

“Budi Pekerti” as a Civil Religion: The Paradox of Schools in Shaping Moral Exemplar

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the practice of "Budi Pekerti" (character education) in schools in Batam, Indonesia, by analyzing it as a form of civil religion and symbolic ritual. Drawing on personal experiential reflection and theoretical frameworks from Clifford Geertz, Émile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean Baudrillard, the study reveals a fundamental paradox: instead of fostering genuine morality, the ritualized and compulsory nature of these activities often produces false obedience and performative conformity. The analysis identifies key failures, including the erosion of intrinsic meaning (ritual failure), the prioritization of administrative compliance over ethical internalization, and the reinforcement of social hierarchies and biases. Furthermore, for Generation Z, these practices are often perceived as empty liturgies, leading to disenchantment. The study concludes that the institutionalization of moral values through coercive, standardized rituals results in a "pseudo-morality," where symbols replace substance and performance trumps authentic ethical commitment. It argues for a reimagining of moral education that prioritizes critical reflection, personal autonomy, and authentic lived experience over rigid ceremonial formalism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Every Friday morning, rows of students in uniform, some of whom may still be sleepy, gather. My school—from elementary to high school—turned into a mass worship hall. Students were required to participate in moral education activities, which included reading the Yasin, listening to lectures, and then returning to class with the hope of becoming moral individuals. At the elementary and junior high school levels, this activity began with a group recitation of the Yasin, followed by a lecture from a

religious teacher or invited ustad. Teachers often punished students who did not attend, threatening, “You will not get a grade if you skip “Budi Pekerti”. However, my experience changed when I was in high school. Budi Pekerti activities were only given to female students. Meanwhile, male students were directed straight to the mosque for Friday prayers. There was no official explanation, only a tacit agreement that was accepted by all parties. It turns out that in other schools, similar activities are labeled “keputrian”—specifically for female students—with lectures that are also more

focused on manners, how to dress, and “female nature” [1].

In the past, I did not think that activity was sacred. But now I ask: Can an activity shape morals if its values are enforced through punishment and absenteeism? Can it be called moral if attendance is only for the sake of numbers and fear? And why, after years of listening to religious lectures, have some of us grown up to be a generation that is skilled at pretending? Even more ironic, why did this activity suddenly target only half of the high school population (female students)? Similar phenomena, such as “keputrian” (exclusivity) for female junior high school students, add to the mystery: what exactly is being “shaped” behind these lectures and punishments? From the perspective of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “Budi Pekerti” activities are not merely religious events. They are rituals, with structured symbols, scripts, and actors. Durkheim even refers to this type of activity as civil religion—a civil religion designed to instill solidarity and collective values in modern society. However, rituals can also go awry. Instead of fostering piety, it produces false obedience. Instead of fostering piety, it produces false obedience. Instead of fostering morality, it reinforces hierarchy and formality. In this essay, I attempt to reinterpret the practice of “Budi Pekerti”—not merely as character education—as a symbolic “ritual” that contains layers of power, exclusion, and paradox. If morality is something that grows from within, then why does the school treat it like an administrative protocol?

Starting from this anxiety and paradoxical question, this paper attempts to delve deeper into the meaning of the “Budi Pekerti” ritual commonly found in Batam. As a civil religion, it has its liturgy (recitation of Yasin, lectures), its authority (teachers, ustadz), its sanctions (punishment, threats of poor grades), and its complex social function of reinforcing dominant values, creating a collective identity, and at the same time—as we will explore—producing paradoxes and hypocrisy itself. This essay aims to dissect

the paradox of schools as moral factories: how institutions tasked with shaping ethical exemplars often get caught up in mechanisms that erode the foundations of true morality—coercion, inconsistency, and false performativity—through mandatory rituals called “Budi Pekerti”. We will explore how this ritual operates, the contradictions it gives rise to, and the conceptual failures that may underlie it in understanding how human character is formed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This subsection discusses a literature review related to the effectiveness of religious activities in schools and their role in shaping student character. This study covers various aspects, ranging from the effectiveness of religious activities in shaping positive behavior, the intensity of rituals and students' religious experiences, the implementation of religious values through routine activities at school, to the representation of multicultural values and moral bias in character education. Based on previous research, religious activities in schools are not only influenced by the frequency and involvement of students, but also by teacher strategies, consistency of moral examples, and the social and gender representations that are displayed. This review aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical basis for understanding how religious practices in schools can holistically influence the character building and ethical awareness of students.

2.1 *Effectiveness of Religious Activities in Schools*

Anwar, Faisal, and Zaim (2023) show that school religious activities play an important role in shaping positive student behaviour, such as discipline and responsibility. However, this study tends to assess effectiveness based on visible behavioural outputs and assumes that rituals will automatically strengthen moral character [2].

Similar research by Hidayati and Nurhadi (2021) found that routine group prayers improve the regularity of

student behaviour, but do not guarantee the internalization of values because participation is motivated by teacher control and the threat of sanctions. Thus, the effectiveness of religious activities needs to be viewed not only in terms of student compliance, but also in terms of the extent to which these activities create autonomous ethical awareness.

2.2 *Intensity of Rituals and Religious Experience*

Ningtyas and Saputera (2018) revealed that the more often students are involved in religious activities at school and at home, the stronger their religious experiences become. However, this study assumes a linear relationship between the frequency of rituals and spiritual depth without considering the possibility of ritual failure [3].

The research by Azzahra and Puspitasari (2022) reinforces these findings by adding that students' active involvement in tadarus and religious discussions can increase social empathy. However, they note that there are indications of boredom when activities are carried out without variation, which has the potential to trigger cognitive dissonance between the values taught and students' daily experiences.

Meanwhile, a survey by the Research and Development Agency of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2020) shows that 45% of students participate in school religious activities only because of administrative requirements and grades, not because of spiritual motivation, so their effectiveness in character building still needs to be evaluated (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2020).

2.3 *Implementation of Religious Character through School Rituals*

Romadhoni, Bakhruddin, and Mulyono (2023) examined teachers' strategies in instilling religious values through routine programs such as communal prayer, Quran recitation, and moral guidance. They emphasized the role of teachers as moral role models but

did not discuss the risks of formalizing values and moral performativity [4].

Santosa's (2021) study shows that teachers tend to use a top-down approach, where students are encouraged to obey without room for dialogue. This results in superficial obedience and makes students prioritize symbols of obedience (attendance, dressing according to rules) over internalizing values [5].

In addition, Rasyid's (2022) research found that the success of religious activities is greatly influenced by the consistency of teachers in practicing the values they teach. The inconsistency between teachers' behaviour and moral messages causes students to be sceptical and view these activities as merely an administrative obligation [6].

2.4 *Multicultural Values and Moral Representation*

Maghfiroh, Halim, and Beddu (2024) highlight the role of Islamic Education teachers in instilling multicultural values through religious activities but have not discussed the bias of moral exemplar representation [1].

Wibowo's (2020) research adds that the character education curriculum tends to highlight national heroes or religious figures who fit the dominant narrative of the state, so that local or minority figures are often neglected. This has the potential to reinforce value hierarchies and marginalize certain identities [7].

The study by Fadilah and Rachman (2022) also reveals that the representation of women in moral textbooks is often stereotypical, placing them as supporting figures or examples of domestic piety. This gender bias influences students' perceptions of the ideal role of women in society.

Based on existing literature reviews, although various studies have emphasized the importance of religious activities in schools in shaping student behavior and character, there are still

several gaps that need to be addressed. Previous studies tend to assess the effectiveness of activities from the aspects of ritual compliance and involvement but lack emphasis on the critical and autonomous internalization of values, as well as the influence of social, cultural, and gender representations in character education. Therefore, this study offers a more comprehensive approach by examining the interaction between ritual frequency, teacher strategies, students' religious experiences, and multicultural moral representations, thereby providing new insights into how religious activities in schools shape character that is not only formally compliant but also based on ethical awareness and critical reflection.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses an interpretive qualitative method with a text analysis and critical reflection approach based on the author's personal experience. The author positions himself as both a participant and an observer in analyzing the practice of "Budi Pekerti" in Batam schools. Through participatory observation and reflection on personal experiences during these activities from elementary to high school, the author examines the meaning behind these rituals using theoretical frameworks from figures such as Clifford Geertz (on rituals and symbolic systems), Émile Durkheim (on civil religion), Pierre Bourdieu (doxa), and Jean Baudrillard (simulacra). The author did not conduct formal field research but explored the meanings, contradictions, and paradoxes that emerged from these practices through relevant theoretical perspectives.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses findings and analysis regarding character education practices through "Budi Pekerti" activities in Batam schools. The focus is on how moral and religious rituals—including reciting the Yasin, lectures by teachers or religious

leaders, and student behavior evaluations—shape collective and symbolic experiences designed to instill moral values. This subsection also highlights the tension between rituals and the realization of everyday morality, including the failure of value transformation, formalities that diminish the meaning of religion, and the emergence of pseudo-morality due to institutional pressure. This analysis places "Budi Pekerti" in the framework of rituals, symbols, and modern morality, while highlighting how values and symbols can fail to translate into real moral behavior and awareness.

4.1 "Budi Pekerti" as a Ritual

The teacher's voice is heard through a loudspeaker, organizing the rows, giving instructions, then starting the activity with a recitation of Yasin chanted together. After that, a teacher or ustad comes to the front to give a lecture on the importance of honesty, devotion to parents, or how to be a pious student. At the end, or sometimes during the activity, students who were late or caught skipping class were called to the front to be reprimanded or punished. All of this took place with an almost identical rhythm, from elementary school to high school, from one school to another in Batam. This regularity and repetition created a collective experience that was separate from everyday life. In Émile Durkheim's view, this pattern reflects the basic structure of sacred rituals in modern society—collective activities carried out in a special space and time—with repeated procedures and a certain authority as the regulator of the procession [8]. This ritual formed a boundary between the profane and the sacred. We were still at school, but during that hour we were "transferred" to a higher moral space. This "Budi Pekerti" activity has all these characteristics: it takes place at a fixed time (every Friday), is

organized by a teacher as the leader of the ritual, and follows a standard sequence of reading “sacred” texts (such as Yasin and prayers), listening to sermons from authoritative figures, and ending with a moral assessment of the participants. This structured procedure creates a clear boundary between everyday worldly activities and this special, honourable space and time.

Furthermore, Clifford Geertz argues that rituals are not merely symbolic acts, but also a way of constructing and maintaining a system of meaning that lives within society. It is not only the structure that makes this moment meaningful, but also the symbols that speak silently. Clifford Geertz would call this a system of symbols that shapes moods and motivations, moods and moral impulses. The Mushaf we hold is not just a book; it is a symbol of truth, something that must be read with a fluent tongue and a pure heart. The voice of the ustad echoes like a sound from the past, making us feel that his words come directly from heaven. The prayers offered together become the most solemn moment, full of hope and surrender, like children trying to negotiate with God.

Prayer together creates a solemn atmosphere, a religious mood that binds people emotionally; while stories about heroes and prophets told in lectures serve as motivations or symbolic encouragement for students to emulate the ideal figures held up as role models by society. Geertz refers to these figures as moral exemplars, models for reality that are projected into everyday life. They are not merely historical or religious figures but living symbols of ideal values. In the context of “Budi Pekerti”, figures such as the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and national heroes

such as Kartini or Soekarno are presented as moral mirrors that students must internalize. However, as will be discussed later, the selection of these moral exemplars is not always neutral and sometimes reflects problematic dominant ideologies.

However, the most powerful aspect is the narrative contained within Surah Yasin itself. There is a story about prophets who came to a country, were rejected, but remained patient. There was a man from the outskirts of the city who bravely defended the truth, then died a martyr for his faith. My Islamic studies teacher in junior high school often slipped messages from this story into his lessons. “See, faith must not waver even in the face of opposition,” he would say. The figures in the story became moral exemplars, silent role models who seemed to say, “This is how you should behave.” From the outside, this activity seemed like a normal religious lesson, but for those who participated in it every week, it felt like a sacred stage. It was a place where values were formed not through theory, but through collectively choreographed spiritual experiences. Indirectly, I was trained to sit still, to be solemn, to not take sacred words lightly. I was taught that being moral meant obeying form, order, and a voice higher than our own.

When the final chant and closing prayer were recited, the room did not immediately return to the ordinary world. There was a residue of silence, a lingering calm. This ritual had completed its subtle yet profound task. It did not merely teach about morality; it created an intense shared experience where those values were lived out in a sacred space. Through its binding ritual structure, evocative symbolic

power, and inspiring exemplary force, the weekly Friday recitation of Yasin becomes an invisible ink that slowly carves a moral landscape in the hearts of its listeners. It builds not only knowledge, but also deep awareness (moods) and the desire to act (motivations). The true foundation of moral character. Overall, this structured, symbolic, and exemplary ritual of reciting Yasin serves as a catalyst for character building. It creates an intense and meaningful shared experience. This ritual is not merely a transfer of religious knowledge, but a process of internalizing values through repeated sacred experiences. The solemnity that is built (moods) and the motivation to emulate (motivations) that is fostered through symbols and stories, together leave an impression on the participants' consciousness, carving out the foundation of a character that is noble, resilient, and based on faith. But does it really shape morality or does it just produce false obedience? This question will be answered in the next section.

4.2 *The Failure of Moral Transformation*

I still remember that scene vividly. A male teacher jumped over the school fence to chase after students who were trying to skip a character-building class. Ironically, after successfully herding the students back to the field, he himself disappeared—and was nowhere to be seen participating in the same activity. In high school, this pattern repeated itself. Some teachers seemed busy “raiding” female students who were hiding in the toilet or library during lecture sessions, while they themselves sat in the teachers' room drinking coffee. I grew up in a system that treated the “Budi Pekerti” activity every Friday morning as a sacred moment: reading Yasin together, listening to

lectures from the Ustaz, and listening to exhortations to be moral individuals. But from that experience, I began to wonder: if morality is indeed important, why does it need to be enforced? And if the teachers who enforce it are themselves absent from the ritual, do they truly believe in the values they are upholding?

According to Clifford Geertz, religious rituals not only symbolize values, but also construct cognitive and affective frameworks that create moods and motivations that shape social reality [9]. However, in the context of “Budi Pekerti”, symbols such as reciting Yasin or stories of the Prophet are unable to internalize values because of what is called ritual failure, which is when the form remains, but the meaning is eroded. For example, in my observation, teachers who teach the value of honesty can be seen opening their laptops and changing students' report card scores for the good of the school. Students who diligently pray together sometimes spread slander through WhatsApp groups. This is where rituals cease to be models for behaviour and become empty performances separated from reality [9]. In practice in Batam schools, “Budi Pekerti” rituals reveal the tension between performance and belief. This activity is no longer a reflective effort, but rather an administrative obligation that carries consequences in terms of grades. When I was still participating in “Budi Pekerti”, it was not uncommon for my friends to admit that they “participated because they were afraid of being punished” or because “their grades could be reduced.” Worse still, I witnessed teachers preaching honesty on Fridays but then had no qualms about changing report card grades or asking for “gifts” from parents.

Failure occurs fundamentally when the values that are theatrically celebrated in rituals contradict the actual behaviour that is observed or experienced. Rituals fail to serve as a means of transformation because their message is negated by everyday reality. Terence Turner emphasizes that symbols and meanings are not neutral; they are the result of political contestation and reflect the interests of dominant groups. The selection of role models in the character education curriculum is a strategic arena in which certain ideologies are fought for and naturalized. Major criticism arises when this process reveals strong biases, such as gender bias (the lack of representation of female heroes and female thinkers or their stereotypical portrayal) and religious bias (only highlighting heroes from a particular religion, such as Islam or Christianity, while ignoring the contributions of figures from other faiths or local figures who are not affiliated with the dominant religion). The Character Education Curriculum—in this perspective—is not a neutral vehicle for instilling universal values, but rather an arena for ideological struggle. Dominant groups (whether political, religious, or cultural) have the power to define what is considered noble character and who is worthy of being a role model, thereby excluding or marginalizing the values and figures of other groups. This process reinforces existing inequalities and has the potential to cause resistance or apathy among students whose identities are not represented.

Generation Z—who grew up in a digital ecosystem saturated with information and rapid interaction—often display a different attitude toward formal rituals than previous generations. For many of them,

moral or religious rituals that are mandatory in schools can feel like outdated formalities, an empty liturgy that has lost its intrinsic meaning and relevance. Rigid, repetitive, and forced rituals, without room for critical dialogue, personal exploration, or authentic emotional connection, lead to disenchantment. The term disenchantment (Weber) here refers to the fading of the sacred aura or deep meaning of practices that were previously considered meaningful. The digital generation tends to be more critical and seeks meaning and authenticity. If rituals at school are only perceived as administrative requirements or soulless ceremonies, without a clear correlation to the complexity of their real lives (including their intense online lives), then these rituals fail completely as a means of moral transformation. They may go through the motions physically, but their minds and hearts are elsewhere, leaving only an empty shell.

Character education—as practiced in Batam schools—does not merely aim to instil the value of “goodness.” It also establishes a hierarchy of who is considered moral and who is not. In this process, morality is no longer a matter of everyday actions, but rather a social performance: whether someone attends prayer services, whether they can quote stories of the prophets, whether they appear obedient in front of their teachers. But performance is not ethics. A classic experiment from Princeton University in 1973, known as the Good Samaritan Study, shows how the presence of rituals or moral intentions does not guarantee ethical actions. In the experiment, theology students who were in a hurry—even when they were about to deliver a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan—tended to pass by an

injured person without stopping to help. Religiosity did not increase the likelihood of them helping. Follow-up studies reinforce this finding: religious people do not consistently act more ethically than non-religious people [10]. At this point, we see a troubling paradox: moral rituals in schools produce a generation that is skilled at pretending, not acting. Morality has changed from an internal process to symbolic compliance. And ironically, in an increasingly critical world like that of Generation Z, when morality must be enforced, what is born is not virtue, but boredom.

4.3 *Religion, Secularization, and False Morality*

"I never wear a hijab to school... except on Fridays," said one of my friends, chuckling softly. She is not the only one. Every Friday morning, the schoolyard turns into a sea of impromptu headscarves. However, when the clock strikes nine and activities are over, many of them rush to take off their hijabs, tucking them into their bags like gym uniforms. "It's just for formality's sake," she said. This is where we see an invisible failure: the ritual is performed, but morality fails to be formed. The phenomenon of "Budi Pekerti" cannot be interpreted merely as a normal religious activity. It reflects the contradictions of modern moral education, where religion and ethical values are institutionalized in forms that are increasingly losing their soul.

In Indonesia, moral education often appears to be a display of piety. Behind the morning prayers and lessons on noble character lies an unspoken void: the values that are taught are not always lived out. Morality becomes a spectacle, not an experience; it becomes memorization, not action. This phenomenon is not merely a

personal irony, but part of a structural crisis in our education. Ethics is often the main channel for teaching religious values. Psychologist Ara Norenzayan argues that belief in a punishing God developed as an adaptive mechanism when human societies grew larger and interpersonal interactions could no longer be maintained by reputation [10]. In a world full of strangers, humans need an omniscient entity—one that is always watching—to maintain order. Therefore, God is not merely a symbol of faith, but also a guardian of collective morality. In this context, "Budi Pekerti" activities in modern schools reflect the same logic: creating morality based on symbolic supervision, not internalization.

However, the approach is often formalistic and administrative. Compliance is expressed through mandatory outward symbols, such as the use of headscarves for female students. The focus shifts from spiritual appreciation and substantive ethics to compliance with institutional rules. This phenomenon is reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *doxa*, which is unspoken and unquestioned beliefs that are simply accepted in a social sphere [11]. Religion in this context becomes part of the school's *doxa*, a set of symbolic rules that must be followed for the sake of order and institutional recognition, often without room for critical reflection on personal spiritual meaning or experience. Religious values are reduced to a series of performative obligations that are detached from their essence. This phenomenon is not unique to educational institutions in Indonesia but reflects a long tradition of how humans construct collective moral systems. As explained by several studies, religion often becomes a public

means of symbolizing morality, rather than its root cause [10].

Values education in character building often adopts a model of efficiency, predictability, and measurability. This is a legacy of the moral structure of the past, when “fear of God” was more effective in shaping social order than personal beliefs. Students are fed moral theories, ethical formulas, and lists of “good behaviour” to memorize and be tested on. This process resembles a fast production line, namely input (theory) → process (memorization) → output (test scores). However, there is a wide gap between memorizing these theories and the internalization of true values and consistent daily behaviour outside the classroom. In religious and civics classes, students are asked to memorize the principles of Pancasila, recite ethical theories from textbooks, and answer multiple-choice questions about “what is honesty.” Moral values are measured by numbers, not actions. George Ritzer criticizes modernization through the concept of McDonaldization, which is the spread of the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (often through technology) to various areas of life, including education. Moral values are undergoing McDonaldization. This means that these values are reduced to points that can be memorized, measured through multiple-choice tests, and “produced” en masse. The result is pseudo-morality, cognitive knowledge of what is “good” without emotional commitment or sustainable practice, giving rise to hypocritical behaviour that adapts to the situation.

These two dynamics—the reduction of religion to doxa and the McDonaldization-style production of moral values—have created a fragile

moral education landscape and shaped a false morality. What we see today in schools is not a revival of values, but rather a repackaging of the theology of order that has been around for thousands of years. They explain why activities such as “Budi Pekerti”, although seemingly sacred and orderly, fail to touch the deepest realm of ethics: the freedom to choose to do good. When rituals become obligations rather than awareness; when values become memorization rather than practice; then institutions no longer shape moral exemplars, but merely moral actors—who know when to smile, when to read prayers, and when to change their headscarves for the sake of attendance. Perhaps the question is no longer “How do we instil moral values in schools?” but “How do we free students from the falseness of those values themselves?”.

In collective rituals such as “Budi Pekerti”, the presence of religious symbols, which should serve as a bridge to meaning, instead become a barrier between individuals and the values themselves. The hijab worn only on Fridays, the Yasin recited with sleepy eyes, and the lectures listened to while glancing at one's watch are not reflections of faith, but rather adjustments to institutional expectations. This phenomenon can be understood through Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra: a condition in which representation becomes more real than the reality it represents. In simulacra, religious symbols—such as the hijab or prayer—no longer refer to faith, but instead stand alone as administrative obligations, becoming “models” that replace a spiritual reality that is no longer lived. Morality becomes a space of hyperreality, where religious practices are carried out without connection to belief and

morality appears as a performance that has lost its substance. As Baudrillard wrote, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1981: 1). In this context, students are no longer invited to experience values, but rather to functionally act them out. Faith becomes repetition, not reflection; morality becomes performance, not commitment. When symbols are more important than meaning, what we create is not moral human beings, but actors who are skilled at playing morality as a seasonal role.

5. CONCLUSION

Budi Pekerti, as practiced in Batam schools, is perhaps intended to be the foundation of students' character and ethics. However, in its implementation, it reveals the profound irony of modern moral education: when sacred values are packaged in an administrative format, when faith is recited in empty liturgy, and when morality is controlled through attendance and the threat of grades. We have witnessed how

these rituals can build solidarity as well as false obedience, how religious symbols can both bind and freeze. Schools, in their zeal to shape exemplary morals, often forget that true morality is not about repeating liturgy or symbolic obedience, but the courage to choose to do good even when no one is watching. When students are more preoccupied with memorizing "how to be good" than experiencing and living it, we must ask: is our system shaping human beings or merely producing actors?

However, blaming rituals entirely is an oversimplification. As anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists have shown, religion and rituals were once the answer to the problem of trust in large communities. But times have changed. Today's generation does not seek God in school loudspeakers, but in honest relationships, relevant meaning, and ethical autonomy. Perhaps it is time we stopped asking, "Are students religious enough?" and started asking, "Are institutions humane enough?" Because in an increasingly complex and fluid world, morality can no longer be taught like a mathematical formula. It must be felt, reflected upon, and lived. And that is only possible if we dare to restore the spirit of what has so far only appeared to be ritual.

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