IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

Centering Indigenous Voices in the Climate Movement with Aimee Roberson and Tristan Ahtone

Cultural Survival executive director Aimee Roberson, and Tristan Ahtone, editor-at-large for Grist, join Charles Blow for a conversation on the importance of centering Indigenous voices when it comes to finding and implementing solutions for climate change.

ANNOUNCER: Please welcome to the stage, Charles Blow.

[applause]

[Charles Blow, a Black man with a gray beard wearing a black suit, host]

CHARLES BLOW: Welcome to “Ideas at Ford,” where we bring together some of the world's best thinkers and activists to tackle some of the world's biggest problems. And tonight, we are talking about centering Indigenous voices in the climate movement. And I am joined by Aimee Roberson, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and executive director of Cultural Survival. And Tristan Ahtone, a member of the Kiowa tribe and editor-at-large at Grist.Thank you both for joining me. I want to start with a big question, but also kind of a baseline question, which is why is the intersection of Indigenous rights and climate so inextricably linked, and why is it something that we must discuss and explore? I'll start with you, Aimee.

[Aimee Roberson, a Choctaw and Chickasaw Native American woman of mixed heritage with dark hair wearing a maroon shirt and beaded earrings, Executive Director, Cultural Survival]

AIMEE ROBERSON: Okay. Thanks. Indigenous people are those with a cultural memory of a sustainable way of life on the land base their ancestors occupied. And so if we think about what it means to be Indigenous, most Indigenous cultures and communities around the world are based on kind of core principles that include things like respect, relationship, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution. And so these core values are embedded into our cosmovisions, the way we see the world, into our teachings and our stories that guide us. And so there are people who adhere to these traditional values to this day, people living a life of indigeneity, living close to Mother Earth, in a respectful relationship.

And so we, you know, it's estimated that maybe around a quarter of the world's forests are stewarded by Indigenous people. And so these relationships of active, active relationships of caring for the environment, of caring for the ecosystems that also nurture us and give us life, is part of how we live sustainably. Right. And so, even so, like these lifeways are under constant threats in today's world, through unchecked development, sort of greed based extractivist

economies coming to extract resources from Mother Earth. And so Indigenous people, as the original caretakers of our lands and waters, have also had to become fierce guardians of the environment who've had to stand up to protect us, try to say no, to unchecked development. And in many cases, this has led to them being in danger, being under surveillance, facing systemic violence, and in some cases, even murder. And so, if you talk to people who—Indigenous people who are defending their lands and waters and putting their lives on the line, you know, many of them will tell you that they didn't set out to be activists, that they were forced into that, to protect their people, their, their homes, their communities, their families. And so, in order for Indigenous people to continue to protect ecosystems, we have to protect them. We have to protect their human rights. We have to protect their collective rights as Indigenous communities.

CHARLES BLOW: Tristan, same question.

> [Tristan Ahtone, a Kiowa man with dark skin, brown hair and a floral sunflower jacket on, editor-at-large, Grist]

TRISTAN AHTONE: Well, first, thanks for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. Yeah. Building on what Aimee said, you know, as reporters, we're always, we cover climate at Grist. We're a climate-focused outlet. And obviously, one of the reasons that we cover climate is it's the biggest story of—on the planet, right? We're at crisis level when it comes to climate change and the impacts of climate.

And again, building on what Aimee said here, I run our Indigenous Affairs reporting desk. And when we're thinking about climate, we obviously want to think a lot about solutions. And I think one of the things that we come up with in our reporting is that Indigenous peoples offer some of the best solutions out there when it comes to dealing with climate change.

So that means that we have to examine all the different areas of how climate change and those climate solutions really impact Indigenous communities. A lot of our focus is, yeah, over development. A lot of it is on the green transition and how it impacts Indigenous communities. And really, I think one of the things that we are always thinking about is, “How is climate change impacting Indigenous peoples?” But also, “How are the solutions to climate change impacting Indigenous peoples?”

CHARLES BLOW: Aimee, I want you to build on that comment, and some of what you said in, in your first answer. First, I'm going to have to come back to “cosmovisions,” and you've got to explain to us what that means, because it's such a great term. But also, how do we get to the point where the climate movement feels patriarchal, that it also feels that we are trying to unlearn rather than learn from?

AIMEE ROBERSON: Yeah, that's a big question. So the first part. So, Indigenous cosmovisions, right? This is in Indigenous peoples, we all have our stories of how we came to be, of how the world came to be and how, you know, what our relationship with the world is. And

so our cosmovisions tell us our perspectives on how to be in right relationship with each other, with Mother Earth, and with all the life forms, entities, and flows around us, whether it's the water or the rocks or the birds or the trees, it's all important.

We all have a role to play. It's the stories that guide us to adhere to these core values that teach us how to live sustainably, and how to be in right relationship with the Earth. They're very place based. They're very specific to the ecosystem system that we live in. I think what's come with colonization is that people, separated themselves from place. They separated themselves from Mother Earth and started to see people as somehow separate from nature.

And so that separation, I think, is what has led people to lean away from more collective ways of being, from really tuning into the environment and understanding our place and our role, how it nurtures us, and how we nurture in return. With Western ideology and ways of thinking, there's the separation of, like, humans from nature. And there's also a lot of, sort of siloing of ideas, science. You know, I'm trained in Western science as well, but it's very much about siloing things, of separating things.

CHARLES BLOW: You once said that a professor told you, “You either have to be a scientist or kind of, more spiritually connected to the Earth.”

AIMEE ROBERSON: Right? So, when I was working on my master's degree in conservation biology, I took an ecology class, and it was actually the teacher's aide who was asserting that you can't be an environmentalist if you're an ecologist. And to me, that made no sense because I was like, “Why would I spend so much time studying ecology and trying to understand how the earth works, how nature works, if I didn't care about it?” Right? And so she was trying to say, I think, that you have to be objective. But we know that, you know, objectivity is something that's highly valued in Western science. But we also know that Western science even tells us that it's, it's not true. It's an illusion. So quantum physics tells us that when a particle is observed, it's impacted by the observer, right. So even science disproves itself in a way. And I don't want to say that scientific thinking and the scientific method is not useful. I think it is. And I think it can work in tandem with other ways of knowing. You know, conservation has sometimes been the spear point of colonization where it's removed Indigenous people from the land with this idea that wilderness is somehow pristine and untouched by humans, which is really the opposite of what we think of as Indigenous people being in relationship, and the importance of that relationship. And so, you know, the paternalism that you mentioned, Western science have contributed to the mess that we're in now. Right? This trajectory of climate change and environmental degradation that's going to—if it's not already touching you, it will be soon. And the trajectory is not good.

CHARLES BLOW: I love your phrase of science living in connection with other ways of knowing, it’s kind of beautiful, Tristan, Grist started in 1999. Nonprofit newsroom solely focused on reporting on the effects of climate change. Since then, other mainstream newsrooms have expanded their climate coverage. Although you still lay claim to being the, quote, “largest and

most experienced climate focused newsroom in the country." We want to give a round of applause for that.

[applause]

As you say on your website, just like one person cannot solve climate change alone, Grist cannot do its work alone. What more can other media do to raise awareness and better inform the public about this issue?

TRISTAN AHTONE: This is the story of the planet right now. This is impacting everybody on the planet in some way or another. Right? And I think the big thing that Grist does very well, and especially on our Indigenous Affairs desk too, is that we try to find ways to help you connect to climate change. You need to understand how it's impacting, like, your life on a day-to-day basis or your neighbors or somebody in your city or your state or wherever. The thing that we do very, very well is put people at the center of our climate coverage.

CHARLES BLOW: Before you go on, "to put people at the center of your climate coverage," what does that mean?

TRISTAN AHTONE: I think that when it comes to being able to do good reporting it's really good storytelling. I mean, I often say that like, you know, journalism is the creative use of reality. We're still bound by ethics. We're still factual on what we do. But at the same time, you know, I can tell you that climate change is happening, but it's different to tell you that there's a particular peach that's cared for by Indigenous people, and there's only 12 trees left, and they're endangered because of climate change, right? Like, these are two different things with topic and story, basically. So I think the thing about what other news organizations can do is really think about what story looks like, think about how climate, how people engage with climate, and how, basically, people engage with even news or story if, or generally. I mean, as a reporter, I have to—you know, I have to compete with TikTok and Instagram and 100 other outlets. I really need to get your attention quickly, you know, and I need you to stay there, and I need you to care. So it's a really big sort of, like, Olympic gymnastics sort of routine to get you to the end of the story. And I think that's something that we do well, and I think that's something that reporters generally do well a lot of the time.

But in terms of thinking about climate, we do something differently in terms of thinking about beats inside of climate, you know? So climate is the overarching umbrella topic that we cover. My team covers Indigenous affairs and how climate impacts Indigenous communities and peoples. When it comes to other outlets, a lot of times it's, it's sort of sliding climate into already existing coverage. To some degree, I think it doesn't matter how you want to go about doing it as long as you're doing it. I mean, it's important that we're having these conversations and it's important to be thinking critically beyond trying to inform audiences that this is happening, into areas of, of, much harder topics to deal with. Everything, again, from green transition to conservation, these are all critical areas that have deeply controversial areas that need to be

discussed. And really huge ideas that audiences need to sort of be aware of in order to grapple with the complexity of climate change and what, and what solutions can look for in climate.

CHARLES BLOW: Do you find the storytelling aspect of it helps to break through the numbing effect of it being such a big problem? People feel like often overwhelmed. And I think people can numb out. Do this, does this approach of, “Story first, people first,” do you feel like that leaps over that numbness?

TRISTAN AHTONE: I mean, I hope so. You know, I think, again, what I like dealing with and I think what my team likes dealing with are the ideas. So you have people, you have people-focused stories. But, you know, to some degree, I like somebody to read a feature that we do and come out on the other end with feeling, right? Like I don't want somebody to come out of the story feeling depressed or down or not empowered to be able to take some sort of action. But I do want somebody to be actually engaged and challenged by the story, right? So we talked about solutions earlier. And, for those—I'm not sure folks here are familiar with the idea of, like, solutions journalism, the idea that we can tell happier stories by telling stories about people who are doing positive things, right? I think there's some value in that. But at the same time, I don't think that it necessarily challenges a reader to make a difference in the world. And I don't—and if you pick a paper straw over a plastic straw, that is progress. If you walk away thinking maybe I should be calling my senator, that's progress, right?

Like it doesn't matter. No matter how small the thing is that you do, it's important. What I want to see happen with the work that I do is that people are engaged, people are thinking, and people come out of it with a more complicated view of the world that challenges them to actually think critically about what the next steps are. When it comes to dealing with climate, the more critical thinking that's going into it and more discussion that's happening between people, the closer we get to actually reaching points where we can hit—where we can turn tipping points backwards.

CHARLES BLOW: Aimee, Tristan talked about impacts on Indigenous peoples, and I want to stay on that. So many Indigenous communities around the planet are in sensitive ecosystems: the Arctic, the Andes mountains, Amazon, deserts, riversides, coastlines. It puts them at a heightened risk from whatever climate events are on the horizon. Some scientists have estimated that they face displacement at seven times the rate as the global population. What are some of the interventions that can help to mediate this problem for Indigenous peoples?

AIMEE ROBERSON: It's really critical to ensure that Indigenous peoples are able to stay on their lands, are able to manage their waters, and continue to steward their ecosystems, because if they're able to do that, they're much more likely to not be displaced. You know, we know that climate change is not the only threat to Indigenous peoples, but tends to exacerbate other issues.

Whether it's extractivism, overdevelopment, systemic violence and oppression, it's all exacerbated by climate change, just making things more chaotic. And so it's, it's important that, that their land rights be intact and be protected. I think it's also important, you know, one of the

things we do at Cultural Survival is to support—we work in solidarity with Indigenous communities around the world, and we support them through a variety of means: through grant making, through capacity building, advocacy, and communications to help them to revitalize their cultures and lifeways, their traditional governance systems, their languages. You know, we talked about cosmovisions and Indigenous languages are what hold our cosmovisions. The way our languages are structured instruct us about, you know, how we're in relationship with the world.

And so, you know, protecting those rights, I think, is really important. Also, like, recognizing that, immigrants rights are really important, too, because people are being displaced. And a lot of the immigrants that come to this country, either from Latin America or other places in the world, many of them are Indigenous peoples that are being displaced because of climate conditions, extreme drought or flooding, or extractivism or political instability or violence, or a combination of all of these things. And so those are Indigenous people too that are now in the diaspora. They're looking for a place that they can be, you know. Traditionally before colonization, many Indigenous peoples had the opportunity to move around as, as there were fluctuations in the climate. And so that was an inherent part of being in connection with the land. And so I think we need to recognize that that's a human reality and always has been. So I think protecting both human rights, but also the collective rights of communities to move if they need to is really critical.

CHARLES BLOW: Tristan, this idea that Aimee brings up about extractivism and overconsumption, all this, just an offshoot of capitalism. And in 2019, you gave an interview with—at the Global Landscape Forum in Bonn, in which you said the big question was, “How do these Indigenous rights, how could you advocate for them when it's operating in that capitalism?” And at the time you said, you know, you needed to think about it more to really be able to make such a big statement. So six years later, how are you thinking about whether or not this—whether or not this conservation concept and Indigenous rights can live alongside capitalism?

TRISTAN AHTONE: You're asking if I did my homework. Mostly, yes. You know, I think, you know, and it is one of the things that we think about in our reporting, is that if we're actually going to think about solutions to climate, we need to have everything on the table. We need to be able to interrogate anything and everything that is going to make a difference in terms of reversing climate change, right?

That includes our current economic system. It means that we need to be thinking critically about, is this going to be working for us? Does capitalism work for the environment? I mean, the evidence is clear that it's, “No.” Study after study has said that—that this is not a viable way to run the planet if we're going to keep it alive. Maori scholar Kera Sherwood-O'Regan, who had, who has this analogy of “Climate change is essentially the tabletop.” And there's all these other legs that keep it in place. Right? So capitalism is one, like ableism is one, like sexism, racism. You have all of these different sort of “isms” that keep climate change in place. And I think the idea behind that is that, let's say, for instance, with the technology invented tomorrow that

removes all the carbon from the atmosphere, reverses everything the technological solution is there.

Climate change will be replaced by something else. The “something else” will come along in its place that will be just as detrimental to the planet. When all of these different legs are still in place, basically. Which is why we have to be, as reporters, asking difficult questions about, “What are we doing, why are we doing it, and is there an alternative?”

So yeah, the answer to your question is like, “Can conservation exist alongside capitalism?” Absolutely not. There's no possible way in which an economic system that values constant production and overproduction is ever going to be able to fix climate. Capitalism causes climate change. We're not going to, you know, capitalism our way out of climate change. It's not going to work. I am not an economist. I, you know, but I think that, again, having those questions and having those conversations are absolutely vital. And if those are conversations that readers cannot have, or folks cannot have about, “Well, this is the one thing we won't touch,” then we have a deeper problem where we're actually involved in a cult, not an economic system.

CHARLES BLOW: I'm not gonna let you get out of this by saying you're not an economist. We're in America. It's a capitalist society. What do you think America can do in particular? I mean, capitalism is a global phenomenon, but what should this country do differently?

TRISTAN AHTONE: Well, I think to Aimee's point here, for instance, just being able to engage in any, any sort of basic human rights already start to undermine that system. Right? So being able to protect land tenure for Indigenous peoples—making sure that it is actually protected, making sure that it is, it is more or less the, for lack of a better word, the property of the tribe. Right? The tribe is, the tribal nation is able to do what they need to with that land to protect it in the way that they want to. You know, this already starts to undermine those systems very quickly when we have any sort of fundamental rights in the United States. So, we don't even need to talk about economics right now if we're just going to talk about fundamental human rights that people need and Indigenous peoples need.

AIMEE ROBERSON: Please if I could jump in, I'm, you know, as an ecologist and understanding ecological systems, you know, these are our life-support systems. This is what we exist within. And we know from ecology that exponential growth, which capitalism is based on—is betting on—is not sustainable. It's—it won't last forever. And so, you know, to just simply recognize that there are systems that we can learn from that are based on natural laws that we exist within, to just simply start having these conversations like we're having now.

It's not that, you know, we necessarily have all the answers at hand, but if we start thinking in that way and realizing that we can learn from these systems and look at these artificial systems that have been created, these economies based on exponential growth, and, and, frankly, greed, you know, that people want more and more and more, the people at the top are concentrating the resources and hoarding power.

We're not all in positions of power to make changes immediately, but we all have some power. We have purchasing power. We have voting power. How are we enacting that power in light of this reality, that we are in an unsustainable system that cannot go on? Exponential growth is an illusion.

TRISTAN AHTONE: And I would say, just to add to this, there's a really—there's a fantastic, Sámi scholar from Norway, Liisa-Rávná Finbog, who has recently put out a paper, that has been a huge inspiration in thinking about this, is the idea of the green transition and having a sustainable future. What she argues, and I hope I'm not paraphrasing it too poorly here, but you know, what she argues is that when we're thinking about a sustainable future—green energy, everybody's driving EVs—what we're actually talking about is how do we sustain the status quo now? Like, how do we sustain capitalism now? By engaging with all of these sort of systems and ideas that will help us have a sustainable future? So again, all of those little legs are in place. It still requires, it still requires, extractive industries.

We are always basically putting off the impacts to another part of the world. And at this point now, what we're saying, at least in our reporting, is that when it comes to the green future and green transition, it's Indigenous peoples that are paying the most for it. So the people who have contributed the least to climate change are now the ones being asked to sacrifice the most when it comes to land, culture, resources, etcetera, so that we don't have to plug our phones in less so that—so that we don't have to have a bus system in Texas. Right? Like these are all the things that we are more or less being asked to sacrifice our lives for so that nobody has to change anything.

CHARLES BLOW: You can clap for that.

[applause]

So you're both in town for the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. How is this message of needing to radically shift our thinking, deconstruct our capitalist concepts, how is that landing? Aimee?

AIMEE ROBERSON: I think, you know, the power of continuing to come to these spaces is that Indigenous people are building solidarity. They're starting to get their messages out there. They're coming together to build strategies on how to hold nation states accountable. How to get more people aware of these issues that we're discussing. How to protect their lives and their families and their communities. You know, it's all interwoven. So it's amazing to hear. It's very powerful messages. But I do wonder sometimes who, who's listening, and who's going to act on that. You know, the implementation has been uneven. So we have to keep working.

CHARLES BLOW: So Tristan, as a journalist, what are you observing as to how this message is landing and who's actually listening?

TRISTAN AHTONE: We had ten reporters here last week, and editors that were working to cover the events and some of the stories that come out of here. It can be very difficult work for reporters to make sure that, you know, a particular report that's being discussed has relevance to a reader. But I think the thing that really inspires me the most about being in here and trying to think about who is listening is thinking that our readers are other Indigenous readers. And thinking about what they're going to be able to get out of that, that sort of second hand sort of solidarity and, and companionship and knowing that there are people who are doing this work.

All of us that are here—so we're running an initiative called the Indigenous News Alliance. It's a group of Indigenous news outlets from around the world and Indigenous Affairs desks, that we pool all of our coverage and we share all of our stories and resources while we're up here. And I think the thing that we always think about is how we're practicing notions of Indigenous journalism. So, and that's the idea that, you know, we're working for self-determination and sovereignty. We do our work very similarly to Western journalists and American journalists, for that matter. But I think where we divert, diverge from many of our colleagues is this idea that, you know, American journalists are very into the idea of sort of, like, working for democracy. We work for democracy, we're—you know, First Amendment, you know, we're the only job that's protected by the constitution, right? We're trying to sort of like state documents here. And Indigenous journalists, because Indigenous peoples do not descend from the same legal background. We practice, you know, that idea of self-determination and sovereignty we practice. How are we going to report a story that is going to be good for our Indigenous readers, but are also not couching it in, you know, any sort of state documents, or ideas or, you know, foreign policy for that matter, or anything like that. So I think that's what makes us different. But again, thinking of how we do that, we are interested in being able to report on human rights.

We're interested in reporting on how Indigenous people are advocating for their rights. And in the U.N. space, it's, you know, on some levels, it's aspirational, right? It's an aspirational space about what could be possible. But again, you know, when discussing this with even, like, American journalists, I mean, democracy is aspirational. But so are human rights. And so is, you know, the idea of Indigenous rights. And I think it's important that we are able to report from that perspective. Not necessarily in an advocacy role, because that's not really what we do as journalists. But knowing that, like, this is a thing that could be possible, and this is the world that we could have, we think it's important to give it the attention that it deserves and treat it with the respect that it deserves.

CHARLES BLOW: You mentioned your Indigenous readers—and it sparked a question for me, which is, to what degree are you writing for Indigenous people as your audience? And to what degree are you illuminating the values, traditions, lives of Indigenous so that other people can come to understand those people and their values?

TRISTAN AHTONE: Yeah. I mean, I'll actually start with the second part of your question. I mean, for us as Indigenous reporters or at least on the Grist desk, you know, we look for story, but we really make sure that we don't cover things like ceremony or traditions or cultures necessarily, unless it's absolutely vital to the story. There's been a long tradition in sort of

Western journalism as, oftentimes veering from journalism into anthropology. So it's something that we're very conscious of, and it's something that we're thinking of is that we have to when the story is out, our sources are going to read it. And if they read it and they're having to sort of like see themselves performing their Indigeneity, it's something that we really try to like, be very, very careful of. But with that in mind too, thinking of Indigenous readers, we need our readers to be surprised. If we do a story on Navajo Nation, we need that person or those sources that we've talked to to come to the story and learn something new. They can't come to it like—we never want our readers to come to one of our stories and say, like, “I knew everything there. Thanks for showing up.” Right? That's not valuable. So this is how we think about it. But, there are a lot of reporters out there that have made good careers and, and actually do good, very good work and sort of explaining Indigenous people to non-Indigenous people, right? There's—there is a lot of value on that.

It's just not a value that I really want to engage with personally. Because I want to make sure that our Indigenous readers in, you know, Aotearoa are getting something out of our story, or, you know, Seminole Nation in Florida or, you know, whoever it is, it still means that there are things that I need to explain. But it also means that there are a lot of things that I don't have to skip over or that I can skip over, because we have similar histories of colonization, and similar histories that we share in terms of, of when we get together, we know what our shared histories are, even if the country that colonized us is different or the language, or whatever. So this is what I think about when we're talking about Indigenous readers, is that there are still a lot of things that we need to explain, but we don't ever want to do it in a way that feels like we're trying to explain ourselves to non-Indigenous people, or perform for non-Indigenous people, basically, we want to be unapologetically reporting Indigenous stories for Indigenous peoples.

CHARLES BLOW: With our last few minutes, I'm going to ask the question that I try to ask at the end of all of these, which is what in this space gives you hope? And I'll start with you, Tristan.

TRISTAN AHTONE: I think the hope that I continue to hold on to here is that it's always the right time to make change. And no matter how deep into the problem you are or how far into the, the issue you are, there's always a chance to say, to. to stop and to turn around and say that, that it's time to make a difference.

And I, unfortunately, am a true believer in journalism. It's ruining my life. And I don't think that journalism is going to change the world. But I do think that, you know, when we're having difficult discussions about difficult stories and whatnot, it can inform those conversations.

But again, all of that is to say that people can change. People have the power to make change. I think we're all empowered to be working together to make change. And there's no time better than now to do that.

CHARLES BLOW: And, Aimee.

AIMEE ROBERSON: Yeah, I think what really gives me hope is that there continue to be Indigenous peoples and communities living sustainable lifestyles, lifeways, now, around the world. Like this is not a thing of the past. This is our current reality. And that those people, by coming to the U.N. or speaking out in other ways, many of them are willing to, to share about what that means, to embrace their Indigeneity and to live by those values. And so, you know, I like to think that we all, all of us, all humans, have Indigenous roots somewhere. Some of us are just further removed from them. But we have these incredible opportunities to learn from current examples, to learn from Indigenous leaders. About how to come back into balance with Mother Earth, about how to come back into relationality, and to together create a better future. It's entirely possible. So that's what gives me hope.

CHARLES BLOW: Well, I want to thank both of you for being here tonight. I really appreciate it.

[applause]

CREDITS

Host
Charles Blow

Executive Producer
Matthew Creegan

Video Director / Producer
Claire Kinnen

Producer
Soriya Chum

Director of Photography
Justin Ott

Camera
Andrew Pietranek
Alex Sierra
Zvonimir Vidusin

Editor
Robert Halstead

Graphic Design
David Perrin

Copy Editor

Meredith Clark

Audio Visual Team
William Guiracocha
Matt Menafro
Brendan Metz

Makeup Artist
Belinda Salazar

Music
De Wolfe

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