

Agrarian Conflict and Customary Land Rights: An Adat Law Perspective on Land Dispute Resolution

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Entered : January 20, 2025
Accepted: March 15, 2025

Revised : February 28, 2025
Published : March 31, 2025

ABSTRACT

Land disputes in Indonesia persist as a major issue, primarily arising from the conflict between the formal national legal system and the Indigenous legal traditions governing land ownership, particularly Adat Law. This research investigates agrarian conflicts, focusing on how traditional land rights (hak ulayat) often clash with the modern legal frameworks that dominate the national system. The study identifies the profound disconnect between state laws and the cultural practices of Indigenous communities, stressing the urgent need for a legal framework that honors both formal and customary law. Through the examination of current conflict cases, the research demonstrates that traditional conflict resolution methods rooted in Adat Law, with their emphasis on community consensus, offer a more sustainable and just approach compared to rigid state systems. The findings argue for the acknowledgment and legal incorporation of customary law in addressing land disputes, thereby protecting the land rights of Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the study advocates for a transformation in national agrarian policies to establish a cohesive legal approach that respects and integrates both customary and formal legal systems, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and just agrarian reform process.

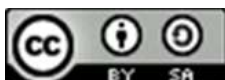
Keywords: Land disputes, Indigenous land ownership, Adat Law, legal diversity, hak ulayat, land conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

Agrarian disputes remain a pressing concern in Indonesia, illustrating the ongoing clash between officially recognised legal claims to land and ancestral or traditional claims that have been preserved for generations. According to the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA), there were 295 incidents of agrarian conflict throughout 2024, representing a 21% rise compared to the 241 cases reported in the previous year. These disputes encompassed 1.1 million hectares of land and affected 67,436 households in 349 villages. The plantation industry emerged as the principal contributor to these conflicts, recording 111 cases, with 75 of these (67%) associated with palm oil plantations. The disputes in this sector involved 127,281.30 hectares of land and had an impact on 14,696 families. On the other hand, the infrastructure sector accounted for 79 conflicts, covering an area of 290,785.11 hectares and affecting 20,274 families. A large proportion of these cases were connected to National Strategic Projects (PSN), with 36 out of the total 39 PSN-related agrarian conflicts occurring in 2024.

In terms of geographic distribution, agrarian conflicts were found in 34 of the 38 provinces across Indonesia. South Sulawesi recorded the highest number with 37 incidents, followed by North Sumatra with 32, then East Kalimantan and West Java with 16 each, and East Java with 15 cases. Beyond the effects on land ownership and household

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livelihoods, these conflicts also triggered serious human rights infringements. During the course of 2024, a total of 556 individuals were recorded as victims of violence and criminal charges, often due to the involvement of state security forces in areas of conflict. These included 399 people who were criminalised, 149 who were assaulted or subjected to violence, four individuals who were shot, and four fatalities. In aggregate, from 2015 through 2023, the KPA documented 2,939 instances of agrarian conflict across the country, affecting 6.3 million hectares and approximately 1.75 million families. The plantation, property, infrastructure, forestry, and mining sectors were the primary drivers of these long-standing disputes.

In the face of escalating agrarian tensions, it is vital to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples have deep-rooted spiritual, ecological, and historical connections to their land. To them, land transcends its economic value; it forms an essential part of their collective identity and sustains their traditional way of life. Customary law, known as Adat Law, has historically served as the legal framework governing the control, use, and inheritance of land in Indigenous communities—commonly referred to as *hak ulayat*. This collective right is passed down through robust social structures based on customary traditions. However, within Indonesia's national legal framework—which tends to prioritise formal administrative documentation—*hak ulayat* is frequently disregarded or considered illegitimate. As a result, Indigenous communities often face criminalisation, forced eviction, and exclusion from their principal means of subsistence. This situation underscores the significant disconnect between the national legal apparatus and the acknowledgement of customary legal systems at the local level.

Agrarian conflict also underscores structural deficiencies within the national legal framework, which still falls short in accommodating the plurality of legal systems that coexist in society. The prevailing orientation of national law emphasises formal legality, legal certainty, and procedural adherence, whereas customary law operates on the basis of communal values, deliberative consensus, and social harmony. This fundamental divergence leads to jurisdictional overlaps and conflicting legal interpretations, obstructing equitable and holistic conflict resolution processes. Furthermore, this form of legal dualism generates ambiguity for law enforcement personnel, judicial authorities, and other stakeholders when dealing with land claims grounded in customary rights. In many cases, the national legal system's failure to consider local contexts deepens existing conflicts and destabilises the social cohesion of Indigenous communities.

In various localised contexts, customary law has demonstrated its effectiveness and sustainability as a conflict resolution mechanism. Custom-based methods for resolving disputes prioritise dialogue aimed at reaching mutual agreement, the restoration of disrupted social relationships, and the pursuit of balance between opposing parties. In contrast to the formal legal system's rigid, top-down approach, customary mechanisms are inherently participatory and community-driven. This framework allows for greater flexibility, empathetic interaction, and the realisation of substantive justice. Resolutions grounded in customary law are also typically more expedient, cost-efficient, and widely accepted within the community, given that they are embedded in long-standing local norms and interpersonal trust. As such, customary law holds considerable promise as an alternative — or even complementary — avenue within the broader framework of resolving land-related disputes.

In light of these considerations, it is imperative that national agrarian policy evolves to create a more inclusive space for the formal acknowledgement and integration of customary law into the land governance system. Such integration could begin with the legal formalisation of *hak ulayat* through statutory provisions and regulatory instruments, active inclusion of Indigenous peoples in spatial planning and licensing

procedures, and the development of hybrid conflict resolution models that bridge customary practices with formal legal mechanisms. Without such harmonisation, agrarian conflicts are likely to persist and intensify existing social disparities and systemic injustice. Recognising and strengthening customary law is not only key to achieving genuine justice, but also integral to building a legal development model that is context-sensitive, participatory, and inclusive.

An exploration of agrarian conflict and Indigenous land rights through the lens of Adat Law carries substantial academic and practical significance. From an academic standpoint, this perspective expands the field of agrarian legal studies by integrating the concepts of legal pluralism and social equity. On a practical level, it lays a compelling argumentative basis for the formulation of laws and public policies that are better aligned with local realities and the specific needs of Indigenous populations. This article aims to undertake a critical examination of the ways in which customary law can play a constructive role in facilitating the peaceful, equitable, and sustainable resolution of agrarian disputes. By bridging theoretical frameworks with real-world applications, this study seeks to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse in agrarian law and promote a more human-centred and community-oriented vision of agrarian reform.

METHODS

Several legal approaches are used in this research. The statutory approach analyzes the relevant legislative frameworks governing agrarian matters and Indigenous rights, including the 1960 Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA), laws on Indigenous Peoples, and key Constitutional Court decisions such as Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012. The conceptual approach explores foundational legal concepts, such as *hak ulayat* (customary communal rights), agrarian conflict, legal pluralism, and the distinctions between substantive and procedural justice. In addition, the case approach is utilized to examine selected agrarian conflict cases that illustrate the tension between customary land tenure and state-backed development, especially those linked to National Strategic Projects (PSN).

The sources of legal materials used in this research are classified into three categories. Primary legal materials include statutory provisions, constitutional articles, judicial rulings, and government regulations. Secondary legal materials consist of legal textbooks, academic journal articles, and research reports from institutions such as the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA), AMAN, and WALHI. Tertiary legal materials such as legal dictionaries and legal encyclopedias are also used to support the analysis.

Legal materials are gathered through library research, focusing on an extensive review of legal literature, case law databases, scholarly publications, and official policy documents. The analysis is conducted through a deductive reasoning process, moving from general legal principles to specific legal issues. This method allows the study to evaluate the compatibility of national laws with Adat Law practices and to identify normative gaps that may contribute to ongoing agrarian conflicts. Overall, this methodology enables a critical and structured legal assessment that supports the development of a more inclusive and justice-oriented agrarian policy framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Overview of Agrarian Conflicts in Indonesia

Agrarian conflicts in Indonesia have persisted for decades and continue to escalate in both frequency and scale, demonstrating that land governance remains one of the most

pressing structural issues in the country. The Consortium for Agrarian Reform (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria/KPA) reported that in 2024 alone, there were 295 recorded agrarian conflict incidents, a significant 21% increase from 241 cases in 2023. These disputes affected more than 1.1 million hectares of land and disrupted the lives of approximately 67,436 families in 349 villages. The plantation sector was responsible for the largest number of conflicts, particularly oil palm plantations, which accounted for 75 out of the 111 plantation-related cases. Infrastructure development, especially projects classified as National Strategic Projects (*Proyek Strategis Nasional*, PSN), also played a major role, contributing to 79 cases and involving over 290,000 hectares of contested land.

These figures highlight the growing tension between national development objectives and the protection of local communities' rights to land. Despite the existence of agrarian reform policies under the Basic Agrarian Law (Law No. 5 of 1960), many land disputes are rooted in the lack of alignment between formal legal instruments and the lived realities of land users, especially Indigenous peoples. Article 6 of Law No. 5/1960 acknowledges the existence of customary law communities and their rights, stating: "*All land rights have a social function.*" However, this provision remains under-implemented in practice, often sidelined by state interests and corporate investments. As such, the failure to protect community land rights within the legal framework has become a key driver of agrarian conflict, necessitating a critical re-evaluation of current land governance models.

2. Understanding Adat Law and Indigenous Land Rights

Adat Law, or customary law, is a fundamental aspect of Indigenous identity and community governance in Indonesia. It is a living, dynamic legal system that governs various aspects of life, including land ownership, use, and inheritance. Central to Adat Law is the notion of *hak ulayat*, a collective right to land held by Indigenous communities (*masyarakat hukum adat*) based on ancestral ties and traditional stewardship practices. These rights are not merely legal but are deeply spiritual, ecological, and cultural, forming the core of Indigenous peoples' worldview. Unlike formal property rights under national law, *hak ulayat* is not recorded in land registries but is legitimized through community recognition, oral traditions, and customary institutions.

However, the recognition of Adat Law within Indonesia's national legal framework has been inconsistent and often superficial. While the Basic Agrarian Law (Law No. 5/1960), specifically Article 3, affirms the state's recognition of customary rights as long as they do not contradict national interests, the operationalization of this provision has been limited. The Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012 further emphasized that customary forests are no longer classified as state forests, reinforcing the recognition of Indigenous land rights. Despite these developments, in practice, many local governments and land authorities require formal documentation, which Indigenous communities typically lack, rendering their rights vulnerable to encroachment and expropriation. The absence of a comprehensive legal mechanism to register *hak ulayat* has led to widespread legal uncertainty and has undermined efforts to secure tenure for Indigenous peoples.

3. Case Study: Conflict Between Adat Law and National Agrarian Law

The conflict between Adat Law and national agrarian law becomes evident in numerous case studies across Indonesia. One notable example is the conflict involving the Marind Indigenous people in Merauke, Papua, where large-scale agricultural investment under the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) has led to the displacement of communities from their customary lands. Despite clear evidence of longstanding communal use, these lands were designated as state land and allocated to private corporations through concession permits issued by the central government. This reflects a systemic problem wherein national land law, especially Law No. 41 of 1999 on Forestry and Law No. 39 of 2014 on Plantations, overrides or neglects customary tenure arrangements, often in the name of national development.

Judicial decisions often exacerbate this imbalance. Courts tend to prioritize formal legal proof of ownership, such as certificates issued by the National Land Agency (Badan Pertanahan Nasional/BPN), while overlooking oral histories, traditional maps, and communal recognition that form the basis of *hak ulayat*. This formalistic approach to adjudicating land disputes undermines the legitimacy of customary law and reinforces legal centralism. The absence of legally binding mechanisms to accommodate evidence based on Adat Law not only marginalizes Indigenous communities but also contradicts Article 18B(2) of the 1945 Constitution, which affirms: *"The State recognizes and respects traditional communities along with their traditional customary rights as long as these remain in existence."* This disconnect between constitutional recognition and statutory implementation illustrates a critical gap that must be addressed through legal reform and institutional realignment.

4. Impact of National Agrarian Policies on Indigenous Communities

National agrarian policies, while often framed in the language of development and modernization, have had adverse consequences for Indigenous communities across Indonesia. The implementation of land-based development strategies, such as the National Strategic Projects (PSN) and Food Estate programs, has frequently overlooked the customary land claims of Indigenous groups. This top-down approach to land allocation is reinforced by policies that emphasize land investment over land justice, resulting in the systematic exclusion of Indigenous voices in spatial planning and permit issuance processes. As a result, Indigenous peoples are often labeled as illegal occupants or squatters on land they have traditionally inhabited for generations.

The marginalization of *hak ulayat* within legal and policy frameworks exacerbates tenure insecurity and leads to widespread socio-economic and cultural dislocation. Studies show that eviction from ancestral lands results not only in the loss of livelihoods but also in the erosion of cultural identity and traditional governance structures. Law No. 2 of 2012 concerning Land Acquisition for Development in the Public Interest permits the state to acquire land for infrastructure projects, but it lacks specific mechanisms to protect *masyarakat adat* unless their land is formally registered. The law's silence on *hak ulayat* rights effectively renders Indigenous land invisible in the development planning process. This policy gap contributes to a broader pattern of structural injustice, wherein the economic benefits of development are enjoyed by elites and corporations, while the costs—displacement, environmental degradation, and cultural loss—are borne by marginalized communities. Bridging this policy divide is crucial not only for justice but for building inclusive and sustainable development frameworks in Indonesia.

5. Legal Pluralism in the Indonesian Land Law System

Indonesia's legal system is inherently pluralistic, comprising a formal national legal framework, religious law, and various forms of customary law (*hukum adat*). Legal pluralism is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived reality for millions of Indonesians, especially in rural and Indigenous areas. However, the application of legal pluralism in agrarian matters has often been subordinated to a centralized, positivist legal approach. The Basic Agrarian Law (Law No. 5 of 1960) attempts to serve as an umbrella for integrating various sources of law by declaring in Article 5 that “*agrarian law that applies to all of the Indonesian people is Adat Law, as long as it is not in conflict with national and state interests or with Indonesian socialism.*” Despite this promising principle, the implementation of legal pluralism has been selective and inconsistent.

In practice, legal pluralism in Indonesia faces numerous institutional and normative challenges. State institutions often prioritize written, codified legal norms over unwritten customary practices. Bureaucratic procedures for land registration, permits, and dispute resolution demand formal documentation, which is often incompatible with Adat Law systems that rely on oral history, communal consensus, and traditional ceremonies. This undermines the legitimacy and applicability of Adat Law in resolving agrarian disputes. Furthermore, decentralization, although providing some opportunities for regional legal innovation, has not significantly empowered local governments to recognize and protect *hak ulayat* due to unclear regulatory frameworks. Thus, despite the constitutional and statutory affirmation of legal pluralism, the actual legal architecture of land governance remains dominated by a monist, state-centered approach.

6. Obstacles to the Recognition of Adat Land Rights

The recognition of *hak ulayat* and Adat land rights in Indonesia continues to be hampered by various legal, bureaucratic, and political obstacles. One primary challenge is the absence of comprehensive and operational regulations that facilitate the identification, verification, and registration of Adat communities and their territories. While the Ministry of Environment and Forestry issued Regulation No. P.32/MENLHK/SETJEN/KUM.1/3/2015 to provide procedural guidelines for the recognition of customary forests (*hutan adat*), its scope is limited to forest areas and excludes non-forest customary lands. In addition, the registration of customary lands under the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/National Land Agency (ATR/BPN) is still constrained by the lack of a national framework for mapping and certifying *wilayah adat*.

Moreover, the recognition process often requires multiple layers of administrative verification—from village to district to provincial governments—which creates delays and inconsistencies. In many cases, political interests and resistance from corporations or local elites hinder the process of legal recognition. Article 18B(2) of the 1945 Constitution acknowledges the existence of *masyarakat hukum adat*, but the absence of implementing legislation with strong binding force renders this provision largely aspirational. The draft bill on Indigenous Peoples (*RUU Masyarakat Adat*), which has been under discussion in the national legislature for over a decade, remains unpassed, reflecting a lack of political will. These structural impediments illustrate how state institutions often reproduce legal invisibility for Indigenous communities, denying them access to land security and legal protection.

7. Role of the Constitutional Court in Protecting Customary Land Rights

The Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Konstitusi*) has played a pivotal role in advancing the recognition of Indigenous land rights through a series of landmark decisions. Among the most influential is **Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012**, which ruled that customary forests are no longer part of state forests (*hutan negara*) but are instead part of *hutan hak*, or rights-based forests, belonging to Indigenous communities. This ruling corrected a long-standing misinterpretation of Article 5 of Law No. 41 of 1999 on Forestry, which previously assumed that all forest areas were state-controlled unless proven otherwise.

This decision marked a turning point in Indonesia's legal recognition of Indigenous tenure systems, affirming that *masyarakat hukum adat* possess inherent rights to their ancestral territories. The Court emphasized that state authority over forests must respect the historical, cultural, and legal existence of Indigenous communities. However, despite its constitutional significance, the implementation of this decision has been slow and uneven. By 2023, only a small portion of customary forests had been formally recognized—far below the estimates of Indigenous territories compiled by civil society organizations such as AMAN (Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara). The disconnect between judicial recognition and administrative enforcement highlights the limitations of constitutional adjudication in effecting structural reform without corresponding legislative and executive commitment.

8. Customary Dispute Resolution Mechanisms and Their Strengths

Customary dispute resolution mechanisms offer an alternative and culturally rooted method for resolving agrarian conflicts. These mechanisms prioritize communal harmony, restorative justice, and consensus-based decision-making. For many Indigenous communities, disputes over land are not merely legal matters but are deeply intertwined with social relationships, ancestral obligations, and spiritual connections to territory. Customary dispute resolution processes—such as *musyawarah* (deliberation), *kumpul adat* (customary gatherings), and the use of traditional elders (*tokoh adat*)—serve to heal relationships and restore social balance rather than assign punitive outcomes.

Unlike the formal court system, which can be adversarial, expensive, and inaccessible, customary mechanisms are local, participatory, and grounded in the lived experience of the community. According to Article 2 of Supreme Court Regulation No. 1 of 2016 on Mediation Procedures, courts are encouraged to explore non-litigation settlement methods, including those based on local customs. Furthermore, the Law on Village Governance (Law No. 6 of 2014) provides a legal basis for villages to institutionalize customary structures, including mechanisms for internal conflict resolution. These provisions open space for integrating customary dispute resolution into the broader justice system. The challenge, however, lies in ensuring that such mechanisms are not only acknowledged but empowered through appropriate legal support, training, and coordination with formal institutions, thereby allowing for a hybrid and context-sensitive model of agrarian justice.

9. Comparative Analysis with Other Legal Systems (e.g., Philippines, Canada)

The recognition and integration of Indigenous land rights vary significantly across legal systems, and comparative experiences offer valuable lessons for Indonesia. For instance, the Philippines has enacted the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, which

explicitly recognizes Indigenous ownership over ancestral domains and provides a robust framework for securing land tenure through Certificates of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT). This law also establishes the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) as a dedicated body to oversee the protection of Indigenous rights. In Canada, the doctrine of Aboriginal title, affirmed in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997) and further strengthened in *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia* (2014), legally recognizes Indigenous land rights based on historical occupation and continuous use.

These jurisdictions demonstrate that integrating customary or Indigenous tenure into national legal frameworks is both feasible and effective when supported by strong legislative mandates and institutional structures. Unlike Indonesia, where Adat recognition is often piecemeal and dependent on local political will, countries like the Philippines and Canada have implemented national-level policies that offer both procedural and substantive protection for Indigenous lands. These models highlight the importance of constitutional clarity, legal mechanisms for registration, dedicated institutions, and the political commitment to uphold pluralism and human rights. Drawing from these examples, Indonesia can refine its approach by adopting comprehensive legislation on *masyarakat adat*, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering meaningful participation of Indigenous peoples in policy-making processes.

Contemporary observations derived from this research affirm a persistent systemic neglect of customary legal traditions within Indonesia's overarching statutory framework governing agrarian matters. This dynamic resonates with the assessment presented by Butt and Lindsey (2011), who contended that although Indonesia formally embraces legal pluralism, such pluralism is rarely operationalised within legal institutions. Their evaluation pointed to the dominance of state-defined legal norms, often overshadowing the presence of Indigenous regulatory systems. In a similar vein, Safitri (2017) asserted that bureaucratic ambiguity and the absence of strong political endorsement are the principal barriers to fully incorporating *hak ulayat* into official land governance. The present study mirrors these assertions, providing concrete evidence that statutory acknowledgment of customary land rights remains superficial without corresponding institutional instruments and collaborative governance mechanisms to operationalise such recognition.

Additionally, the findings of this study reaffirm the growing scholarly consensus on the frictions arising from legal bifurcation in Indonesia's land dispute mechanisms. Fitzpatrick, McWilliam, and Barnes (2020) observed that the persistent disconnect between formal statutory law and customary land management practices has created a fragmented land regime that fails to adequately address local realities. In their fieldwork conducted in eastern Indonesia, they found that Indigenous communities continue to favour customary dispute resolution processes for their procedural flexibility, rooted legitimacy, and emphasis on restorative rather than punitive outcomes. Extending this perspective, the current analysis demonstrates that such preferences are not geographically isolated but are consistent across a range of conflict-prone areas, where Indigenous norms continue to guide land relations despite limited legal recognition. This reinforces the argument that customary jurisprudence is not a remnant of the past but a living, responsive system capable of addressing modern agrarian challenges with cultural competence.

The misalignment between national legislative agendas and locally embedded customary principles exacerbates institutionalised disparities and undermines justice delivery—a

pattern that reflects similar critiques raised in comparative international literature. Anaya (2004), for instance, documented how symbolic victories for Indigenous peoples in courts are frequently undermined by slow, ineffective bureaucratic implementation. While Indonesia's Constitutional Court rulings—such as Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012—have marked judicial progress in recognising Indigenous territorial claims, this legal momentum has not translated into tangible improvements on the ground. The current findings amplify this critique by illustrating how formal policies remain detached from customary communities' lived experiences. Drawing lessons from global examples like the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of the Philippines or Canada's constitutional framework for Aboriginal title, this study underscores the urgent need for an integrated legal approach. Such reform must elevate Adat Law from symbolic recognition to a structural pillar of agrarian governance that is responsive, participatory, and grounded in community legitimacy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that agrarian conflicts in Indonesia are deeply rooted in the structural dissonance between national statutory frameworks and Indigenous legal traditions, particularly Adat Law. Despite legal advancements such as the Constitutional Court's recognition of *hak ulayat*, practical implementation remains fragmented, and Indigenous communities continue to face marginalisation, criminalisation, and displacement. The findings affirm that the national land law system prioritises formal legality and procedural norms while overlooking the sociocultural legitimacy and restorative justice embedded within customary dispute resolution mechanisms. Moreover, the research reveals that Adat Law provides a viable and contextually appropriate alternative for resolving land disputes—one that is grounded in local values, social consensus, and generational trust. Its participatory and reconciliatory approach contrasts with the rigid, hierarchical nature of formal legal procedures. As such, Adat-based mechanisms not only facilitate more humane and sustainable outcomes but also strengthen community resilience and social harmony. In light of these findings, the study concludes that it is imperative for Indonesia's agrarian legal policy to move beyond symbolic recognition of customary land rights and toward a more integrative model. This requires legislative reform, inclusive spatial planning, and institutional synergy that respects legal pluralism and empowers Indigenous legal systems. Only through such a transformation can the state achieve equitable agrarian reform, mitigate structural injustice, and uphold the principles of substantive justice for Indigenous peoples.

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