange perspective, the visitation of the pangs of a pregnant woman upon the Ulster nobles and warriors for a numerically significant five days and four nights can be clearly identified as the spiritual animation that, according to Mauss, attaches to unreciprocated exchanges. As the paradigmatic expression of fertility, the labour pains suffered by the Ulstermen explicitly evoke the sphere of production that is conventionally associated with Dumézil’s third function; and consequently, there can be little doubt that the nature and duration of the curse corresponds to the ‘haunting’ of the Ulstermen by the spirit of the goods they have appropriated. It is in this sense that the debility can be seen as the result of violating an implicit contract between the first two and the third functions. A contract, in essence, is the establishment of relations of mutual reciprocity between two parties, and consequently, the breaching of contract entails the consequences that attach to any form of unreciprocated exchange – namely, the activation of the restorative morality that demands all received goods to be reciprocated with goods of an equivalent nature. Considered from this perspective, what the curse of Macha can thus ultimately be thought of as is the symbolic expression of a contractarian ethic, in which the breakers of the contract – the Ulster warriors and nobles – suffer the consequences of violating the reciprocative morality that would otherwise tie them into a relation of mutual alliance and support with the very productive strata they

exploit.

### **The Naming of Cú Chulainn**

With the Curse of Macha episode now dealt with, it is time to move on to the second sequence that is of concern to my current purpose – the Naming of Cú Chulainn narrative. As I will show presently, this narrative represents the converse of the situation depicted in the Twins of Macha sequence, but before doing this, it is worth briefly recalling its main dimensions. Although not, strictly speaking, a pre-narrative to the *Táin* (it is recounted by the exiles during the *Táin* proper), the Naming of Cú Chulainn deals with the events behind how Cú Chulainn exchanged his birth name, Setanta, for his more famous warrior-name. The tale tells how when Cú Chulainn was a boy, king Conchobar was invited to a feast at the home of the smith, Culann. Meeting Setanta at play with the boys of Ulster, Conchobar invited him to the feast, but not yet having had his fill of sport, Setanta assures the king that he will follow the royal train later. After arriving at the feast, Conchobar forgets that he has invited Setanta, and Culann releases the fearsome hound that he uses to protect his property. Later in the evening, Setanta approaches Culann's house only to encounter the hound. Using his precocious warrior skills, Setanta kills the hound to the obvious distress of Culann, whose property is now without its protector. In order to make good the loss, Setanta agrees to defend Culann's homestead until he can find an equivalent whelp to take the place of the original hound, and from this follows his warrior-name of Cú Chulainn, or the hound of Culann.

When approaching this narrative sequence, the central question, as Jeffrey Gantz observes, is “why the central character of the Ulster Cycle, a figure whose divine origin is manifest, should have been given a name so much more appropriate to a mortal hero, especially when his original name suits him so well” (1981: 135). In response to this question, my claim here is that Cú Chulainn is awarded the name he has because, in direct contrast with the Twins of Macha sequence, his actions signal the establishment of an implicit contract between the first two and the third functions. Though Culann is not a herder-cultivator, his role as a smith clearly advertises his association with the productive capacities of Dumézil's third functional group; and consequently, his invitation to the

Ulster nobles provides the initial background for the establishment of a contract between the relevant categories. This is of course augmented by Cú Chulainn's resolution to provide protection for Culann and his household, which clearly symbolises a relation of reciprocity in which the martial strata of society protects the productive caste in return for goods and services<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, by viewing the narrative sequence from this perspective, it becomes possible to deliver a convincing explanation as to why Cú Chulainn on the one hand, and the Ulster exiles on the other, are exempt from the curse of Macha. In terms of Cú Chulainn, this is particularly important, because the extant reasons given for his exemption are somewhat unsatisfying. In the *Táin* itself, Fergus suggests that Cú Chulainn escapes the pangs of Macha because he is not from Ulster – an explanation that is sufficiently cryptic to more than justify Gantz's comment that the Macha narrative "has not been well integrated" (1981: 128) with the Ulster Cycle. Similarly, when Bruford argues that "Cú Chulainn, [...] as the son of the god Lug is not subject to the curse" (1989: 130), he ignores the significant tradition that nominates Cú Chulainn as the son of Conchobar through an incestuous union with his daughter. Against both of these interpretations, the contractarian view I argue for here explains Cú Chulainn's exemption from the curse on the basis of his agreement to defend the third functional group in the form of Culann's homestead. Just as the curse is originally motivated by the exploitation of the productive capacities of the third function in the person of Macha by the first two functions, Cú Chulainn's exceptional status derives from his willingness to reciprocate all received goods with his martial prowess; and consequently, he is immune to the effects of Macha's curse.

For equivalent reasons, the exemption of the Ulster exiles can also be explained as stemming from their willingness to engage in reciprocative behaviour. In their case, they challenge the avarice that characterises Conchobar's behaviour

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that the *Lebor na hUidre* (1996) version of the Naming of Cú Chulainn narrative has Setanta express initial reservations about his new name. On the interpretation advanced here, this reticence can be explained as an inherent unwillingness on the part of the singular warrior figure to go against his nature and substitute *reciprocation* for *exploitation*.

throughout the Ulster Cycle. Though the full details are too numerous to recall here, Conchobar is consistently nominated as being materially and socially acquisitive, even to the extent, as noted above, of purportedly violating the incest taboo, which, as Claude Lévi-Strauss observes, “expresses the transition from the natural fact of consanguinity to the cultural fact of alliance” (1969: 30). This avariciousness reaches its peak, however, when Conchobar deliberately compromises Fergus’s guarantee of safety for the sons of Uisnech by slaying them when Fergus is honor-bound to attend a feast. As a triple figure, the sons of Uisnech can, in this scenario, be interpreted as emblematic of the entire social order – an assertion that is ratified by Mac Cana when he notes that “It has been observed that triplication may have an intensifying force and that it may also convey the concept of totality” (1983: 43). In this context, what Conchobar’s actions represent is the supreme form of non-reciprocation, in that they correspond to one of the characteristic sins that Dumézil identifies in the Indo-European representation of kingship. In Dumézil’s words, these sins

destroy either the *raison d’être* of sovereignty, namely the protection of the order founded on truth (the sin of lying), or the mystical support for human sovereignties, namely the respect for the superior sovereignty of the gods and the sense of the limitations inherent in every human delegation of that divine sovereignty (the sin of pride). The king falls prey to one or the other of these risks, which [...] are at bottom the same thing. (Dumézil 1973: 111)

In essence, by treacherously killing the sons of Uisnech, Conchobar identifies himself as a singular figure who operates entirely outside the system of obligation and entitlement coextensive with ordinary social morality. Consequently, Conchobar is subject to ‘haunting’ by both the curse of Macha and the exiled warriors whose honour he has compromised, with the latter ‘haunting’ obviously coming in the form of the incursion of the Connacht armies and the exiles into Ulster. For similar but opposite reasons, the exiles escape Macha’s curse by both acting in accordance with the demands of social solidarity and allying themselves with Medb, who, as a fertility figure, carries some of the associations of the third

functional group<sup>2</sup>. In this way, they become party to the same type of contract that links Cú Chulainn to the productive strata of society, and correspondingly, they escape the debility afflicting their former comrades in arms.

### Conclusions

Putting all of this together, what thus emerges is that the Twins of Macha and the Naming of Cú Chulainn sequences represent semantic inverses of each other. Though both narratives concern themselves with exchange and contract, the first deals with a violation of the exchange morality responsible for intra-social solidarity, while the second details the way in which this exchange ethic functions to create ties of alliance between the different strata of society. In this latter regard, there can be little doubt that the verisimilar surface content of each narrative masks a deeper set of correspondences that have a significant bearing on any assessment of the Indo-European provenance of the ideology expressed in the *Táin*. In particular, by outlining the consequences of failing to maintain relations of reciprocity between the regal, martial and productive components of society, the pre-narrative sequences to the *Táin* act as a type of moral charter that extols the virtues of a reasonably egalitarian arrangement of mutual support between the three estates. Moreover, because no pre-mercantile society is capable of building up such an arrangement except through exchange, the negative effects of failing to do so are expressed entirely through the morality of gift giving and receiving as it is described by Mauss. While it is certainly possible to extend this analysis further and deliver a more comprehensive assessment of the role played by exchange and its associated morality in both the *Táin* proper and the other pre-narrative sequences, the size of such an undertaking obviously makes it impractical here. For now, my aim will have been achieved if I have managed to cast light on some of the more puzzling aspects of

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<sup>2</sup>Admittedly, Medb also carries associations with the first function, which makes any unequivocal identification of her with the third function problematic. Nevertheless, this situation is not unprecedented in trifunctional analysis. As Allen observes: “Dumézil himself sometimes presents individual entities as ‘transfunctional’, that is, as manifesting a synthesis of all the functions” (1999: 404). In this sense, Medb, as queen, can be interpreted as a composite figure with more than one functional association.

the Twins of Macha and Naming of Cú Chulainn episodes in *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.

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