

# Jamiat Kheir: A Catalyst for Islamic Intellectual Renewal and Educational Transformation in Early 20th Century Java

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## Abstract

The arrival of Europeans to the archipelago posed a challenge to the Islamic kingdoms that were then in power. The internal and external conflicts experienced by the Islamic kingdoms fueled the colonial spirit of the Europeans. The decline of the Islamic kingdoms became the transition to the beginning of colonialism in the archipelago. Europeans competed with each other to control the archipelago, starting from Portuguese colonialism, VOC colonialism, and British occupation to colonialism with a long period by the Dutch government. The practice of colonialism applied during the Dutch Government, which was very discriminatory and exploitative, gave rise to the Ethical Policy in the early 20th century as an effort to redeem Dutch behaviour. This policy has led to the emergence of new ideologies that are growing rapidly due to easy access to education, information and technology. One of the new ideologies that developed rapidly in the 20th century was the understanding of Modern Islam pioneered by the Jamiat Kheir organization. Jamiat Kheir, which is engaged in social education, began to spread the ideology of Modern Islam through teaching and interacting with the outside world of the Dutch East Indies. The spread of Modern Islam initiated by Jamiat Kheir eventually led to the growth of other Modern Islamic organizations.

**Keywords:** *colonialism, ethical politics, ideology, modern islam, jamiat kheir*

## **Abstrak**

Kedatangan bangsa Eropa ke nusantara menjadi tantangan bagi kerajaan-kerajaan Islam yang saat itu berkuasa. Konflik internal dan eksternal yang dialami oleh kerajaan-kerajaan Islam tersebut menyulut semangat kolonialisme bangsa Eropa. Kemunduran kerajaan-kerajaan Islam tersebut menjadi transisi dimulainya kolonialisme di nusantara. Bangsa Eropa saling bersaing untuk menguasai nusantara, mulai dari kolonialisme Portugis, kolonialisme VOC, dan pendudukan Inggris hingga kolonialisme dengan kurun waktu yang panjang oleh pemerintah Belanda. Praktik kolonialisme yang diterapkan pada masa Pemerintahan Belanda yang sangat diskriminatif dan eksploitatif tersebut memunculkan Politik Etis pada awal abad ke-20 sebagai upaya menebus perilaku Belanda. Kebijakan tersebut menyebabkan munculnya ideologi-ideologi baru yang berkembang pesat karena kemudahan akses pendidikan, informasi, dan teknologi. Salah satu ideologi baru yang berkembang pesat pada abad ke-20 adalah paham Islam Modern yang dipelopori oleh organisasi Jamiat Kheir. Jamiat Kheir yang bergerak di bidang pendidikan sosial mulai menyebarkan ideologi Islam Modern melalui pengajaran dan interaksi dengan dunia luar Hindia Belanda. Penyebaran Islam Modern yang digagas Jamiat Kheir akhirnya melahirkan organisasi-organisasi Islam Modern lainnya.

**Kata Kunci:** *kolonialisme, politik etika, ideologi, islam modern, jamiat kheir*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of competitors to the dominance of Islamic rule in the archipelago, which began in the 16th century until the early 20th century, made the practice of colonialism carried out by Europeans able to be applied, even further becoming a new dominance replacing the Islamic rule. Starting from the arrival of the Portuguese who finally managed to control the Malacca region, until the Dutch Colonial Government, then precisely in the 17th century the practice of colonialism officially took place. The practice of colonialism implemented by the Dutch Colonial Government was very discriminatory and intimidating, where a hierarchical social class

structure was divided into three classes. The first class consisted of Europeans, the next class consisted of foreign Easterners, namely Arabs, Chinese and Indians. The division based on these classes led to a social gap between the classes, where often people who did not belong to the European class were treated differently and discriminated against. The Dutch Colonial Government's policy was exacerbated by the massive exploitation of both natural resources and human resources.

At the end of the 19th century, a Dutch jurist, Van Deventer, published an article entitled *Een Eereschuld*, which stated that the Dutch colonial government owed a debt to the Dutch East Indies because of the massively exploited wealth. Queen Wilhelmina then investigated welfare in Java and began to enforce Ethical Politics right in 1901 (Ricklefs & Wahono, 2008, p. 320). The Ethical Policy's three important points were education, irrigation, and immigration. This aspect of education became one way to bring about the modern movement. People in the Dutch East Indies had easy access to Western knowledge. Developing technology made it easier to access information from the outside world disseminated through newspapers and magazines.

Information related to the massive modernization movement that developed in the Middle East had reached the people of the Dutch East Indies, which then had a strong influence on giving rise to the Islamic revival movement in Indonesia. The ease of access was also supported by the interaction of Dutch East Indies Muslim intellectuals with Middle Eastern Muslim intellectuals through the Hajj journey. Not only did they perform Hajj rituals, but some of them even went to Al-Azhar in Egypt to study Modern Islamic thought (Ali, 2016, p. 22). After returning from the hajj rituals, the Dutch East Indies intellectuals taught Modern Islamic understanding in various mosques and from house to house. Therefore, in the 20th century, many Modern Islamic movements began to emerge in Java that focused on the social realm of education.

The educational situation implemented by the Dutch Government severely restricted the course of Islamic-based education. This is because the Dutch consider education to be not only culturally pedagogical but more psychologically political (Suminto, 1986, p. 49).

Applying Western-style education can produce educated people with Western culture so that they are more accommodating to colonial interests. In addition, the Dutch colonial government was also concerned that Islamic education could become the axis of Muslim militancy as a form of resistance to the Dutch colonial government. The Dutch Government deliberately made the isolation of Islamic education because the Dutch Government considered that Islamic education, which prioritized aspects of divinity and religious belief, could be a stimulus and motivation to fight the infidel colonizers (Suminto, 1986, p. 49). Therefore, the Dutch Colonial Government made a policy towards Islamic schools (*Mohammedans God Dienst Onderwijs*) with *Staatsblad* 1818 No.4, which states that the Governor General must authorize religious teaching.

In addition, the Dutch East Indies Government also implemented the Teacher Ordinance policy issued in 1905. This policy required every religious teacher to request or obtain prior permission from the Dutch East Indies government before carrying out their duties as a teacher. The existence of the Teacher Ordinance policy was an attempt by the Dutch Colonial Government to supervise the teaching carried out by Islamic religious teachers. In addition to supervising teaching, the Teacher Ordinance's actual policy was to limit the space for the entry of Islamic teachings in schools. This policy implemented by the Dutch Colonial Government often led to cases where Islamic teachers were questioned when facing the Christianization movement. However, the application of discriminatory policies did not discourage the growth of modern Islamic-based schools. This is evidenced by the emergence of a legal modern Islamic-based school, namely Jamiat Kheir, which was the first Islamic-based school in the early 20th century to obtain a Dutch government license.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

In studying Jamiat Kheir as a pioneer of the Modern Islamic Movement, this research uses historical research methods using sources from scientific writings in the form of journals, papers, essays, and reference books. This research also uses a methodological approach through social sciences, namely sociology, to examine the influence of Jamiat

Kheir on the growth of the Modern Islamic Movement in Indonesia on the island of Java.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **History of Jamiat Kheir**

Jamiat Kheir is one of the oldest modern Islamic movement organizations in Java. This organization was founded in the year and has its headquarters in Batavia. This organization was founded by several Arabs from among the *sayyids* consisting of: Sayid Ali bin Ahmad bin Syahab as chairman; Sayyid Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Syahab as vice chairman, Sayyid Muhammad Al Fachir bin Abdurrahman Almasyhur as secretary; Sayid Idrus bin Ahmad bin Syahab as treasurer; and Said bin Ahmad Basandiet as member (Nasution et al., 1992, pp. 480-481).

The meaning of Jamiat Kheir comes from two words, *Jamiat*, which means association, and *Kheir* means goodness, so the meaning of Jamiat Kheir is an association of goodness. This organization is engaged in the social realm of Islamic-based education and sending young people to study in Turkey (Noer, 1978, p. 68). Historically, Jamiat Kheir's struggle was motivated by social and educational aspects. Before focusing on education, at the beginning of its establishment, Jamiat Kheir was only a social organization consisting of Arab crossbreed. However, the concern of the Arabs about the education system implemented by the Colonial Government where students had to wear shorts above the knee and the Government kept students away from the customs and religion of their families, made Jamiat Kheir begin to focus on education. Jamiat Kheir was actually established in 1901, but only received official recognition in 1905. Before gaining official recognition, Jamiat Kheir, at the beginning of its establishment, had received repressive measures from the Dutch Government where the authorities raided the founders' houses, and some of the founders were arrested and imprisoned because Jamiat Kheir was considered a rebel group. In 1903, Jamiat Kheir applied to the Dutch Government to be recognized as a legal organization. The application was finally approved by the Dutch Government officially on July 17, 1905 through Bestuit Number 4. However, the Colonial Government prohibited the

establishment of Jamiat Kheir branches outside the Batavia area (Mansur & Junaedi, 2005, p. 65). This condition did not discourage its members, so in 1906 Jamiat Kheir again applied to the Dutch Government to establish madrassas and meeting halls.

Jamiat Kheir, in addition to aiming for the educational welfare of Muslims, also has various objectives, among others; providing assistance to its members in matters of death and marriage, establishing schools and implementation of teaching; members are not only from among the Arabs, but all groups as long as they embrace Islam. In addition, the establishment of Jamiat Kheir also has objectives listed in the Articles of Association, namely: organizing education and teaching, as well as holding lectures and preaching, organizing publishing, libraries, and printing, establishing education in schools from elementary to college levels with student dormitories, and organizing funds for scholarships (Rahmadi & Hidayat, 2019, p. 5). Jamiat Kheir, in realizing its goals, made several work programs, which include: *first*, perfecting the foundation's organizational structure and compiling basic rules of order in the field of education, improving the curriculum and educational infrastructure (library, dormitory, school building). *Second, branding* through the provision of brochures and improving cooperative relations with external parties both at home and abroad. *Third*, organizing courses and upgrading for teachers, religious education seminars, seeking academic level education and arranging scholarships. *Fourth*, engaged in da'wah by opening *mubaligh* courses, taklim assemblies, traveling tabligh.

### **Jamiat Kheir in Transnational Studies (Relationships with Foreign Newspaper Editors and Middle Eastern Scholars)**

In carrying out Jamiat Kheir's work program regarding *branding* and seeking academic-level education, they made *branding* efforts by collaborating with many newspaper and magazine editors from abroad in 1908. Jamiat Kheir began working with the director of Al-Muayyad newspaper, Ali Yusuf, in Cairo, Egypt. In this case, the newspaper published information about the development of Islam in the Dutch East Indies through the activities of Jamiat Kheir. Furthermore, Jamiat Kheir also cooperated with the director of Al-Liwa newspaper, Affandi Kamil,

who was also in Egypt. Apart from working with the directors of Egyptian newspapers, Jamiat Kheir also worked with newspaper directors from Lebanon, Turkey, and Singapore. Jamiat Kheir collaborated with the director of Samaratul Al Funun newspaper, Ahmad Hasan Tabarah, based in Beirut, Lebanon. Jamiat Kheir also cooperates with Al-Ittihad Al-Uthmani newspaper in Turkey and Al-Iman magazine in Singapore.

Meanwhile, in pursuing academic education, Jamiat Kheir brought in teachers from outside Java, even abroad. In 1907 Jamiat Kheir brought in a teacher from Padang named Haji Muhammad Mansur to teach Malay language and religious knowledge (Noer, 1978, p. 59). In addition to bringing in teachers from outside Java, Jamiat Kheir, in the process of advancing education and the success of its work program, also brought in many teachers from abroad, especially from the Middle East, such as for example Al-Hasyimi who was a teacher brought in from Tunisia. He was a figure who dared to oppose the French. Al-Hasyimi was brought to Jamiat Kheir in the same year to teach physical education (sports) and scouting. He even became the first father of scouting in the Nusantara Islamic world (Noer, 1978, p. 59).

In 1911 Jamiat Kheir again brought in teachers from the Middle East. This time it was not just one teacher, but three teachers from the Middle East, namely Sheikh Ahmad Soorkati from Sudan, Sheikh Muhammad Thaib from Morocco, and Sheikh Muhammad Abdul Hamid from Mecca. Sheikh Muhammad Thaib did not stay long in Jakarta. He only stayed for two years. Meanwhile, the same year, Shaykh Muhammad Abdul Hamid was transferred to the Bogor branch of Jamiat Kheir. In the same year, 1913, Jamiat Kheir again brought in three teachers from the Middle East, all three of whom were close friends of Sheikh Ahmad Soorkati, namely Muhammad Noor Al-Ansari, Hasan Hamid Al-Ansari, and Ahmad Soorkati's own brother, Muhammad Abul Fadl Al-Ansari. These Middle Eastern teachers taught lessons ranging from Religion and Islamic History to Geography. Apart from teaching religion, the teachers from the Middle East also taught Modern Islam because all the teachers brought in from abroad were Egyptian reformers; they were also followers of Muhammad



Abduh, one of the originators of the Modern Islamic Movement in the World.

The arrival of Middle Eastern scholars as teachers at Jamiat Kheir was very influential in changing the mindset of the Muslim community in Java. The ideas of Modern Islam that were initiated became a positive thing in fostering the spirit of anti-colonialism. The changing views of Modern Islam also led to contestation with Traditional Islam as happened in Jamiat Kheir where there were differences in views between Sheikh Ahmad Soorkati and the Arab *Sayyid* group (descendants of the prophet). Soorkati views the attitude of the *sayyid* group, who feel their status is higher than other Islamic groups because they are descendants of the prophet, as a discriminatory attitude. According to him, this attitude also contradicts the principle of humanity embraced by Muslims, where all humans have equal status, which distinguishes them only from faith and devotion, not from their bloodline or ethnicity. The principle promoted by Soorkati is called *Kafa'ah*.

### **Between Jamiat Kheir, Sheikh Ahmad Soorkati, Thought Reform and the Growth of Modern Islamic Organizations**

Sheikh Ahmad Soorkati is a teacher of Jamiat Kheir and also a figure of Modern Islam in the archipelago. He was born in Udfu, an area of Arqu, Dongula, Sudan in 1874 AD. The name Surkati comes from the ancient Dongula language, *Surkaty*, which Sudanese people often use as a person of knowledge (Otoman & Suriana, 2021, p. 174). Soorkati was born into an educated family, where his father and grandfather attended school in Egypt. Soorkati's father was a graduate of Al-Azhar Cairo. Soorkati studied in Medina for four years, then settled in Mecca for eleven years and was appointed as a mufti there. While in the Middle East, Soorkati often communicated with modernist scholars in Egypt. In 1906 Soorkati was certified by the Turkish government in Istanbul.

During his time in the Jamiat Kheir organization, Sheikh Ahmad Soorkati implemented many reforms in Islamic thought. As in applying the principle of *Kafa'ah*, Soorkati made a fatwa on the permissibility of marriage of a *sharifah* (woman from the prophet's descendants)



marrying a man from *non-shayyid* circles. The fatwa, known as the "Solo Fatwa", was issued by Soorkati in 1913. The fatwa was motivated by a problem when there was a *sharifah* who lived in the same house with a Chinese man. During a meeting among the Arabs, Soorkati asked those who came to the meeting to help raise money so that the *sharifah* could leave the Chinese house. However, the Arabs refused to spend money on the *syarifah*. Therefore, Soorkati offered an alternative way of finding a Muslim to marry the *sharifah*, so that she would not live with the Chinese. Soorkati's proposal provoked the anger of the *sayyid* group present, they firmly rejected the proposal because a *sharifah* could not marry a man who was not from the *sayyid* group. As a result of the fatwa Soorkati began to be ostracized at Jamiat Kheir and was often not invited to the forum.

There was also another event that led to the creation of the Solo fatwa by Soorkati. In 1913 Soorkati was given the opportunity to visit several cities in Java. Soorkati visited the Solo area and was invited to attend a meeting between Arabs. While at the meeting, Soorkati was asked a question by Umar bin Said bin Sungkar regarding the concept of *kafa'ah*. Umar asked about whether a *sharifah* woman could be married to a man who was not from the *sayyid* class. Soorkati responded to Umar's question with the answer "permissible according to *just shara' law*". This answer made the *sayyid* group disagree, and the change in the attitude of the *sayyid* group towards Soorkati was even more evident.

Another incident also occurred because of someone who was influenced by Soorkati's concept of *kafa'ah*, namely Sheikh Umar Manggus. He was also a close friend of Soorkati who served as an Arab captain in Jakarta. He refused to do *taqbil* (kissing the hands of the *sayyid* class) when he met Umar bin Salim Alatas who was one of the leading *sayyids* because Umar Manggus believed that basically humans have equal degrees, and differences in degrees are not seen from lineage.

Another reform carried out by Sheikh Ahmad Soorkati was related to the ritual of grave pilgrimage and introspection. The tradition of grave pilgrimage was robust in Islamic society in the Dutch East Indies. Muslims flocked to grave pilgrimages either to the graves of their

deceased parents, relatives, or even to the graves of their ancestors before fasting and after Eid prayers. Seeing this, Soorkati looked at the grave pilgrimage tradition which is considered to be a unity that must be done starting from praying, watering the grave, to sprinkling flowers. Soorkati states that there are manners that can be done and some that are actually not mandatory or even have no provisions based on Islamic law. The manners performed during grave pilgrimage are praying for the person being pilgrimaged. This is because the adab is indeed in accordance with what is prescribed in Islam. While traditions that are not listed in Islamic law such as watering food to sprinkling flowers on the grave (Rusli et al., n.d., p. 59).

In addition to grave pilgrimages, the Islamic community in the Dutch East Indies believed in *tawasul* through prophets and saints. *Tawasul* is a way of getting closer to Allah, carrying out His commands, worshiping Him, following the instructions revealed to His prophet, and practicing all the practices that He loves and is pleased with. Soorkati sees that many Muslim communities do not pay proper attention to the concept of *tawassul* in accordance with Islamic law. According to Soorkati, the concept of *tawassul* in accordance with Islamic law is to believe that only Allah is the One who wills all affairs, while the intercession of the saints and *habaib* is not an exemption from sin. Soorkati tries to set the record straight by showing false hadiths and stories that have been fabricated by interested parties and referring back to the Quran and hadiths to dissect the legal origin of the tradition.

Jamiat Kheir was the first Modern Islamic organization in the Dutch East Indies, making it an organization that played an important role in inspiring the establishment of other Modern Islamic organizations. This can be seen in how some members of Jamiat Kheir decided to establish other Modern Islamic organizations. The split that occurred in Jamiat Kheir due to the conflict between supporters of Syaikh Ahmad Soorkati (*non-sayyid* group) and the *sayyid* group, made several Jamiat Kheir members leave and establish other Modern Islamic organizations. Like what Haji Samanhudi did. Haji Samanhudi is the founder of the Islamic organization Sarekat Dagang Islam or SDI. Samanhudi founded SDI because of his unrest over the dominance of non-Islamic traders in the Dutch East Indies. Samanhudi, assisted by

his colleague who was also previously a member of Jamiat Kheir, began to mobilize Muslim traders through the organization Sarekat Dagang Islam (SDI). Jamiat Kheir members who took part in Sarekat Dagang Islam included Sheikh Said Bajunaed, who became the treasurer of SDI; Usman Al Saqqaf, who became the executive officer of the Buitenzorg (Bogor) branch of SDI; Abdurrahman Al-Shatiri as SDI commissioner. After Samanhudi's leadership period, Samanhudi handed over his leadership to Haji Oemar Said Tjokroaminoto after Sarekat Dagang Islam was dissolved and renamed Sarekat Islam (SI) based in Surabaya. H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, who had also previously been a member of Jamiat Kheir, in running the Sarekat Islam organization also adopted many organizational systems from Jamiat Kheir (Mobini-Kesheh, 2004, p. 45). In running the Sarekat Islam organization, H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto even received financial assistance from Jamiat Kheir member Hasan Bin Sumait.

Apart from Sarekat Dagang Islam, another modern Islamic organization that Jamiat Kheir influenced was Muhammadiyah. The founder of Muhammadiyah, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, was a member of Jamiat Kheir and a close friend of Shaykh Ahmad Soorkati. In establishing the Muhammadiyah organization, Ahmad Dahlan even stated that the establishment of Muhammadiyah was inspired by the ideas of Shaykh Ahmad Soorkati. Jamiat Kheir inspired Ahmad Dahlan because Jamiat Kheir was able to present modern views, thinking patterns, and actions in improving the mindset of the community from belief in superstition to belief in traditions that are not in harmony with Islamic teachings. Ahmad Dahlan was also inspired by Jamiat Kheir because it was able to educate the community through the strengthening of modern education (schools), and was able to build a strong network in social life. Persatoean Islam was also strongly influenced by Jamiat Kheir.

Persatoean Islam (Persis) was officially established in 1923 in the city of Bandung founded by Haji Zam Zam. In the course of Persis, Haji Zam-Zam even brought in a scholar from Jamiat Kheir, Hasan Hamid Al-Ansari (Mobini-Kesheh, 2004, p. 55). Hasan Hamid Al-Ansari was even appointed as the caretaker of the Islamic Unity Boarding School in 1936 (Kusdiana, n.d., p. 253). This pesantren has a two-stage

education program, namely small pesantren and large pesantren. The small pesantren is specialized for children's education and is implemented in the afternoon. While the large pesantren is prepared for the education of teenagers.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Dutch colonialism period was a difficult time for the people in the Dutch East Indies. The policies implemented by the Dutch colonial government were often discriminatory and exploitative. The Dutch treated society in the Dutch East Indies by dividing groups of people based on race or ethnicity. This caused a gap between classes and often non-Europeans received discriminatory treatment. Apart from making discriminatory policies, the Dutch Colonial Government also exploited both nature in the Dutch East Indies, as well as the people who lived there.

This inhumane policy eventually gave rise to the Ethical Policy initiated by Van Deventer, which is the politics of reciprocity carried out by the Dutch Colonial Government to the people of the Dutch East Indies in the early 20th century. Ethical Policies, especially in terms of education, created easy access to science, technology and networks with the outside world. This eventually gave rise to a group of intellectuals who fostered new ideologies. One of them that grew among Islamic intellectuals was Modern Islamic Understanding.

Muslim intellectuals from the Dutch East Indies interacted with Modern Islamic thinkers from the Middle East through the Hajj journey. They also tried to teach and spread Modern Islamic Thought through the social aspect of education by starting the Modern Islamic Movement which made in the 20th century the emergence of various Modern Islamic organizations. One of the pioneers of the growth of the Modern Islamic Movement in Java is the Jamiat Kheir Organization which was founded in 1901 in Batavia or Jakarta.

Jamiat Kheir developed into one of the main drivers of the Modern Islamic Movement through modern education in Indonesia. Despite facing challenges from the Dutch Colonial Government who wanted to limit the space for Islamic education, Jamiat Kheir obtained an official license to operate in 1905. Jamiat Kheir also began to spread its wings

by cooperating with newspapers and magazines in the Middle East. They also brought in lecturers from the Middle East who had connections or were even Modern Islamic reformers in the Middle East. One of the central figures in Jamiat Kheir, even the Modern Islamic Movement in the Dutch East Indies, was Shaykh Ahmad Soorkati.

The renewal of thought regarding Modern Islam taught by Ahmad Soorkati prioritizes the principle of equality among Muslims, as well as improving the view of Islamic teachings that are different from before. The renewal of his thinking was also an effort to fight discrimination both experienced by the Muslim community internally, as well as externally. His thinking also built a spirit of awareness and resistance to the discriminatory practices of colonialism.

Jamiat Kheir and the role of the organization's Modern Islamic reformers played a key role in paving the way for the emergence of more modern and progressive Islamic organizations that not only fought for education but also for the rights of Muslims in the face of social injustice (the colonialist practices of the Dutch Government). Jamiat Kheir also became a symbol of the Modern Islamic Movement that sought to change the face of Islamic society in the Dutch East Indies towards a more modern and just era.

The influence of Jamiat Kheir and its teachers not only generated educational enthusiasm but also triggered the birth of many other Modern Islamic organizations. Some Jamiat Kheir members also drew inspiration from what they learned in the organization by applying Jamiat Kheir's values and organizational model to other Modern Islamic Movement organizations. Such as Haji Samanhudi in his Islamic Trade Union organization, Hadji Oemar Said Tjokroaminoto in his Islamic Union organization, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan in his Muhammadiyah organization, and Hasan Hamid Al-Ansari in his Persatoean Islam (Persis) organization.

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