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SECRETS AND SOCIETY: THE BENG OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE

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[O]ne should appear as a particularly noteworthy person precisely through what one conceals (Simmel 1950:337).

Secrecy guards . . . the central aspects of identity (Bok 1983:13).

In a Beng village in Côte d'Ivoire in which I lived for some time, there was said by residents of the entire region to be a secret spot (or perhaps a few spots) considered so mystically powerful that everyone–inhabitants of the village as well as visitors–was forbidden ever to spit there. Beng friends from other villages warned me that anyone who violated this taboo would die instantly, punished by the invisible spirits that are said to live in those places.

To Westerners, the existence of such a localized taboo may be surprising, since public spitting is typically taboo no matter the locale, as signs sometimes proclaim in subways and alley walls.[1] But like many West African peoples (e.g. Spindel 1989), Beng villagers acceptably end certain meals or snacks with long-distance spitting.[2] Because spitting is often part of the adult Beng villager's daily habitus, the taboo against spitting in a particular spot is quite meaningful to Beng who inhabit or visit the village in question.

In fact, people who live in other Beng villages often dread visiting the village in which I was living–let's call it "Gwanagbe" (Secret Village)–even to the point of finding reasons not to attend weddings and funerals held there, precisely because they know of the taboo but not of one crucial detail: the exact whereabouts of the dangerous spitting zones. This is due to the reputation of Gwanagbe residents, who were said to be even more close-mouthed than the rest of the usually secretive Beng; they declined to warn outsiders, including Beng people from other villages, exactly where the otherwise ordinary act of spitting could become deadly. Indeed, it was from Beng residents of other villages that I heard about the risks attached to spitting; when I asked my village neighbors about what I had been told, they inevitably denied it, though the denial was usually accompanied by what I interpreted as a nervous laugh.

I suspected, but never confirmed, that my neighbors were sworn to silence on this unrevealable matter. Alternatively, it is possible that the reputation Gwanagbe had throughout Bengland for being both extra-powerful and extra-secretive was unearned–on this count, at least–and that the forbidden spitting zones exist in the minds of worried outsiders but not those of village inhabitants. In either case, the

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allegedly lethal–and invisible–spitting locales highlight one theme of this article: that, as Simmel observed long ago, secrecy is, ironically, a critical ingredient of society (1950:330 and *passim*; cf. Gilbert 1993:137). In the Beng case, I will argue, this applies perhaps in more ways than is usual, insofar as secrecy pervades innumerable spheres of daily Beng life, including intimate bodily habits. In taking this theme as my focus, I will be departing implicitly from the view sometimes espoused by Western intellectuals that secrecy is frequently, or even by definition, affiliated with immorality (e.g. Bok 1983). Even Simmel has observed that "although the secret has no immediate connection with evil, evil has an immediate connection with secrecy: the immoral hides itself for obvious reasons..." (1950:331). However, Simmel by no means dwelt exclusively on this nefarious connection, instead exploring the ramifications of secrecy in a multitude of directions, morally and otherwise. Following this more open- minded direction of most of Simmel's work on the subject, and in contrast to a dominant popular Western predilection for associating secrecy with evil, I will not assume any particular moral cast to secrecy in and of itself, but instead follow the Beng lead in exploring where secrecy will take us (cf. Beidelman 1993).

At a general level, secrecy is quite familiar to many West Africans (and West Africanists) from the Poro, Sande, Ogboni, and other well-known secret societies of the region, whose secrets are often kept by cult members on pain of death (e.g. Bellman 1983; MacCormack 1979; Bledsoe 1984; Little 1949; Schloss 1988; also see Bok 1983:56-57). In the northern Mande heartland in Mali, the elaborate age grade system is well known for initiating boys and men into successive levels of esoteric knowledge, each of which builds on, but also to some extent challenges, the previous layer of concealed knowledge (e.g. Zahan 1960). The rigors and even gruesome dangers of some of these secret societies in the context of contemporary politics have even been explored recently in fictional form by an American novelist (Dooling 1994).

What distinguishes Beng society from the above- mentioned and many other West African groups (Mande-speaking and otherwise) is the absence of formal secret societies or initiation grades. Beng girls are only initiated individually–though not secretly–as the opening to their wedding celebration, and boys undergo no initiation ritual whatsoever, whether individual or collective. Despite this absence of formal secret societies, or perhaps because of it, much of Beng society overall is constructed around a broad imperative to secrecy that is evident not only in formal and/or ritual settings, but in multiple daily encounters as well.

In the pages that follow, I discuss the nature of secrecy in Beng society and its implications for Beng epistemology. Mostly I focus on the praxis of secrecy–its continual production in daily life to the point of creating what Bourdieu (1977) might consider a habitus. My point will be to emphasize the ways that secrecy can pervade individual consciousness not only through dramatic ritual events performed on an occasional basis, but also in the myriad acts performed and decisions made as people–in the case of Beng society, virtually everyone–go about living their lives. I

will then address the relationship that such a generalized engagement with secrecy holds to other segments of Beng society so as to emphasize the broader social context within which Beng secrecy gains its meaning. Here, I will highlight a contrasting set of expectations and behaviors that emphasizes publicity for actions that many Westerners might expect to be kept private. In turn, I will consider the implications that this dual-layered system hold for an understanding of culture at large. To anticipate briefly my argument, I will suggest a reevaluation of the culture concept so as both to draw on and take further current anthropological rethinking of culture that emphasizes heterogeneity, disjuncture, improvisation. In so doing, I will suggest that secrecy may be as intrinsic a defining feature of even a face-to-face, tight-knit society as is the more classically accepted factor of shared knowledge. But before proposing such broad reflections, let us first explore, to the extent that propriety and professional ethics permit us, the world of Beng secrets.[3]

THE SECRET LIFE OF YAMS

The Beng are primarily farmers who grow, especially, yams (also rice, corn and manioc) as staple starches, as well as a large array of vegetable ingredients to make up the sauces that accompany those starches.[4] Their region has in the past been quite fertile, but in recent years, farming has become problematic for a variety of reasons. Most Beng adults attribute the erosion of their economic base to a significant decrease in soil fertility, with accompanying crop productivity declining alarmingly. The result is both less money, because of lower yields on cash crops such as coffee, and to some extent lower yields even on subsistence crops. During my last stay in Bengland (summer 1993) I observed to my dismay that the continuing economic decline in the Beng region had reduced many families to bare subsistence levels, with all signs of a cash economy virtually absent in many households.

Westerners would undoubtedly blame this trend on a host of broad political and international economic factors well beyond the control of impoverished peasant farmers such as the Beng. Prime among these would be the drastic lowering of coffee prices on the world market in the past decade. In turn, this international trend partially explains the worsening debt structure of Côte d'Ivoire, although the latter is also attributable to political corruption and internal mismanagement. Additionally, scholars might point to deteriorating ecological factors, especially the relatively recent introduction of monocropping. In the Beng case, because of financial constraints, this intensive farming system is often not accompanied by the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers to compensate for the damage that this ecologically costly farming technique generally causes; hence, ironically, monocropping as it is practiced by the Beng has significantly reduced rather than increased crop yields.

In trying to account for the declining crop yields, most Beng farmers themselves emphasize another factor: the increasing presence of migrants now living in their villages. Western social scientists might term this factor social, but in Beng eyes, there are profound spiritual ramifications of the immigrants insofar as they are

seen as impinging on the spirits (*bɔŋzɔ*) that inhabit critical spaces of the Beng Earth (*ba*). In fact, the Beng never attempted to isolate themselves from neighboring groups. Before the French colonial period, inaugurated at the end of the nineteenth century, the Beng grew kola nuts that itinerant Jula traders from the north came regularly to buy for resale, and the Beng in turn bought various items such as ceramic pots, iron implements, and cloth, from a variety of nearby ethnic groups (Gottlieb 1996: Chs. 1, 6). But in recent years, such contacts have increased significantly as a large number of immigrants from Mali, Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire has settled down to farm in Beng villages. These immigrants have taken advantage of the Beng region's wide reputation for relatively rich soils, in the face of increasing desertification and the continuing threat of droughts in their own homelands to the north. To the dismay of some Beng youth, who complained bitterly to me about it, Beng elders have offered the use of their lands rent-free to such migrants. Many of the latter arrive as single men; some have since married Beng women, others have found women from their own group to marry, or they have remained single. But in all cases, the migrants usually live in their own distinct *quartiers* that they have established at the edges of Beng villages.

The ethnic groups from which these migrants come, including Jula and Jimini people from northern Côte d'Ivoire, Mossi from Burkina Faso, and Malinke from Mali, are by no means considered by the Beng to be intrinsically polluting, barbarian or the like. Rather, the problem from the Beng perspective is that the migrants have failed to obey a set of taboos (*sõ pɔ*) related to farming that the majority of Beng people still observe. To understand these taboos, I must digress briefly to outline the indigenous Beng calendar, which offers a framework that circumscribes the schedule for both farming and indigenous religious practice.[5]

The traditional Beng calendar revolves around a six-day week, in which one day is set aside for worshipping the Earth by having Earth priests offer sacrifices and prayers to Earth spirits, while most other people relax in the village (Gottlieb 1996:29-31). On that day, no one may do any farm work other than picking enough crops to eat for that day's main meal; out in the forest, the spirits are said to dine on the farmers' crops. Thus this Earth day serves to feed the spirits, keeping them content. But Beng farmers complained to me frequently that every week, the non-Beng migrants violate this taboo by farming on the rest day. The migrants' continued violation of this taboo is cited by the Beng as the ultimate cause of the current ecological disaster. For in Beng thought, as is probably the case with many, perhaps even most, African groups (e.g. Schloss 1988), the soil is a material manifestation of both social and spiritual principles. If harmony is not maintained within the village and/or at the cosmic level, the spiritual forces that guide crop production–be they ancestors, Earth spirits resident in the bush, or, ultimately, a distant god–will make their displeasure known. In this case, the bush spirits attached to the Earth itself are said to be the most potent of religious forces, hence it is they who are held responsible for the current crop failures.

Why do the migrants regularly transgress the Beng Earth's taboo? It's true

that many of them, being from the north, are Muslim and probably disapprove of the entire enterprise of Earth worship, with its regular sacrifice of domestic animals; for the slitting of animals' throats by a non-Muslim sacrifier renders the animal inedible to Muslims and more generally puts it outside their definition of an appropriate religious act.[6] But my Beng friends didn't mention this at all when I asked them about the migrants' violation of Beng religious proscriptions. Instead, one farmer explained it this way: "The migrants don't know they're committing a sin: they have no idea it's taboo to farm on those days! If they knew, maybe they'd observe our rest day."

"But why don't they know about it?" I asked, perplexed.

"Because," my Beng friend answered, "we never told them." When I inquired further, he merely shrugged, unmoved by my implied suggestion that informing the migrants of the local Earth's taboo might have encouraged the newcomers to observe that taboo. In subsequent conversations with this and other Beng farmers, it became clear to me that this omission in communication between host and guest was no oversight but, rather, a deliberate strategy by the Beng to conceal the existence of their weekly agricultural taboo from the migrants. . .despite the possibly disastrous consequences of this enforced ignorance to the Beng harvest.[7]

In this case, the Beng penchant for secrecy has been carried to extremes. Secrecy about dangerous spitting zones is one thing: the victim who might fall prey to the invisible spitting zone would presumably die–a personal tragedy, of course, but one without further effect. In contrast, the agricultural taboo that Beng farmers say is violated regularly by immigrants is seen to have a far greater impact, of direct consequence to the entire Beng community. What I found significant was quite simply my Beng friends' direct association of the lower yields with the immigrants' regular violation of a taboo that the Beng actively persisted in keeping secret. Though no one ever said it to me in quite this way, the Beng as a group are in a cultural bind: required to maintain secrecy about a religious prescription whose violation is said to result in disaster, in effect they have been victimized by their own secretiveness.

At the risk of using rather crude economistic terms, we might ask: What benefit would Beng farmers perceive in taking such a considerable risk? As it was explained to me, they are simply following the dictates of their predecessors and ancestors in guarding secrets that must never be discussed with "strangers" (*tiniŋ*). At this level, then, secrecy exists as a virtual ethnic marker: to broach it would violate the corporate sense of a discrete ethnic group that permeates at least some self-images of Beng identity (Gottlieb 1996:1-8).

At a more spiritual level, Beng who are devoted to their indigenous religious practices clearly maintain secrecy about the taboos because to do so is in effect a religious mandate: the spirits demand it. My own discovery of this taboo, as with other secret matters, came rather late in my fieldwork and was confirmed only by a few close confidants who came to trust my discretion during conversations whispered in far- flung corners of the village, or in town, or in the dark of night.[8]

The case of the secret life of yams and other crops concerns an extraordinary situation relating to secret knowledge whose foundations are, according to local conception, cosmological. The same is roughly true of the case of the secret spitting zones with which I began this discussion. Indeed, I opened the paper with these two examples because it is religion that first comes to mind when I think of Beng secrecy.[9] Most Beng not only explicitly value their religion, they define it in good part by reference to its secret nature. As a result, indigenous religious practice was probably the most difficult subject I could have chosen to study among them (Gottlieb and Graham 1994). Other West Africanist scholars have often remarked on a similar situation for their own fieldwork elsewhere in the region (e.g. Stoller and Olkes 1989); in contrast, some Western fieldworkers who have had relatively easygoing relations between themselves and their West African host communities have revealed that they deliberately refrained from inquiring about the more secretive aspects of local religious practice, implicitly acknowledging how such inquiries might have compromised the rapport and trust already achieved (e.g. Sudarkasa 1986:184).

The Beng themselves distinguish linguistically between secrets that relate to religious matters and those that concern more secular affairs. In the Beng language, *za golɛ* ("hidden affair") refers to matters that should, we might say in English, be kept secret, private or hidden for reasons to do with social politeness and norms concerning individual action (see below). In contrast, the phrase *za lu bolɛ* ("to unearth the bottom of the affair") is used in referring only to the forbidden action of disclosing a secret that has spiritual underpinnings, such as sharing knowledge concerning sacrifices and other rituals with people who should not have access to such knowledge. Thus an inappropriately inquisitive person such as a child, a guest, or an anthropologist (see Note 7) might be rebuked for inquiring into religious secrets by being offered the response, "*mà zi à lú bòɛ*" ("I can't reveal that" [lit., "I not can its bottom unearth"]).

Yet if Beng religion is defined by secrecy, the reverse is not necessarily true: Beng secrecy by no means stops with religion. In fact, secrecy, of the sort described as *za golɛ*, is evident in the myriad daily encounters in which Beng people, both child and adult, engage.[10] When I recall ordinary Beng discourse, there are two sentences that recur regularly in my memory: *De a pe mi nì*? and *Mí pɔ za ní*! The first translates readily as, "Who told you that?" and the second as, "It's not your affair" or, more loosely, "None of your business!" I heard these phrases repeated by the Beng day after day, in household and in public spaces alike. Naturally, given our unusual and problematic identity in the village, they were often addressed to my husband and myself in our early months in the region (cf. Gottlieb and Graham 1994); but they are also frequently directed to other Beng as well, especially to curious children, but also at times to adults.

Now, most peoples–perhaps all–deem it important that a given subject be discussed only by the appropriate person and in the appropriate context, both spa-

tially and temporally; indeed, much of the field of sociolinguistics has been devoted to documenting rich examples of such rules concerning appropriate discourse. But the Beng may take this common tendency to an extreme degree, insofar as they make even private gossip problematic to the point that it is highly circumscribed. This became clear to me as I pursued information about the very complicated system of Beng marital alliance (Gottlieb 1996:72-97). In trying to ascertain the scope of various incest taboos by interviewing individuals well informed in the local kinship patterns, I began by asking whether a marriage between two individuals whom my informant knew well might be considered incestuous. I quickly changed my tactics when people indicated that such questions violated their sense of appropriate knowledge. Their perception of rudeness was invariably signaled by the inevitable protest: *mɔ za ní* ("it's not my affair"). In this way, perceptions of politeness vs. rudeness blended into notions of privacy as defined by local rules of social discourse.[11]

Once this lesson of linguistically enforced privacy became clear, I began to see its workings in countless daily encounters. For example, the sorts of questions one asks casually in Western social settings when being introduced to someone for the first time–What sort of work do you do? How long have you lived t/here? Where did you go to school? Are you married? How many children do you have? and so on–would be considered horribly inappropriate in first encounters among the Beng, whether these be with fellow Beng or with non-Beng visitors to the villages. Other questions that might in theory be seen as more locally appropriate to first encounters–such as What is your matriclan (or patriclan)? or, Who is your real father (or mother)?–would be considered equally invasive and are simply never asked. Instead, one accepts at face value, as it were, the person one has just met and goes about learning his or her identity indirectly, through observation and hints offered obliquely. This is true not only for odd, uninvited visitors such as myself, but also for Beng visitors to other villages (or towns).

Although such rules may seem unrelated to the sort of religious secrets I have discussed so far, I suggest that the two sets of practices constitute a single theme. Beng villagers are actively interested in restricting access to knowledge for a wide variety of persons who, they deem, have no right to that knowledge–whether the subject be esoteric religion, genealogical niceties, or even trivia.

Elusive speech patterns in common talk are a related byproduct of this tendency. For example, in casual conversation, even young Beng children learn to use referential kin terms almost exclusively, rather than personal names, in discussing the actions of others. As a result, there is a heightened creation of what the linguist Basil Bernstein (1971) would call restricted speech codes that narrow markedly the circle of listeners who can understand the subject of any given conversation. Thus a sentence such as "Little brother went to town this morning"–the sort of sentence uttered day in and day out in countless conversations held in Beng villages–would be meaningless to those who don't already know exactly which "little brother" is being referred to (cf. Bird-David 1994:591-93; Keen 1994). In this way, regular use of referential kin terms in effect continually creates a circle of secrecy in the most

casual of conversations: those in the courtyard who are unsure which "little brother" is meant are willy nilly excluded from the conversation, which thereby in effect becomes a secret, despite its apparently public utterance.

If knowledge is carefully monitored in a myriad of daily contexts, how is the curiosity of children dealt with? Significantly, I cannot recall a single instance of a Beng child asking the sort of "Who/what/where/when/why?" questions that, for example, many young, middle-class American children are likely–or indeed, are often encouraged–to ask regularly. A Beng student living with my family one year in the U.S. was struck by the constant round of such questions posed by our then seven-year-old son… and by the fact that my husband and I always endeavored to reward our son's questions with full answers rather than brusque dismissals. This is not to say that the urge to know does not exist among Beng children–of course it does. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Beng children eventually come to acquire a vast array of knowledge. But so far as I have been able to tell, such knowledge is acquired by patiently and silently observing the actions of adults; blunt questions by children, of the sort that anthropologists ask brazenly, would certainly be met by stern rebukes. (In this way, among the Beng, the visiting anthropologist is hardly playing the role of the child, as one popular stereotype of our profession asserts.)[12] Given this situation, my argument is that Beng children are not given license to express the natural urge to know in verbal form precisely because inquisitive questions might encourage them to ask about matters on which they are forbidden to have any knowledge at all.

The Beng proscription on verbal inquisitiveness extends to young adulthood. Some of my male adolescent and young men friends have continued to lament to me that they are eager to gain access to the sort of cultural knowledge about Beng esoterica that I have pursued during my research. However, they are painfully aware that they are forbidden to pose to their elders the kinds of questions I have posed daily, sometimes shamelessly. So much is hidden, they complain, and they will only come to know it all when they are old men–why should they have to wait so long? Occasionally my young friends teasingly dared me to share with them the esoteric knowledge they were sure I had gained. In noting new vocabulary items on 3 x 5 index cards, I have often had to shield my precious stack from the view of teenage eavesdroppers who sought–they thought inconspicuously–to find cultural treasures in my growing pile (Gottlieb 1997). Still, my young companions know well that the old men's secrets are meant to be kept from them, and ultimately they accept this hierarchical apportioning of knowledge.

Gender serves as another divide in knowledge. In Bengland as elsewhere (e.g. Keen 1994), there are explicit bodies of knowledge that are considered appropriate for women while others are appropriate for men. A few years ago, for instance, several female friends agreed to speak to me about intimate matters only if I turned off the tape recorder; they knew that the tapes would be transcribed by two Beng, male university students, and the women explained that what they had to say should not be heard by young men. All adults are constantly aware of such conven-

tions. For example, when I first asked some adult men about the meaning of jewelry worn by infants (Gottlieb 1998), my interlocutors declared solemnly that this was part of women's secrets; as men, they couldn't possibly know anything about the colorful beads and bracelets. When I later asked women about the items, they confirmed that they kept men in ignorance about the meaning of these esoteric bundles of semiotic beauty.

Or consider this story: A Beng acquaintance was about to go on a long, important trip. He lived in an Ivoirian city with a Beng relative and was in regular touch with the Beng community in town. Yet he managed to conceal all his preparations for his voyage from even his closest kin until the night before his departure. When he finally told an uncle about his plans, the man laughingly congratulated him for having kept the impending trip a secret, saying, "*Mi lɛ gɔŋ*!"—"[Now I know that] you're [really] a man!" In ways such as this, linguistic secrecy is embedded and reproduced in the daily praxis of life.

In accordance with the value that Beng people place on secrecy in daily relationships, the Beng have somatized the concept by locating it in the human body: they say that a secret, like anger, is kept in the stomach. In fact, however, anger starts out in the chest (*mi zu e bina*: "your chest is lit") and only descends into the stomach (*e blana nɔ*) when the person remains angry. In this case, the anger can make the person sick, or endanger a woman during childbirth (for an example, see Gottlieb and Graham 1994:119). By contrast, secrets that are lodged in the stomach will never cause harm to their host. For example, it is thought that secrets do not mix with food that is digesting in the stomach, hence they do not cause digestive troubles. Instead, secrets are said to remain well protected in the "stomach bag" (*nɔ klE*) or "stomach gourd" (*nɔ kpɔŋ*), where they stay out of earshot of those not meant to know them.

With such an ideology, the Beng conception of the person incorporates a notion of secrecy as integral to the formation of the body. Reciprocally, the human body is perceived as critical to the holding of a secret.

If all speech exists in a social universe, it may seem ironic that the ultimate private act of language–talking to oneself–is explicitly condemned, rather than condoned, by the Beng. Indeed, talking to oneself is taken unambiguously as a sign of impending madness. I learned this one day as I was chatting with a friend when a woman walked by my compound mumbling to herself about her plan to relieve herself in the forest. On hearing this undirected muttering, my friend became visibly upset and interrupted our conversation to predict that some day the woman would surely go mad (Gottlieb and Graham 1994:265-66). This story reveals a powerful lesson: speech is meant for others and must never remain entirely secret. Thus although secrecy in language, as in religion, must be maintained in specific contexts, such secrecy must not be taken to the most extreme degree such that no communication whatsoever is possible among people. This would be a perversion of the lesson of secrecy … whose intent, as Simmel recognized long ago, is, ironically, ultimately

social (1950).[13]

THE SECRET LIFE OF CLANS

At a more systematically sociological level, Beng people encode secrecy in varying ways in their two major social groupings: matriclans and patriclans. Beng social structure is organized around a system of dual descent, and the two clan types have vastly different agendas.[14] In day-to-day relations, the matriclans are by far the dominant of the two; significantly, these clans do not require secrecy. Indeed, relations between members of one's matriclan should be open to the point that one's identity is very much bound up in the identity of other matriclan-mates, and with the group as a whole. This is evident in residence patterns. While patrilocality is the norm, the *de facto* situation is quite different. Because of an ideal of matriclan endogamy, matrikin in fact live together frequently, such that the *quartiers* of the villages are constituted matrilaterally. The high degree of quotidian interaction among extended matrikin contributes to the feeling of shared identity that the Beng cite as a hallmark of matriclan relationships.

On the other hand, many Beng people have told me that it is quite impossible to be friends with a member of one's matriclan. As I understand it, the reason is simply that to be friends with someone, there must be a structural and emotional gap to be bridged (Suttles 1970:97). With Beng matriclan-mates, with whom one is seen as sharing so much of one's veritable identity, there is no such gap. Instead, the Beng say of fellow matriclan members, *ã se do* ("we're all one").

There is, however, one place for secrecy within these tightly knit groups. Significantly, it is at the illicit level: through witchcraft. Indeed, virtually all witchcraft among the Beng is directed only at matrikin.[15] In a sense this is appropriate, as witchcraft in Africa is the ultimate hurtful–and hidden–act of subversion of values that should be shared. Among the Beng, it is among matrikin that such values are preeminently shared, hence on occasion preeminently challenged (for some political implications of this painful lesson, see Gottlieb 1989). At death, one's prior illicit and secret acts of malevolence are revealed, however: as they lie dying, it is said that Beng witches cannot complete the final stages of death until they confess all their past witchcraft deeds. (During this ordeal, I am told, maggots may be emerging from the semi-dead corpse.) Secrecy is thus unmasked, though not, of course, in time to undo its deleterious effects on its past victims.

For those familiar with clans in Africa, all this must seem somewhat expectable, as witchcraft in many African groups is often confined to close quarters, including clanmates (cf., for example, Beidelman 1971 on the matrilineal Kaguru of Tanzania). But when we come to Beng patriclans, the situation is quite different. Here, personal identity is hardly so bound up in the identity of clan-mates. As a result, there is neither that potentially oppressive pull of complete belonging nor that heterodox resistance against such total belonging through illicit bewitchings. Instead, patriclan-mates may be friends, for with patrikin there is a psychological chasm

that may be bridged. There may be a physical chasm as well: patriclan members do not necessarily know one another, since the clans may be widely scattered among the twenty-odd Beng villages.

Given these facts, what unites patriclan members at all? I suggest that there is a form of shared mystical property that serves this purpose. At death, one's spirit (*wru*) is said to travel to a spirit village (*wrugbe*), where it rejoins the other deceased members of the patrilocal extended family. Now this journey to a patrilineally constituted spirit village is accomplished only if the corpse is first washed thoroughly in an herbal decoction by a patriclan-mate. Exactly which herbs may be used is highly secret. Each clan owns the rights to use only certain herbs, and no one knows which herbs the members of other clans use.[16] If we accept Goody's classic definition of corporate clans as requiring the presence of inalienable property, it is just this–the right to use these herbs and only these herbs, and the corresponding obligation to conceal their identity from non-clan members–that constitutes the basis for patriclan corporation (e.g. Goody 1961). As a bundle of intellectual knowledge rather than a material entity such as land, this is not the type of property that Goody seems to have had in mind. But recent discussions of the importance of symbolic capital (e.g. Bourdieu 1977) should encourage us to stretch the scope of Goody's definition to include mystical "property," including secret funeral herbs, as crucial to the actors involved.[17]

Comparing the role of secrecy in each of the two clan types, then, we see an inversion. With the matriclans, secrecy exists illicitly in the form of witchcraft within the clans, while with the patriclans, secrecy exists normatively in the form of knowledge of corpse-washing herbs that is not shared between the clans. Nevertheless, in both cases, secrecy is in effect intrinsic to the definition of the clan as a structural unit, and to the individual's own experience of the clan.

THE SECRET LIFE OF POWER

> *The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former* (Simmel 1950:330).

So far I have been discussing secrecy as it relates to knowledge or its concealment. There is another factor that is allied to both secrecy and knowledge in Africa: power. Now secrecy and power have a long and often sordid interrelated history, a history that the philosopher Sissela Bok (1983) has traced admirably. But Bok's discussion focuses on the abuse of secrets for political gain: her "power" is not only explicitly political, it is nefarious. By contrast, in Africa, power is rarely defined by reference to the same parameters as it has been in the West for a long while (Arens and Karp 1989). Rather, power in Africa is often tied to attributes that Westerners would term "mystical." As such, it is associated with the production, and mastery, of knowledge for both licit and illicit purposes (Gottlieb n.d.b). This is evident, for

example, in the Tiv language of Nigeria, in which the word for "witch" translates literally as "person who knows things" (Bohannan 1988:88).

Among the Beng, political power is closely affiliated with witchcraft, such that newly installed kings, queens and village chiefs are required to bewitch a specified number of close relatives within a year of taking office (Gottlieb 1989). Aside from the political clout that this demonstrates quite forcefully, the act also reveals the new officeholder's command of the body of esoteric knowledge required to practice witchcraft. A demonstration of this knowledge also reveals the concomitant ability to make use of the knowledge of witchcraft techniques to protect the kingdom (or village) from other witchcraft attacks once the king (or village chief) has taken office. The situation reveals a general association of knowledge with occult power, and the flip side as well (which a reading of Weber [1947] would not necessarily have led us to anticipate): a very specific alliance of power with knowledge. The Beng proclivity for secrecy–with its implication of private knowledge, and the power that that confers on the knower–fits in nicely here.

In fact, the Beng situation echoes a pattern that exemplifies the constellation of societies deriving from wider Mande culture, of which the Beng are one (marginalized) example. In most Mande-speaking societies, knowledge is considered the most potent form of power. As such, it must be subject to stringent rules concerning the circumstances under which it may be divulged, when, and to whom (e.g. Bellman 1984; McNaughton 1988; Zahan 1963). The Mende language of Sierra Leone indicates this trenchantly: the verb for "to ask" also means "to interrogate," which, as Fermé observes, indicates a clear association between questioning, which is itself a potential challenge to secrecy, and power (1989:2, N. 2). As this example suggests, knowledge, power and secrecy are, throughout the Mande world, a virtually inseparable triad (for other West African cases beyond the Mande region, see Barber [1981:739] on the Yoruba of Nigeria and Quarcoopome [1993] on the Dangme of Ghana).[18]

Considering this, and the wide scope of secrecy in Beng society in particular, we are compelled to ask: Has secrecy for the Beng become an end in and of itself? This has indeed been noted elsewhere, for example, among the Baktaman of Papua New Guinea. There, Barth (1975) has termed the cycle of men's initiation a Chinese box model, with each level of initiation merely a disguise concealing what will later be revealed… which turns out to be yet another veiled layer of disguise. Among the Baktaman, Barth suggests, secrecy exists essentially to perpetuate respect for itself--the very idea of secrecy. In Wagner's terms (1986), it is a symbol that has come to stand for itself.[19]

Elsewhere, secrecy may be more motivated by the content it is meant to conceal. Closer to Bengland, the Bamana place great importance on the content of secret knowledge, so that the four grades of men's initiations are seen as successive steps toward intellectual and spiritual enlightenment in a sense similar to that meant, for example, in Buddhism and Hinduism. In creating such a system, the Bamana emphasize the increasing tendency (which may seem paradoxical at first) for the

male initiate to develop from a state of exteriority to one of interiority, or personal knowledge (Zahan 1963, 1979). This movement requires absolute control over such knowledge—in other words, secrecy.

The Beng, as I mentioned, do not have such a formal system of male initiation that would encapsulate a body of esoteric knowledge. But as distant relatives of the Bamana, they do share a somewhat similar impulse, in their motivated urge to secrecy. Yet among the Beng, knowledge itself is explained in relation to forces wider than the individual: Beng situate their secretiveness by reference to those powerful Earth spirits that we have already encountered. The spirits are the focus of their religion, and they are said by the Beng to be both psychically and physically attached to the Earth. In the Beng model of moral geography, the Earth with a capital E is seen as having boundaries. Indeed, it circumscribes the Beng area, so that leaving the Beng region automatically puts one at risk as one abandons the ritual zone–the Earth–in which Beng protective spirits are said to be most effective. Beng citizens who venture beyond their homeland often offer prayers and sacrifices before their trip, and bring along various charms and amulets for protection against unknown forces that their localized spirits may not otherwise be able to combat.

If many Beng live their lives in relation to these invisible spirits, they by no means assume an unearned permanency to their gods. They continually endeavor to maintain their end of their contract with the spirits, but they also recognize that lapses are possible at any moment: taboos are broken and amends must be made. Should the offense against spirit by human be too severe, thoughtful Beng acknowledge that the spirits may well abandon the Beng altogether–a prospect the Beng of course dread. In that case, they say the Beng Earth itself–the Earth that is worshipped, that gives Beng life meaning–would leave too, as the Earth is indissolubly tied to its spirits. And without the Earth, the Beng couldn't possibly farm successfully, as the Earth spirits oversee the soil's fertility. The cycle of people-spirits-crops would become unhinged, and Beng life rendered impossible. It is for these reasons, which make sense to virtually all Beng, that I suggested that Beng secrecy does not exist as an end in itself, as it does among, say, the Baktaman, but rather in relation to a postulated set of wider spiritual forces.

THE SECRET LIFE OF SOCIETY

> *The secret . . . is one of man's greatest achievements*
> (Simmel 1950:330).

If secrecy suffuses both quotidian relations among the Beng and the higher callings of Beng religion, as well as giving definition to an indigenous notion of power–all of which are, in any case, intimately intertwined–how does the normal business of culture, with its endless round of quotidian acts allowing people to communicate with at least a modicum of mutual comprehension, get carried out? As Fredrik Barth has observed, the more secrecy exists in a society, the less there exists

a fund of shared knowledge (1975:264 ff.): "secrecy entails a pattern of distribution," he writes, "where most actors are excluded from knowledge" (p. 265). Given the classic definitions of culture (from, say, Tylor [1874] to Goodenough [1970:105] to Geertz [1973]) as including, if not revolving around, the notion of shared knowledge, where can secrecy fit in with our understanding of culture? In the face of societies that virtually revel in widespread secrecy, I suggest that our understanding of culture must expand from the classic definitions to consider cases in which the shared quality of certain bundles of knowledge is offset by an extreme individualism of other bundles of knowledge. Yet ironically, this individualistic approach to knowledge is itself founded on a culturally defined ideology—an ideology that a wide array of crucial dimensions to social life must remain private and may not be discussed or otherwise shared with others.[20]

But this still begs the question: How may a society whose members consider it cohesive–which Beng people certainly do–exist on such a basis? The answers to this question are undoubtedly multiple in the cross-cultural spectrum. In the Beng case, I will begin by suggesting that the society may endure as such because the extreme emphasis on secrecy in certain respects is in fact counterbalanced by its opposite: an extreme level of public airing of social events and individual experience, in other spheres.

For I must now acknowledge an alarming contrast to what I have emphasized up to this point. Far from being enveloped by an overwhelming aura of secrecy, my first impressions of a Beng village were that social relationships exhibited great openness; over the months, this impression was confirmed as I took notes daily on regular, intense social discourse about subjects that would certainly be kept private, if not secret, in the middle-class, Western settings in which I was a native. When Beng parents rebuke their children, for example, it is done outdoors, in the courtyard, and when the rebuked children sulk or whimper, that too is accomplished outside. If it is a particularly intense sulk, the sobbing child might attract a small crowd to stare at him–as I once observed with an especially unhappy two-year-old who had just ripped his shorts and had been harangued by his impoverished father for the expense it would incur. In no case would such a child be shooed inside the house by an embarrassed mother, as would likely occur in a middle-class, Western setting.[21]

Other activities that most middle-class Westerners would likely consider private are routinely conducted in public in Beng villages. These include a range of bodily events. For instance, urinating is frequently conducted outdoors within the village, while in the evenings, teenagers of the same sex often walk into the forest in small groups to defecate. The luxury of an afternoon nap on a rest day is indulged in outdoors, under the shade of a thatch canopy or a village tree, and often in groups of people lying close to each other on their bark cloths or more modern mats. Indeed, life in general during the day should be conducted outdoors. People who remain indoors for any length of time during the day--unless it's raining hard and the wind is blowing spirits through the village–are immediately suspected of witchcraft (Gottlieb

and Graham 1994). In this context, privacy is associated with secrecy, and secrecy is associated with nefarious intentions.

In Bengland, even sick people are not left alone.If they are so ill that they can't rouse themselves from bed to lie outdoors, patients should expect a steady stream of unannounced visitors to come into their rooms all day and evening to wish them a speedy recovery. If the convalescents are sleeping when visitors call, the guests usually attempt to wake the patients so that the sick ones may realize that they have been visited. Likewise, people who come to pay a visit to a newborn usually pick up, speak to and wake the sleeping baby, thereby imparting the lesson that sleep is a luxury that must take second place to sociability. Along related lines, my husband's initial major frustration in trying to practice his craft as a writer while living in a Beng village was simply to find private space in which to write. Eventually, he gave up and learned to write sitting outside while surrounded by large clusters of people talking, listening to the radio, washing and nursing babies, stripping lianas, repairing bike tires, peering into his notebook (Gottlieb and Graham 1994).

Disputes between spouses–that act of supreme privacy in most middle-class, Western households, rarely shared with even close friends or relatives–take place in the public eye among the Beng, occasioning on-the-spot gossip by interested relatives, friends and neighbors. Such disputes usually end by the husband appointing a formal mediator to apologize publicly to his wife. If he fails to do so because he is so angry that he cannot bear to apologize, the dispute ends in a semi-public trial. By "semi-public," I mean that the judges are male and female elders of the couple's families, but the trial is conducted outside, in the courtyard, and anyone who is interested may linger to watch along the sidelines. The more outrageous the supposed action of the accused, the larger the audience.

All these sorts of public or semi-public airings of what most middle-class Westerners would consider private affairs suggest a very different understanding of the self from that which is embodied in the dominant Western notion, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and its firm boundaries around itself (Dumont 1986, Lukes 1973).[22] But in some ways the Beng configuration is probably not unexpected to the anthropologist, for it fits in rather nicely with the image of the small-scale, face-to-face community that we have constructed, and with which anthropologists have felt comfortable for a long while: the community in which one's business is everyone else's and everyone else's business is one's own, precisely because the self is supposedly defined fully by reference to others in the group--lineage, clan, village, what-have-you (e.g. Fortes 1987). In the classic anthropological accounts of non-Western social selves, it can sometimes be hard to imagine where any concept of the individual–with outlines approximating those appreciated in most Western settings–can find room to exist and manoeuver. It is here that the Beng emphasis on secrecy in both a large number and array of contexts surprises the Western-trained anthropologist, not expecting any developed notion of the non-Western individual as a discrete being with secrets worth guarding (cf. Barth 1975:26).

The combination of excessive secrecy and excessive publicity–"excessive,"

that is, when viewed from the normative perspective of the Western-trained scholar–might indicate a system at loggerheads with itself. Yet among the Beng, the two orientations of secrecy and publicity exist side by side. Given this, I now want to revise an earlier model of society I may have appeared to endorse–a view that comes down to us from Hobbes, via Durkheim–that entropy is a critical force in society, which will tend to fly apart if not stuck together by the glue of culture. It is precisely such a model of society that is implicit in the question I posed earlier when I asked how Beng society can continue to exist in the face of pervasive secrecy. Having now considered the flip side to this situation–the existence of widespread publicity in relation to affairs that most Westerners would consider private–I want to suggest that the question I posed earlier was misguided. My response to it now is the following: Beng society would no more wholly fly apart without its public airings of intimate affairs than it would wholly cohere without its widespread secrecy. Rather, the culture has available, as it were, two models of social relations that may operate in different arenas depending on the social context. As with, say, the *gumlao/gumsa* models of Kachin society as interpreted long ago by Leach (1954), the two Beng models of society are radically different, but complementary. One is not prior to the other: they exist at the same epistemological level…which is to say that they are mutually defining. Put crudely, the dominant social impulse at the heart of Beng society is not only to remain cohesive but also to provide a systematic alternative to cohesion.

Note the difference here from a hegemony/resistance model of society. In the latter, the pull of the conceptual antonym is present but is located on the margins of society. In contrast, the Beng model I have hypothesized relies on an interior conception of a system and its opposite. With such a system, any possibility of revolution that might exist beneath the practice of resistance would be mitigated.

The argument I am making here resonates with one I have proposed elsewhere regarding Beng society at large, which I characterized as constructed of two seemingly opposed yet complementary principles, those of identity and difference (Gottlieb 1996). There I suggested that these two principles ramify into multiple domains of Beng experience, from descent to folklore. My main point in positing this dual-leveled model of Beng society was to suggest that neither component is dominant, nor can one be reducible to the other. The overall thesis underlying both that work and the current one is that a society may be comprised of two (or more) models on which social relations are premised, and that these models may be quite distinct, even competing … though they may also be complementary.[23]

Accordingly, I am suggesting that both secrecy and publicity are intrinsic to the Beng construction of sociality. This framework for interpreting Beng society, which is in effect a dual-leveled model, speaks to the opening up of our theoretical frameworks in anthropology, especially our opening up of the notion of culture itself, that key symbol in anthropology that for many years was seen in a constricted sense as monological and homogeneous. Of course, recent work on a variety of related topics has already done much in this direction (e.g. Fox 1991)–a direction to which

I view this current article as a contribution. A consideration of indigenous models of society such as the dual one that the Beng offer us may help us to develop our awareness of, and sensitivity towards, alternative, complex, even contradictory models of culture. Current directions in anthropology revel in the complexity of culture, emphasizing heterogeneity, disjuncture, improvisation, and proposing the possibility of multiple models to account for such complexities.[24] One lesson of Beng secrecy and its obverse is that, as others have begun to argue (e.g. Kuper 1992), in providing indigenous models of complexity, non-Western societies can actively speak to, illuminate and, one hopes, shape our predominantly Western- inflected academic discourses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper has been inspired by the work of Georg Simmel, whose writings on the nature of secrecy (1950) still constitute the paradigmatic point of reference on the subject. His perspective suffuses my own approach to the extent that it would be tedious to refer continually to individual points that Simmel has made on the subject.

My greatest debt, and one that is not ever more than only partially repayable, is to the Beng people who have shared their lives, and sometimes their secrets, with me for reasons of their own having everything to do with their own notions of sociality and friendship.

I have presented several different versions of this paper at conferences and elsewhere: the 33rd Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association (Baltimore); the Ninth Triennial Conference on African Art (Iowa City); the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago; and the Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign. I am grateful to members of all my audiences for their inspirational comments and proddings. I am also grateful to J. A. Barnes and Michael Herzfeld for very useful comments. Philip Graham has discussed with me in ever-perspicacious fashion the issues raised in this paper over the course of fieldwork and beyond; my gratitude to him is no secret.

* * *

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NOTES

[1] The brief comparative comments that will be offered throughout this article on Western approaches to privacy and publicity are informed by a wealth of texts in Western social and intellectual history. Lacking space here to expand on this intriguing and complex set of issues, I refer the interested reader to such classic works as Foucault (1970), Habermas (1987, 1989) and Weber (1958), and more recent discussions and critical commentaries such as Bernstein (1985), Dumont (1986) and Rasmussen (1990).

[2] This is especially the case while chewing tobacco or, even more, kola nuts which, when chewed, produce a bright orange stream of saliva.

[3] I promised my Beng friends and informants that I would only publish that which would not violate the canons of Beng secrecy. In this paper I have tried to talk about Beng secrecy while endeavoring strenuously to avoid divulging the actual contents of certain bundles of secret knowledge that would cause special pain were they to be publicized. Future Beng readers can judge if I have succeeded in this attempt.

[4] Beng men also hunt game in the surrounding forest and savanna regions, making the village economy essentially a mixed one. In recent years, however, the demands of cash-crop farming have been such that men have far less time to hunt than previously; additionally, the cost of trapping lines, guns and cartridges has become exorbitant in recent years as the price paid for locally grown cash crops (especially coffee) has declined precipitously.

[5] The indigenous religion of the Beng revolves around worship of the Earth and associated spirits, and also includes sacrifices to ancestors' spirits (Gottlieb 1996, Gottlieb 1998, Gottlieb 2000, Gottlieb and Graham 1994). In recent years, Islam and, to a lesser extent, Christianity, have offered religious alternatives, though many Beng "converts" to these religions continue to observe at least intermittently the ritual practices associated with the indigenous calendar.

[6] The Jula migrants are all Muslim and do not participate in any form of Earth worship. Although all the Jimini migrants I knew were also Muslim, it is possible that some remain faithful to the local Jimini religion, which also involves Earth worship, based on their own six-day calendar (Ellen Suthers, personal communication). Further research is needed to explore this issue.

[7] Of course there is no way of knowing whether the mostly Muslim immigrants would indeed observe the local taboo if they did know about it. In fact, it is possible that they might well ignore it, as their commitment to Islam might disincline them to reducing their work time for the sake of an alien religion that they probably consider heathen. Nevertheless, the refusal on the part of their Beng hosts to inform the migrants of the local work taboo is striking.

[8] In the space of this article, I cannot expand on the implications of secrecy for the conduct of anthropological fieldwork. This issue is, in narrative form, a major theme of my coauthored memoir (Gottlieb and Graham 1994); I hope to develop it more analytically in a future piece.

[9] Although there is no Beng term of which I am aware that translates directly as the English "religion," the concept is by no means foreign to Beng thought. The Beng readily distinguish, for example, between taboos (*sõ pɔ*), which have a spiritual basis, and rules (*mla*), which do not; and they articulate several zones of spiritual interaction with humans: matters having to do with the Earth as spiritually conceived (*ba za*); matters concerning spirits (*bɔŋzɔ za*) that are themselves seen as attached to particular locales on the Earth; and matters concerning the souls of ancestors (*wru za*).

[10] For parallel treatments of secrecy in the quotidian context elsewhere in West Africa, see Gable (1997) on the Manjaco of Guinea-Bissau, Gilbert (1993) on the Akuapem of Ghana, and Piot (1993) on the Kabre of Togo.

[11] In pursuing this interest in arranged marriage patterns, I learned to discuss the possibility of hypothetical incestuous matches only for my respondent him- or herself, and, occasionally, for a few of the latter's very closest relatives. This necessitated me having a wide network of informants for this particular topic of inquiry.

[12] But see the excellent article by Karp and Kendall (1982) that effectively refutes this persistent image.

[13] Correlatively, the Beng make much of formal speech and indeed formalize many speech occasions that Westerners would leave casual. That formality produces a vast array of rules whose ultimate purpose is simply to specify who may say what. For example, at a funeral, the members of each village must designate a formal male speaker who will announce the collective grief of his fellow villagers when they arrive at the host village in which the deceased had lived and in which the funeral is now taking place. Occasionally, bitter arguments may break out because the chosen speaker is judged inadmissible for one or another reason (for more on Beng funerals, see Gottlieb 1992). Even more formal speeches are required for weddings. In both cases, the point is not secrecy, *per se*, but an extension of the lesson of secrecy: that the production of speech is circumscribed and, depending on its content and context, it must always be associated with a particular person.

[14] For more theoretical discussion of my approach to descent in general, and further ethnographic discussion of the resources, activities and sentiments associated with the two clan types, see Gottlieb (1996:46-71).

[15] The one exception to this rule occurs at kings', queens' and village chiefs' funerals, during which time

witches may attempt to bewitch people present who belong to any matriclan (Gottlieb 1989).

[16] This was one of the very few bits of information that a Beng king whom I got to know quite well would not divulge to me, an outsider to his patriclan.

[17] J. A. Barnes has suggested that Goody might well be willing to include my amendment into the scope of his definition (personal communication).

[18] Speaking of lying–a topic with intimate ties to secrecy– Barnes (n.d.) has written that whereas lies appear to be categorically evil, in fact in some contexts they may be crucial, integrated, expected, and/or understood as such. His point is akin to mine for secrecy.

[19] Among the Kabré of Togo, as Piot analyzes it, secrecy is "part of a set of movements and provocations" (1993:362) that appear when ambiguity and/or possible equality–which is itself seen as a potential sorce of untenable ambiguity–define a social relationship. Here, the point is not secrecy for its own sake, nor is it secrecy for the sake of protecting dangerous and hidden knowledge. Rather, secrecy is a deliberate attempt to conceal indeterminacy, which is itself perceived as dangerous. Of course the irony is that the attempt to conceal ambiguity can only create further ambiguity (cf. Fermé 1989).

[20] Note that I am not referring to the individuation of experience--which itself poses a challenge to the classic anthropological definitions of culture for other, though related, reasons, as Bruner (1986) and others have lain out.

[21] In this and the ensuing discussion, I take the U.S. as my paradigmatic model for this claim. The extent to which life in other Western nations conform to this model is variable.

[22] In contrast, Sennett (1977) suggests that since the Industrial Revolution and the rise of late capitalism, intimacy has, paradoxically, become a public commodity in the West. Popular examples include the huge viewing audiences of American daytime television shows that focus on intimate topics, both fictionally (soap operas) and non-fictionally (talk show hosts such as Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey) (Philip Graham, personal communication). .

[23] For a discussion of the intellectual lineage behind this approach, including a discussion indicating divergences from Lévi-Strauss with whose work my approach may appear to have affinities, see Gottlieb (1996); for recent ethnographic applications of the approach taken here to multiple models of social life as applied to gender issues, see for example Gottlieb (1990), Meigs (1990).

[24] For an earlier roundup of the beginnings of this trend, see Ortner (1984). For a related debate over the utility of the concept of "society," see Ingold, et al. (1996).

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