

Hope as a restoration of power within a neighbourhood of poverty: A missional reflection

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on hope. It understands hope as the willpower that makes it possible for human beings to overcome the difficulties of any given here and now and to believe that the improvement of their quality of life is possible. This research uses the grounded theology methodology to wrestle with the concept of willpower in the context of a South African township. Townships are peri-urban communities of poverty that are renowned for crime from within. The researcher lives in the township of Soshanguve and he is aware of a section of his township called Jukulyn that is renowned for its bad reputation in terms of criminal activities. He has also met several residents of Jukulyn who also think poorly of their area and wish they could move to a safer area. This research reflects on how the church could participate in restoring the hope of residents so that a bad reputation could be converted into an agency to catalyse a good quality of life for all. It discovered that disappointment in the government's ability to provide safety and security has led to a lack of hope. It, also, discovered that a lack of communal solidarity African communities are known for has led known criminals to not be held accountable. It also discovered that joblessness and materialistic desires have led some neighbours to seek answers to their problems from their neighbours. It finally discovered that some local churches are involved in the local community as tangible signs of the restoration of hope. The research concludes that local churches could be prophetic witnesses in places like Jukulyn and proactively educate ordinary people to be agents of their good quality of life.

Keywords

Agency, contribution, crime, hope, polycentric

1. Introduction

Hope seems to allow human beings to face challenges and generate some wisdom out of those challenges. Hope can be defined as the willpower that makes it possible for human beings to “overcome the difficulties of any given here and now” and to believe that the improvement of their quality of life is possible (Sacks 2018:3). Hope can also have “a positive effect on one’s well-being and equips people to look for ways of achieving goals toward success, overcoming setbacks, coping, decision-making, and having a positive view of life” (Aziz 2021:2). Hope “can be a source of resilience and meaning making when space and opportunity are created for lament and grieving, and talking about trauma and loss”(Aziz 2021:2).

The above-mentioned understanding of hope makes a strong connection between hope and power. Communities of poverty need hopeful individuals who can tangibly demonstrate what it means to participate in building the kind of future a local community desires. These hopeful individuals could be scriptwriters of the kind of desirable society that is needed in places such as Soshanguve, the context in which this article is written. Transferable principles about the building of such a society could be drawn by those with the willpower to see it become desirable. Such a society could “foster a collective desire to improve the quality of life in those locations” (Kabongo 2019:1). Such collective desire could restore hope which is seen as a kind of power to long for. This power is shared, generated from below, and has the potential to multiply and be sustainable. This article stresses that “human beings are supposed to use power in a way that empowers others and improves the quality of their lives”(Kabongo 2019:3). Such use of power gives hope for a better future in a community of poverty.

This research reflects on what could be the contribution of the church in empowering a local community towards a hopeful future. It uses a section of the township of Soshanguve called Jukulyn to build its arguments. This section seems to be undesirable for both its residents and non-residents. It can be argued that “the acceptance and normalization” of an undesirable situation can birth and perpetuate systemic trauma that can be toxic for self and communal improvement of quality of life. Therefore, the body of Christ as a faithful witness of the good news of the gospel could help the residents of Jukulyn “to perfect their world, refusing to accept the

inevitability of suffering and injustice” in their neighbourhood (Sacks 2018:2). The church in peri-urban areas such as Soshanguve is challenged to generate “theologies” that are good news because they are meaningful and transformational (de Beer 2022:7).

This research attempts to bring to the surface a theology that is meaningful to a community of poverty by listening through interviews to 30 residents of Jukulyn and 4 church leaders serving in the area . It uses grounded theology as a methodology to learn from the experiences and realities of local residents about hope or the lack of it. Grounded theology is a methodology that seeks to develop a “theology of experience and theologies from below” (Stevens 2017:203). This research intends to build its arguments from lived experiences and generate theological principles that could be relevant to communities of poverty such as Jukulyn. It is asking: how can the church participate in restoring the hope of residents so that a bad reputation could be converted into an agency to catalyse a good quality of life for all? Grounded theology has helped this research to be inspired by lived experiences of hope in order to generate theological principles that could be useful to the church located in Jukulyn as well as in other communities of poverty. This research aims to develop a theology from below that could help bring signs of hope in communities of poverty such as Jukulyn. The collection of lived experiences (data) through interviews adhered to ethical requirements involving research participants.

2. Ethical considerations

The author spoke to his research participants who are residents of Jukulyn or serve in that area. He wanted to learn about the lived experiences of hope and the lack of hope from this selected group. From this learning from insiders, he will be attempting to propose theological principles from below that could empower ordinary people and the church to be agents of the restoration of hope in local communities. The author informed his research participants that their individual experiences won't be shared in detail. However, the author's interpretation of their shared experiences through coding will be put into themes and shared in an academic article. He handed out to all his research participants a consent letter to be signed before they participated in this study. The letter described the purpose of

the research. It stated that nobody's name will be mentioned in the article. It finally stated that nobody's shared experience would be written verbatim. The following section will discuss the themes that were generated by the author's analysis interpretation of the data.

3. Themes discovered

3.1 Safety issue

All the research participants have been living or serving in the area under study between 5 and 24 years. All of them were from the age range of 30 to 69. Twenty-five of them stated that what they like about the area is just the fact that they are land and property owners. According to them, it gives peace of mind to own a property rather than to rent. Land ownership seems to be a sign of a hopeful future in places like Soshanguve. Five of the research participants stated that they like the area because of the relationships they have. The people they trust the most are some of their neighbours. All the local church leaders stated that their congregations are in that area because that is where they found a space to build their church buildings. All the research participants bemoaned the high levels of crime they have experienced in their neighbourhoods. Jukulyn seems to be a tangible reminder of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Frantz Fanon (1963:28) reminds us that one of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid that is still displayed nowadays in the mind and actions of many Africans is "self-hatred, inferiority complex and aggressiveness". Additionally, political power in current independent Africa seems to be characterised by "bloodstains, bullets and violent murders" (Baloyi 2015:2). This reality would make someone argue that the violence inherited from apartheid has not been undone by democratic South Africa. The current feeling of safety in Jukulyn can affirm Fanon's (1963:29) argument that since "violence" was a normalised tool to dislodge an oppressive and unjust system such as apartheid, violence may be seen as a normal tool to communicate power or grievances. All the research participants stated that they knew a neighbour involved in crime and actively contributed to the feeling of unsafety in the Jukulyn area. There is, therefore, a connection between the violent nature of the apartheid system and the current "calamities" of crime and violence experienced by the residents of Jukulyn (Baloyi 2015:2). The

research participants had witnessed within their local community “many self-destructive patterns of behaviour ... that could be seen as a lack of pride” from within (Sekhaulelo 2021:4). Issues such as littering, illegal use of water and electricity, vandalising of public properties such as fences have been normalised.

All the research participants mentioned that the most challenging reality of Jukulyyn is the high levels of crime. According to them, crime has almost been normalised, but it remains an unpleasant and traumatic reality. They feel like their outcry towards the government authorities to eradicate crime “are taken for granted. Crimes go unnoticed because they have become commonplace and normal” (Coula 1997:220). From this collective sentiment of the research participants, it could be argued that Jukulyyn is “a community in crisis” that is dissatisfied with the general safety of its residents and their belongings, and it is longing for a change that is very slow to come (Tamez 2001:59). One should even “worry” about the residents of Jukulyyn who are regularly “taught the language of blood and death” (Baloyi 2015:2). There is reason to be concerned “about the impact of more brutality on an already brutalised people” such as the population of Jukulyyn (Baloyi 2015:2). Such concern should challenge the church to wrestle with pathways to solutions and how to implement them. The church could encourage discussion at a local community level or in congregations located in Jukulyyn about how to improve the safeguarding of residents. In these discussions, a holistic approach should be adopted starting by engaging the agency of the Jukulyyn residents themselves in the creation of a safe environment for them. Such conversations have the potential to generate hope in residents.

The majority of the research participants blamed the worsening of safety in Jukulyyn on others such as the police inaction or low action in responding to criminal activities, the youth addicted to drugs and alcohol, and undocumented foreign nationals. The research participants indicated that the general population of Jukulyyn has lost “trust” in the police (Baloyi 2015:3). Many of them testify to the fact that they or people close to them have laid charges with the police against a criminal. The latter was arrested, only to be seen “on the streets within few days” (Mogotsi 2014: 5). There is now a common question: “If criminals keep getting busted up and are out within days, where do we turn?” (Mogotsi 2014: 5). Hence there are some

feelings of hopelessness shared by some residents of Jukulyln. These negative feelings could be a hint for the church to become an active role player in the promotion of the common good such as the safety of local residents. Such a role could nurture hope in people. The church could be involved in “the aspect of justice, distribution of resources and power, accessibility of social services, eradication of man-made poverty and the respect of humanity and creation” (Dowling 2016:8).

The church could also play a role in ensuring the promotion of a collective agency where local community residents could proactively participate in the building of the society around them in ways that promote ownership, “accountability, solidarity and collaboration to ensure that all citizens experience growth in their human dignity as human beings created in the *imago Dei*” (Dowling 2016:8).

The current realities of crime in Jukulyln affect all its residents. Crime is traumatic. Violent crime in particular tend to have the follow effects (Stavrou 2011:3):

- Emotional changes characterised by numbing, powerlessness, extreme vulnerability, and a lack of feeling. Anxiety, irritability and restlessness are also prominent symptoms.
- Insomnia or irregular sleeping patterns are also prominent manifestations of trauma. The lack of sleep has a negative effect on someone’s productivity at work or school.
- Difficulty or incoherence in thinking. This challenge has a negative effect in someone’s concentration and ability to remember properly. Many children in crime infested environments struggle academically.
- Social isolation is also prominent in such environments. Social isolation is sometimes associated with aggressiveness when someone is around people.
- Physical ailments such as headaches and stomach-ache could be signs of trauma. Refusal to eat and a lack of appetite could also be connected to trauma.

Communities such as Jukulyln where violence has been normalised seem to be characterised by a lot of “post-traumatic stress disorder” (Baloyi 2015:4). This disorder “develops when a person has experienced or witnessed a scary,

shocking, terrifying, or dangerous event”. Such disorder has a negative impact on the quality of life of the general population. The church could play a role in the provision of pastoral caregiving and psychological help “working alongside these communities to uproot these effects and ensure the right frame of mind (Baloyi 2015:4). The church could involve some of its members who are skilled in areas such as psychology, social work, and pastoral counselling to help out or advise on the course of actions to take. Such efforts would be a tangible way to demonstrate solidarity, especially towards the vulnerable which many research participants bemoaned to be lacking in Jukulyn. Such efforts would also be a tangible contribution of the church in generating hope in places such as Jukulyn that seem to be overwhelmed by hopeless situations.

3.2 Lack of communal solidarity

All the research participants bemoaned the lack of communal solidarity in instances where someone is a victim of crime. Twenty-one of the research participants highlighted that this lack of solidarity is a caution for safety. In the past, some rescuers of victims of crime have been killed or badly hurt by criminals. Therefore, many people have in the back of their minds that their efforts to try and help a victim of crime may work against them. The caution has made crime perpetuation easier, which means that many more people are victims of crime. Crime is traumatic. Therefore, one could argue that many residents of Jukulyn are traumatised.

The church needs to creatively find ways to help its members and the surrounding local community to lament this loss of communal solidarity Africans are known for. The value of communal solidarity is expressed in sayings such as “ a person is only a person with other persons” or “ it takes a village to raise a child”. A church that overlooks or is silent in the promotion of core African values such as communal solidarity could be accused of promoting colonial Christianity. The latter expression could be used when the body of Christ “succumbs to the death-dealing forces” of society without interacting with them in ways that could promote the common good and restore hope that is often hard to sense in the day-to-day language of ordinary people living in communities of poverty such as Jukulyn (De Beer 2022:7).

The church should always seek ways to encourage solidarity among its members and people because solidarity has the potential to improve the quality of life of people and nurture people's hope so that they can pursue the common good. Dowling (2016:7) stresses that one of the body of Christ tasks is "to ensure the common good of all citizens". A practical communication of such a task could be to creatively help "transform citizens into becoming and being active agents of transformation in their own communities by using their insights and experience to develop policies and practices that will make a real difference in their quality of life" (Dowling 2016:7). Agency is critical in lifting a local community spirit and even to finding solutions to critical issues such as joblessness which is a common frustration in Jukulyn.

3.3 Joblessness and materialistic desires

All the research participants pointed out that there is a high rate of unemployment in their local community and that explains why some people resort to crime as a means of survival. Jukulyn is just a sample of the South African high unemployment statistics. According to Statistics SA, the "unemployment rate came at 32.6% in the second quarter of 2023". Additionally, the rate of unemployment among "the youth is 63.3%". There seems to be a connection between the high unemployment rate and crime. It can be argued that unemployment tends to propel persons into crime to enable them to survive economically, and also that unemployment tends to increase the anomie among the unemployed that is related to criminal behaviour (Office of Justice Programs 2023:4). Seven research participants added that unrealistic expectations of someone's worth in terms of salary scale have made some of their neighbours decide to resign from their existing job. They resigned because they felt like they were paid less than they were worth. As a consequence, they became unemployed and many of them have remained unemployed for a long time.

Nineteen research participants also pointed out that greed and materialism are important factors to consider when trying to understand what leads some people to commit crime. There also seems to be a promotion of instant gratification in the local community. Such a promotion has tempted some people to commit crimes in order to fit in or be seen as successful in the eyes of ordinary people. It seems like "conditions of poverty are ripe

for the development of a materialistic orientation as a way to compensate for a lack of positive sense of self” (Benyah 2018:113). As ordinary people can point out these societal maladies around them, there is hope that they could also be part of the solution in their resolve. In places like Jukulyn where politics seem to fail, “it might be ordinary people” who could figure out how to make their local community work (De Beer 2022:7). Local communities driven by their own residents’ willingness to build it from the inside out in improving the quality of life of everyone around them may be the best alternative in the restoration of hope in places such as Jukulyn. Local residents could be seen as the most “hopeful alternatives” to making Jukulyn become a desirable local community (de Beer 2022:7). The local residents dedicated to the common good could also select a leadership team that is relevant to them. Such a leadership team that emerges from below could be called “societal leadership” because it will gather key community stakeholders who may have the knowledge and the wisdom to build it up (Pieterse 2021:9). The church could be a catalyst of the building of societal leadership through an intentional engagement of its local community. It could also articulate a “theology of participation” which stimulates ordinary people’s agency to dream and help build the kind of local community they hope for (Pieterse 2021:7). Such an effort could catalyse “a movement from below” that relevantly and meaningfully interacts with its local community” (Kabongo 2023:5). Such a movement could help build a shalom community. This kind of community is “an environment where socio-economic justice is available to all and community’s problems and their resolve is a concern for all” (Linthicum 2003:38).

In places like Soshanguve, theologies should be about the shalom of local communities. These theologies should therefore encourage a citizenry that goes beyond its walls and invites as many local residents as possible to play a role in creating shalom communities around them. These theologies could position the church as an important role player in modelling how individuals and groups of residents could participate in building the safe community they desire. Role modelling is needed in communities such as Jukulyn to inspire people and organisations towards a certain way of building from the inside out. Positive role modelling has the potential to nurture hope from within.

3.4 Role modelling from a few local churches

In local communities such as Jukulyn, the church could use biblical principles to wrestle with what it means to be restorers of hope through careful, yet intentional building of desirable local communities. Many African local communities could do with positive role modelling. Twenty-seven research participants do not see the local churches around them as positive role models. According to them, church members seem to only care about their agenda to increase their membership and for people to declare their belief in Jesus as their lord and saviour. These research participants seem to have a perception that local churches are primarily inwardly focused.

Three research participants see local churches as a danger to community building. They gave examples of local churches that occupied communal spaces such as a part of a soccer field or a park. They also stated to have participated in protest actions to remove a church tent or building structure from a community recreational space. In many areas of the township of Soshanguve, they are empty spaces that are meant to be communal such as parks, sports grounds, or community centres. Such spaces have not been built up by the government as intended due to lack of budget, the local residents are told. Over the past ten years, many of those empty spaces have been occupied by individuals and organisations such as churches.

The four local pastors involved in this research believe in local community involvement and they are trying to influence their congregants towards such a vision. One pastor hosts a University of Pretoria drug rehabilitation program on his church premises. He pointed out, though, that he has received a lot of pushback from his board because there have been burglary incidences on the premises and the suspects are the people living with drug addiction who regularly frequent the church premises. There seem to be a collective trauma and anxiety around crime in Soshanguve that sometimes influence people to make unfair statements about who the criminals are. People living with drug addiction are generally seen as criminals, for instance. They are usually the first people to be finger-pointed as being guilty of a crime, when there is no evidence of who the criminal is.

Another pastor runs a community-based soccer team. His team uses the church yard because there is no soccer ground in their local community.

He also receives pushback from some of his congregants who believe that the use of the churchyard by non-believers is blasphemy. Some local church theologies are evil-focused, to the point that non-believers and believers from other denominations are perceived as sinners and evil. This negative perception could go as far as not allowing non-church members to be on the church premises because they would leave evil spirits on it.

One pastor spends half of his time ministering to offenders in a government-run secure care (a prison for people under 18 years old). The last pastor reaches out to a neighbourhood government clinic and does regular home visits to patients who are open and interested in his spiritual care. These pastors are in a small, yet decisive way championing “the virtue of transformation” (Shambara & Kgatla 2018:10). The body of Christ is meant to be other-centred and is called to be “the embodiment of unity of purpose” in solidarity with the community around it. It also has the task to educate its members on what it means to emulate values of unity, collaboration and solidarity with people who may not share the same faith with them. Such education could be done through workshops or preaching. Such education has the potential to equip Christians with the know-how “to address the realities faced by ordinary people” in their local community (Villa-Vicencio 1992:40).

In this way, the church could contribute to raising capacity of people who are agents of transformation from the inside out. Such people are needed. Their presence and actions would be a tangible communication that “Christian mission is not only the project of expanding churches, but also of the church embodying God’s presence in the world” (Balía and Kim 2010:12). Such embodiment should be good news to others because of it will be relevant and meaningful. It will derive its relevancy from being “grounded in and derived from a particular context (Balía and Kim 2010:12). It will also be a tangible communication of love to the world. Loving others could be seen as a good way to spread the gospel. Perkins defines the gospel as “the love of God made visible” (Perkins 1993:44). The local community of Jukulyn could do with more Christians who live out the good news of the gospel “in a way that can be seen, heard and handed” (Hayes 2006:113). The author reckons that such Christians would be the embodiment of hope that is needed in a place such as Jukulyn.

4. Reflection on the findings

The research participants shared so much about why Jukulyn is not the safest neighbourhood to live in. The pastors involved in this research showed that small actions could be meaningful in the restoration of hope from below. Local community building is sustainable when it involves various role players – especially its residents. The latter agency and resilience could be the cornerstone of the restoration of hope in a local community.

It seems like an alternative way of building a local community such as Jukulyn will be to encourage communities of practice that the church could facilitate. The goal of these communities is to contribute to the building of their local community using their “experience” as a resource in the restoration of hope (Graham, Walton & Ward 2005:3). This approach could be a practical way to restore the power to participate in nurturing hope within Jukulyn. It could be generative “of new knowledge that could benefit” a local community and even expand its boundaries broadly (Stevens 2007:204). The church could help “identify the highly respected, influential, and leading figures to be incorporated in the strategy of peace. Problem-solving workshops, as well as raising awareness about the outcomes and negative consequences of violence” could be very helpful (Lederach 1998: 41). The church should always strive to “speak to people in their immediate contexts” (Baloyi 2015:7). It could also assist “a justice system to uproot and eliminate crime” (Baloyi 2015:7).

These communities of practice could help birth a polycentric local community that would value being the answer to its own questions. Polycentric communities see each of their members as assets. They stress that each of their members should have a dual role of a leader and follower so that their interactions can be mutually beneficial (White & Woodward 2016:53). They stress that people need each other “to stay actively faithful” in pursuing a certain goal or mission (Stoppels 2013:16-17). They are a tangible communication of the concept of “mission-with-others that creates an opportunity for effective contextualization of the gospel” in restoring hope in a context such as Jukulyn (Riemer and Banda 2016:6).

One could even argue that they stress that each member should feel safe to contribute and have the humility to learn from others. They “model the interrelation of the trinity, where there is an interdependent, communal,

relational, participatory, self-surrendering and self-giving” approach (White & Woodward 2016:53). They require humble and “mature people who live and minister together over sometime, because a strong mutual trust is needed to practice this well” (White & Woodward 2016:58). They become a reality when ordinary people and “local institutions start to organize themselves, take collective ownership for their own well-being and futures” (de Beer 2022:8). It could be argued that once polycentric communities are confidently in charge of their role, their actions will be “in the interest of a greater common good” (de Beer 2022:8). Such actions have the potential to bring a better balance of power and positively distribute power within a local community. In many African local communities such as Jukulyn, many factors of power benefit the few at the expense of the majority.

One of those factors is education. It is “a major cause of privilege and ostracization” (Hattery and Smith 2019:67). This is why the church is called to play a prophetic role in learning “new strategies and new skills that promote a good quality of life for all”, even those who do not have an academic education (van Niekerk 2015:1). Another one is wealth. It sets “people apart into different social classes which have unequal levels of power” (Hattery and Smith 2019:67). The church could play another prophetic role through the promotion of “mutually respectful relationships” regardless of socio-economic classes (Myers 2011:113).

Another factor is political affiliation which “matters in how someone or a community has access to services that all citizens of a country are entitled to. This harms the democratic culture of a country” (Hattery and Smith 2019:68). The church could help remind political role players that the original meaning of politics is “to care for the city and all its residents” regardless of their political affiliation, race, or gender (Kabala 1999: 65). Therefore, all residents of a country have to be cared for by the political leaders who rule over them. Someone’s ethnic group could also be a source of power. Political and religious leaders seem to prefer to surround themselves with family and people from their ethnic group. The author argues that nepotism and ethnocentrism are a “cancer to community building” (Hattery and Smith 2019:68). They seem to be good ways to sabotage community-building because, oftentimes, merit is overlooked due to family and ethnic affiliation.

In many cases, a group “monopolises power, uses it to maintain the status quo at the expense of the majority” (Hattery and Smith 2019:68). Nepotism is prominent in the township of Soshanguve and it is an important contributor of the “weak prophetic witnessing” of the current African church (Katongole 2011:1). Many local churches in the township of Soshanguve, including Jukulyn, are a family business. They limit their “leadership positions to family members” (Mashau & Kgatle 2019:6). The local church in places such as Jukulyn is challenged to role model to the society around it, a leadership style that is inclusive, diverse and based on someone’s ability to make a positive contribution to the building of an institution or society. Such role-modelling could also help nurture hope because a local community could learn to see all its residents as assets for its building and people in leadership positions will be there based on merit. The local church’s conscious action towards broadening its leadership, beyond family ties, could be a tangible step toward restoring hope of a local community in all its citizens.

A possible prophetic role the church could play in a neighbourhood such as Jukulyn will be to disciple its members to play a role in building polycentric communities. The author believes that “discipleship plays a major role in social transformation” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013b:10-1). It can train and shape someone to live in a way that is good news to others. White (2021:6) argues that discipleship could be “one of the ways to reduce crime and to promote uprightness in society”. It could contribute positively to the transformation of local community. The gospel is meant to be good news and therefore, inspirational.

A local community infested by hopelessness needs inspirational leaders who can help restore hope. Discipleship could nurture hope. Such hope should translate “into decisions and concrete gestures of concern, justice, and solidarity (Mayemba 2016:11). Christians should strive “to organise hope to make it concrete in everyday lives”, relationships, in social and political commitments” (Mayemba 2016:11).

5. Conclusion

This article used the grounded theology methodology to reflect on what it means to restore hope in a local community such as Jukulyn. Jukulyn is a

local community that has a prominent reputation for high rates of crime in the township of Soshanguve. Thirty-four research participants were involved in this research. The analysis of the data gathered through coding generated the following themes: safety issues, lack of communal solidarity, joblessness and materialistic desires, and role modelling from a few local churches.

This article stressed that the church could help form communities of practice that could nurture and catalyse the agency of ordinary residents of Jukulyn. These communities of practice could help restore hope through small, yet decisive actions of community building such as being safe persons people could go to, posing small acts of solidarity and raising awareness about employment opportunities.

These communities of practice could be effective if they are polycentric in being gender inclusive with a good generational mix. A polycentric community would amplify the voices of every community member regardless of their gender, race, or age. It will also create a safe platform where each community member will feel safe to contribute to the building of their local community. Additionally, everyone will be expected to be humble enough to listen and learn from others.

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