

The Cajuns of Louisiana: From Americanization to Globalization

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It is tempting to think of the culture of the American South as primarily British and African in origin, but one distinctive exception can be found in the broad, triangular-shaped region of south Louisiana west of New Orleans. On the map of Louisiana, the northern angle is Alexandria, the western angle is Lake Charles and the eastern angle is the mouth of the Mississippi River (Maps 3-5). Covering the lower third of the state of Louisiana—and independent of the city of New Orleans which became the birthplace of jazz—is the land of the Cajuns, a land consisting of prairie in the north and the Atchafalaya swamp and coastal marshlands along the Gulf of Mexico.

The Cajuns originated in west central France, the area around what is now La Rochelle and the Loire River valley (Map 1). To escape religious wars, famines and a series of epidemics, in the first half of the 1600s, peasants from this area migrated to “New France,” the area now known as Nova Scotia, Canada.

The greater portion of these French immigrants were industrious, frugal and bound together by an intricate extended family system, French language and Catholic faith, and they shared an abiding attachment to the land they farmed. They called their new homeland “La Cadie,” from the local Native American word for “land of plenty.” Gradually the name changed to “l’Acadie” in French and “Acadia” in English (Map 2). All went well for them until British influence in North America extended to Acadia and they came under increasing pressure to

give up their French language and Catholic beliefs and declare loyalty to the British monarch—which for the men meant serving in the British army, and perhaps fighting against either the local Native Americans or the French colonists.

Some left of their own accord, but in 1755 the British forcibly deported those who remained. Some moved to Haiti, the Carolinas and Georgia, and others of their own accord drifted back to France. But wherever they went, they maintained their new identity and managed to maintain contact with fellow “Acadiens”—for they were no longer French peasants; they were now a new people, once again looking for a land to settle in.

By 1765 the first Acadiens settled in Louisiana, which the French had founded in 1682, a land that welcomed the French-speaking Catholics. Word went out around the Atlantic region that some of their compatriots had found a place where they were welcome, and fellow Acadiens began to arrive from Canada, France, the Caribbean and the southern British colonies in North America. They settled in the triangle of lands west of the mouth of the Mississippi River, along the two main rivers called Bayou Teche and Bayou Lafourche and in the prairie lands to the west of these bayous. For the most part, in the new land they built their houses in such a way that they lined the banks of the watercourses, rather than huddling together in hamlets. This pattern was partially dictated by geography and partially by the shape of land grants offered by the Spanish, who ruled the region at that time, offered to the new immigrants.

Nearly all early settlement along the southern Mississippi River and the bayous of Louisiana was along natural levees of the rivers. Padgett (483) points out that ironically, the highest land was actually that closest to the river banks, where silt and sand was deposited from the natural overflow of the rivers in the spring. Beyond this natural levee, the land sloped gently into swamps where timber could be harvested and animals trapped.

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The government granted “long-lot” plots of land to the immigrants, narrow on the riverbank but extending far back into the swampland, indirectly stimulating the newcomers to take up farming, fishing and trapping to support themselves, as only one of the three would be insufficient (Padgett 484). As generations passed, these long plots were divided lineally among the children, meaning that one’s neighbors were usually part of a huge extended family, bordered by other extended families. This had the impact of reinforcing the closeness of family and neighbor ties in the region.

The land was too low to allow for construction of roads—except along the top of the levees—so most travel was by water, aboard canoe-like “pirogues” and the flat-bottomed rowboat-like “bateaux.” All these factors contributed to building close relations with others along the same waterway, a major difference with the independent plantations and isolated farms of most of the rest of the American South.

Finding that most of the older French colonists had already established themselves along the banks of the Mississippi around and above New Orleans, the new arrivals sought a home in the lands to the west of the city. For this and other reasons, for the most part, the newly arrived Acadiens maintained their distance from the Creoles, the descendants of the French immigrants who had settled in New Orleans. In its broadest sense, “creole” means “native to Louisiana”, as opposed to immigrants who settled there. In a narrower sense, it means “descendants of the French and Spanish.”

The French Creoles considered the Acadiens to be peasants, while many Acadiens considered the Creoles to be aristocratic snobs (Bankston 1333). So despite the fact that both groups spoke French and practiced Catholicism, they in general did not blend together. True enough, some Acadiens aspired to join the plantation society of the French Creoles and to climb the ladder of success toward

the gentry, but for the most part the Acadiens were content to work their own land, trap wildlife and fish in order to provide for their families.

While they had been dry-land farmers and ocean fishermen in Canada, in the swamps and marshlands of what would one day become Louisiana, they became fishermen and trappers and in the prairies north of the coastline they raised corn, rice, sugarcane and cattle. While the rest of the South rather strictly adhered to ethnic and cultural lines, the Acadiens interacted and intermarried with their neighbors, except with their black neighbors. Some intermarried with Native Americans as well as with German, Spanish, Anglo-American, Irish and Scottish immigrants. The closest their English-speaking neighbors could come to pronouncing “Acadien” was “Cajun” and that is the name under which they came to be known.

Distinctive Cajun culture was maintained by both the relative difficulty of transportation into and out of the region except by small boats—roads being difficult to build and maintain—and the recognition of the power of cooperation and sharing. The people were more than willing to participate in cooperative undertakings like building houses both because they knew their neighbors would help them at some later time and because such gatherings were accompanied by good food and drink. In fact, Cajuns were often said to live to eat. Such gatherings were usually celebrated with the typical soupy stew of the Cajuns known as *gumbo*, a delicious dish which is often used as a metaphor for Cajun culture because it is based on brown *roux* (French), thickened with okra (African) and sassafras (Native American), and includes local game and seafood (Louisianan).

The fundamental cooperative spirit of the Cajuns was apparent in the *boucherie*, or country butchery. Anywhere from 24 to 48 participants would, in turn, contribute a hog or cow to be butchered. Arriving at the site of the

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butchering early on Saturday morning, they would butcher the animal and by evening each participant would take home his portion to his family. Because Louisiana is subtropical and meat would last only a few days back when there was no refrigeration, this cooperative system provided meat to a large number of households on a regular basis. Twenty-four participants meant that each provided an animal on a particular Saturday morning and they all had meat for 24 weeks (Post 135). The weekly Saturday butchering also served as an occasion to exchange community news.

If an unfortunate farmer fell sick, and if he was in good standing in his community, his neighbors would gather for a *piocherie*, a hoeing bee, in which everyone would help the sick person by hoeing his entire field for him. The recipient made no cash payment for this help, but instead provided a feast for dinner, which in this case was actually the noon meal (Post 137).

Being rural dwellers who lived a subsistence livelihood, the Cajuns had little entertainment except what they themselves provided, so Saturday night neighborhood dances became an extremely important event. In the 19th century, neighbors took turns sponsoring these gatherings. The sponsoring family of the *bal de maison* (house dance) would invite families from up and down the bayou or the closest road several miles in each direction. The family would move all of the furniture out of the largest room of their house, to make room for perhaps a single fiddle or accordion player and the dancers, and someone would provide a traditional supper, such as chicken gumbo and rice for the huge crowd that assembled. These dances were essential opportunities for regularly using Cajun language and enjoying Cajun dance, cuisine and music.

Late in the 19th century, the traditional *bal* began to move from individual residences into specially built public dance halls. In addition to being a place for the community to meet, these *salles de danse* (dance halls) served as more open

sites for courtship (Post 146). While they were still under the supervision of parents and other relatives—because whole families attended—young people were able to meet other boys and girls who were not just the immediate neighbors they saw regularly.

The dances in these large halls, called *fais-dodo*, demanded more than a single musician. To be heard above the crowd, these dances required a band—usually composed of an accordion (the chief instrument), a fiddle, a guitar and a little steel triangle. Sometimes there was a “washboard” for percussion. In the beginning, this latter instrument was an actual washboard, but eventually became a specially-made apron-shaped piece of metal that fit over the shoulders and was “played” with metal thimbles, spoons and even bottle-openers. The player of the accordion—which was introduced by German immigrants to the area in the 1870s—was usually the leader and the soloist, and the other musicians did not sing parts or in unison. The music, sometimes called generically “French music” to distinguish it from the popular music of the Anglos, was dance music, not music to listen to attentively.

According to Ancelet (2008) the name “Zydeco” later came to be used for the kind of “French music” that was played and enjoyed more often by the French-speaking black creole residents of the region, and while it tended to employ more blues, more of an Afro-Caribbean rhythm and performance style, with more electric guitar sounds than “Cajun” music, to the untutored ear, they sound very similar.

Cajun music and cuisine is combined in the Mardi Gras celebration, which occurs on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the Lenten season. While the best-known Mardi Gras in North America is that celebrated in New Orleans, the Cajuns have their own.

It begins in the daytime with masked, horse-mounted riders wearing pointed

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hats and dressed in outlandish costumes in the traditional colors (purple, red, yellow and green) traveling the country roads from farm to farm, accompanied by musicians on a wagon or truck who play while the members dance and perform at each farm in exchange for a contribution to the communal gumbo that will be served to all the members of the community at the end of the day.

The riders are allowed to drink all day, so they occasionally get rowdy, but the leader—called the capitaine—maintains discipline as they make their way from farm to farm. After a full day of riding, drinking and performing, the riders gather with the rest of the community for the ceremonial gumbo, cooked in huge pots by the women of the community. In the evening there is a masked ball which marks the final hours of celebration before the beginning of Lent. The festivities come to an abrupt halt at midnight, and the next morning (Ash Wednesday) many of the participants are at church receiving the penitential ashes on their foreheads.

Defending Cajun Culture

While their music tended to express their *joie de vivre*, the Cajuns were long discriminated against by the neighboring regions and the rest of America. They were, to use a highly derogatory term, treated as the “white niggers” or “Acadian niggers” of Louisiana (Bernard xvii). Other times they were called “coon asses,” another derogatory term for someone who is rural, backward and uneducated. Often just the word “Cajun” was enough to convey the insult. This discrimination has a long history.

Shortly after President Thomas Jefferson bought the enormous “Louisiana Purchase,” making all of its residents “American” in 1803, the land was divided into several smaller territories and the southernmost territory became the present-day state of Louisiana. The boundaries of Louisiana ignored the historical settlement patterns of English-speaking culture in the north and French-speaking

culture in the south. In the beginning the French-speaking Creoles and Cajuns—despite the gulf that existed between them—both maintained the hope of remaining distinct. Even after the Civil War introduced more Anglo culture into the area, the small farmers of the Cajun region maintained their Catholicism, their Cajun French, and their distinct culture. Isolation was a key element in maintaining Cajun culture; poverty was another.

But at the turn of the 20th century, numerous factors combined to threaten that culture. First, the relatively isolated Cajuns faced a major influx of English-speaking Americans and the lure of wage-paying jobs when oil was discovered in Jennings, Louisiana, in 1901. Oil fields were later developed throughout the area, and then offshore as well. These jobs provided much-needed income to the Cajuns, but at the same time, they were thrown into a largely English-speaking workforce. When World War I came and American males were all subject to conscription, Cajun men, who might not otherwise have left their homeland and might not have been forced to learn English, served in the military where English was the only language used.

Second, following World War I, a wave of “Americanization” swept the nation, and southern Louisiana was no exception. Although the Cajuns had maintained their dialect of French, political changes came to threaten the language. First, the state legislature gave the Department of Education the right to choose all textbooks and curricula for public schools. Then compulsory education was put into effect. Finally in 1921, the state constitution was changed so that all school proceedings had to be conducted in English. Where Cajun trappers and farmers had once lived in comparative isolation, surrounded by other French speakers, there was no need to go to school and no need to learn English at all, but things changed.

For at least one generation, parents continued to speak French at home, while

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their children learned English at school. Many older Cajuns today recall that school children were actually beaten if they spoke Cajun French on the school grounds, even among themselves at recess outside the classroom. There is even a story that one boy ended up wetting his pants because he did not know the English for how to ask to use the toilet. Still in the early days, the children would continue to learn French at home. But as the English-educated generation grew up and raised its own families, French declined.

It was not just a matter of language, but one of forcing a change of worldview. In the local view, the trouble with most Anglo-Saxon people in America is that they want everyone to think like they do. That included the Anglo-Saxon work ethic, materialism and patriotism.

Third, as was true throughout previously isolated areas of the South, improvement of roads and the extension of radio made English culture much more accessible, threatening the older culture that had survived when the Cajun triangle was isolated. But it was precisely out of these isolated areas in Louisiana that the great musicians came. The great accordionist Clifton Chenier described how he was born and raised outside of Opelousas, Louisiana, saying, "I come from out of a hole, man, I mean out of the *mud*, they had to dig me out of the mud to bring me to town. You know, a lot of people don't like to say where they come from...The average fella now that's big stars, that's where they come from, out in the country" (Sandmel, 33).

World War II changed the culture even more. Indoctrination of American patriotism in the schools resulted in a sharp decline in the number of Cajun children who spoke French as their first language. Some 63% of all those born in the five years before WWII spoke French. But of those who were born in the five year period after the war, only 38% did (Bernard 3-22). In addition, the Cajun men who went off to fight in the war were also considerably different upon their

return.

Postwar Decline and Resurgence

Although the Cajuns themselves had changed during wartime, at home and at the front, once the war was over, they still faced discrimination. Admittedly, it was not as vicious as the discrimination American whites practiced on blacks, but there was clearly an Anglo-Saxon form of Americanization still at work. In the state's geography textbook, *The People of Louisiana*, published in 1951, one can still see how Cajuns were denigrated. The Cajuns are described as "an unsophisticated agrarian people...slow in adopting 'American' ways," which the book defined as "the values and standards of their English-speaking neighbors." The textbook goes further to link poor educational results not with rural poverty or isolation—which was the actual case—but with Cajun culture itself. In a final insult to the Cajuns, the textbook blamed the French-speaking Cajun minority for the poor national standing of the entire state. "More than any other factor, this contributes to Louisiana's poor national standing, just as the Spanish-speaking population of New Mexico is responsible for that state's low ranking educationally."

Cajun children continued to be punished for speaking French at school. "My first-grade teacher knocked me on my knuckles with a wooden ruler for speaking half English and half French," recalled a former student who started school in 1946. "I stood in the back corner of the classroom [as punishment] for what seemed like all day. I had no recess ever. I had to read English books while other children play outside. I remember my first-grade teacher discussing with the second-grade teacher what a waste of her time I was." (Bernard 33)

Cajun children were also embarrassed by the gap between their own lunches and the lunches brought by the town kids to school. "We had red beans and corn

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bread. When the teacher would ring the bell [for lunch], we'd go out there to eat, sometimes we'd be ashamed to get our lunch out of our bag. Them other children come from town, they had some good lunch meat and apples and oranges. You ashamed to come out with corn bread in front of them children. We'd go to school and sometimes we didn't have no socks. In the wintertime we'd put paper in our shoes to warm our feet, that's God's truth." (Zydeco 71)

The Federal Highway Act of 1956 came to have a major impact on the Cajuns. One of the roads built under this system was Interstate Highway 10, about 200 miles of which bisected Acadiana east to west once it was completed in the mid-1970s. Of particular fascination was the 18-mile stretch of I-10 known as the "Atchafalaya Expressway" (Bernard 78). It is a monumental elevated causeway built across the vast, snake and alligator-infested wetlands that symbolized the Cajuns' cultural isolation.

As we will discover repeatedly in considering the cultural roots of Southern music, the truly distinctive music with a strong "sense of place" comes from oppressed communities, and that is the case with Cajuns, too. And as was the case with black music and black people, a revival took place. In the 1960s, a surge of revival began to sweep ethnic communities everywhere. In the U.S., the most oppressed minority was obtaining a new voice, recognition and assurance of legal rights through the Civil Rights Movement. Other groups benefited from the new mood of the country, and in 1958 the federal government began legislative steps to allow education in languages other than English. In Louisiana, the governor, sensing political and economic benefits could be gained by reasserting a French image for his state, began pushing the state legislature to adopt measures to not only encourage French in the schools but to actively promote it.

By the early 1960s at the grassroots level, younger Cajuns had lost almost all interest in the traditional "French music." Anglo-American and British pop music

seemed far more attractive. Fewer young people knew Cajun French at all and few were learning traditional Cajun instruments and songs. But in 1964, one event changed everything.

Insurance salesman Dewey Balfa (1927-1992), who along with his brothers was a fourth-generation Cajun fiddler, and several other Cajun musicians were invited to play their traditional music at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival, playing with renowned musicians like Joan Baez, Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary. Faced with a decline in popularity of their music at home, they worried that they might be laughed off the stage at Newport.

“I had no idea what a festival was,” Balfa later confessed (Bernard 102). “I had played in house dances, family gatherings, maybe a dance hall where you might have seen as many as two hundred people at once...And in Newport, there were seventeen thousand.” Contrary to their expectations they received a standing ovation. They were hailed as maintainers of a long-ignored regional tradition and even the urbane *New York Times* praised their “exotic, flavorful sounds.”

This response from the outside world encouraged Dewey Balfa and others to conclude that Cajun music had a future—if they could reach the children. Charged with a sense of mission, these people cooperated in founding a state agency called the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL, also Conseil pour le Development du Francais en Louisiane) in 1968 to teach French—not the local variety but the French language of Europe—in the public schools. French is now taught as a second language in the state’s elementary schools, and there are “French Immersion” programs in several parishes, or counties. Early in its existence, CODOFIL was criticized for stressing standard French over Cajun French, and for importing French teachers from Canada, Belgium and France, instead of using local teachers. However, the group worked zealously for the preservation of Cajun culture and actively confronted

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affronts to Cajun heritage. As part of their mission, in 1974 they started a “Tribute to Cajun Music” festival to encourage young musicians to continue traditional Cajun music. This revival of music has, in turn, stimulated an interest in learning Cajun French, because to play the traditional music—even in a new way—simply requires the ability to sing in French.

Significant artists of “Cajun” music following the revival begun by Dewey Balfa and his brothers have included Marc Savoy (an accordion builder as well as performer), Michael Doucet (fiddler) and bands like Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys. Following the passing of accordionists Clifton Chenier, who was undisputed King of Zydeco, and Boozoo Chavis, a new generation has vied for the top spot in Zydeco but no one has taken the crown. Contemporary performances by these artists and others attract excited audiences at New Orleans’ annual JazzFest, Lafayette’s Festivals Acadien, other music festivals around the world and of course in occasional performances at local venues.

The teaching of French in the schools was a major breakthrough—a reversal of a long trend which began in 1916. Not surprisingly there was a decline in the number of fluent speakers of Cajun French. The change has been dramatic. It is now estimated that the Cajun population of south Louisiana—if we take that to mean descendents of the original Acadiens—exceeds some 750,000 people. About half of these can speak at least a little and sing in Cajun French—in addition to being fluent in English.¹

The revitalized Cajun pride has led to two two-week celebrations of Acadien-Cajun heritage. In 1994 an estimated five thousand Cajuns made the trek to Moncton, New Brunswick, in Canada for an emotional celebration marking the tricentennial of Louisiana’s founding as a French colony. For the second Congrès Mondial Acadien in 1999, thousands of French-Canadians journeyed to Louisiana for family reunions, genealogical symposiums, academic conferences and music

festivals.

As the Cajuns have reclaimed a sense of pride in their unique culture over the past half century, an interesting phenomenon has appeared. Residents of southern Louisiana with no ethnic connection to the original Acadiens and with no cultural connection to the French-speaking culture have appropriated the name “Cajun” for themselves. Because “Cajuns” are thought to have more fun and have pride in their origins today, these other people claim the name simply because they live in the general region. In fact the popularity of things Cajun has led to commercialization of the Cajun image, which often includes things that no resident of southern Louisiana would recognize, such as Cajun pizza and a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, beer that is advertised as brewed “in the time-honored Cajun tradition.” In actual fact, the Cajuns had no beer-making tradition at all. Still, the fact that attaching the label “Cajun” is now a way of popularizing products is quite a change from the days when “Cajun” was a “put-down.”

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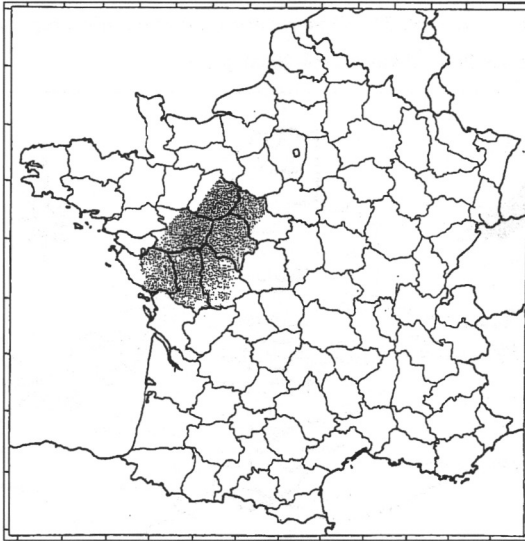
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Appendix

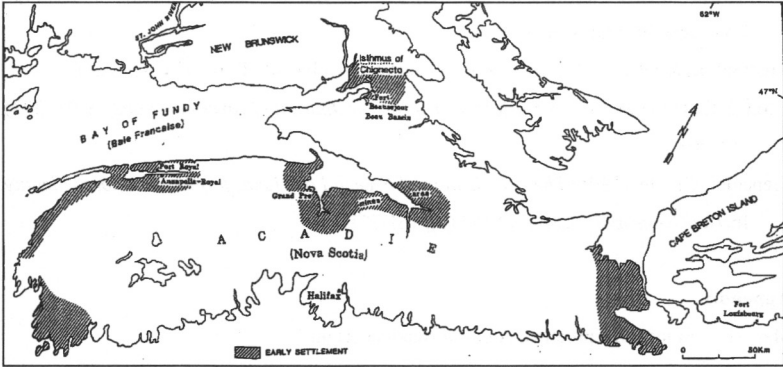
Map #1 France: the principal zones of Acadian origin

Barry Jean Ancelet, Jay Edwards, and Glen Pitre, *Cajun Country* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1991), p.4.

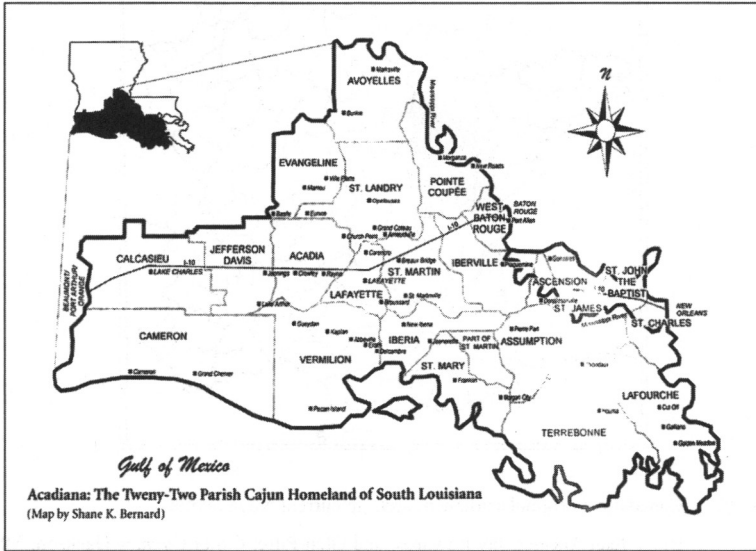


Map #2 Canada: the original settlement areas in current Nova Scotia

Barry Jean Ancelet, Jay Edwards, and Glen Pitre, *Cajun Country* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1991), p.7.



Map #3 Acadiana: the main parishes (=counties) of settlement in Louisiana
 Shane K. Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), p.xvi.



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