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The Structure and Transformation of Religion in Modern Japan : In Search of a Civilization Studies Perspective

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The Structure and Transformation of Religion in Modern Japan: In Search of a Civilization Studies Perspective

Hirochika NAKAMAKI
National Museum of Ethnology

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1. A CIVILIZATION STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

According to Umesao Tadao, civilization refers to a group of “devices (*sōchi*)” which make human life possible. To put it another way, it is a system formed of human beings and their “devices.” The field of research which focuses on this system is civilization studies (*bunmeigaku*). It is an extension of the natural sciences, and aims toward elucidation of the historical transformation from the system formed of human beings and nature (the ecosystem) to the system formed of human beings and their own “devices” (the system of civilization). Civilization studies is the study of a whole system, and of relationships. It attempts to construct an inorganic rather than an organic model. In contrast to “civilization,” “culture” is a spiritual or mental abstraction, and as such is only one part of civilization [UMESAO 1981a]. Thus, the perspective of civilization studies implies considerations and conceptualizations of a different dimension than the perspectives of “cultural studies,” such as anthropology, history, or religious studies.

Once one’s ways of thinking and conceptualizing are set, however, it is not a simple task to shift to thinking in terms of a different model. Even with the addition or exchange of certain parts, conceptual transformation is not easy. This is true for those who have been trained in “cultural studies:” their change-over to civilization studies is very difficult. As such, this report can be considered no more than an attempt to apply a civilization studies approach. I will focus on modern Japanese religion, beginning with two micro-level examples and then moving on to consider macro-level problems.

In the highly civilized society of contemporary Japan, there are certain customs which are becoming ever more popular. One such is paying a visit to a shrine or temple at New Year’s. During the several days of celebration, even those who are irreligious in their own admission and so recognized by others flock either to a local

shrine or to one of the nationally famous shrines and temples, such as Ise Shrine, Meiji Shrine, Naritayama Shinshōji Temple, Kawasaki Daishi Temple, Fushimi Inari Shrine or Toyokawa Inari Shrine. How is this practice being treated in cultural studies? In *Nihon Minzoku Jiten* (Glossary of Japanese Customs), the entry for the New Year's visit reads as follows:

A Visit at New Year's to the shrine or temple of a local patron deity (*ubusuna-gami* or *chinju-sama*) is the older form of this custom. At present, it has become popular to visit famous shrines, especially those in a lucky direction for that particular year.... Thus the present urban practice of making a visit to a temple or shrine on New Year's Day may have been derived from the custom of visiting the shrine of one's patron deity on New Year's Eve [NAOE 1972: 575-576].

In *Shūkyōgaku Jiten* (the Dictionary of Religion), published by Tokyo University Press, or *Nihonshi Jiten* (the Dictionary of Japanese History) published by Kadokawa Shoten, there is not even a mention of New Year's, to say nothing of first of the year visits to shrines and temples. It should be possible to apply the religious studies dichotomy of the sacred and the secular to the New Year's celebrations, examine the sacredness of the New Year, and interpret this holiday as a "re-emergence of the origin of time" à la Eliade. In sociology and psychology, a multiple-choice questionnaire might be prepared asking why respondents make New Year's visits, to which temple or shrine they go, with whom they go, and for what they pray. These "cultural studies" approaches are each meaningful and valid in its own way. What sort of explanation can civilization studies offer?

In contrast to cultural studies, which asks "why do so many people visit shrines and temples at New Year's," civilization studies might ask "why is it possible for so many people to make this New Year's visit?" and inquire into the circumstances which make such visits possible. Let us look at one possible answer from this perspective.

For the Japanese people, New Year's Day is a national holiday, so declared by law, which itself acts as a general norm for the society. Further, the first three days of the New Year are established by customary norms as holidays. During this period, government and other public agencies, private companies, factories, banks, stores and all other organizations which serve to sustain the daily functioning of Japan's high level of civilization take time off, and Japan's enormous workforce is temporarily liberated from the workplace. In this context, mass media and one's friends and acquaintances all combine to influence one's rather vague sense that the New Year is the time for paying a visit to a shrine or temple. The transportation industry adds extra trains over extra trains as needed to haul all the passengers making these visits. Temples and shrines do their part to cope with the increased volume of visitors by, for example, mobilizing a temporary staff of young priestesses. If we look at the enormously popular New Year's shrine visit as a system, we can see that while it suspends the operation of one giant and complex system, it activates yet

another system which encompasses mass media, Shinto priests and priestesses, and railway workers. Without this system the visit of large numbers of people to famous shrines and temples during the New Year would doubtless be impossible. If it were necessary to rely on the ordinary system of everyday life, the visiting of shrines and temples at New Year's as we know it today would be impossible. Additionally, in the perspective of civilization, we might hypothesize with respect to the relationship between human beings and the "devices" which enshrine gods, such as shrines and household alters, that there is a negative correlation between the low diffusion rate of household alters in contemporary urban households, and the high rate of participation in New Year's shrine visits.

I am not entirely confident of the suitability of this sort of explanation to exemplify the perspective of civilization studies, but one thing is certain, namely that New Year's shrine visits in contemporary urban society, on the one hand, and the attendance of the head of a household on a patron deity, on the other, are qualitatively different phenomena both in form and in meaning. Some religious studies scholars claim that the deity enshrined in Meiji Shrine is the guardian god of Tokyo, but New Year's visits to this shrine can no longer be fully understood with reference to the symbolism of the shrine parishioner-patron deity relationship. They are undoubtedly the product of contemporary civilization characterized in part by relationships between the masses and cities which have grown to enormous proportions. Furthermore, the god worshipped at these New Year's shrine visits will probably continue to flourish as a god of the human beings *cum* device system, i.e., civilization.

In contrast to flourishing customs like this one, there are others which are becoming ever more obsolete in the highly civilized society of contemporary Japan. One such is the practice of praying for rain. Recently I had an opportunity to investigate this custom in Nagi-cho located in Katsuda County, Okayama Prefecture in Chūgoku District, which is part of Western Honshū. I would like to take up this case in understanding the transformation from "ecosystem to civilization system."

The custom of praying for rain, which is an integral part of the man-nature ecosystem of Nagi-cho, involves the "burning of *senda* (cut wood) on the plateau" and the "ceremony for the gods of the waterways" [NAKAMAKI 1983b]. The "burning of *senda* on the plateau" is a method of bringing water into one's own rice fields by making a huge bonfire on a high plateau, creating a change in air currents, and thus precipitating a sudden rain shower over a specific locality. The site of this bonfire is a mountain in the vicinity of a village or a plateau near a reservoir, and is always a place upstream from the relevant river system. The "ceremony for the gods of the rivers" involves belief in the existence of mystical spirits dwelling in the rocks and waterfalls in the uppermost regions of the river system, welcoming those spirits, and imploring them to use their miraculous powers to bring rain. In contrast to these practices is "the ceremony for the gods of reservoirs," an example of a rain ritual which is part of the "human being-device" civilization system rather than of the ecosystem. In this case, we take the reservoir to be an artificial human device. The deity is enshrined and worshipped by those served by the reservoir, and becomes the

object of prayers and ceremonies for rain whenever there are droughts. One such deity has been named Ameuke Daimyōjin (literally, "the Great God Who Gives Rain").

Looking at the vicissitudes of the practice of praying for rain, both as it exists in the ecosystem and in the civilizational system, we see that after the Second World War, this custom, as part of the ecosystem, saw rapid decline. The gods in the civilization system, however, have obstinately survived. To offer a concrete example, completion of the Nagi Reservoir in 1944 enabled a network of tunnels to supply water to the principal reservoirs of the area, and consequently prayers and ceremonies for rain were no longer necessary for minor droughts. In addition, improvement of dams and reservoirs, changes in methods of growing rice and decreasing dependence on rice are all responsible for the decline in this custom. In any case, the "burning of *senda* on the plateau" has disappeared almost without a trace, and the "gods of the rivers and streams" are all but forgotten. Only the "god of the reservoir" is still worshipped regularly as of old. The survival of this deity, needless to say, is very much related to the significance of the reservoir as a "device."

An examination of this relationship between the irrigation system and the custom of praying for rain reveals both the demise of the ecosystem and the continuation of the civilization system in a space of but forty to fifty years. To develop an argument from examples like these, one might hypothesize that gods of the civilization system have potential for the future, whereas those of the ecosystem are nearing extinction. Only the future can attest to this hypothesis.

2. JAPANESE CIVILIZATION AND RELIGION

In wrestling with the difficult task of trying to locate religion within the context of Japanese civilization, I would like to consider analysis from the perspectives of civilization studies, setting aside the conventional approaches of cultural studies. I will limit myself here to the presentation of one quite rough-hewn hypothesis which assumes Japanese civilization to be fundamentally a multi-layered, multi-dimensional system of interconnected oppositional pairs. Religion as a spiritual abstraction will also be taken to be fundamentally a multi-layered, multi-dimensional structure of oppositional pairs.

This approach retains several limitations. In Umesao's terms, "religion as a spiritual abstraction" would signify "religion as culture," and as such, is maintained by "religion as civilization." Thus, in reality, understanding "religion as civilization" should be the objective of civilization studies, but because we are still limited by the conceptual framework of cultural studies, a considerable emphasis continues to be placed on "religion as culture." Further difficulties arise for the multi-layered, multi-dimensional structural model in dealing with phenomena which have disappeared in the course of history. Moreover, the concept of oppositional pairs itself is too abstract, and runs the risk of markedly distorting our perception. While

admitting these weaknesses, I have nonetheless formulated a hypothesis, and in so doing have relied on the approach of systems engineering.

The conditions for the definition of a system in systems engineering are as follows [SUGITA 1981: 92]:

- 1) It must include two or more elements.
- 2) There must be relationships among elements.
- 3) It must have a purpose.
- 4) Some part of it must change over time.

Let us apply these conditions to civilization. With regard to the first, it goes without saying that civilization has innumerable elements. The third concerns the purpose of a system, and here it is clear that civilization has multiple purposes as well as multiple functions, and cannot be reduced to a system with a single purpose like those specific to engineering, and as such is decisively different. Questions arise in considering conditions (2) and (4), the relationships between items, and change over time, respectively. While it may seem somewhat strained, I would like to use the computer as an analogy in considering the relationship between items. I will assume that civilization, just as the computer, takes the binary system as its fundamental principle. The matrix of the computer is comprised of the following four pairs: 1-1, 0-1, 1-0, and 0-0, but their combinations are three: 1/1, 1/0, and 0/0. In the terminology of the human sciences, these might be the relationships of rivalry, oppositional coexistence, and harmonious coexistence, respectively. For the time being, I will take civilization to be a system in which these three types of relationships constitute complex and multi-dimensional relationships. The question of change over time is actually an historical problem, but I would like to offer a simplified understanding of it as well. While on the one hand civilization progresses and declines through the intensification of opposition between paired elements, occasionally a control mechanism sets in and a path of coexistence is pursued. The function of the control system and the structure of coexistence become particularly important issues in considering Japanese religion.

There are three systems within the hypothesis put forth here: the system of the principal bearers of civilization; and the system of the major devices of civilization; and the system of religion as the civilization's spiritual abstraction, or culture. Taking up first the principal bearers of Japanese civilization, we find that the opposition, hunter-gatherers and fishermen versus farmers has developed into a non-sedentary/sedentary relationship. The "non-sedentary" includes mountain people, itinerant craftsmen, itinerant religious specialists, and so on, whereas the "sedentary" includes those ranging from farmers and merchants to *samurai* and salaried employees. Turning to civilization's major devices, the example of the political system has shown great changes over time, from the *shizoku* (clan) system to the Ritsuryō system, and then to the feudal system. However, in that the political system has served an important function as a controlling mechanism for religion, the relationship

of dominance and submission between government and religion has not evidenced much change. Furthermore, social organizations of the village show remarkable geographical variation, some manifesting the vertically aligned, family-based *dōzoku* system, others exhibiting the egalitarian *kōgumi* system, and yet in not a few cases both have managed to coexist. The changes in tools and machines, or in roads and bridges, have been radical in recent years, but until fairly recent times it was most common for the old and the new to exist and be used side by side. Reflecting this trend, the religious system too has exhibited a multitude of elements coexisting in multi-dimensional opposition and in multiple layers. For instance, in the system of civilization's principal bearers, belief in spirits (animism) among farmers, hunter-gatherers and fishermen have served as the basis of the development of beliefs in sedentary and wandering deities. To these were added religious practices relating to the *dōzoku* and the *kōgumi* in the system of devices. Superimposed on all this are religious practices of the national level.

I have been dealing with "opposition versus coexistence" and "opposition versus rivalry." It is important to clarify my assumption that coexistence presumes opposition, and does not indicate the absence of opposition. Rather, as is seen in factionalism within a single political party, Japan is not a society in which everyone can easily come to an agreement. Nevertheless, it seems the road to coexistence has been pursued with determination, and the thorough extermination or elimination of opposing entities has been avoided.

This "opposition versus coexistence" principle is exemplified symbolically in the festival. In festivals, the superior and the subordinate in the *miyaza* (shrine) organization, groups organized around east and west, neighborhood organization, and age grades all manifest marked opposition to one another. And it is only through such revalrous opposition that the upsurge of emotion of the entire community characteristic of festivals can be generated. This rivalry is concluded in the course of the festival, and is not carried over into everyday life. Festivals have their own systems, and it is the multi-dimentional structure of oppositional relationships which enables the festival to achieve its climax. This is an area in which concepts of systems engineering could be profitably applied.

Clothing and food offer additional examples. In clothing, there is Japanese style attire, Western style attire, and "folk attire" which fits into neither category. In food, there is Japanese food, Western food, Chinese food and others. Usage of all these is determined by appropriateness of time and place, but they all coexist within Japanese society. In fact, mixtures of the various styles of either dress or cooking are exceedingly rare [UMESAO 1981b: 338-382]. The systems of Japanese attire, Western attire, and folk attire exist independently of each other, and at the same time there is an entirely different, overarching system to account for their coexistence. Such systems of "opposition versus coexistence" are no doubt common in other areas as well.

Whether or not this structure of multi-layered co-existence of various oppositional pairs is appropriate as a basic model for Japanese civilization, and consequently

for Japanese religion, is a question which leaves much room for further investigation. However, if, in spite of intensification of the contradictions caused by opposition and rivalry, coexistence is still tenaciously maintained, then at the very least, the multi-layered, multi-dimensional structural model indicates one desirable direction for future research.

3. MODERN JAPANESE RELIGION

Modern Japan does not begin with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. It began gradually in the latter half of the eighteenth century, a time characterized by the accumulation of commercial capital and the relaxation by the shogunate and *daimyōs* of the *bakuhau* system of governance. Uprisings demanding reformation of the world (*yonaoshi*) became frequent, and noticeable changes took place in the thinking and religious beliefs of the commoners. The consequences of some of these changes were inherited by the Meiji period (1868–1912). What has given modern Japan its particular economic and political character is, of course, the capitalist nation-state; but the deeply-rooted, so-called feudal system of the previous era has also survived. In fact, it is the “opposition and coexistence” of these two that has characterized modern Japan. To restate in terms of the framework described in the previous section, one of the major “devices” of modern Japan is characterized by the rivalry and coexistence of the feudalistic and capitalist systems. The principal bearers of this “device” are to be understood in terms of the agriculturalist/non-agriculturalist, or the sedentarist/non-sedentarist oppositional relationships. One major change is in the disappearance of the *samurai* class, and the emergence in its stead of the white-collar population which has come to occupy the largest portion of the non-agricultural population. In the sense that they too live on a fixed salary, white-collar workers are the successors to the *samurai*, and they also represent non-sedentarists. The bourgeoisie/proletariat oppositional relationship known in economics is also important as a framework for the significant bearers of the capitalist system. This relationship does not, however, prove very effective as a conceptual framework for understanding religion. A better understanding of structural trends in modern Japanese religion is achieved by keeping in mind the oppositional pairs of agriculturalist/non-agriculturalists, sedentarist-non/sedentarist, and feudalism/capitalism. One illustration is the rivalry and coexistence between old and new religions. While bearers of old established religions are not limited to farmers, their nucleus does consist of sedentary people, and they do preserve such feudalistic relationships as that between temples and their parishioners. The new religions, on the other hand, find most of their believers among the white-collar population and other non-sedentary people, and have introduced the modern norm of voluntary participation as in their membership system. Moreover, the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese religious life are that while the household as a corporate unit supports the temple-parishioner relationship, its individual members espouse new religions and that these two coexist without any particular contradiction.

Another important "device" lending a distinctive character to modern Japanese society is the strong national polity. Some aspects of this system such as local self-government and a well-organized bureaucratic system, may be derivative of the *bakuhau* system, but Japan was forced to new accommodations in confronting various foreign countries. This allowed the ideology of the Imperial system to enter the scene. Among the populace, however, movements and ideas were seen which were stubbornly and harshly opposed to the system created by the government establishment. This is also one of the important characteristics of modern Japan, a reflection of which in the realm of religion may be seen in State Shinto, on the one hand, and the ideology which opposed it, formed by groups like Tenrikyō and Ōmotokyō, on the other.

Japanese religion, particularly from its ideological standpoint, may be understood fundamentally to have a tri-polar structure. These three poles are: native religion; universalistic religion; and nativistic religion [WALLACE 1956]. The native religion is one inherited from ancient times and which lacks any awareness of unique national or racial identity. The rituals and beliefs concerning such deities as the gods of the mountains and rice fields, souls of ancestors, ghosts and spirits and the gods of water, all more or less fit into this category. In contrast, universalistic religion applies its principles universally, irrespective of time, place and occasion, to race, class or nationality. In Japan, Buddhism and Confucianism represent this type of religion. One of the distinctive features of the structure of Japanese religion is the development of yet another type of religion, namely, nativistic religion, based on the indigenous religion in opposition to the universalistic religions coming from abroad. Its archetype is Shinto, and in modern Japan it is State Shintoism, an ethnic and nationalistic religion which can be traced back to revivalistic Shinto. The nativistic religion is not, however, limited to State Shinto. Tenrikyō and Ōmotokyō, which are religions with broad mass appeal, also share much of this character. Furthermore, they have developed a universalistic emphasis. In this way, nativistic religion in modern Japan evolved out of existing Shinto, on the one hand, and new religions like Tenrikyō and Ōmotokyō which are based on the tradition of the indigenous religion, on the other. In this sense, the influence of Christianity is insignificant. In contrast, the history of religion in the so-called primitive societies or underdeveloped countries, shows a bipolar structure consisting of native religion and universalistic religion. There, nativistic religion never achieved a level of development equal to State Shintoism or Tenrikyō and Ōmotokyō. Instead they were destroyed in most cases while still in an immature stage. This phenomenon is worthy of future investigation as a problem in comparative civilization.

I would now like to turn away from questions of ideology, and consider organic and inorganic models by using the example of modern Japanese religious movements. To clarify the difference between cultural and civilization studies, it is important to avoid entanglement with the content of ideologies. A typical example of an organic model from the cultural anthropological approach to religious movements is Anthony Wallace's theory of "revitalization movements." This is an attempt at a general

theory of movements which try to bring about revolutionary change in the cultural structure. He takes the perspective of homeostasis, in which the parts all function to maintain integration of the whole, and respond to stress with emergency measures designed to restore the equilibrium of the matrix. He also introduces the concept of "mazeway," which is defined as images held by individuals of nature, society, culture, personality, and the physical body. What allows escape from this mazeway is the revitalization movement, which occurs within a general process consisting of: 1) a "steady state;" 2) a time of "individual stress;" 3) "cultural distortion;" 4) a "period of revitalization;" and 5) a "new steady state." Further, revitalization movements are characterized by the following generalized stages: adaptation; cultural transformation and routinization through reorganization of methods of escape; communication of a "gospel;" organization around a charismatic leader; and modification of dogma. Wallace's model of revitalization movements is an effective framework for understanding not only movements inspired by contact with Westerners, such as the Ghost Dance and Peyote Cults among American Indians and Melanesian cargo cults, but also the early stages of development of Christianity and Islam.

However, there are limits to the effectiveness of organic models. What is problematic is the unilinear notion that society and culture aim for stability, and work toward restoration of equilibrium. Although movements do indeed manifest a salient aspect of this sort, it is very difficult to apply this notion to a social system as a whole, especially when dealing with complex civilizations. There are, for instance religions like Tenrikyō of the Meiji period and the postwar Sōkagakkai, in which a charismatic leader emerged, and a period of rapid expansion was followed by gradual institutionalization. The history of these religious orders manifests a number of aspects which may be interpreted as revitalization movements. However, within the framework of Japanese civilization as a system supporting these religious movements, we must focus not only on the numerous bearers who might be called "the masses," but also on the various devices of the contemporary civilization, such as the nation-wide transportation networks, the lodging facilities capable of accomodating the huge numbers of believers, the mass media and systems of distribution and publication which enable dissemination of religious doctrine, and the architectural technology which makes construction of solemn and magnificent edifices possible. Movements like Tenrikyō and Sōkagakkai require a sophisticated organizational theory for organizing the masses, and its systematic application. They are also "mass thought movements," which are possible only in societies with highly developed civilization. Furthermore, these "devices" do not necessarily serve only the purposes of Tenrikyō and Sōkagakkai. Consideration of other religious movements and dominant systems indicates the need for a model of a system which enables coexistence of various systems, with each self-sufficient onto itself, rather than a model of a single system. It is just at this point that an inorganic model becomes appropriate. In short, when we take modern and contemporary Japanese mass religious movements as examples, Wallace's organic model of revitalization

movements demonstrates its effectiveness to a certain extent in interpreting each movement per se, but is less useful in considering related phenomena like sets of "devices," various movements, and systems of control.

4. THE RIVALRY OF JAPANESE RELIGION AND FOREIGN CIVILIZATIONS

Finally, I would like to touch on the meaning and function of Japanese religion for the Japanese living in a foreign society, a question of culture in a foreign civilization [NAKAMAKI 1983a]. Buddhism in the United States, following the Christian practice of Sunday worship performs services each Sunday and operates "Sunday schools" for children. Observances of the Festival of the Dead (*higan*) and the equinox (*obon*) also take place on the weekend closest to the actual date of the occasion. To be sure, some temples tenaciously observe the Japanese Buddhist festival days, but most have chosen to fit themselves into the American calendar. Established Buddhist sects, Jōdo Shinshū most certainly, along with Shinto, have played the role of nativistic or ethnic religion in confronting the universalistic religion, Christianity. This follows the American tradition in which religion has performed an important function in the integration of ethnic groups. Although Buddhism in Japan is the representative universalistic religion, in the Japanese American community it contains a number of nativistic elements, albeit in a mitigated form. Even Japanese Buddhism, in its confrontation with Christianity, found it necessary to emphasize its character as a world religion and *pro forma* borrowed patterns of Protestant ceremonies. Its primary character is to be seen in its emphasis on fulfilling ceremonial, educational, and social functions for Japanese and Japanese Americans. While Buddhism proselytizes among non-Japanese Americans (though not very successfully), there is at the same time a certain hostility to acceptance of non-Japanese Americans. To be sure, some religions, like Sōkagakkai and Zen, have a large number of non-Japanese American converts, but their movements are organized differently. Japanese converts to Christianity, too, organize Japanese churches, and these continue in most cases as ethnic churches without amalgamating with non-Japanese churches [NAKAMAKI 1982].

Japanese religion in the Japanese American community may be characterized thus more appropriately by a quadri-polar structure centering around Buddhism than a tri-polar structure. Japanese Americans as latecomer immigrants and a minority continue to manifest a strong tendency to adapt to American society, while maintaining cultural and ethnic identity. This tendency is reflected particularly clearly in religion among Japanese Americans, which while absorbing institutional elements of the Christian church, show dependence on traditional Japanese religion, whose ideological core is established Buddhism. However, as the thinking and conduct of third and fourth generation Japanese Americans continue to change drastically, sooner or later this interpretation may have to be altered.

Looking at it from yet another perspective, we might conclude that Japan's

religion (*Nihon shūkyō*) in the United States is no longer Japan's religion. We might better refer to it as "Japanese religion (*Nihon-teki shūkyō*)" within the context of American civilization, for, even if the dogma and action are Japanese (*Nihon-teki*), what is supporting the religion is almost entirely American civilization. I have previously suggested the concept of a multi-national religion in the context of investigating Japanese (*Nikkei*) religion as it has spread to a number of countries [NAKAMAKI 1979: 20–22]. At some point I would like to re-examine this notion once more from the perspective of civilization studies.

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