

Rural Criminology and the Cultural Authorization of Homicide: How Lethal Violence Becomes Socially Permissible

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Article Info

Article history:

Received June 15th, 2026

Revised June 21th, 2026

Accepted June 27th, 2026

Keyword:

Cultural authorization; De-authorization; Homicide; Rural criminology; Social permission.

ABSTRACT

Research on homicide has largely explained lethal violence through individual motives, legal weakness, or cultural belief, leaving unclear how rural social relations can make killing appear acceptable among those surrounding an event. This study examines how lethal violence acquires cultural authorization and becomes socially permissible within relationally rural settings. It uses a qualitative literature review and thematic analysis of academic studies, legal materials, policy documents, and institutional reports concerning honor-based homicide in Pakistan, blood-feud homicide in Albania, and sorcery accusation-related killing in Papua New Guinea. The findings show that rurality matters less as location than as a concentration of dependency, reputation, and access to protection within the same relationships. Cultural authorization develops when an alleged violation is claimed as a collective injury, the accused person is treated as a continuing source of harm, and someone in a recognised social position is expected or permitted to impose lethal punishment. This process is neither uniform nor inevitable because relatives, local leaders, and alternative explanations can interrupt escalation. The comparison also identifies an evidentiary asymmetry: people closest to the accusation often hold the most relevant information, while investigators depend on their cooperation. Criminalisation remains necessary, but enforcement may begin only after social permission has shaped the threat and limited the victim's exit. De-authorization therefore refers to weakening that permission before lethal violence becomes an accepted response.



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INTRODUCTION

Much homicide research has been built around urban conditions. Its strongest explanations emerged from studies of urban disadvantage and illicit economies, leaving less room for killings rooted in family obligation or informal punishment. Rural criminology has widened the field, yet its work on lethal violence remains thinner than research on victimisation or access to justice (Ceccato, 2025; Eason et al., 2025). Homicide outside cities has not gone unnoticed. Rather, the social relationships surrounding these deaths are still too often treated as local colour instead of part of the causal account.

A person may be widely known to be at risk and still remain unprotected. In a small community, news of threats can circulate quickly, but so can news of an attempt to leave or contact the police. A victim who depends on relatives for housing or transport may have no private route out. Rurality matters here because dependence is concentrated within a limited social field. Proximity does not determine whom a community will defend: a victim may be visible to everyone while those around her continue to place family standing above outside intervention. The crucial issue is how close ties distribute protection when personal safety conflicts with collective reputation (Ragusa, 2013).

Cultural explanation often enters when structural or individual accounts seem insufficient. Honor killing, for example, is frequently attributed to an honor culture, as though the label itself explained why one accusation acquires lethal force while another does not (Gill & Brah, 2014). The label identifies the language surrounding an act but leaves its decisive social work unexamined. An event must first be defined as a violation. Once a family claims the alleged injury, rather than leaving it to the person directly involved, control over the response shifts. Others begin to decide what counts as repair and who may provide it. This process is rarely uncontested. Recent research treats support for honor violence as a problem of social coordination: actors may endorse punishment because they expect significant others to demand it (Aksoy & Szekely, 2025). Culture, in this sense, is not a settled belief shared by all. It is a field in which some actors acquire authority to define an injury, while those who resist force may lack the influence needed to stop it.

Criminal prohibition may remain clear even when a family expects a killing. The law threatens punishment, but enforcement may appear slow or uncertain; the consequences of refusal are immediate. A person who rejects the demand may lose family support or be treated as having failed a social duty. Black's account of violent self-help is useful because it explains violence as a response to perceived wrongdoing (Black, 1983). Yet the eventual offender does not always create the punitive claim. In the cases considered here, others may define the wrong and shape the expected response long before the killing occurs.

Only one person may carry out an attack, but the authority behind it can extend beyond individual motive. Cultural authorization is the social recognition that a particular actor may use lethal force against an identified target. Recognition may operate as permission or as pressure. A relative seeking revenge may invoke family duty to gather support; another may act reluctantly because refusal would damage his standing among people on whom he depends. The relevant audience need not represent an entire community. Its influence lies in its ability to affect the position of both victim and prospective offender. The accused is gradually cast as someone who may be punished, while the potential killer is recast as the person expected to act. Support after death can preserve this authorization. Witnesses may protect the offender by withholding what they know, and an informal settlement may close the dispute without challenging the original claim to punish. Motive alone cannot explain these relationships. Nor is normalisation sufficient, since the killing may remain rare (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

Personal conduct in Pakistan may be treated as damage to family standing (Kadir, 2026e, 2026c), and honor-based killings are not confined to rural places (Nasrullah et al., 2009). Albanian blood feud raises a different problem because an earlier killing can burden a wider line of kin, even while the contemporary scale of the practice remains disputed (Arsovska & Verduyn, 2008). Papua New Guinea extends the comparison further. Sorcery accusations may cast a person as an ongoing danger to others, but many accusations are contained without lethal violence (Forsyth, 2019). Their value lies in the ways punitive authority is produced, not in a shared cultural logic.

Existing work explains why violence can be understood as punishment and why rural victims may struggle to obtain protection. Less is known about situations in which the audience naming the injury also controls the victim's access to support and, through its judgement, shapes whether a lethal response appears acceptable. This article asks how homicide acquires cultural authorization in relationally rural settings. It argues that lethal violence becomes socially permissible when an allegation is transformed into an injury claimed by a group and influential actors recognise a particular person as entitled to punish the target. The concern is not cultural approval of homicide in general, but the narrower process by which social conditions create permission for a particular death.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative literature review because the relevant evidence is dispersed across academic studies, legislation, policy documents, and institutional reports rather than contained in a single dataset (Snyder, 2019). The units of analysis were passages in the selected texts that explained how an allegation, social obligation, or local response became connected to homicide or a credible risk of death. Pakistan, Albania, and Papua New Guinea were treated as case clusters, not as representations of national culture. The comparison focused on honor-based homicide, blood-feud homicide, and sorcery accusation-related killing. Most sources were published between 2000 and July 2026; earlier works were retained only when they supplied concepts still necessary to the analysis, especially violent self-help and informal social control.

Academic sources were identified through Google Scholar and DOAJ. Legislation, policy materials, and institutional reports were collected from official government, parliamentary, United Nations, and human-rights websites. Crossref was used only to verify bibliographic details and DOIs. Searches combined terms relating to rural homicide and informal punishment with the terms used for each case cluster. Citation tracking was also conducted when relevant studies used different terminology (Grant & Booth, 2009). Full-text sources were included when they examined homicide or potentially lethal violence and provided an identifiable empirical, legal, or documentary basis for discussing social norms, community responses, victim protection, or legal intervention. Sources were excluded when only an abstract was available or when the basis for their claims could not be identified.

The selected texts were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Relevant passages were entered into a comparison matrix recording the rural setting, alleged violation, social response to violence, and legal or institutional response. Initial themes derived from the research questions were revised as recurring patterns emerged. The analysis then compared the operation of similar themes across the three case clusters while preserving differences in local meaning and institutional context (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Particular attention was paid to the movement from allegation to collective concern, the assignment of authority to punish, and the support or resistance surrounding lethal violence. Nonlethal outcomes were considered only when the literature described a plausible point of interruption in sufficient detail. Where sources disagreed, their definitions, geographical coverage, and evidentiary bases were compared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Rurality as a Relational Infrastructure of Normative Authority

Place alone did not explain the killings described in the selected literature. Some occurred outside cities, yet the decisive pressure came less from remoteness than from the organisation of support and information. In other cases, kinship obligations travelled into urban settings and continued to shape decisions there. Rural criminology has rightly criticised approaches that treat rural crime as a smaller version of urban crime, though the contrast can still be overstated. The documents examined here point to a narrower issue: people often depended on the same local relationships that judged their conduct (DuBois, 2022).

Such dependence could restrict action before any direct threat was made. A woman who relied on relatives to reach a police station, for example, could not seek help without alerting people connected to the dispute. Housing posed a similar difficulty when leaving home meant losing the only available place to stay. These situations did not occur in every rural setting, nor were they absent from cities. Their significance lay in the concentration of support within a limited network. The same relatives could offer care while making independent action difficult, and few victims could replace those ties quickly without serious cost. Rurality mattered most when ordinary needs could not be separated from the people enforcing local expectations (Peek-Asa et al., 2011).

Studies of honor-based violence in Pakistan make the effect of reputation more visible (Huda & Kamal, 2025). Conduct attributed to one woman was often treated as an injury suffered by her relatives, even where the decision concerned a relationship or marriage that was personal to her. Once the allegation circulated, other family members faced judgement as well. The available research is useful because it does not assume a single cultural rule accepted by everyone. Support for punishment may grow when people expect that significant others will condemn inaction. The pressure therefore comes from anticipation as much as from an explicit demand. In several accounts, the family's response mattered because its standing was repeatedly assessed by people whose judgement continued to shape everyday family relations within the same community (Kadir, 2026d, 2026b). That pattern can also appear in cities, as Pakistani reporting confirms. Its rural force becomes stronger where the audience is difficult to leave and where alternative sources of recognition remain weak. Reputation then carries consequences beyond talk. It shapes whether a family is treated as having fulfilled an obligation that others believe belongs to it.

A similar pressure appears beyond honor-based cases, although the object of judgement changes. In blood-feud accounts, a family may be criticised for failing to answer an earlier killing (Phillips, 2003). In sorcery-related violence, refusal to act can be framed as a failure to protect the wider community. The moral languages differ, but both show that audiences matter when their judgement affects an actor's place within a group. Agreement is never complete: some relatives resist and some

local authorities intervene. Nevertheless, anticipated disapproval can narrow what a person believes he can safely refuse, even without a formal command.

Accounts from northern Albania describe families living with the effects of killings committed years earlier. An unresolved claim could remain attached to a line of kin, exposing people who had no role in the original event. Some reports describe children kept from school and adults restricting work or movement because another attack was still feared. The scale of contemporary blood feud is disputed, and its recorded impact varies by period and source (Kopsaj, 2016). That disagreement should not be hidden. It shows why the issue cannot be reduced to prevalence. Where the claim remained credible, kinship determined who continued to carry its consequences and who was expected to answer them.

Police presence did not always provide an independent route to safety in the Papua New Guinea literature. Several studies reported that information was withheld after sorcery accusations, especially where community members believed the accused remained dangerous. Officers therefore depended on cooperation from people who might also support the accusation (Forsyth, 2022). Work from Bougainville adds a spatial dimension: distance from aid posts or police stations sometimes allowed attacks to proceed with little outside scrutiny, but geography alone did not account for the gap. Victims and witnesses often remained inside the network organising the accusation, so a formal complaint could increase rather than reduce exposure. Limited police resources aggravated the problem, while the deeper obstacle was social. State institutions could be physically present yet unsafe to use when access depended on actors tied to the dispute. Victims had few routes out, and officers still relied on local people for information and entry.

The literature also contains outcomes that do not fit a simple escalation model. Many sorcery accusations in Papua New Guinea did not lead to physical violence. Some were interrupted by mediation, local leadership, or other locally grounded responses, although the available detail varies (Witne et al., 2023). Albanian sources likewise disagree about the continuing reach of blood feud, and honor-based killings are not confined to rural districts. These differences matter because similar social conditions did not always produce the same result in practice. Close ties could carry an accusation, but they could also help a family hide a threatened person or support refusal. Rurality created pressure only when influential actors gave that pressure a violent direction.

Across the sources, informal authority was strongest when those interpreting the alleged wrong also controlled everyday support and access to protection. This overlap made refusal costly for a prospective offender and escape harder for the person at risk. Its emphasis varied by case. Reputational judgement was most visible in the Pakistan literature, Albanian sources traced obligations across kin, and studies from Papua New Guinea repeatedly returned to control over information. These processes were neither identical nor uniquely rural. Taken together, however, they show how expectations acquire practical force. A social network does more than express an opinion; before any killing occurs, it can shape what each person is able to do.

2. The Cultural Authorization of Homicide: From Collective Injury to Conditional Killability

Many accusations in the literature did not end in homicide. Sorcery allegations in Papua New Guinea were often challenged, redirected, or contained, while disputes involving honor or feud also produced outcomes short of killing. The difference did not rest in belief alone. Violence became more likely when influential actors treated one interpretation as binding and alternative explanations lost practical force. This variation directs attention away from the mere presence of a norm and toward the struggle over who may define the wrong and determine what follows.

After a death in several Papua New Guinea studies, illness, accident, and sorcery remained possible explanations, but they did not carry the same implications. They could shift the matter from mourning toward accusation. When sorcery became the accepted account, the alleged wrong extended beyond the bereaved family because others could also see themselves as future victims. Forsyth and Gibbs (2022) describe these competing causal accounts as socially consequential rather than merely descriptive. The interpretation supported by respected or feared actors narrowed what people thought could be done next. A medical explanation might close the matter. A sorcery accusation could keep it open and enlarge the group claiming an interest in punishment.

A woman's relationship or marital choice could also be taken over by relatives and recast as harm to the family's standing. The family then acquired a separate claim. Interview-based and survey-based work does not suggest complete agreement. It does show that some relatives anticipated judgement from people whose approval mattered to them, and that anticipated judgement could make inaction

costly (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013). The injury was no longer treated as hers to define or settle. Albanian blood-feud material describes another route. An earlier killing could remain a claim held by kin who were not directly present when the first violence occurred. Some field and institutional accounts describe relatives living under restrictions long after the original event, although the scale and present reach of feud remain disputed. The moral language differed, yet both settings allowed people beyond the immediate dispute to claim authority over its outcome. Collective injury is useful only in this narrower sense: a wider group claims both the harm and some control over how it should be answered.

Relatives did not always accept the wider claim, even within the same local setting. Some rejected an accusation, refused retaliation, or helped a threatened person leave (Mappaselleng & Kadir, 2025). Local leaders sometimes challenged the interpretation that made violence seem necessary (Kadir et al., 2026). These disagreements are not peripheral exceptions; they show why neither family nor community can be treated as a single authorising subject. Even when a grievance was described as collective, its meaning still had to be defended against rival accounts and against those who opposed the proposed response. Claims to honor, revenge, or protection gained force only when their opponents lacked sufficient influence, security, or institutional support to alter what followed.

A person became more exposed in the accounts examined when the accusation was treated as a continuing problem rather than a completed act. In honor-based accounts, the woman could be portrayed as the source of an injury that remained present while she lived. A feud could expose a relative who had not committed the original killing because kinship itself carried the unresolved claim. Sorcery accusations went further by presenting the accused as capable of causing future deaths. This was more than negative labelling (Opotow, 1990). The person was treated as an obstacle to ending the danger, and physical removal could then be presented as a necessary solution.

The identity of the eventual killer varied considerably across the sources. In some honor cases, family position mattered because a male relative was expected to answer conduct attributed to a woman in the household. Blood-feud accounts attached expectations to membership in the injured kin group, although contemporary practice varied and a claim did not always produce retaliation (Kadir, 2026a). Sorcery-related attacks could involve several participants, while influential figures sometimes strengthened an accusation without joining the assault (Jorgensen, 2014). These patterns do not establish a single model of command. They support a narrower claim: social position may shape who is expected to act, who can refuse without losing standing, and whose violence is likely to receive support. Relational mandate denotes that socially assigned expectation—not a formal order or legal excuse. Personal motives may remain powerful, and offenders may invoke collective language to disguise private hostility. Even so, motive alone cannot explain why one actor is treated as responsible for carrying punishment forward.

Approval was often harder to establish than public descriptions implied, both before and after an event. The people whose judgement mattered sometimes formed a much smaller circle than the community later invoked to justify the act (Cialdini et al., 1990). Some gave explicit support; others protected the offender after the killing or discouraged cooperation with investigators. Silence is more ambiguous. A witness may remain quiet because the violence is accepted, because retaliation is feared, or because local relationships make police cooperation unsafe. The evidence does not allow every failure to intervene to be read as authorization. Wherever sources permit, resistance, fear, dependence, and approval must be distinguished.

Much of the nonviolent material in the corpus shows that sorcery accusations did not inevitably become violent. Outcomes were more likely to remain nonviolent where influential people rejected the accusation, where relatives defended the accused, or where another explanation of the death retained credibility. Comparable evidence is thinner in the Albanian and Pakistani material, which should be stated openly. Even so, the broader implication is clear: authorization was contested in practice. Violence gained ground when one interpretation of the injury and one claim to punishment became harder to oppose through local or institutional means. The nonlethal material therefore changes the model rather than merely limiting it.

Table 1 compares how different moral claims performed similar relational functions without implying a shared cultural logic.

Table 1. *Comparative Mechanisms of Cultural Authorization Across the Three Case Clusters*

Case cluster	Claim over injury and construction of the target	Expected actor and relevant audience	Interruption and evidentiary issue
Pakistan: honor-based homicide	Conduct linked to a relationship or marriage may be recast as damage to family standing. The woman can then be treated as the continuing source of that injury.	A male relative may be expected to restore standing, particularly when significant others make inaction socially costly.	Relatives may reject the claim or help the threatened person leave. Family control over reporting can restrict the account available to investigators.
Albania: blood-feud homicide	An earlier killing may remain an unresolved kin claim. Exposure can extend to relatives who did not commit the original act.	Members of the injured kin group may be expected to retaliate, although contemporary practice and scale remain disputed.	Refusal or mediation may prevent retaliation. Fear, isolation, and inconsistent definitions limit the evidence available for comparison.
Papua New Guinea: sorcery accusation-related killing	Death or misfortune may be interpreted as sorcery. The accused person is then framed as an ongoing danger to others.	Relatives or community members may be mobilised, while diviners or locally influential figures can strengthen the accusation.	Alternative explanations and influential opposition can stop escalation. Police may depend on the same local ties that restrict disclosure.

Source: Author's synthesis based on Aksoy and Szekely (2025), Arsovska and Verduyn (2008), Huda and Kamal (2025), Kopsaj (2016), Forsyth (2019, 2022), Forsyth and Gibbs (2022), Jorgensen (2014), and Witne et al. (2023).

The comparison supports a narrower definition of cultural authorization than a general local belief in violent punishment. Authorization arises when people beyond the immediate dispute claim the injury, treat a particular person as its continuing source, and accept that someone in a recognised social position may answer with lethal force. Conditional killability refers only to this selective weakening of social protection; it implies no loss of legal status or moral worth. Nor does it presume unanimous approval. The killing remains unlawful even when people close to the event defend it as socially acceptable under the circumstances they recognise.

3. De-Authorizing Homicide: Criminal Law, Evidentiary Problems, and Preventive Policy

Pakistan's 2016 amendment narrowed the effect of family waiver in honor-based homicide cases. Section 311 requires life imprisonment even when the victim's heirs forgive or compound the offence. The reform limited one route through which relatives could reduce the legal consequences after a killing (Fatima et al., 2017). It did not change pressures that developed beforehand, when the same family might define the alleged wrong and expect someone to answer it. Papua New Guinea's repeal of the Sorcery Act in 2013 worked differently (Forsyth, 2016). It changed the legal position, while accusations of sorcery continued to draw force from local relationships.

A homicide investigation may begin with the attacker while still examining people involved beforehand. Liability remains personal, but inquiry into planning need not end with the person who used the weapon. A message sent before the killing may reveal knowledge of the plan or practical assistance; praise offered afterward is different evidence. It may explain later protection without proving prior agreement. Silence is more uncertain still, especially where witnesses fear retaliation. Investigation can remain broad without treating kinship, proximity, or shared belief as evidence of guilt. Liability must rest on what each person knew and did.

Family relations may reveal why a victim was already at risk before the attack. A woman threatened after a disputed relationship, for example, may appear to have been killed after a private quarrel unless investigators ask who had claimed injury and who expected a response. Cultural context can make that danger visible. The difficulty arises when explanation begins to soften judgement. Studies of cultural defence warn that contextual evidence may clarify an offender's intention while also making

violence appear more understandable than it should. Pressure from relatives may matter, but it is not automatically equivalent to a threat that satisfies the legal requirements of duress. It may explain hesitation, dependence, or fear without meeting that standard. Its significance depends on the evidence and on the domestic law governing intention, participation, and excuse. Courts also need to separate evidence about the offender's situation from assumptions about the worth of the victim. Cultural context should help explain vulnerability and involvement without making the death seem less serious.

Timing often determines the meaning of evidence. A relative who knows of a plan and arranges transport occupies a different position from someone who praises the killing only after learning that it occurred. Later assistance may explain how the offender avoided arrest, but cannot establish prior agreement without further proof. These distinctions disappear when every surrounding relationship is described as part of a single authorization network. The term is better retained as analytical shorthand, not treated as an evidentiary conclusion. Courts and investigators must still establish what each person knew, intended, and did under the applicable law.

The Papua New Guinea literature provides the most detailed accounts of the evidentiary problem. Police often depend on local relationships to identify witnesses and understand how an accusation developed. Those relationships may also restrict disclosure when people fear violent actors or believe that the accused person caused a death. The policing literature describes both possibilities. Local ties may assist intervention in one case and obstruct it in another. A limited evidentiary record therefore admits more than one explanation. Investigation may have been poor, or no broader plan may have existed. In some cases, however, witnesses who know what happened may be unable to speak safely. That possibility cannot be presumed merely because evidence is scarce. Pakistani material points to a related problem when an honor-based killing is managed within the family and relatives control the account given to authorities. The Albanian evidence remains thinner because reports use different definitions and disagree about the present scale of blood feud. These limits prevent a single conclusion about enforcement. They still reveal an evidentiary asymmetry: people closest to the accusation may know most, while the state depends on their cooperation to prove what occurred.

A person who relies on a threatening family to reach the police has no independent route to protection. Contacting officials may reveal an attempt to leave, while short-term removal offers little security if the person must return to the same relationships. The literature does not establish a single service model for Pakistan, Albania, and Papua New Guinea, but it does support a narrower conclusion: protection is more credible when a threatened person can seek help without the knowledge or permission of those controlling the dispute (Main, 2024). The policy question is not simply whether services exist, but whether they can be reached without reproducing the dependence that created the danger.

Some sorcery accusations in Papua New Guinea ended without violence because locally influential actors rejected the allegation or supported the accused family. The documented cases also stress cooperation between state and non-state actors. Comparable evidence is less developed in the Pakistani and Albanian material, so the finding cannot be extended without qualification. Even so, the cases show that local influence does not move in one direction. A respected person may strengthen an accusation, or make refusal socially possible. Refusal becomes more credible when it is backed by someone able to protect those who dissent. What matters is whether the intervention protects the accused and weakens the claim that lethal punishment is required.

Across the cases, legal intervention was most constrained when the relationships defining an accusation also shaped the victim's access to safety and the evidence available to investigators. De-authorization refers to weakening this overlap before a killing occurs. The comparison does not establish one preventive model for Pakistan, Albania, and Papua New Guinea, but it does suggest a priority. Threatened people need routes to protection that do not depend on those claiming authority over the dispute, while the person expected to act must retain room to refuse. Prosecution remains necessary after death, yet it begins only after relationships have shaped what people believe should be done. Law is more likely to prevent harm when that social permission is challenged before lethal violence becomes accepted as the proper response.

CONCLUSION

In the cases examined, lethal violence became socially permissible when an alleged wrong ceased to be treated as a matter between individuals. Family members or other influential actors claimed the injury, shaped how the victim was understood, and pressured someone expected to respond. Rurality

mattered when the same relationships controlled reputation, daily support, access to protection, and information reaching state institutions. These conditions did not cause homicide or create a single cultural pattern across Pakistan, Albania, and Papua New Guinea. Honor-based killing, blood feud, and sorcery accusation-related violence rested on different moral claims. Their common feature was relational: people beyond the immediate dispute could exert practical influence over who should be punished and how. Many accusations did not end in death, confirming that cultural authorization remained contested and could be interrupted.

The study redirects attention from violent belief or individual motive to the relationships that make lethal punishment appear acceptable in a particular case. Cultural authorization is narrower than general approval of homicide. It arises when a group claims an injury, treats the target as a continuing source of harm, and accepts that a particular person may use lethal force. Criminal prohibition remains necessary, but enforcement may begin only after these relationships have restricted the victim's exit and shaped the evidence available to investigators. De-authorization describes the earlier task of weakening social permission, not a policy model whose effectiveness has already been established. The comparison is limited by uneven evidence across the three case clusters; it neither measures prevalence nor proposes a universal intervention. Its central finding is that relationships can make homicide socially permissible, and prevention must challenge that permission before it is acted upon.

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