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# **Befriending the Other: A Paradigm for Re-Building Relationships**

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**Abstract:** Africans believe that life is a complex web of relationships. “Befriending the other” in an African context aims at rebuilding relationships that are broken and distorted due to slave trade, religious fundamentalism, tribalism, and all sorts of gender and cultural inequality that destroy human life. In the Old Testament God revealed himself in constant relationships by rebuilding the community of Israel through His own Spirit and in the New Testament Jesus makes the theme of relationship central through his vision of “who the other is” and how one should respond to the other. Pope Francis invites us to share our lives as a symbol of God’s love with the marginalized and the poor and Jean Vanier insists that “each one is carrying the capacity to be, to become, to love and to be loved. The goal of ‘befriending the other’ is to transform our relationships in all spheres of life. It is to make our entire cosmos a better place to live in. The various efforts of our Inter-religious Dialogue invariably aim at building bridges with the other and to learn to accept others with all their differences. Befriending the other indeed is a process of radical opening of oneself up to God and to the ‘other towards the fullness of humanity.

**Keywords:** Befriending; Bridge-building; Relationships; Interconnectedness; Harmony; Africa

## **Introduction**

Have you ever been an alien, a foreigner, or a stranger? I have and I thought I was going to die. I felt I was losing my

identity; no longer sure of who I was, as if the ‘me’ I thought I knew had been steamed off. I understood however, that I was different. Still the question of who the ‘other’ is might seem useless because in some way we are all the ‘others’ to someone, and everyone else is ‘other to us. We can never fully know ‘the other’ and even if we strive to do so, ‘the other’ is constantly changing. At the same time, there can be no ‘I’ without relation to the concept of the other.

The concept of the ‘other’ is considered to be an individual or a group perceived as not belonging, as they are culturally constructed as being fundamentally different in some way, those we usually do not want to see or those who pretend do not exist and are excluded.<sup>1</sup> The other is also seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly in a society having fewer or no legal rights or may even be regarded as sub-human. The paradox of our times is that the drastic process of ‘othering’ is accelerated in an apparently ‘unifying’ world through unitive processes of globalization and information and communication explosion.

Befriending the Other means treating human as “human” and giving them due respect. It is veritably the need of the hour as the panacea to various conflict situations both national and global such as socio-political-economical-cultural-ethnic tensions, religious rivalries, terrorist violence, ideological differences, dehumanizing elements, selfishness, individualism, egoism, oppression of women, the poor, the orphan, sexual abuses, deforestation and ecological unawareness.

We meet many people every day. We might have often looked at them but without seeing them because we think that they are different. Befriending the other in the society is to understand them, to respect them and accept them as they are and treat them with dignity and justice rather than belittling

them because they are created in the image and likeness of God, the Ultimate OTHER.<sup>2</sup> It is to cause someone to be your friend. It is a means of reducing the isolation (*Ecclesia Africa* 79) and build up bridges to maintain close relationships, nurture confidence and trust. It is the best gift to the world, a spiritual nova in our midst exerting a force stronger than vengeance, stronger than racism, stronger than discrimination and hate.

Hence each relationship is effectively a union of what the referred person needs and that which the other can offer. Certainly this asks a lot of effort on all sides, as it encourages being open and walking step by step - towards building a compromise where the world views/feelings and needs of each member have a place. We are shaped by those who love us and by those who refuse to love us. Befriending has the potential to rip through the processes of ‘othering’ and accentuate the processes of ‘building bridges’. Most relationships can begin with a simple greeting offered sincerely. It can begin a conversation, which in turn starts a friendship that can powerfully affect lives and relationships. Learning to be quick to befriend the other, ready to accept them, and join them in their life journeys begins the process of rebuilding relationships with others around us and offers to them a soft place to fall,<sup>3</sup> shares stories, cry together and forgive.<sup>4</sup>

## **1. Befriending the ‘Other’ Is a Bridge Building**

Human beings are beings for others. Befriending is a state of genuine well-being of an entire community, of which human relationships form the core. Be-friending the ‘other’ in Africa aims at rebuilding relationships that are broken, due to slave trade, colonialism, tribalism, corruption, gender discrimination and religious fundamentalism that has destroyed human life, culture and human possibilities.

Jean Vanier presents a radical way to embrace the ‘other’ when he says, “each one is carrying the capacity to be, to become, to love and to be loved.”<sup>5</sup> We are all called to share our lives with people in dehumanising ambiances and pain, and place them in a position where they can grow toward authentic humanity in all its fullness of life.<sup>6</sup> Befriending the other challenges us to venture beyond our boundaries towards wider horizons, where the rest of the human family may be encountered and appreciated, learn to share, build spaces<sup>7</sup> and relate because each person is a house where God resides.<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis in his *Evangelii Gaudium* invites us to share our lives with the marginalized of the society “because God’s heart has a special place for the poor,<sup>9</sup> those we consider the ‘other’.

The African Philosophy of *Ubuntu*<sup>10</sup> (humanness) insists on the inter-connectedness of all humankind, an all-inclusive nature of community in which every individual is befriended. The Zulu expression of ‘*Umuntu ngubuntu Ngabanye Bantu*’ means ‘a person is a person through another person’, insists on interconnectedness of humankind and an all-inclusive nature of a society in which every individual is valued and appreciated. Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells us that “if at all we are to prosper it will only be together.”<sup>11</sup> This is also stressed in GS 25 where human beings are essentially social and interdependence by nature. Community building values of love, generosity, reconciliation, freedom, justice, peace and trust should be everywhere cultivated.

## **2. Areas in Africa Crying for Befriending the Other**

Relationships can be messy. When they are good, they are really good, but when they turn sour nothing can be more painful. Being hurt by others can make us so judgemental and so protective of ourselves that it is difficult to invest in new relationships.<sup>12</sup> It is not just the interpersonal relationships between individuals that requires reconciliation, healing and

befriending but the social and cultural relations as well. The socio-historical experiences of othering in Africa have left profound and evident scars in communities and persons, and they require the healing touch of ‘befriending’. Those areas are:

### ***a. Slavery***

People are considered slaves when others have total control on their life and they are used, forced to work either by mental and physical threat instead of being loved. Human beings were reduced to commodities (‘other’) a category that sanitizes the high level of violence and mass murder that inflicted on the Africans and their societies.<sup>13</sup>

Between 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries about hundred million people were uprooted from Africa by this physical and social violence.<sup>14</sup> Of these millions only 10 million arrived America, Europe and Asia. Many were killed individually or collectively in various brutal and vicious ways.<sup>15</sup> In 2001 Pope John Paul II in Senegal asked for forgiveness and said “Christians may never again become the oppressor of the other brethren.”<sup>16</sup> Sad enough this evil is still going on in some parts of Africa. Global Slavery Index 2014 shows that out of 35.8 million enslaved people in modern world 6.4 million are in African Continent.<sup>17</sup>

Wars and political instability have forced many African citizens to move to other parts of the continent and abroad which makes them vulnerable. In South Sudan for example, there are 800,000 people currently enslaved citizens<sup>18</sup>. The country’s decades of civil war between the North and the South has enslaved thousands and resulted periodic raids on villages. Many local residents were subsequently enslaved to work as local domestic field workers, many women forced into marriages, boys and men forced to join armed groups.<sup>19</sup> In this context of deplorable social cleavages and bruising

historical experiences of dehumanizing slavery, the Africans are called to be agents of befriending the other which Christ our peace (Eph.2:14) offers to humanity and rebuild our embittered relationships.

### ***b. Gender Inequality and Cultural Barriers***

Many women in Africa are not perceived as equal citizens as they have few rights and no decision-making in the families, religions or societies.<sup>20</sup> They are often denied access to health care, property, education and information and are affected by religious and cultural oppression.<sup>21</sup> Women are often considered the ‘other’ especially in the patriarchal system<sup>22</sup> and not “treated as person and sister in humanity.”<sup>23</sup> The working paper on the African Synod, “*Instrumentum Laboris*” clearly outlines some of the types of discrimination as:

- Some aspects of marriage laws and customs in Africa which are oppressive against women and really dehumanizing e.g. polygamy<sup>24</sup>, dowry system, virginity rituals and child bearing force.
- Clan consciousness which is exclusive.
- In some societies a girl of 13-16 years is given in marriage to a man she does not know and is much older than herself. This can be a very sad experience for the young bride.
- Customs of widowhood which are generally oppressive of women, e.g. widow’s disproportionate exclusion from property ownership.
- Cultural practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting.<sup>25</sup>
- The role of women within society is something unduly restricted.

- In some societies women are practically reduced to beasts of burden and are subjected to untold suffering and inhuman treatment.

This has been part of the fate of the African woman. But befriending the other will show that it is not her destiny. Despite all these a woman in Africa remains the source of strength and the backbone of the society. Her spit remains a fire that flares stronger and higher with each attempt to extinguish it. Her smile lights up the darkest night and the warmth of her embrace heals the worst wounds. This strength is for the well-being of the whole community rather than for the woman herself.

In those countries where there is war, women and girls are targeted of conscious shocking brutality and sexual violence and being taken to slavery. Every day they face threats from armed militias, the military and even the police who are supposed to protect them. Where are the 220 school girls of government secondary school Chipok Nigeria kidnapped by Bokoharam in 2014?<sup>26</sup> Parents say the girls are being sold to their Islamic extremist abductors for 2,000 naira (\$12) and married. If numbers could scream,<sup>27</sup> the world would understand how women are silent sufferers in a society we now live and it is more dangerous to be a woman today than a soldier.<sup>28</sup> It is in such situation St John Paul II once said, “Men must be taught to love in a noble way; they must be educated in depth in this truth, that is, in the fact that a woman is a person and not simply an object of adultery.”<sup>29</sup>

Women as primary caretakers of the family are afraid to work in the fields or gather firewood from the jungle or collect water even in a group as it puts them at a greater risk of attack. They have to care for children and try to earn money with no social safety net. Women are silent sufferers. How to befriend

the ‘other’? How do we equalize oppressive power relations through the process of befriending? We are in dilemma!!

Befriending the other will provide an atmosphere for women to be loved, to be listened, to be appreciated and to be treated with absolute ease and a sense of friendliness that hold no trace of embarrassment or inappropriate familiarity. It will change the mindset of the Africans and “study further women problem in cooperation with the government and church agencies whenever possible” (*Ecclesia in Africa* 121) and create inclusive conditions on which we relate and accept ‘the other’ for we are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28)

### **c. Religious Fundamentalism**

Relationships in Africa are at stake. There are groups based on Religious Fundamentalism (known as “*Born again fundamentalists and fanatics*”) <sup>30</sup> e.g. *Bokoharam* – Nigeria, *El Shabaab* – Somalia, Brotherhood – Egypt, and *Uamsho* <sup>31</sup> – Tanzania and more others. In these countries, Christian-Muslim relationship is at its lowest ebb. Fundamentalist’s activism is nothing if not youthful, and its young disciples are most urban, unemployed and profoundly unhappy with the politics they have known. The ‘other’ who is my sister and brother is seen by the religious as ‘*Kafir*’ – infidel who deserves only to be killed. Such groups and more others have forgotten that human life is sacred and valuable and each has the right and freedom to live and worship. The sanctity and dignity of life which has been preserved and adored by all cultures and religious traditions in the past, seems now to be weakened. This is challenging the ‘*Ubuntu*’ understanding.

Religion must touch upon the deepest level of identity. It is a relational identity because religion in its purest sense is about relationship. It challenges the believer to grow into an ‘I’ – ‘Thou’ relationship with the Divine and resonate its dynamics in the relationship with the ‘other’. Here the ‘other’



is not an object or an 'it' but a 'thou' a subject, a person.<sup>32</sup> However, the existence of such extremist groups shows that the main groups have failed to give meaning and identity to their people especially the young. Many see life as meaningless because of sufferings, hardships and unrealized goals in life. They are hoping for eschatological satisfaction and promises. African values of family, generosity, protect life, care the other, freedom to worship and religious pluralism are losing meaning.

It is in this context that we have to understand befriending 'the other' as a paradigm for rebuilding relationships for "the greatest needs of human being are the needs of fellow human beings."<sup>33</sup> You recognise me in my sameness when you acknowledge me as a human among humans. Therefore befriending 'the other' is a vision of both an on-going process to establish a community of love and care in which conflict and injustice, though still present, are actively being addressed, and the eschatological goal of cosmic communion in love being definitely achieved."<sup>34</sup> A call for religious pluralism will lead us to transcend the borders in a radical way by fashioning an agenda for dialogue,<sup>35</sup> and make all aware that no matter what religion one is believing we are all "fellow-travellers searching for life, light and truth."<sup>36</sup>

#### ***d. Tribalism***

Within the borders left by the colonial powers, the coexistence of ethnic groups with different traditions, languages and even religions<sup>37</sup> often meets obstacles arising from serious mutual hostility (*Ecclesia in Africa* 49). It is common in Africa to find people of the same tribal supporting each other. The problem begins when this 'standing together' is exclusive. This malaise is spiritually, emotionally and socially crippling and social and religious communities, thus making them unspiritual, unhappy, unloving, unfruitful and

unfriendly. Divisions due to tribalism have been a scandal to witness the Gospel as many live unfulfilled life in the society and Church as chances to fulfil their dreams are blocked.<sup>38</sup>

Although Bujo Benezet reminds us that Jesus Christ, the Proto Ancestor is the foundation of a new tribe/clan community and culture. Such a culture is challenged by the culture of Christianity and of *Ubuntu* that celebrates the spirit of unity in diversity which upholds an inclusive solidarity as opposed to exclusiveness: “All people are called to belong to the new People of God to promote peace” (*LG 13*) and “Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with human race in its history” (*GS 1*). Unfortunately, in many parts of Africa, stress on ethnicity, tribalism and regionalism have threatened living together in amity. Ethnic antagonism can be very disastrous. The worst case of genocide in 1994 took place in Rwanda where about a million Rwandans died. “The Hutu saw the ‘elimination of Tutsi sisters and brothers as a practical solution to their political problems.’”<sup>39</sup>

Befriending the other protects our relationships from the damage of the past. It frees others from demand of perfection as it overlooks faults and offenses. When the Africans learn to share the journey together they will be able to transcend tribalism that has enchained the mentality of many. This challenges us to venture beyond our ethnic or regional boundaries towards wider horizons and open spaces where the rest of humanity will be encountered and befriended.<sup>40</sup> Africans must energetically combat tribalism, which is a poison, a social scourge that is Africa’s misfortune today.

### **3. The Biblical Call to Embrace the Other**

As scriptural image of befriending, shalom, peace addresses the fundamental order of relationships with physical world, other persons both individually and collectively, oneself and

God. Befriending the other reigns when the whole world and its parts are in right relationships. It evokes an image of harmonious interrelationship order and cooperate for independence.

Living in God's love is the first step of befriending. Befriending the other is the covenant relationship of Yahweh and the people: they shall be my people and I will be their God with faithfulness and justice (Zechariah 8:8). The chapter ends (vv 20-23) with the image of God's dwelling among the people. In Is. 2:2-5 it is the word of Yahweh which instructs the nations to beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into punning hooks (Hos. 4:1). For Hosea, one cannot claim to have experienced God as a covenant partner if one does not maintain the same relationship with one's fellow human partner.<sup>41</sup>

When relationships are broken we see God repairing with his own Spirit (Ez. 37:23). Thus relationship with God seems prerequisites to befriending the other and its fulfilment is to live the life in fullness – live in God and God in us (Jn. 5:20). The entire biblical narrative can be read as the consistent, persevering attempts of befriending from an unconditionally loving God to a people who constantly rebel, distance and seek to retreat to their own selfish shells. God doesn't give up! This can be a paradigm for all our initiatives of befriending.

Service to other person flows from fundamental openness to a personal reality. Human persons are being for others. Prophets Amos 5:10-12; Isaiah 1:21-23 measured the quality of community life by response to the concrete needs of those who were powerless to demand a response, namely the poor, the widow and the orphans. Prophet Amos has strongly insisted "Where there is no justice the society suffers, and where there is no righteousness the society dies"<sup>42</sup>

The New Testament presents a recurrent cluster of ideas in its descriptions of befriending the other and of bringing people together.<sup>43</sup> The breaking-in of the reign of God in Jesus' mandate connected to some specific signs (Lk. 4:18-19) reveals the whole idea of befriending. This liberation means wholeness on socio-political as well as personal level. In Lk. 19:1-10, Jesus risked ruining His own reputation by befriending Zacchaeus and called him in the world of love. The simple act of offering lunch and conversation rocked Zacchaeus entire world and transformed him.<sup>44</sup> The call of befriending the other comes from Jesus himself in the form of command: "love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn. 13:34,35). "There is no greater tool for touching the world than simple demonstrations of love".<sup>45</sup>

Befriending the other is God's action through Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1-8); Eph. 2:13; Col.1:20). The whole ministry of Jesus proclaimed this reality of befriending the other and particularly his death on the cross and resurrection. He gave us the divine response to human sufferings as well as injustice and violence.

By His incarnation where "God himself in Jesus goes out in search of the "stray sheep," a suffering and lost humanity,"<sup>46</sup> God raised the dignity of human beings beyond creatures to a higher and more noble level of children of God "by adoption" with the possibility of inheriting from God as from a father (Gal. 4:4-7). He overcomes the historically accrued divisiveness between God and human persons, between groups as well as between human persons (Jn.10:35-37) and how we should respond in case of a need. It is in this dignity and respect of the other as fundamentally equal and origin in needs which the story of Good Samaritan salutes. This Samaritan saw the robbed victim an equal whose specific needs called for corporeal works of mercy.

## 4. Befriending Is Cosmic

Seeking God is the universal human quest. It is common to all cultures. It is the fundamental human longing and ultimate to all human activities.<sup>47</sup> We can find God in everything; we can commune with God in and through all things. Creation and other people in particular, not only regain their true light, given to them by God, the Creator, but, so to speak, they lead us to God himself the way that God will to reveal himself to us. Human persons are fundamentally equal in originality (*GS* 29). This equality calls for an end to discrimination or violations of basic human rights. The other is also knowing, willing, feeling, acting subject just as the “I”. The other is neighbour, colleague and equal. One cannot exist without the other.<sup>48</sup>

Human person lives in relationships and is equal in God’s sight.<sup>49</sup> The human person is fundamentally open to external reality that involves dialogue with reality. The human person is in relationships to the material world, to other persons, to the group of persons and to God. These relationships can be characterized as associations of solidarity (a being with), of creation (a being by) and of service (a being for). There is solidarity with the material world in that human person and the material world share the same earth, and labour under the same needs and laws.

All are related to the whole created order (Gen 1). Dominion over creation is the capacity to love, to nurture and to develop into wholeness and any human approach towards this material world needs to be a posture of service in contrast to exploitation. We Africans hold that the world and nature are gifts that entrusted to us to provide: nourishment and security. Nature was altars and temples. It was under the big trees where people used to meet for reconciliation, sacrifice offering and plan for building the communities.

God in Africa is a relational being who is known through various levels of relationship with creation, a cosmic wholeness.<sup>50</sup> In relation to humanity, God is the great ancestor of the human race. This is what also moved intimately Pope Benedict XVI in his call for peace to exhort humans to make ‘heaven on earth.’ “Our use of creation and human development in general should be for the development of the whole human being and all people,” he said. (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 30). The same idea is strongly stressed by Pope Francis in his *Laudato Si’* “to work together in building our common home”.<sup>51</sup> Therefore befriending the ‘other’ is on-going process to establish a community of love that the eschatological goal of cosmic communion is definitely achieved and “together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with sacred, affection and humble respect.”<sup>52</sup> Thus the heavens, the land and the animals contribute to a befriending the other rebuilding of all the relationships. When Yahweh is the God of the nations, then befriending the other can be known in personal well-being, in social-political and in the cosmic world (*GS* 39).

## **5. Encounter the Other as Neighbour in Inter-Religious Dialogue**

Africans believe that life is a complex web of relationships that may either enhance and preserve life or diminish and destroy life. The goal of religion is to maintain those relationships that protect and preserve life. *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity’ recalls God’s universal plan of salvation of mankind and the sending of His Son, in order to establish a relationship of peace and communion with himself and in order to bring about brotherly/sisterly union among people.<sup>53</sup>

Interreligious Dialogue in Africa is particularly necessary because people are literally surrounded by religions. It is the

way with which mutual relationship can be made possible. Often religious pluralism cuts across nation, tribe, and at times even family lines. Moreover, the dialogue the “primary importance should be given to getting involved with the life of the neighbour next door”<sup>54</sup> Cardinal Arinze tells us that “Interreligious Dialogue is a meeting of sincere believers who want each to listen to the other and identify areas to study together what they can do together.”<sup>55</sup> The unity of all united humanity is the will of God (*Ut Unum Sint* 27). It creates and revives relationship in all religions. The act of befriending the other challenges and opens hearts, heals wounds of divisions and creates communion.

The pain and cost of the broken relationships in our world and the frequent use of violence as a tool for achieving happiness is a draw to any process of befriending the other. Change of hearts and minds will re-enforce befriending as a process that brings healing. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “It is easy to be friendly to one’s friends. But to befriend the one who regards him/herself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion.”<sup>56</sup>

For it is the harmony and stability that provides good relationships, that create the conditions for well-being and wholeness. Inter-religious Dialogue in Africa is a tool for peace and language for befriending. It “is a meeting of hearts and minds across religious frontiers who want each one to listen to the other and identify areas of convergence and divergence and to study together what they can do together”<sup>57</sup> to build trust and understanding of the world of the other. Religious Dialogue in Africa is particularly important and indeed necessary for relationships. This is because people are literally surrounded by other religions among which they live, witness to and work for the Kingdom of God. Often religious pluralism cuts across nation, tribal and, at times even family lines. We seek dialogue with persons of other religions not because we tolerate their

beliefs out of courtesy but a specific mode of being and a way of life in view of forming one communion of communities. Fr. Arul Swamy Kaspar is reminding us that “We shall not live in our own petty narrow worlds of hatred and violence against those who do not belong to us but rather we shall imagine the greatness and uniqueness of everyone and revere them as sons and daughters of God.”<sup>58</sup> Each religion is called to a critical appropriation on its own tradition and also to openness to the truth and grace in other traditions and no religion shall hinder us to befriend the other for there are no strangers and aliens in our common Earth. Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania and the Father of the Nation, during his time of ruling (1961-1985) not only tolerated, but respected other people’s beliefs.<sup>59</sup>

Inter-religious Dialogue is “building bridges to others who do not share our faith. “In this way we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking and speaking.”<sup>60</sup> It is the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality centeredness.” It leads to mutual conversion, removes prejudices; brings greater understanding and it leads to communion, peace, harmony and integrity of nation. When some of us in Africa have lost courage to hope, dialogue becomes an invitation to solidarity in a challenging hour of sufferings. “We cannot truly call on God the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a sisterly/brotherly way anyone created as image of God” (*NA* 5). Africans must respond to the signs of the time and see the human race as a complex whole (*GS* 5) and make the “joy and hope, grief and anguish of people especially of those who are poor and afflicted to be theirs (*GS* I). Change of heart and mind is what reinforces befriending, a process that brings healing.



## 6. Conclusion

Jesus came to give life and life in abundance (Jn. 10:10) and announces the kingdom that brings life. It is this Kingdom where people 'the other' are embraced and experience life, love, freedom and justice we are called to build in order to befriend the other<sup>61</sup>. We are today in an age of befriending. The age of rivalry is over and the world is taking different turns. In this context religions and politics have the responsibility of coming together and working hand in hand and solve the world issues and give meaning to the life of people.

We are now called upon "to promote together for the benefit of all humankind social welfare and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom" (NA 3). Dialogue is a tool for peace and language of befriending. Befriending remains an important bridge for us to cross into the other <sup>62</sup> as it involves both listening and replying. Befriending therefore is a radical opening up to God, to the 'other' and to the cosmos. It is a process in which there is a transition from brokenness to fullness of humanity that leads to true relationships.

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