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**Shembeism and the Rainbow Nation:  
Shembe Religion and Cultural Change in Durban,  
South Africa**

**Dallas L. Browne**

**Abstract**

*Based on fieldwork conducted in South Africa, this article explores the beliefs and practices of the followers of Isaiah Shembe in contemporary South Africa. Situating Shembeism within the literature on revitalization movements, the author argues that it is important to understand the basic precepts and concomitant practices of Shembe's followers as they play an important role in the construction of a multi-racial and peaceful South African nation.*

## Introduction

The Shembe religion is the fastest growing independent African church in South Africa. Despite its obvious and growing importance, Africanists have yet to write a lucid, clear, easily readable articulation of the basic beliefs and values of Shembe's followers. This article seeks to fill this lacuna on the increasingly important role of religion as an impetus for social mobilization and modernization. James Fernandez noted that Independent African Churches grew from 30 churches in 1913 to more than 6,000 in 1967, with an estimated membership of 6 million. Barrett has speculated that the membership may be as high as 20 million members (Fernandez 1978: 195).

Many of these converts are rural-to-urban migrants who find comfort in the familiar beliefs and practices of Shembe's church, and this eases the transition to urban modern living for them. This religion eases the rural-to-urban transition for millions of Africans and helps them to cope with the modern world while not feeling that they are betraying their traditions. Fernandez notes:

Given the emphasis upon the 'civilizing mission' and the Europeanization of Africa, there was some reason for this implacable view. In the first 20 years of this century there were many instances of prophetic leaders arising out of traditional religious milieus but working with a syncretistic symbolism. They took up the fallen torch of resistance to colonial rule. The enthusiasm they provoked, which often carried beyond their intentions, created

some very difficult situations for that rule. The best-known example is the Maji-Maji rebellion of 1905-07 in German Tanganyika under the diviner and prophet Kinjikitili. But the records of practically any colony or territory of the period would give evidence of leaders of this kind who employed indigenous religious idiom and armature in protest against the colonial yoke (Fernandez 1978: 199).

KwaZulu-Natal Province is on the Eastern or Indian Ocean side of South Africa and extends from the coast into the Drakensburg Mountains. This is the heart of Zulu territory and the birth place of Shembe's religion. While in South Africa I wanted to explore Ted C. Lewellen's belief that:

Revitalization movements are basically attempts, often unsuccessful, to adapt to new conditions, despite the religious trappings they are basically political. The prophet's vision may be seen as a pivotal point in the history of the culture, at once combining external and internal factors, past and future, tradition and inevitable change. Over the past two centuries most such movements have arisen in the context of domination by Western powers. Thus, they may be seen as a first form of political protest, a cry of pain and accusation in the absence of knowledge, organization or

power to confront the occupiers on their own terms (Lewellen 1992: 76).

Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of an independent Kenya, was fond of relating a story in his speeches of how when the European missionaries first came to Africa they came with bibles in their hands and the Africans had the land. The missionaries gave the Africans the bible, told them to close their eyes and kneel down and ask God for forgiveness. When they stood up and opened their eyes they had bibles in their hands and the Europeans had the land. For Kenyatta, the struggle for independence was basically the struggle to regain the land. Kenyatta was an anthropologist as well as a politician and understood well the relationship between religion and politics. Just as African-American churches led the fight for civil rights in the U.S. South, Shembe and his followers kept hope of autonomy and sovereignty over their land and culture alive until leaders like Nelson Mandela and other activists picked up the struggle and carried it to its uplifting conclusion.

The Shembe faith emerged long enough ago to be currently in what Anthony Wallace characterized as a "routinization" phase (Wallace 1985). Wallace argued that such religious movements go through five stages. During the first or pre-movement stage, the society comes under sustained stress and pressure for radical change. This occurred in Natal Province when the British exerted their dominance over the tribes already living in the area and claimed ownership and control over the land and the lives of the people. Gradually this invasion by foreign whites and acculturation pressures, i.e. forcing people to speak English and obey English laws and customs, caused Zulu, Xhosa and other African people to experience psychological

stress while their culture was under constant attack. The African response was that crime, alcohol abuse and lawlessness rose to frightening levels due to anomie and normlessness.

At this point a movement began through a prophet who formulated a new code of living, that of Isaiah Shembe, who gained enlightenment as a result of being struck by lightning. This is a traditional Zulu sign that a person has been chosen by God to be one of his prophets. The revelation then is disseminated to disciples who spread the new religion among the masses until some sort of organization of believers becomes necessary. This occurred when Shembe was ordained bishop of the new amaNazaretha church and began ordaining priests to teach his gospel. Literate members followed Isaiah Shembe around as he spoke and recorded and published all of his sermons and beliefs.

Next, a new faith must adapt to its environment, either by defeating bested interests or making modifications in the original doctrine to allay hostility and suspicion. Shembe adopted Gandhi's philosophy of "non-violence" from his neighbor, Mahatma Gandhi—who donated the first land owned by Shembe and his followers, to damper European fears that he and his followers were planning to revolt. When a significant number of people, or the whole population, has adopted the new religion, a cultural transformation is effected, bringing the culture into a more harmonious alignment with the conditions that precipitated the movement. Finally, in a post-movement phase, the movement becomes routinized as a mainstream religion or political party and a new stable state is achieved. If we accept Wallace's model, this is the point at which the Shembe religion is today. The history of the Shembeites follows

Wallace's model of the phases that revitalization movements pass through.

### **Significance of Revitalization Movements**

Over time revitalization movements have been equated with acts of open defiance to white (or other) authority, which must be met with force and put down. Thus violent reprisals have accompanied news of the development of a revitalization movement. For example, when news spread throughout American society that the "Ghost Dance" was rapidly spreading the teachings of the Native American prophet Wovoka, the U.S. military moved in at Wounded Knee and massacred many Indians (Mooney 1896). Ghost Dancers tried to lead pure lives so that they could inherit a world in which buffalo would return to the Great Plains and the people could live in security and peace. The Handsome Lake Movement among the Iroquois likewise was viewed with suspicion (Wallace 1972). Its founder is considered a great prophet who outlawed the use of liquor, emphasized strong families and encouraged the return of an Iroquois confederacy. His goal was to purge Native American society of unwanted foreign and corrupting elements and to reconstitute a former era of happiness. For this, some whites feared him and wanted him dead.

The "Vailala Madness" swept over New Guinea and called for the total expulsion of whites from the islands so that the ancestors could deliver cargo or Western goods to the natives. It was a native way of securing such wonders as radios, processed food, cars, etc. Whites were never seen making such goods so native New Guineans reasoned that these must be rewards sent to them by their ancestors. If

you could just master the magic of writing your wishes on a sheet of paper and sending it to the ancestors, you too could enjoy such privileges. In the New Guinean mind, cargo was created by the ancestors who had made it for the natives, but the whites had usurped the magic formula. They had to be removed before the cargo could reach the natives. In response to occupation of their islands during WWII, natives slaughtered all of their pigs, their main source of food, in the belief that the ancestors would send more pigs from the skies just as the soldiers received cargo by airplane to re-provision them. Like many other revitalization movements this one ended tragically.

I agree with Lanternari who feels that revitalization movements like the Shembe phenomenon are "cries for freedom" (Lanternari 1963). The rituals that others find frightening are merely as Kertzer argues "the glue that holds states and societies together," because people respond politically better to rituals than to logic (Kertzer 1988). Shembeism is now so routinized that it serves merely as the focal point for protest within the rules of Western politics. President Thabo Mbeki was so grateful to this group for maintaining peace in KwaZulu Natal province that he brought them a huge new clean water system as a reward while I was there in the summer of 2003. I must add, that Mbeki neutralized chief Buthelezi and the Inkatha Freedom Party by appointing Buthelezi Minister of Home Affairs. This put him in charge of internal security and made him responsible for maintaining law and order. As such he could not unleash his "impi" regiments to murder African National Congress (ANC) supporters as he did during the 1994 presidential elections. Because his hands were tied, Inkatha did not go on a killing spree with police backing and the last election was not only almost violence-free but the ANC



carried KwaZulu-Natal Province for Mbeki by a wide margin.

### **Basic Beliefs and Values of Shembeism**

My conception when I began my study of the Shembe movement was simply that the armed rebellion by Bmabata was ruthlessly and decisively crushed by the British military machine with its overwhelming technological superiority. The British had demonstrated their absolute ruthlessness by killing thousands of Afrikaner women and children whom they held in concentration camps during the First and Second Anglo-Boer Wars. This led both Gandhi and Shembe to conclude that armed resistance would be crushed brutally. Both took the path of non-violent resistance. Shembe did this by asserting the right of Zulu culture to remain independent and autonomous despite missionary efforts to eradicate Zulu customs such as ancestor worship, polygamy, and "lobolo" or bride wealth, all of which Shembe encouraged his followers to practice as a symbol of their independence of thought and action. Thus, they remained loyal to their own cultural ideals while simultaneously adapting enough Western culture to survive within its belly. Let me now describe the basic beliefs and values of Shembe followers.

Shembe is a syncretic religion. It blends Christianity with acceptance of selected aspects of traditional African culture, such as the following: the use of vernacular Zulu to explain the scriptures and for singing religious hymns, use of Zulu music and dance, traditional Zulu clothing, ancestor worship (*amadlozi*), polygyny, bride wealth (*lobolo*), ritual sacrifice, respect (*blonipha*), praise songs and poems (*izibongo*), Buffalo thorn (*umlahlankhosi*) to transport the soul home if a person

dies far from home, the use of water to heal illnesses, observance of traditional taboos (such as not killing snakes that enter a home because they are thought to represent reincarnated ancestors), consulting *sangoma* or diviners, and finally, Shembeites believe that church leaders must be African or black.<sup>1</sup>

Zulus are one of the largest African ethnic groups in South Africa and among the most feared. Their warriors under a great leader named Shaka swept across vast regions of Africa conquering everything in their path. They defeated the British at Isandlwana, at a time when the British seemed invincible to other Africans. So African nationalists across the length and breadth of Africa honor and revere the mighty Zulu. Many African-American Nationalists call themselves Shaka or Shaka Zulu. They have a proud history too vast to explore or do justice to in this paper, so I briefly mention it here and encourage readers to read more about the Zulu.

Zulus founded this religion and most of the African cultural traditions that it preserves are Zulu, however, they have adopted one Xhosa tradition, namely male circumcision. Shaka had outlawed this custom, so Zulu men went to war as a right of passage into manhood, while Xhosas circumcised. To give their religion pan-African appeal such concessions were made. Shembe men cannot marry until they are circumcised. Zulu traditionalists are not happy about this.<sup>2</sup> Many Shembe followers believe that their founder, Isaiah Shembe, was a Black Messiah; some even claim that he was a "Black Christ" (Sundkler 1961). Members approached Shembe on their knees as they had honored Shaka in his day (Krige 1936). Many believe that Shembe is the savior of their people, as Shaka was. This is part of the "Black Christ dogma." Shembe is regarded as both a Zulu king and an "isangoma" or traditional healer

(Oosthuizen 1965). His remedies rely exclusively on the healing power of water.

Zulus respect elders and an older person is respected more than a young person. So, Shembe followers worship God, the father, more than they worship God, the son, or the Holy Ghost, due to the "seniority principle" (Vilakazi 1986). Menstrual blood and semen are seen as polluting substances. Menstruating women are not allowed to shake hands with church officials and priests; neither can such women touch their clothing or their food. This would diminish the healing power of leaders according to their beliefs (Sundkler 1976). Followers who have had recent contact with the dead must be ritually purified before returning to their community (Krigel 1950). Premarital sex is prohibited and the virginity of unmarried girls is protected. Polygamy is acceptable, but a man and his wife must agree to any subsequent marriages (Vilakazi 1986). Only Vaseline and water can be used as medicines in healing rituals. Healing occurs through the power of prayer primarily in this religion. They eat unleavened bread and can only eat animals whose throat was cut. If the animal was stabbed through the heart it cannot be eaten by Shembe followers.

Shembe claimed that everything that he taught came from the Christian Bible, especially the Old Testament, Number Six, "The Vows of the Nazarites." For this reason their holy day is "Saturday, not Sunday" (Vilakazi 1986). They do not work on Saturday, nor will they eat hot food prepared on Saturday. They only eat cold food prepared on Friday for the Saturday meal. They do not light fires on Saturday, nor do they cook or bathe. Shembe is claimed to have healed people by touch and prayer. At the birth of a child they slaughter a goat to give thanks to God. Animals are sacrificed to appease the "amadlozi" or ancestors. The

“impepho” flower is placed on graves along with water, and incense is burned from the plant *Helichrysum miconiaefolium*, which Zulu diviners eat to keep themselves holy and help them to see the future (Krige 1950).

Jean and John L. Comoroff believe that Shembeism began as a reaction to racial oppression (Comoroff and Comoroff 1991). Wallace, however, classifies such religions as messianic revitalization movements (Wallace 1966). A decade after the collapse of the apartheid regime, it is important to note that Shembeism’s defiance continues to challenge the homogenizing efforts of colonial assimilation or postcolonial assimilation that imposes a uniform identity on all South Africans. In 1906, Christian missionaries flooded into Zululand and argued that the Zulu must denounce “lobolo” or bride wealth, ancestor worship (amadlozi), respect (hlonipha), polygyny, animal sacrifice and many other customs that the Zulu cherished (Poewe 1993). In contemporary South Africa, Shembeism appeals to millions of Africans because it allows them to modernize and Christianize without losing their African identity or core values, more or less to achieve a form of Japanese modernization with cultural preservation (Werbner 1988).

### **Genesis of Shembeism: Comparative Perspectives**

Shembeism can be described as Zulu society’s indigenous mechanisms for self-healing and recalibration of specific norms and values in the aftermath of a colonial onslaught. When martial arts of self-defense and offense failed, people like Shembe resorted to an inward-oriented re-articulation of Zulu identity. Seeing that violent resistance failed them, many Zulu sought a different way to deal with

Europeans. Mahatma Gandhi lived among the Zulu and interacted frequently with Zulu leaders such as John Dube and Isaiah Shembe (Du Toit 1996). Both men adopted Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence or "satyagraha" (Marks 1975). I visited Gandhi's former home in Inanda at Phoenix, and found that Shembeites served as its caretakers and as the guardians of Gandhi's tradition and legacy. Gandhi's concept of "sarvodaya" or "welfare for all" has become a cornerstone of Shembeism. This is the name by which Gandhi's former home in Phoenix, Inanda, Natal Province is currently known, i.e. "sarvodaya" or communal care for the needs of all. Blending the Gandhian principle of "welfare for all" with a communal ethos for self-help, the Shembeites worship at Ama Nazareth Churches, which encourage "self-help" and offers poor members support. It preaches a strong work ethic and many employers in the city of Durban prefer Shembeites because they work hard and do not complain. They are thrifty, do not drink, smoke or gamble and use most of their earnings to support their family and their church (Personal interviews, Durban, Summer 2003).

In many respects Shembeites resemble followers of "Father Divine" in the United States (Weisbrot 1983). Robert Weisbrot demonstrated that mainstream American employers preferred hiring followers of Father Divine because they were clean, honest, hard-working and reliable, did not form unions and did not grumble about either working conditions or pay. Employers with whom I spoke in Durban made similar comments about Shembeites, though they admitted that they knew little about their beliefs or their religious values. Most employers are East Indian or European and have strong prejudices against Africans, but admire the attitude of Shembeites toward work, family and

civic duty. Shembeites wear Western clothing when working in town but revert to special religious clothing for ceremonial occasions (Vilakazi 1986). They do not believe in cutting bodily hair and grow their hair long like Jamaican Rastafarians, but their hair is not fashioned into dreadlocks. Since most perform unskilled labor, having long hair and beards is not much of a problem for their employers, who expect white collar employees to wear Western clothing, be clean shaven and have neat hair cuts (short, so-called "well-groomed" hair), but are less concerned about the appearance of employees who do not interact as much with the public (Turner 1975).

Saturday is the main day of worship for Shembeites because they claim that this was the day that God told people to worship in the Old Testament of the Bible, which is what they follow rather than the New Testament like most Christians. Their Saturday morning service stresses "work" as the mark of a "true" Shembeite. They are warned not to be "lazy" because they equate laziness with "sin." At one service that I attended the preacher noted that "begging is degrading" and thus should be avoided. Their Saturday evening prayers stress the need to "always prepare for the unexpected through thrift" (Kiernan 1988). Shembeites embrace polygamy as an accepted tradition and norm, which brings to mind Mormonism. Mormon's place a similar value on preparedness for emergencies and store fresh drinking water, canned or preserved food, and blankets in their homes, just in case an emergency occurs and they might need such items. Mormon missionaries tried to recruit my family to their faith and they continually stressed their preparedness for emergencies throughout their proselytization as a major selling point.

### **Shembeism: Indigenized Christianity of the Church of Nazareth**

Shembeites adhere to culinary injunctions of the Old Testament that define followers of Judaism, the Eastern Coptic Church and Islam. Shembe prayers stress the need to obey parents and other authority figures as a way of showing that they follow God's teachings. Muslims empathize with this for they also believe that individuals should submit first to the authority of their parents, then to other worldly authorities and ultimately to God's authority. Like followers of Islam who are called to prayer by a muezzin, a large bell is used to call followers to prayer at nine in the morning and at six in the evening each Saturday. The morning service begins at nine to commemorate the death of their founder who passed away at that time. Evening services begin at six to mark Isaiah Shembe's time of burial.

In life Shembe was a prophet. In death he is transformed into a guardian ancestor who watches over all of his followers. His followers say that Isaiah Shembe told them that if they prayed to him as a revered ancestor then after he died, "he would remember them and watch over them there, in the place where God will send us." Church elders believe that the "amadlozi" or ancestors bring Africans good fortune and fight off adversity for them because they live near God and can serve as advocates for their descendents. In Shembe they begin many prayers with the phrase, "God of my grandfathers (amadlozi), God of Mr. Shembe, God ..."

Since his death in 1936, Isaiah Shembe has come to serve an ambassadorial role, linking Shembeites with their

ancestors. They tell Shembe what they want and he then takes responsibility for telling this to their ancestors and to God, as their representative. God is above Shembe, but if he asks him or the "amadlozi" for something they will grant it. They believe that even Mr. Shembe must ask God for permission before speaking to the "amadlozi." Thus, their prayer to the "amadlozi" begins, "Mr. Shembe's God, my amadlozi's God, I want ...." Such prayers are accompanied by the sacrifice of animals to please the ancestors and God. The daily prayers demonstrate the syncretism of Shembeism, which give life to ancestral worship embedded within a Christian framework to which it is adapted.

Shembeist churches are identified by a circle of white rocks which define the outdoor open-air sacred spaces that they consider their churches and cathedrals. Shoes must be removed before stepping on this holy ground. Men must remove head coverings such as hats, while women must cover their heads with hats or scarves like traditional Zulu married women. A Shembe priest noted:

He (Shembe) said, 'According to God's commandment, a man is not allowed to wear sandals in a holy place.' Those who enter Jehovah's home wearing sandals turn it into a playhouse, and are thereby breaking this commandment. Those who wish to enter a holy place must wear nothing on their feet (Summer 2003, Holy circle near the "Workshop" in downtown Durban, South Africa).

Shembeites prohibit the drinking of liquor. Yet, Elizabeth Gunner noted that for a traditional Zulu living



without traditional Zulu beer (*utshwala*) is unthinkable (Gunner 1988b). Such beer was used to entice neighbors to help a person build a new house or weed a field. It was a reward for offering such help. Zulu drink beer at all major social ceremonies and use it to help friends reconcile. Yet, Shembe priests, in contravention of Zulu tradition, decreed that residents of Umlazi, an African Township near Durban, should stay away from "shebeens" or illegal bars. Sobriety and industry are fostered by Shembe priests who argue that beer brewing is an unnecessary and unproductive use of food and should therefore be avoided.

Other taboos imposed on followers of Shembe are taboos against eating pork and chicken. Poultry and pigs, animals thought of as scavengers by Shembeites, are banned because they are considered to be unclean. Tobacco is prohibited. They are allowed to use the "laying on of hands," holy water and prayer to heal their sick. Neither men nor women are permitted to cut their hair or shave their beards. In Durban Shembeites adhere to such decrees on their appearance and attitude, which causes problems for their youth in the schools. Teachers often demand that Shembe children cut their hair, but many drop out of school rather than comply. This defiance to the homogenizing rules of modernity continues to mark Zulu traditional resistance to assimilation.

As noted previously, men must not wear hats when walking through or standing in sacred places. It is also taboo for a married Shembe woman not to cover her head with a hat or a scarf. Traditionally Zulu women wore hats into which their own hair was woven. They slept with special wooden pillows to maintain their headgear in tack. Only unmarried girls left their heads and breasts uncovered as a sign that they were available for marriage. Today married

women in cities still cover their heads and wear bras. Many unmarried Zulu girls do not wear bras but they do wear blouses to cover their breasts in school, at the workplace and on public transportation. They may display their breasts, however, at African weddings in the townships. This is not an invitation to premarital sex, rather it means that the young lady is eligible for marriage, should an appropriate match be found.

Polygamy is acceptable to Shembeites (Krige 1985). A man, however, must ask the permission of his first wife to marry again. If she agrees he may enter into subsequent marriages. Usually subsequent wives are subordinate to the first wife and must obey her as well as their husband. Second and third wives help with child caring, cooking, cleaning and joint family business ventures (Vilakazi 1986). Polygyny is not equated with promiscuity since premarital sex is strictly prohibited among Shembeites. Virginity is stressed by an unmarried girl's family and community, representing continuity with pre-colonial Zulu traditions as well as with its post-colonial manifestations as Shembeites.

### **Shembeism's Duality: Embracing Christianity without Submitting Indigeneity**

Since the 1994 election, when black Africans were allowed to vote for the first time, millions have flocked into South Africa's cities from the rural hinterland. The cities are foreign and dangerous to most as they were once considered White fortresses, but now they are viewed as exciting islands of opportunity where Africans can find work and schools for their children. Those who were unable to leave the townships, continue to live in slums, but dream of a better life. Spiraling unemployment figures of

approximately 60 percent to 80 percent in rural areas contribute to the continuous exodus from rural to urban areas that has made Durban's African population triple since 1990. Although urban life continues to be a difficult and harsh experience for unskilled communities such as Shembeites – reminiscent of the fate of practicing Rastafarians in the slums of Kingston, Jamaica – Shembeites often earn an honest living working as night watchmen, sanitation workers, office messengers and in other unskilled jobs. In this competitive urban environment where English is the language of government and work, their reputation for honesty gives them an advantage in being hired over Africans who may speak English but may possess questionable values.

Many South Africans coping with post-apartheid economies find a safe haven in the Shembe religion. They learn to speak Zulu, come to recognize Zulu symbols and become assimilated into Zulu culture, along with the duties and privileges entailed, which has been the major engine of growth for the Zulu nation since the days of Chaka. Membership in Shembe churches provides the newly urbanized workers with a social support network needed to earn low wages without succumbing to the temptations of an alien modernity. Thus, Shembeites find new identities as “reconstituted Zulus” guided by an indigenous cosmology and core values of Christianity. Armed with a malleable Christianity with a “Black Christian” savior in the person of Isaiah Shembe embedded in the assimilation of Zulu culture, they represent an example of a culture in continuous transformation and adaptation to the strange and forbidding new environment of South Africa's cities. This revitalizes many of the downtrodden masses and gives them the self-confidence to go forward and continue to struggle for a

living. Without it, many may turn to alcohol, drugs, crime or, at worst, suicide—a rising trend in the townships.

Shembeites follow Presidents Mandela and Mbeki's call to try to form a "rainbow nation" and to treat East Indians and whites as brothers and fellow citizens. Land seizures, revenge for past wrongs and getting even are discouraged, adding to the remarkable calm and peace enjoyed by South Africans today. Shembeism is one of several stabilizing influences. While the achievements of political prophets, such as Mandela, have been celebrated, prophets of peaceful co-existence and brotherhood, such as Isaiah Shembe and his followers, are yet to be acknowledged properly. The pacifism, industriousness and indigenous pride of these ordinary South African men and women have made it possible to contemplate a life with a vision rather than of dissolution, common among those victimized by alcohol and violence in cities. A key feature that stands out in the Shembeist community is the duality of indigeneity and Christianity free from the noxious fumes of corrupted morals, drugs and alcoholism. The failure of such institutions could lead to racial bloodshed and violence, so it is essential that we know and understand what Shembeism teaches and what its followers believe.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Dallas Browne (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> This was told to me during a conversation with Chief Gatsha Buthelezi at the King Zwelithini Stadium in Umlazi, July 2003.

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