

# The Analytical Study of Belief in Isan Community Forest Conservation

Jaras Leeka<sup>1\*</sup>, Phramaha Jaroon Ritthithit<sup>2</sup>, Phrakhrubhavanabodhikun (Somchai Phangmuenwai)<sup>3</sup>, Phrakhu Baidika Narint Sachaiyan<sup>4</sup>, Phra Sombat Sukprasert<sup>5</sup>, Niraj Ruangsan<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6</sup> Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand

Email:<sup>\*6</sup>niraj\_rs@outlook.com, <sup>5</sup>sombat.suk@mcu.ac.th

## ABSTRACT

This research aimed 1) to study the problem status of community forest conservation of Isan people, 2) to study Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation, and 3) to analyze Isan people's thoughts in community forest conservation. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach. Data were collected from documents, research papers, and in-depth interviews with 30 participants (monks/laypersons). Data were described using an inductive approach. The study results found that 1) problem status of community forest conservation of Isan people occurred since people in communities did not feel fear of sacred power of community forests. They invaded forests and cut down trees, contributing to deforestation and deterioration caused by 1) population growth, 2) expansion of communities, 3) the use of new technologies, and 4) construction of buildings; 2) Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation have been practiced for such a long time based on a belief in sacred figures living in forests, i.e., tree guardian angels and tree spirits. Worship is organized to express gratitude and thankfulness, becoming excellent traditions in which philosophy conceptual framework is hidden behind and accumulated with local wisdom and passed down as a body of knowledge with a method of folk philosophers, which has stayed together with Isan people's way of life until today; 3) In metaphysical dimension, belief gave rise to best practices through appropriate rites.

Meanwhile, those rites have been adapted to meet a current way of life. Concerning the epistemological dimension, a body of knowledge has been accumulated in the form of local wisdom and hidden in rites and traditions. Folk philosophers revealed it by interpreting to make the natural body of knowledge known, leading to revenue generation and encouraging communities to become self-reliant in no-life communities in a sustainable manner. In terms of Buddhist ethics, people in communities brought disclosed concepts and beliefs to self-practice, for example, to express gratitude or appreciation to forests that generate the practice of tree ordination, the building of treebanks, and the building of rice banks. Support has been given and shaped to be communities of dependency by having such beliefs as a paradigm.

## Keywords

Belief; Conservation; Community forest; Isan people

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## Introduction

In the 1970s, world forestry technical officers agreed that world forests, especially tropical forests, were rapidly destroyed, and most of those forests were located in underdeveloped and developing countries whose political structure was dictatorship or semi-dictatorship [1]. In other words, power in natural resource management of those countries was in the hands of a few people in the ruler class. Forest exploitation was then, in a way bringing two significant damages; 1. Forests were viewed as a source producing logs to be cut to generate country revenue; 2. Forest management – States have to have absolute power for forest management [2]. People did not have rights to forest utilization. People most likely were in the situation of forest invaders or those who conducted illegal felling and smuggling of trees. Though they needed to rely on forests throughout their lives, they were blamed as those who committed wrongdoing against State laws. Probably, it can be concluded that forest management in the way States are forest owner harms the ecosystem in every country and the world. Meanwhile, it brings about unfairness in distributing benefits obtained from public resources [3].

Consequently, there is an offer in changing forest management philosophy by expecting two major results: no destruction while the ecosystem can be maintained and restored better. In the meantime, a method is sought to allow people living around or in forests, who are disadvantaged in society, to benefit from forest lands and forest resources

increasingly. Finally, the model of forest resources and land use in rural areas of many underdeveloped countries has been conducted continuously for centuries. In this regard, academics named the model of using resources while forests are the center of production and villagers' livelihood by having them as owners, managers, and beneficiaries as 'Community Forestry'[4].

A community forest is the forest area managed by local people or participation from people and community organizations per local beliefs and cultures for the benefits consistent with community requirements continuously and sustainably. Principles of community forest management have been promoted since a large number of people in rural areas of Thailand live their lives by depending on forests. Communities enjoy a peaceful and simple way of life since forest and water resources were prosperous in the old day. However, in recent periods, country development and economic expansion rapidly grew. Various resources were used as raw materials for producing a large number of products, especially forest resources that were used more than their capacity. Forestlands were converted into agricultural lands, contributing to long-term or permanent loss of forests that affects other resources such as shortage of water, soil infertility, etc. People relying on forest resources and earning their living as farmers experienced failure in agriculture and had poor quality of life, resulting in social problems. An increasing number of forest invasions brought about severe conflicts between State officials working on forestry and people who live by forest resources

several times and quite often that the society was deprived of peace. Based on the problems mentioned earlier, pressure given to achieve urgent problem-solving as well as political development gives rise to a new idea to solve the problems and develop natural resources and the environment in the form of participation or "Pracharat cooperation mechanism." Implementation methods are changed or modified as formerly the State was the only party who had a duty to oversee and take responsibility for natural resources. Decentralization is implemented by allowing community participation; for example, sub-district administrative organizations, a part of local administration, are assigned to participate in protecting, oversee, restore and maintain natural resources and the environment in their areas [5].

Confidence showing community forests can conserve forests is given based on the fact that when community lives depend on the survival of forests as forests are good sources of water, lands for cultivation, food, and necessary factors for community livelihood [6]. Many things or everything is important conditions making communities must conserve forests without being forced by an external power. Beliefs in sacred power such as ghosts of forests, ghosts of mountains play a vital role in community forests. When community forests are mentioned, the meaning is not only tangible resources where trees, animals, and insects are living together; real community forests are the livelihood of people living in communities in all aspects; making a living; family and relative system; power structure; rules and regulations, are related to and support one another. Beliefs in ghosts, tree guardian angels, or tree spirits are meaningful and important. It can be seen and understandable when seeing from villagers' points of view, not judging from one's point of view. Humans have no direct power to control nature. Ghosts, angels, and guardian spirits who have power over humans are the ones who control nature, protect, and preserve forests and mountains. Thus, humans should not cut trees or destroy forests beyond what is necessary as it is considered a violation of power over humanity. Consequently, villagers' beliefs that some people see as superstition can help some parts of forests survive. The way that villagers pay respect and fear of those kinds of power over humanity is how they pay respect to nature, and they try to live their lives in balance with nature.

In contrast to urban people, modern-day people, wood business investors view nature as nature; the forest is forest, wood is wood. As a result, they destroy those things without respect or fear. Probably they are afraid of laws. However, if laws are not strictly enforced, nothing can stop them. Somewhat studying villagers' beliefs revealed that their beliefs in ghosts or tree spirits are an instrument used for forest conservation. Regularly, villagers teach their descendants and tell one another that if their watershed forests are destroyed, risks of drought will increase. No water will be available for cultivation and consumption. By doing this, villagers perceive and treat as a general rule in not cutting down trees or farming in those areas. Anyone who violates the rule will be punished by communities or fined as agreed [7].

Therefore, the researcher is interested in analyzing beliefs hidden behind the concept of community forest conservation of Isan people in terms of how beliefs in ghosts and tree spirits are determined to be an instrument used for

community forest conservation. When the research is finished, it will be information and a guideline for community forest conservation across the country. As a consequence, community forests across the country will become a part of a way of life staying with communities forever.

## Objectives

- 1) To study the problem status of community forest conservation of Isan people
- 2) To study Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation
- 3) To analyze Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation.

## Research Questions

What are the problems and obstacles of community forest conservation of Isan people?

How are Isan people's beliefs related to community forest conservation?

How are Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation involved with and related to philosophical concepts?

## Research Scope

The research was conducted using a qualitative design, and its scope could be divided as follow:

**Scope of documents:** 1) Primary sources, i.e., Thai Tipitaka Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Version B.E.2539 (1996) and data from an in-depth interview, 2) Secondary sources, i.e., conceptual framework, theories, textbooks, academic articles, and research studies related to the analysis of beliefs in community forest conservation of Isan people.

**Scope of content:** 1) Problem status of community forest conservation of Isan people; 2) Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation and 3) analysis of beliefs in community conservation of Isan people.

### Scope of the study area

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Khon Kaen Campus was selected to be the area of the study because it is a higher educational institution having a diversity of learners, monks and laypersons, and fertile forests due to care and attention from university personnel.

### Scope of key informants

There were 30 participants (monks/laypersons) divided into four groups as a university management team – 5 persons, 5 folk philosophers, 10 monk students, and 10 layman students. Inclusion criteria comprised 1) persons who are involved with forest and environment conservation, 2) persons who have public consciousness, 3) persons involved with forest and environment conservation for 3 years or more

**Scope of time:** The study was conducted from 1 September 2017 – 30 September 2019.

## Anticipated Benefits

- 1) To learn about the problem status of community forest conservation of Isan people.
- 2) To learn about Isan people's beliefs as information for those who are interested as well as government and private agencies.

## Results

To study the problem status of community forest conservation of Isan people – Based on the data analysis about the problem status of community forest conservation of Isan people, it was found that community forests in the Isan region seemed to disappear. From the site visit, the researcher found causes and problems why community forests disappeared. The major causes are

- 1) An increase in population; it was found that the problem related to the increase in population tended to be higher every year. The yearly increase of population must be involved with and related to the use of limited and shortage quantities of natural resources for consumption in response to living a life, becoming an important cause of forest invasion and destruction of natural resources like forests, sources of water to occupy as one's property without thinking about effects on the public, and to lead to the loss of the balance of nature and global warming as currently seen. All of these bring about the occurrence of community forest conservation
- 2) Expansion of urban areas – The expansion of urban areas and communities gave rise to environmental change. The rapid expansion of urban areas and communities brought about numerous problems due to a lack of advanced urban planning. The rise of industries will follow the expansion of urban areas and communities, causing pollution problem and destruction of the environment in conjunction with community forest invasion for building places to live and factories
- 3) The use of new technologies – it was found that the use of new/advanced technologies is a value of Thai people as they will help speed up work execution with fewer working hours, regardless of negative impacts on the environment and communities. New technologies brought to business play a vital role in agricultural production; for example, the use of modern machines to cut down trees or restore areas for cultivation or road construction can be executed in a short time. Even though the use of chemicals for agriculture like fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides brings about chemical residue and contamination in soil and water, causing a health hazard to people in communities and community ecosystem
- 4) Construction – various kinds of construction occurred, such as road construction or road expansion to serve the convenience and time-saving in traveling and transportation. The construction of large reservoirs and dams, including factories, are considered significant causes that directly destroy forests and the environment. The aforesaid buildings also affect the ecosystem and places for the living of numerous kinds of wild animals, contributing to a higher chance of extinction of wildlife. Meanwhile, people can more easily and conveniently enter forests. Therefore, a

campaign should be raised for community forest and environment conservation for the sake of the balance of the ecosystem.

**To study Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation** – After the site visit for conducting the study based on small group discussion, the researcher found many important issues which were determined for the research in 3 aspects as

1) way of life of the Isan people – Isan region is a land of various cultures and traditions having unique characteristics. Buddhism is used as a tool to shape up people's habits to be humble, generous, and kind to other people. It is a society of dependency among one another. Isan people's way of life pays respect to the spirits of ancestors, household spirits, and guardian spirit of rice fields (Phee Ta Haek). They show their respect to those spirits by worshipping and treating them with savory and sweet foods according to their custom. Furthermore, Isan people's way of life follows Heet-Kong (Isan monthly tradition) as a guideline for living a life in a simple way close to nature. Their major career is being farmers depending on nature like sources of water. It is noticeable that Isan people most likely build their houses near rivers or canals. The three vital reasons for selecting geographical factors in setting their villages are 1) water for agriculture, 2) water for growing rice (sticky rice) as a staple food, and 3) plateaus where a flood cannot reach for community design and town creation. From the way of life that depends on nature to obtain happiness for themselves and families, including fertility of crops, various nice cultures and traditions occur following Heet 12 (Heet Sip-Song = traditions or rituals practiced in 12 months that help people have a good life). Heet 12 is the combination of rituals related to ghosts and agricultural rituals with Buddhist rituals in a proper way. Those traditions or rituals have been performed by Isan people on different occasions throughout the 12 months of the year.

2) About Isan people's beliefs, it was found that their beliefs have been passed down from their ancestors. They believe in mysterious power over nature. They also believe in marriage life and earning a living. They refrain from doing what their ancestors viewed that they may bring harm or trouble. As for the beliefs in settling down villages, it is no different. Isan people pay respect to household spirits and Phee Tan or Phee Fah (high-class spirit). They worship the spirits of their ancestors to let them protect descendants. Shrines of ancestors (Chao Pu Shrine) are situated in highlands which are called by Isan people as "Khok" meaning a highland where a flood cannot access and surrounded by a large dense growth of trees. "Toob" or a cottage is built to be a place for Chao Pu to live. "Bue Ban" (the major pillar of a house) is built for the auspiciousness of the village. In the 7<sup>th</sup> month each year, a ceremony is held to treat Phee Pu Ta (grandfather and grandmother spirits, ancestor spirits from father side and mother side). All these four people, by the time they were alive, were very much revered by their descendants. When they pass away, a cottage or "Toob" is built with 4 poles, a gable roof, and raised floor. It will be built in "Dong", a place like a forest where there are big trees and different kinds of wild animals. It is called "Dong Pu Ta". It is a sacred place where no one can cut down trees or hunt animals or even speak rude words as Pu Ta will punish that person to have a headache



or stomachache. When people in villages get sick or die unnaturally, Isan people call "Lak Ngiang Nguay". A new major pillar of the house must be built in a straightway. A ceremony for praying and offering foods to monks will be held, and angels will be worshipped. A new piece of wood will be replaced by the old one. The spell or magic design is given before it is put into the ground in the center of the house. Isan people believe in settling down "the house pillar" because it is a major component of the structure of communities and the heart of a house. When communities grow, "the house pillar" is developed to be a city pillar as seen across Thailand. House pillar is made of auspicious wood such as golden shower wood, Indian mulberry wood. Isan people's beliefs, as shown above, can be concluded as follow: 1) beliefs in Phaya Tan (Phee Tan), 2) beliefs in love destiny, 3) beliefs in worshipping ancestors and sacred things and 4) beliefs in merit, sin, heaven, and hell.

3) Practice guidelines for beliefs of Isan people – Isan rural society is changing to an era of material development rapidly, causing local customs and traditions are looked down on as wicked and obsolete things. Local youth and new generation people are passionate about modern cultures originated by the combination of different cultures with a variety of multiculturalism, enabling them to forget their roots or where they come from. Various traditions and beliefs treated as practice guidelines from the old day become something in response to impermanent entertainment. The old strategy to instill socio-cultural consciousness was ignored, making the morality and ethics of people decrease. The family institution, educational institution, and religious institution lose their roles in giving training, knowledge, and instilling morality, leading to values and behaviors that focus on materialism and consumerism. Good values and local wisdom have been ignored and less likely passed down. The social value system in public consciousness, generosity, and assistance given to each other seem to decline since traditional activities implemented for the public did not gain attention. Finally, it will lead to the downfall of cultures that ancestors accumulated for such a long time. Therefore, to build practice guidelines to Isan people's beliefs to exist appropriately among the changing society while being able to maintain old models, content, and objectives, affecting socio-cultural security further, the following points should be implemented:

4) Conservation – beliefs of Isan people that have been practiced for such a long time become beautiful cultures and traditions. Though many traditions seem to be nonsense, judged by modern worldview and criticized by points of view of modern academics, those traditions and beliefs still stay with Isan people's way of life until today. Some traditions do not only adhere to the beliefs of people in communities but also are full of philosophical concepts accumulated with wisdom and passed down in the form of a body of knowledge through philosophical methods.

5) Restoration – some beliefs, cultures, and traditions were covered by modern cultural trends and progress of technologies, making them, as the Heet and Kong tradition, ignored to practice due to social change. Factors that bring about changes like discovery, invention, conflict, competition, social and traditional change affect how people in communities live their lives while the importance given to

ancient traditions decreases accordingly. Consequently, some disappearing cultures and traditions should be restored to play an important role in community way of life again with the following methods: 1) Pass down. 2) Promote activities. 3) Disseminate and exchange.

6) Application – various merit-making traditions; for example, paddy merit-making tradition held by temples, should be applied to be establishing rice banks for helping those in need based on the following methods: 1) Enhance local philosophers. 2) Prepare cultural information network system.

7) Create new things appropriately. New things should be created to be compliant with existing knowledge by applying and adjusting a body of knowledge in communities to be in line with the current way of life. Local wisdom developed and promoted using modern science can generate considerable revenue and value-added. The important thing is a body of knowledge of one community to other communities that will contribute to mutual development and become sustainable in no-life communities; for example, the establishment of rice banks, establishment of cattle banks, the gathering of a group of housewives and youth to carry out activities in a systematic manner increasingly.

**Analysis of beliefs in community forest conservation of Isan people** revealed that there was a concept, beliefs, body of knowledge, and principles of ethics hidden behind the beliefs. Therefore, the researcher brought those concepts and beliefs to analyze using the following philosophical theories:

1) Analysis using metaphysics theory found that beliefs in community forest conservation of Isan people revealed how Isan people are associated with beliefs in mysterious power over humanity. They believe in ghosts, tree guardian angels, or tree spirits as those who have power over humanity. Those spirits control and protect forests, mountains, and rivers, making humans not destroy forests more than necessity. Deforestation is considered a violation of power over humanity. Some beliefs seem to be superstitious but this superstition can help protect some forests to survive until today. To sum up, Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation consists of 2 points as 1) beliefs in ghosts and mysterious power and 2) beliefs in tree guardian angels and tree spirits

2) Analysis using epistemology theory (theory of knowledge) – there are 4 aspects in the analysis: 1) characteristics of knowledge, 2) sources of knowledge, 3) value of knowledge and 4) justification standard of knowledge. It was found that the process of a body of knowledge is in the form of wisdom hidden behind rituals full of principles of teaching. A method used to access and bring the body of knowledge to develop communities is an unclear knowledge change process through experience sharing obtained from observation or imitation or practicing. Experiences, opinions, beliefs, methods, being unclear knowledge sharing between interested persons on a one-to-one basis, including knowledge extraction from persons and those bodies of knowledge, will be disclosed by folk philosophers.

3) Analysis of beliefs in community forest conservation of Isan people using the principles of Buddhist ethics can be concluded into 3 points as 1) to refrain from badness, 2) to practice goodness, and 3) to purify mind, body, and spirit, to enable practitioners to achieve happiness for the current life

and next life and finally they can release from the endless cycle of rebirths called nirvana (Nibbana) in Buddhism. The mentioned beliefs give rise to beautiful traditions in communities, such as the tradition of tree ordination or forest ordination that aims to combine the unity of people in communities for community forest conservation and prevention of deforestation

## Discussion

Based on the data analysis of the study on beliefs in community forest conservation of Isan people, there are many interesting points which can be discussed as follow:

1) Problem status of the community forest conservation of Isan people is caused by the need to expand areas for earning a living and housing including the growth of the population in communities. Areas were expanded to serve agriculture and animal raising, decreasing fear of sacred power of forests and leading to deforestation and forest degradation. The important reasons previously mentioned are from the actions of humans who destroy community forests. This is consistent with Chaladchay Ramitanon [4] saying in the book titled community forest, the meaning of forest and community which can be concluded that confidence showing that community forests can protect forests is based on the fact that community lives depend on the survival of forests since forests are the sources of water, lands for cultivation, sources of food, materials, and factors essential for living a life of communities. If the survival of communities does not depend on forests, people in communities do not see the importance of forest conservation, deforestation for benefits of building houses or agriculture and animal raising as well as forest degradation will occur.

2) Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation have been practiced continuously for such a long time, adhering to their beliefs in sacred things in forests, i.e., tree guardian angels and tree spirits. Worshipping is performed to express their gratitude and appreciation to those sacred things, becoming nice cultures and traditions for localities which stay closely with Isan people's way of life until today. Those beliefs are hidden behind philosophical concepts accumulated with wisdom and passed down as a body of knowledge through methods of folk philosophers. It is consistent with Sathien Coses [8] who mentioned in the book titled ghosts and angels that tree guardian angels, based on Thai people's beliefs, are sacred things living in trees. It is probably that opinions in Buddhism mentioned that tree guardian angels are a type of angels whose paradise is in trees. Worshipping tree guardian angels are worshipping a tree. Belief in worshipping trees is available in Hinduism as well. It is the combination between Hinduism and Buddhism, consistent with Chanin Phongsawat [9], who conducted a study on beliefs in worshipping tree guardian spirits in Thai society to investigate whether or not it was influenced by Hinduism or Buddhism as the study found that tree guardian spirits are sacred things that Thai people are familiar with and no one does not know them. In this regard, it showed that Thai people had been associated with tree guardian spirits for such a long time. In Thai society, people believe in paying respect to big trees such as banyan tree, bodhi tree,

ironwood (Takhian) as tree guardian spirits are living in there. People pay respect to those big trees as they are afraid of them and think they are mysterious trees.

3) Analysis of Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation about metaphysics dimension found that those beliefs generate nice tradition and practice guidelines through traditions and rituals in an appropriate manner amid the changing society. Meanwhile, traditions are applied to be consistent with a current way of life. In terms of the epistemology dimension, there were bodies of knowledge accumulated in the characteristics of local wisdom hidden behind rituals and traditions. Those bodies of knowledge are disclosed by folk philosophers. Analysis based on the Buddhist ethics dimension revealed that people in communities brought the disclosed beliefs to self-practice; for example, expression of gratitude to forests gives rise to nice traditions, i.e., tree ordination, treebanks, rice banks, etc., leading to support to each other within communities. Thus, communities become communities of dependency by having such beliefs as a paradigm. This is consistent with Chutima Samart [10], who conducted a study on participatory management of community forest in Ban Nikhom Phattana 1, Tha Chamuang sub-district, Rattaphum district, Songkhla province. The study found that community forest management started from creating conscience in people to feel that the community forest belongs to everyone and wish to cherish it. Various groups involved with the conservation of community natural resources were established to allow everyone to participate in the management. Rules and regulations related to the utilization of the community forest were set up. Community forest management was implemented using local wisdom and community cultures and traditions. This is consistent with Phawadee Thakrairaj [11] on local wisdom and community forest management in the border area as the study found that community forest is a community natural resource that people in community and neighboring areas can both directly and indirectly utilize. Emphasis was placed on consistency with a way of life, local beliefs, and local cultures to ensure benefits will meet people's requirements in living their lives by relying on community forest based on local cultures, beliefs, and wisdom.

## Recommendations

An analysis of beliefs in community forest conservation of Northeast (Isan) people is a qualitative study with three objectives. Research suggestions are shown as follows:

**Policy-based suggestion** – 1) The discovered reasons for community forest conservation of Isan people should be contained as a prevention and promotion plan for the development of Isan communities. 2) Philosophical concepts and theories, including principles of Buddhist ethics, should be adapted in solving and preventing community forest invasion problems in the northeast (Isan) region. 3) The research results should be used as a guideline for solving and preventing community forest problems and developing community forests to become sources of learning and sources of food for people in communities

**Suggestion for application** – The analysis of beliefs in community forest conservation of Isan people revealed that the research results are consistent with the determined

objectives. Therefore, the researcher provided the following suggestion for application: 1) Communities that comprise temples, houses, and schools should be enhanced to participate in working together and build multilateral networks for community forest conservation. 2) Monks, communities, and government organizations in the Isan region should be promoted to participate in building a role model community for community forest conservation, 3) Promotion should be given to the preservation of rituals and traditions related to the expression of respect to the community forests and community forest code should be established

**Suggestion for future research** – When this study was conducted, some point was unclear which related to the analysis of Isan people's beliefs in community forest conservation based on epistemology dimension that mentioned bodies of knowledge hidden behind rituals and traditions in the form of local wisdom. The other point is time limitation; analyzing content was not comprehensive and complete. For future research, 1) a study should be conducted on the management of bodies of knowledge containing in rituals and traditions of community forest conservation by using epistemology theory, 2) a qualitative study should be conducted on collaboration between the government sector and private sector for the participation of Isan region communities in Isan community forest conservation, 3) a quantitative study should be conducted on the participation of Isan communities in Isan community forest conservation, 4) a mixed-method study (both quantitative and qualitative study) should be conducted on Isan community forest conservation.

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