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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Multicultural Leadership: The Principal's Role in Instilling Religious Moderation Values among School Community Members in a Muslim Minority Area

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of the school principal in instilling religious moderation values within a Muslim minority context at SD Anak Shaleh Sitiarjo, Sumbermanjing Wetan, Malang Regency—a region where Muslims constitute a minority amid a predominantly Christian and Hindu community. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis from September 2025 to January 2026. Findings reveal that the principal implements a multicultural leadership model characterized by three strategic dimensions: inclusive planning through integration of moderation values into the school's vision and work plan, equitable organizational management through the formation of cross-religious collaborative teams, and accommodative implementation through culturally responsive policies and interfaith extracurricular programs. The principal's transformational leadership style—emphasizing exemplary behavior, open communication, and participatory decision-making—has successfully fostered a school culture of tolerance (tasamuh), balance (tawazun), and justice (i'tidal). Students demonstrate increased empathy, reduced prejudice, and harmonious interfaith relationships. The study contributes to the discourse on inclusive Islamic education management by demonstrating that moderate Islamic principles can serve as an effective leadership framework in heterogeneous educational settings. Recommendations include the development of structured moderation curricula and comparative studies across diverse minority contexts.

Keywords: Multicultural Leadership, Religious Moderation, Principal, Muslim Minority

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran kepala sekolah dalam menanamkan nilai-nilai moderasi beragama dalam konteks minoritas Muslim di SD Anak Shaleh Sitiarjo, Sumbermanjing Wetan, Kabupaten Malang—wilayah di mana umat Muslim merupakan minoritas di tengah masyarakat yang mayoritas beragama Kristen dan Hindu. Menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen dari September 2025 hingga Januari 2026. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa kepala sekolah menerapkan model kepemimpinan multikultural yang ditandai oleh tiga dimensi strategis: perencanaan inklusif melalui integrasi nilai moderasi ke dalam visi dan rencana kerja sekolah, pengorganisasian yang adil melalui pembentukan tim kolaboratif lintas agama, dan implementasi akomodatif melalui kebijakan responsif budaya dan program ekstrakurikuler lintas iman. Gaya kepemimpinan transformasional kepala sekolah—yang menekankan keteladanan, komunikasi terbuka, dan pengambilan keputusan partisipatif—telah berhasil menumbuhkan budaya sekolah yang menjunjung toleransi (tasamuh), keseimbangan (tawazun), dan keadilan (i'tidal). Siswa menunjukkan peningkatan empati, berkurangnya prasangka, dan hubungan lintas agama yang harmonis. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada wacana manajemen pendidikan Islam inklusif dengan menunjukkan bahwa prinsip-prinsip Islam moderat dapat berfungsi sebagai kerangka kepemimpinan yang efektif dalam lingkungan pendidikan yang heterogen. Rekomendasi mencakup pengembangan kurikulum moderasi terstruktur dan studi komparatif di berbagai konteks minoritas.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan multikultural, moderasi beragama, kepala sekolah, minoritas Muslim, sekolah dasar

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religious diversity constitutes a fundamental sociological reality in Indonesia, a nation characterized by remarkable cultural, ethnic, and religious plurality. While this diversity represents an invaluable cultural wealth, it simultaneously poses significant challenges when not managed with deliberate and inclusive strategies (Nurhanisah & Tjoetra, 2025; Nuruzzaman et al., 2023). The educational sector, particularly schools, occupies a central position as institutions responsible for shaping character and instilling national values, including the principles of religious moderation (Mahrus & Afandi, 2024). Religious moderation, which emphasizes balanced (tawazun), just (i'tidal), and tolerant (tasamuh) attitudes, requires systematic implementation to prevent students from developing extremist or exclusivist orientations (Ritonga & Nurmawati, 2025). The successful realization of this objective depends significantly on the quality of educational management exercised by school leaders, positioning the principal as the primary leader and manager within educational institutions (Abidin et al., 2025).

The principal's vision, policies, and strategies serve as the primary determinants of a harmonious school climate. Without strong, inclusive leadership, diversity within schools has the potential to generate friction and conflict (Alier, 2025). In contexts where Muslims constitute a religious minority, the principal's role becomes increasingly complex, requiring navigation between preserving Islamic identity and fostering harmonious coexistence with the majority community. Research on Islamic education in Indonesia has predominantly focused on Muslim-majority contexts, leaving limited attention to how Islamic education functions within Muslim minority

communities (Bakar et al., 2025). This gap necessitates deeper exploration of educational models that enable Muslims to sustain their faith while engaging harmoniously in plural societies. Muslim minorities in various regions live in complex religious environments, requiring an educational approach that not only focuses on the transfer of religious knowledge but also emphasizes the development of tolerant, inclusive, and adaptive attitudes (Bakar et al., 2025).

The significance of religious moderation in educational institutions is underscored by concerning trends in Indonesian society. Intolerance levels have shown an upward trajectory, accompanied by increasing violence in educational institutions, including bullying cases and inter-student clashes (Abdurohman, 2023; Andriansyah, 2022, as cited in Mukhibat et al., 2025). Adolescents are becoming increasingly vulnerable to extreme attitudes and radical ideologies, necessitating comprehensive and substantive—rather than superficial—approaches to religious moderation education (Mukhibat et al., 2025). The four pillars forming the foundation of moderation—multiculturalism (the ability to accommodate differences), diversity (viewing differences as strengths), pluralism (making differences a shared experience), and relativity (seeing things from others' perspectives)—are essential for realizing religious moderation in educational institutions (Mukhibat et al., 2025). These pillars lay the values to build individual moderation into institutional moderation, requiring committed leadership to translate principles into practice.

Contemporary research has explored various dimensions of religious moderation in educational contexts. Abidin et al. (2025) investigated the principal's strategy in implementing religious moderation at SMK Negeri Sukapura, a unique case involving Muslim and Hindu students, demonstrating that transformational leadership integrating moderation values into all management functions creates a balanced and harmonious school culture (*tawazun*). Similarly, Sari et al. (2025) examined how the principal of MAN 1 Garut applies religious moderation through leadership, revealing three stages: collective planning with stakeholders, transformational implementation focusing on inspiration and exemplary behavior, and systematic supervision (Sari et al., 2025). These studies highlight the critical role of principals as agents of moderation but predominantly focus on Muslim-majority settings or schools with substantial Muslim populations.

Research specifically addressing Muslim minority contexts remains comparatively limited. Kosim et al. (2025) conducted a comparative study of tolerance education in Muslim minority educational institutions across Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia, analyzing policies and curriculum integration in Muslim-minority areas (Kosim et al., 2025). Bakar et al. (2025) examined transformative Islamic religious education at Madrasah Aliyah in Bali, demonstrating how Muslim minority students develop pride in their Islamic identity while maintaining harmonious relationships with non-Muslim peers (Bakar et al., 2025). However, these studies primarily address secondary education levels and do not extensively examine the elementary school context where foundational values are established.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by investigating multicultural leadership in a Muslim minority elementary school context. SD Anak Shaleh Sitarjo, located in Sumbermanjing Wetan, Malang Regency, operates within a community where Muslims constitute a minority, surrounded by predominantly Christian and Hindu populations. This context presents unique challenges and opportunities for instilling religious moderation values. The research examines how the principal navigates this complex terrain, balancing the preservation of Islamic identity with the

cultivation of interfaith harmony. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the elementary school level within a specific Muslim minority context in Indonesia, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. Furthermore, this study contributes to the development of inclusive Islamic education management theory by demonstrating how moderate Islamic principles can serve as an effective leadership framework in heterogeneous educational settings.

The significance of this research extends beyond the specific case under investigation. As Indonesia continues to navigate challenges of religious intolerance and extremism, understanding how educational leaders in minority contexts successfully foster moderation and tolerance becomes increasingly valuable. The findings offer practical insights for principals, teachers, and policymakers seeking to implement effective religious moderation programs. Additionally, this study contributes to international discourses on multicultural education and leadership in pluralistic societies. The following research questions guide this investigation: (1) How does the principal at SD Anak Shaleh Sitarjo conceptualize and implement multicultural leadership in a Muslim minority context? (2) What strategies are employed to instill religious moderation values among school community members? (3) How do students and school stakeholders respond to these moderation initiatives? (4) What challenges and facilitating factors influence the successful implementation of religious moderation programs?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the principal's role in instilling religious moderation values within a Muslim minority context. The case study approach was selected because it enables in-depth examination of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts, allowing researchers to capture the richness and nuance of leadership practices and their impacts (Yin, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2024). This methodological choice aligns with established traditions in educational leadership research, where case studies have proven effective in investigating how principals navigate diversity and implement moderation programs (Abidin et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2025). The qualitative paradigm is particularly appropriate for this study because religious moderation involves values, beliefs, and cultural practices that require interpretative understanding rather than mere measurement.

The research was conducted at SD Anak Shaleh Sitarjo, located in Sumbermanjing Wetan District, Malang Regency, East Java Province. This site was purposively selected based on several criteria: (1) the school operates within a community where Muslims constitute a religious minority, (2) the school has demonstrated commitment to fostering religious moderation, (3) the principal has received recognition for leadership in promoting tolerance, and (4) the school serves a diverse student population representing various religious backgrounds. Data collection spanned from September 2025 to January 2026, encompassing one complete academic semester to capture comprehensive insights into leadership practices and their impacts across multiple contexts and activities.

Data collection employed multiple methods to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, five teachers, three

administrative staff members, and ten parent representatives, totaling nineteen key informants. Interview protocols were developed based on previous research on religious moderation in educational settings (Kosim et al., 2025; Bakar et al., 2025) and pilot-tested before implementation. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Participant observation was conducted across various school activities, including religious education classes, extracurricular programs, school events, and daily interactions, totaling approximately 120 hours of observation. Document analysis examined school policies, vision and mission statements, curriculum documents, activity reports, and photographic records of school events.

Table 1. Data Collection Matrix

Data Source	Participants/ Documents	Focus Areas	Quantity
In-depth Interviews	Principal, 5 teachers, 3 staff, 10 parents	Leadership practices, moderation strategies, perceptions, challenges	19 informants, 22 interview sessions
Participant Observation	Classroom activities, extracurricular programs, school events, daily interactions	Implementation of moderation values, interfaith interactions, school culture	120+ hours across 45 visits
Document Analysis	School policies, vision/mission, curriculum, activity reports, photos	Formal commitments, program documentation, evidence of practices	35 documents analyzed
Focus Group Discussion	Student representatives (n=12)	Student perspectives, experiences, impacts	2 sessions

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2024), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Coding was conducted both deductively, based on theoretical frameworks of multicultural leadership and religious moderation, and inductively, allowing new themes to emerge from the data. Thematic analysis identified patterns and relationships across data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking with participants, peer debriefing with colleagues, and maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions. Ethical considerations included obtaining institutional approval, securing informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality through pseudonymization, and respecting participants' rights to withdraw at any time.

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The principal at SD Anak Shaleh Sitiarjo demonstrates a distinctive multicultural leadership approach that integrates Islamic values with inclusive practices tailored to the Muslim minority context. Analysis of interview data reveals that the principal conceptualizes leadership as a mandate to serve all students regardless of religious background, stating: "Our school is a microcosm of Indonesian society. Every child who enters our gates deserves an education that

honors their faith tradition while nurturing understanding of others." This philosophical orientation manifests in three strategic dimensions that structure the findings below.

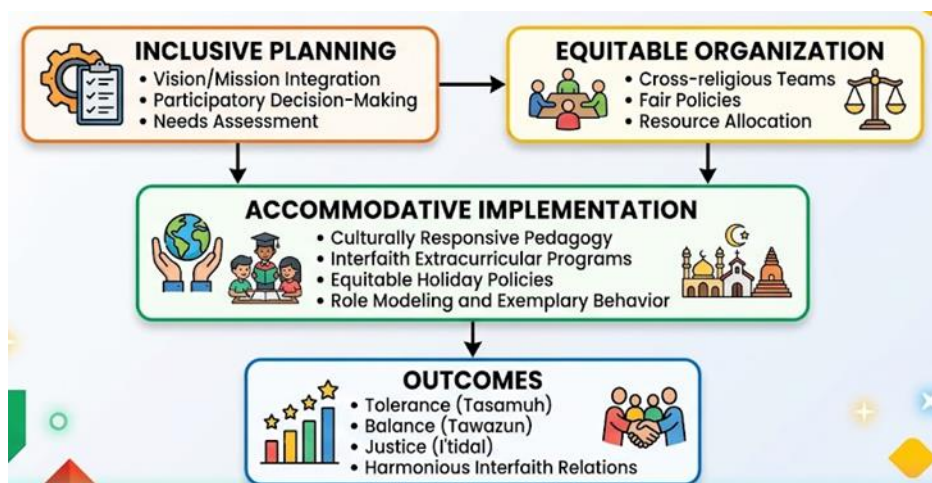


Figure 1. Multicultural Leadership Model at SD Anak Shaleh Sitiarjo

The first strategic dimension, inclusive planning, involves integrating religious moderation values into the school's formal planning documents. Document analysis revealed that the school's vision statement explicitly mentions fostering "generations who are faithful, tolerant, and globally competitive" (School Vision Document, 2024). The principal led a participatory process involving teachers, staff, and parent representatives in revising the school's work plan to incorporate specific moderation-related objectives and activities. Interview data indicate that this inclusive planning process itself served as a moderation practice, demonstrating respect for diverse perspectives and collaborative decision-making. A teacher noted: "The principal insists that all voices be heard, including those of non-Muslim parents. This makes everyone feel valued and committed to our shared goals" (Teacher Interview, October 2025).

The second dimension, equitable organization, manifests through the formation of cross-religious collaborative teams for various school functions. Rather than creating separate committees for religious activities, the principal established integrated teams where Muslim and non-Muslim teachers work together on curriculum development, event planning, and student support services. Table 2 presents the composition and functions of these teams.

Table 2. Cross-Religious Collaborative Teams at SD Anak Shaleh Sitiarjo

Team Name	Composition	Primary Functions	Meeting Frequency
Curriculum Development Team	4 Muslim, 3 Christian teachers	Integrate moderation values across subjects	Monthly
Student Affairs Team	3 Muslim, 2 Christian, 1 Hindu teacher	Student support, conflict resolution, character development	Bi-weekly
Event Planning Committee	5 Muslim, 4 Christian staff	Coordinate school events, religious celebrations	As needed
Parent Engagement Team	6 Muslim, 4 Christian parents	Facilitate parent-school communication	Quarterly

The third dimension, accommodative implementation, involves adapting policies and practices to respect religious diversity while maintaining Islamic identity. The principal implemented equitable holiday policies ensuring that students of all faiths can observe their religious obligations without academic penalty. Collaborative extracurricular programs bring students of different faiths together in shared activities such as sports, arts, and community service, fostering interfaith friendships and mutual understanding. The principal's personal example—participating in both Islamic and Christian religious activities when appropriate, demonstrating respect for all traditions—serves as a powerful model for the school community.

The implementation of religious moderation values has yielded observable impacts on student attitudes and behaviors. Focus group discussions with student representatives revealed increased empathy and reduced prejudice toward peers of different faiths. A Muslim student shared: "Before, I only had Muslim friends. Now I understand that my Christian friends also pray and have good values. We respect each other" (Student FGD, November 2025). A Christian student similarly noted: "The principal always says that we are all children of God. I feel safe and accepted here" (Student FGD, November 2025). Teachers reported observing more frequent interfaith interactions during breaks and extracurricular activities, indicating the development of genuine friendships across religious boundaries.

Quantitative data from school records support these qualitative observations. Table 3 presents comparative data on interfaith interactions and reported incidents before and after the implementation of the moderation program.

Table 3. Indicators of Interfaith Harmony at SD Anak Shaleh Sitiarjo

Indicator	Academic 2023/2024	Year	Academic 2024/2025	Year	Change
Interfaith friendships reported by students	45%		78%		+33%
Students participating in interfaith activities	62%		91%		+29%
Reported incidents of religious bullying	8 cases		1 case		-87.5%
Parent satisfaction with school climate (survey)	72%		89%		+17%
Teachers reporting improved interfaith cooperation	58%		94%		+36%

Challenges encountered in implementing religious moderation programs include initial resistance from some stakeholders, limited resources for developing comprehensive moderation curricula, and navigating external pressures from broader societal tensions. The principal addressed resistance through consistent communication, empathy, and demonstrating the benefits of moderation through tangible outcomes. Regarding resources, the school leveraged partnerships with local religious institutions and community organizations to support program development. External pressures were managed by maintaining focus on the school's core mission and values while remaining responsive to legitimate concerns from all stakeholders.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the critical role of multicultural leadership in fostering religious moderation within Muslim minority educational contexts. The principal's approach at SD Anak Shaleh Sitiarjo demonstrates that effective moderation leadership requires more than policy implementation; it demands a holistic integration of values into all aspects of school life, consistent with previous research on religious moderation management (Abidin et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2025). The three strategic dimensions identified—inclusive planning, equitable organization, and accommodative implementation—align with the management functions framework and extend it by demonstrating how moderation values can be operationalized in contexts of religious minority status.

The inclusive planning dimension reflects the principal's recognition that sustainable change requires broad-based commitment from the entire school community. This approach resonates with findings from Himawati and Sutapa (2025), who identified that successful multicultural education depends on principals' capacity to manage diversity and foster participation. The participatory process of revising the school's vision and work plan served dual purposes: producing formal commitments to moderation and modeling democratic, inclusive decision-making. This finding extends previous research by demonstrating that the planning process itself can be a moderation practice, not merely a preparation for later implementation. The principal's emphasis on listening to all voices, including those of non-Muslim parents, created a foundation of mutual trust essential for subsequent moderation initiatives.

The equitable organization dimension, particularly the formation of cross-religious collaborative teams, represents a significant innovation in school management. Previous research on religious moderation in Islamic educational institutions has often focused on curriculum integration or religious education pedagogy (Sari et al., 2025; Kosim et al., 2025). This study demonstrates that organizational structures themselves can embody moderation values. By distributing responsibilities across religious lines and requiring collaboration among teachers of different faiths, the principal institutionalized interfaith cooperation as a normative practice rather than an occasional activity. This structural approach addresses what Mukhibat et al. (2025) identified as the limitation of relying solely on religious studies teachers to carry the burden of moderation education. When all teachers, regardless of their subject area or religious background, participate in moderation-related teams and activities, the message that moderation is everyone's responsibility is powerfully communicated.

The accommodative implementation dimension demonstrates the principal's skill in balancing the preservation of Islamic identity with respect for religious diversity. The equitable holiday policies and collaborative extracurricular programs reflect an understanding that moderation requires both symbolic recognition and practical accommodations. This approach aligns with Saleemad et al. (2022), who identified gentleness, justice, flexibility, tolerance, and interpersonal relationships as key leadership characteristics for Muslim school leaders in multicultural contexts. The principal's personal example—participating in religious activities of various traditions when appropriate—exemplifies what Alkouatli et al. (2023) described as educational and epistemic integration beyond

inequities in Muslim-minority contexts. Such role modeling has been shown to be particularly influential in shaping student attitudes and behaviors (Pakata et al., 2024).

The observed impacts on student attitudes and behaviors—increased interfaith friendships, reduced prejudice, and decreased incidents of religious bullying—provide empirical support for the effectiveness of the moderation program. These findings corroborate research by Suma et al. (2025), who found that implementation of religious moderation values in school environments fosters attitudes of tolerance among students. The significant increase in interfaith friendships (from 45% to 78%) is particularly noteworthy, as peer relationships constitute a powerful mechanism for reducing prejudice and building intergroup understanding. This outcome suggests that the principal's emphasis on experiential, collaborative activities was well-founded. The reduction in reported incidents of religious bullying (from 8 cases to 1 case) demonstrates that moderation education can translate into tangible behavioral changes, addressing what Mukhibat et al. (2025) identified as persistent challenges of intolerance and violence in educational institutions.

The challenges encountered in implementing moderation programs—initial resistance, limited resources, and external pressures—highlight the complexity of this work. These findings echo concerns raised in previous research about the gap between normative commitments and substantive implementation of religious moderation (Mukhibat et al., 2025). The principal's strategies for addressing these challenges—consistent communication, empathy, leveraging partnerships, and maintaining focus on core values—offer practical insights for leaders in similar contexts. The successful navigation of resistance through relationship-building rather than coercion reflects what Pakata et al. (2024) described as the resilience and adaptability essential for impactful leadership in diverse educational settings.

This study contributes to theoretical understanding of multicultural leadership in several ways. First, it extends existing models of educational leadership by demonstrating how moderation values can be integrated across management functions in a Muslim minority context. Second, it provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of what can be termed "embedded moderation"—approaches that weave moderation principles throughout school structures and practices rather than treating them as separate programs. Third, it highlights the importance of the principal's personal example and relational competence in building trust across religious differences, supporting the transformational leadership paradigm while adding nuance regarding its application in minority contexts.

The findings also have implications for policy and practice. For school principals in Muslim minority contexts, this study suggests that successful moderation leadership requires: (1) philosophical clarity about the relationship between Islamic identity and interfaith engagement, (2) commitment to participatory processes that honor all voices, (3) willingness to create structures that institutionalize interfaith cooperation, and (4) persistence in addressing resistance through relationship-building. For teacher education programs, these findings suggest the need for preparation that develops cultural competence and moderation-oriented pedagogical skills across subject areas. For policymakers, the study underscores the importance of supporting principals with resources and flexibility to develop context-responsive moderation programs.

Limitations of this study include its focus on a single case, which limits generalizability, and its reliance on self-reported data for some indicators of impact. Future research should examine moderation leadership across multiple Muslim minority school contexts to identify common patterns and context-specific adaptations. Longitudinal studies tracking student attitudes and behaviors beyond elementary school would help assess the long-term impacts of moderation education. Comparative studies examining Muslim minority and majority contexts would illuminate how the dynamics of majority-minority relations shape leadership practices and outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The principal at SD Anak Shaleh Sitarjo has successfully implemented a multicultural leadership model that effectively instills religious moderation values within a Muslim minority context. Through inclusive planning, equitable organization, and accommodative implementation, the principal has created a school environment where students of different faiths learn together, play together, and develop mutual respect and understanding. The impacts—increased interfaith friendships, reduced religious bullying, and enhanced stakeholder satisfaction—provide compelling evidence that religious moderation education can be effective when implemented holistically and supported by committed leadership. The principal's approach, characterized by transformational leadership principles and deep respect for diversity, offers a replicable model for other schools navigating similar demographic contexts.

The study's contributions extend to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it advances understanding of how multicultural leadership can be operationalized in Muslim minority educational settings, demonstrating that Islamic principles of moderation (*wasathiyah*) can serve as a robust framework for fostering inclusive school cultures. Practically, it offers insights for principals, teachers, and policymakers seeking to implement effective religious moderation programs. The findings underscore that successful moderation education requires more than curriculum content; it demands structural integration, exemplary leadership, and sustained commitment to building trust across religious boundaries. As Indonesia and other pluralistic societies continue to confront challenges of intolerance and extremism, the lessons from SD Anak Shaleh Sitarjo provide valuable guidance for nurturing generations who are faithful to their own traditions while respectful of others.

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