

A HISTORIAN'S METHOD OF NIGER DELTA STUDIES BEFORE A.D. 2000

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INTRODUCTION

According to Walsh, history is in three stages.¹ First is the subject matter of it. Second is the methodology and third are the lessons of history. The subject matter of history is the human past through which individuals and communities render accounts of their past actions. Hence, Carr defined history as 'a record of what people did and not what they failed to do,' meaning that history concerns every aspect of human endeavor.² With history as a study of the human past, there is always 'a constructive outlook over the past' to correct the present and plan for the future.³ As such history as a systematic study of the human past with the historians reflections of how, why, when and what consequences of the past affect the living present. In fact, it reminds us of a Niger Delta pottery made in the remote past and unearthed in the recent past. A poet viewed it as follows:

The Pottery

For many centuries
They lay without records,
Without trace, without identity.
The diggers toiled not for burial treasures
But to build the University of Calabar.
Then came upon pottery,
The finest in the land!
Who were these fine artists?

The fact remains, the search continues.
The pottery was made from earth to dust;
The pottery has lasted centuries.
Man made the pottery, himself to dust
Has long returned
Without records, without trace;
The pottery is there and here.⁴

Being one of the records of human actions centuries ago, the causes, course and consequences of this pottery are history to the living. Also, it is an evidence of the contributions of the Niger Delta people to their historical development of pottery, irrespective of the particular maker of this unique pottery. The same thing is applicable to all events.

Considering the second meaning of history which lies in the methodology, Nwodo described it as the science of writing the true accounts of the past.⁵ A way to establish this true account brings a dialogue between the historian and the evidence with a view to discovering deeper meanings of past events. In the course of it, he uses more than one source to establish historical truth. This is where history is a science unlike religion, the creative arts such as fine arts, theatre arts and literature. While religion studies the purpose of propagating moral values for the good of society, the creative arts tell stories to entertain society and create leisure centers for the people. On the other hand, history studies human achievements in the past and systematically recalls past events as it affects the present.

Both significant and insignificant human activities in the past are the lessons of history which the historian publishes for public awareness. The insignificant activities are the basis of innovations. By so doing, history is a record of human progress because man profits from the experience of his predecessors. In fact, Acton saw history as a progressive science that traces the problems and progress of man in the past and use them

for the development of society in the present.⁶ When a community does not believe in development, they will not concern themselves with historical lessons. History is the medium of understanding the past, rectifying the present and planning for the future. The lessons of history are the indispensable signpost that guides human endeavors.

Coming to the nature of history, Walsh interpreted it as ‘a critical inquiry into the historical thinking of a people’ with a view to uncover the deeper meaning behind events.⁷ In the Niger Delta where historical events are interwoven with human progress, they accumulate the experience of the past as the medium of knowledge for transferring skill and rectify errors in the present. Instances are the making of pottery and conquering the environment which were difficult tasks to their forebears. Every stage of their successes has been acquired by past and present generations.

Bury who understands history as the idea of progress states that every society imposes duties on the living for the progress of posterity.⁸ Exactly is the case in the Niger Delta where the progress of everyone lies in the ability to recollect the past as it affects the present, improve from there and save society. To them history is dynamic with changes, movement and progress. The unprogressive things are static because progress is realized when things change for the better. From the above, one can easily understand that history emanates from the systematic study of the causes, courses and consequences of human actions in the past. The study could be the life and times of an individual which is biography or autobiography, the human actions of a community which is micro-history and the human action of a region, nation and continent which is macro-history. Studying the Niger Delta is studying a macro-history for human self-knowledge and the benefit of the present.

Historical Research in the Niger Delta Region

No historian can do without research. Research is a fact-finding exercise that goes with an object of study and a methodology through which facts can be documented, authenticated, interpreted and presented for human self-knowledge. The object of study that forms the interest area enables the historian to start from ignorance and work towards knowledge. The question is how does the historian obtain knowledge when the actors and eyewitnesses of the object of study which took place in the past are dead? He does it through the interpretation of evidence from the past.

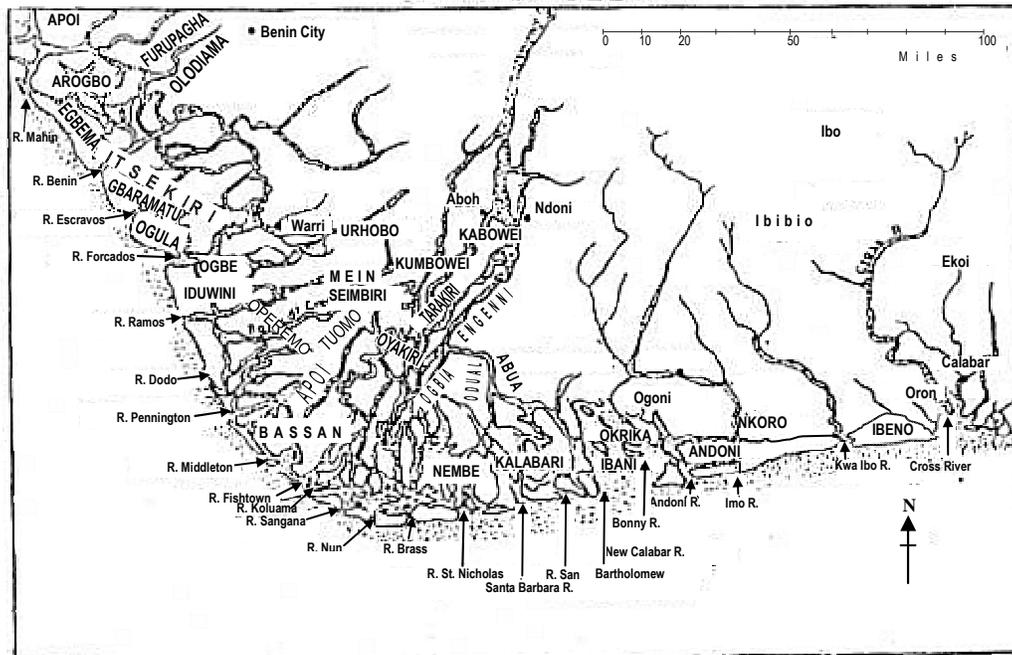
To interpret it well with the causes, course and consequences, he culls for wider sources like oral, written, ethnographic, linguistic (philological) and archaeological documents and data from the natural sciences. These sources endow him with the knowledge of the earliest times, pre-European contact era and colonial period. It also makes him work like a scientist. Man can be known through his actions in the past and the interpretation of past events is what is published as history for the purpose of human self knowledge. This pushes the ignorance of the object of study away and the state of knowledge is developed and improved.

Nevertheless, the Niger Delta Region of our study is 75, 000 square kilometers, an expansive and expensive area of research in Nigeria. It is naturally divided into three zones, Western, Central and Eastern zones, each with its peculiarity. The Eastern Delta zone is from the Santa Barbara to the Kwa-Ibo river estuaries and politically in the Rivers and Akwa Ibom States. It has the salt water environment of the South Atlantic Sea. Cookey recorded the saline and tidal floods as the base of the large mangrove vegetation. Researchers come across its lowland rainforest, muddy terrain and sandy beach ridges which made fishing and trading the major economies of the people.⁹ Obviously, historical

Map of the Niger Delta Region

field work in the area is scheduled to suit their social and economic programmes. Entry into this zone is through Port Harcourt in the Rivers State, Ibeno, Eastern Obolo (Andoni) and Ikot Abasi in Akwa Ibom State.

The Central Niger Delta zone from Santa Barbara to Pennington river estuaries is also well endowed with a labyrinth of rivers and creeks. A clear demarcation between



this and other zones is their freshwater environment. As such, the area is prone to seasonal flooding. But their firm soil with a large rainforest makes farming, fishing and trading, the main economies of the people. Transportation is by land and water through Yenagoa in Bayelsa State. However, the third zone of the region is the Western Delta that lies within Pennington and Mahin rivers estuaries. It combines the peculiarities of the Central and Eastern Deltas into its environmental features. In fact, salt and fresh water swamps as well as the sandy beach ridges are parts of the physical features that promoted their agricultural economies. Researchers take through Ondo, Delta and Bayelsa States.

Apparently, the location of this coastal region on latitudes 4-6 N and longitudes 3-8 E contributed to the humid weather and the Niger Delta dwellers are used to the heavy rainfall annually with a relief between December and February. Together with the complicated network of waterways, the region is singled out as one of the wettest parts of the world.¹⁰ Other things that researchers enjoy are traveling from one end of the Delta to the other through the waterways. Dike and Leonard experienced it from the Kwa Ibo Basin to the Lagos Lagoon.¹¹ The route also kept the Federal Armed Forces mobile during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970. With the indentation of the Delta waterways that link with the hinterland, researchers can branch off to other Nigerian cities like Aba, Umuahia, Ahoada, Oguta, Abak, Nbawsi, Idah and Lokoja during their fieldwork.

There are three basic concerns of the historian in the Niger Delta. These are the past human activities in the region, change through time and the uniqueness of events. History, being the historian's attempt to reconstruct the past, goes with an object of study which concerns these three basic qualities. However, what demarcates history in the Niger Delta from other disciplines is change through time. The historian is after the changes and developments in the communities at various times. Through this means he analyzes the uniqueness of events, their exact order and periodization as well as highlighting the differences and interconnections between them.

Absolutely, research into the object of study will reveal the human actions in the past. In the case of the author, his object of study was the socio-economic history of the region between 1849 and 1999. As a result, the uniqueness of the events and the developments through time characterized his interest. But then the repositories of

knowledge explored were oral sources, esoteric traditions, archaeological data, ethnographic and philological records as well as the archival and written documents.

Oral Data

Oral data in the Niger Delta consist of oral tradition and oral history. While the former is a testimony of oral narration that comes from the remote past through generations, oral history is life experience of actors and eyewitnesses in the recent past.¹² Both are spoken words, distinguished from material objects, artifacts and written records. Thus, oral sources have been serving the Sub-Saharan Africa in the transmission of historical messages through the centuries.

However, its lapses cannot be overlooked. It could be used as a political charter and could be unreliable due to poor memory and poor chronology. To obtain the reliability of oral sources, a strict canon of historical methodology of obtaining variant versions and combining it with the archaeological, linguistic, ethnographic and written documents, has to be applied in its collection and interpretation. Coupled with fixed texts that go with sanctions against flaws, its authenticity can rarely be contested.¹³

During fieldwork, most informants were literate. English language became the medium of expression and their age bracket ranges between 50 and 80 years old. Rather than drawing up questions, his framework of a model table of contents opens up lines of enquiry. But it was corrected by informants' accounts. Among the important things recorded were the internal developments and achievements of the pre-European contact period. These include the settlement history and the post-settlement traditions that provided the records of indigenous knowledge.

Oral data on the European penetration and the early colonial period were collected from informants drawn from the twenty-two main tributaries of the Niger. These are the

rivers Mahin, Benin, Escravos, Forcados, Ramos, Dodo, Pennington, Middleton, Nun, Kulama, Fishtown, Sangana, Brass, Nicholas, Santa Barbara, San Bartholomew, Sombreiro, New Calabar, Bonny, Andoni, Imo and Kwa Ibo. They accounted for what happened on their rivers between Europeans and Africans. Actors and eye-witnesses, too, narrated their experiences of the colonial interlude, the rise and triumph of nationalism and the progress of independence.

By so doing, free texts were widely collected. The variant versions helped in checking the disjointed narratives and distortion that resulted from memory lapses.¹⁴ Informants were given the opportunity to give details of the subject matter. Questions were only asked for clarity and understanding the complexities. A more scientific approach of inductive method was also applied. According to Akpakpan and Topolski,¹⁵ it is most useful for the direct establishment of facts. A tape-recorder and field notes were used to document information and informants' personal histories. However, Vansina cautioned that no historian should be content with one source.¹⁶ This view and the limitations of oral data drove this author to combine evidence from esoteric traditions, ethnology and archaeology.

The Use of Esoteric Traditions, Ethnology and Archaeology

While esoteric traditions are clan or family history learnt by a special group and transmitted by individuals attached to that group, ethnology is the study of cultural evidence.¹⁷ It contains the past of a people like myth, proverbs, rituals, music, dance, festivals, genealogical data, and other ethnographic documents that tell about their past. They are fixed texts controlled by sanctions for accurate verbal transmission from generation to generation through laid down methods. It can be useful in reconstructing

the past when the historian uncovers the cultural groups that hold the esoteric traditions of his area of study.

In the Niger Delta region, it is the *Owuogbo* group, known as *Ekine* in Kalabari and *Sekiapu* in Okrika and Nembe. This cultural heritage that engulfs the region was the government of the people in pre-colonial times. With a masquerade festival staged mostly in the rainy season (*fongu mine*) and on the death of initiates, members are well acculturated in the traditions of the Delta people.¹⁸ To apply it, the author resorted to their cultural values. The *Owuogbo* group is tied to esotericism. The master-drummer receives specialized training on the formal traditions of the area and its transmission by drum-lore and lyrics. No one else is allowed to do it by drum-beats even when he is well-versed in them. However, the master-drummer could be replaced in case of death or incapability.

While the esoteric nature of the *Owuogbo* is its ability to preserve the traditions of the people and sanctioned it to good delivery, it is ethnological through its transmission as cultural evidence. This makes it an inflexible kernel of historical truth. The onlooker obtains joy from the reliability of its content as well as recreation from the performance of the masqueraders, singers, drummers and dancers.¹⁹

However, the author was privileged to witness it at Kalabari, Okrika, Bonny, Opobo and Obolo (Andoni) during his fieldwork. All of them transmitted many things in common including the ancient and big communities in the Niger Delta. Thus, at each of the above places, the master-drummer called the masqueraders, one after the other, and tested their acculturation of the traditions of origin in the Delta region. The ancient places that received the fortissimo of the drum in relative chronology include Obolo known as Ido; Ke in Kalabari and Okochiri in Okrika,. Obolo also received the praises of the drum

as one of the most populated communities in the Delta in ancestral times, then called 'Opu Ido' meaning, 'Big Ido.' This strengthened the analysis of their settlement history.²⁰

One of the good things with the *Owuogbo* masqueraders is that when a masquerader answers the drummer wrongly, he would be chided. Those that understand the drum-lore very well and dance to its tune received the admiration of everybody. As it tests the mettle and good acculturation of each masquerader, it also checks the poor memory and political charter criticism of oral traditions. But then it is 'history in a popularized form, expressed in poems' and given in public performance.²¹ As the poets, both master-drummers and masqueraders, had no choice in the subject matter, the author used the inductive method to receive commentaries from them. Their values authenticated the fact that ethnology contributes to the temporal depth of an area as words accosted into drumbeats forever remain unchanged as long as the festival lasts.

Next was the use of archaeology to test the findings of the above sources. Not less than five sites in the Niger Delta have been excavated. These include Ke, Okochiri, Onyoma, Saikiripogu (Ewoama) and Ogoloma. They have produced radio-carbon dates that correspond with the esoteric traditions and ethnology. Archeological record also revealed the economic, social and political organizations in the pre-colonial Delta.²² The author utilized its values in reconstructing his work, especially the chronicle of man's existence in the Niger Delta. Nonetheless, these are not the only authentic sources. There are the philological method and other sources.

The Philological Method, Archival and Written Documents

The philological method is synonymous with 'words and things methods' used by linguists to determine cultural practices and the level of cultural borrowing in any community. It helps one to know how people lived in the past and by what means their

method of operation have changed. From here it could be used in establishing historical facts. The historian who is applying the philological method will first of all learn the original language of the people and detect foreign names which are relatively loan-words like place names, street names, buildings, markets and personal names in the community. He will analyze it historically in the light of general linguistic knowledge.²³

This writer applied it in his study of the colonial period in the Niger Delta. Two cities, Calabar and Port Harcourt, were experimented. Calabar, a corruption of 'Calambar' named by the early Europeans and having the acronym of 'Come and Live and Be at Rest,' was the first capital of Southern Nigeria between 1886 and 1906.²⁴ Its street names of Goldie, Hewett, Beecroft, Harcourt, Mayne, Edgerly, Macdonald, Egerton, Moore, Hawkins, among others, gave it a wealthy source of colonial history. Since these names did not occur in the pre-colonial Calabar tradition, informants only know them in connection with colonial administrations. Oral history and other related facts locked behind them were used in reconstructing the past.

On the archival and written documents, Isichei may not be wrong to have mentioned the Niger Delta as having the longest bibliography in Nigeria.²⁵ The Delta was the first region in the country to have elaborate contact with Europe. As a result, it became more documented in European records between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These records found in the archives actually assist in reconstructing the history of the Delta region. But they are limited. In the same way are the colonial documents of the twentieth century: intelligence reports on the communities in the Delta, annual reports, Hansards, statistical surveys, handbooks, staff lists, budgets, censuses and cartographical surveys, found at the National Archives Ibadan, Benin and Enugu. They

could not cover the events of the pre-European contact periods. Besides, coming from people with alien culture, means that extreme care must be applied in their usage.

In addition to these primary sources, there are police files left by the colonial authorities. The documentary evidence contained therein and the early editions of old newspapers furnished the author with information on the colonial interlude and the rise and triumph of nationalism. Although their focus was on other subjects, some lines, paragraphs and pages of them relate to the Niger Delta and the progress of independence. Secondly are books and periodicals as well as unpublished projects on the history, politics and personalities in Nigeria that contain the genesis of Nigerian political ideas and some interesting things on the Delta region. Other documents came from National Museum Calabar, Colonial Museum Aba, and the War Museum, Umuahia. All sources mentioned above received the sledgehammer of critical evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Alagoa and Vansina advised strongly that historians should evaluate sources at their disposal before using it in historical reconstruction.²⁶ This could be done by adopting the critical method to compare evidence from different sources. It enabled the researcher to obtain the main clue of past events. Two methods were employed in the search for historical truth. The first was the accumulation of data from the oral, ethnological, archaeological, written and philological sources. The second was the search for historical uniformities in them. Although these two methods complement one another, the first enriched the author's knowledge of the past comprehensively and the second uncovered evidence that are historical testaments.

The critical evaluation of sources independent to each other started with the oral data. Evidence of Obolo, Ke, and Okochiri among the most ancient communities in the Niger Delta was compared with the ethnological, archeological and written sources. While the ethnological evidence collected from three different places and the written documents were in accordance with it, archaeology proved it indirectly. Although Obolo (Andoni) land is yet to receive the archeological shovel, communities that migrated from Obolo, like Okochiri already dug, proved to be older than many settlements in the Eastern Delta.²⁷ This is through the radio-carbon dating technique.

So also is the philological data that have direct bearing on the oral evidence as well as the archival and written documents. As oral sources narrated the advent of Europeans in, and the colonization of, Nigeria through the Niger Delta, philological data supported it with the examples of Calabar and Port Harcourt and helped in checking the archival and written documents. The evidence was subjected to thorough checking by considering its source, the circumstances under which it was given and the extent of the involvements of the informants in the issues discussed.

Other methods of using common denominators as historical facts helped in cross-check the variant versions, especially of oral data against neighboring traditions.²⁸ Its resultant effect was an asset to this writer. Besides, each of the sources counter-balanced the other. But then these sources that started its accounts from the pre-European contact period were used with the cause and effect methods of analyzing events. Historical findings took a dialectical pattern of events happening as a result of the earlier one. Emphasis was on how economic conditions in the Niger Delta region influenced the evolution of Nigeria and the social and political life of the people thereafter. With dynamism, the cause and effect methods best analyzed the moving events in the Niger

Delta and Nigeria and the intermeshing of the economic, social and political structures in a historical process.

In the case of Niger Delta, the economic need was the initial desire of Europeans. They established a flourishing trade with the Niger Delta people from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This attention enkindled the British to use the Delta seaway to penetrate into the Niger Delta hinterland by navigable means.²⁹ As a result, the English political system was introduced not only to replace the native governments of the Delta city-states but also to colonize their land and resources. For this reason, productive activity was the condition for all other activities in Nigeria and the Delta region was among the first to experience the British hegemony in West Africa. Their material condition was the substructure that compelled the British to create the Nigerian nation-state. Hence, the study of the Niger Delta history in concert with the history of Nigeria can only be done by using the cause and effect methods to analyze the events.

Another reason of choosing this conceptual framework is to explain the direction and deeper causes of change. History being a process of change, the events of these years, was not static. The various stages of change were studied for a proper documentation of the Niger Delta contributions in a single volume. As such, the dynamism of events and its variations of historical movement characterized the chapters in the author's dissertation as follows, from settlement to economic conditions, to colonialism, to nationalism, to independence and nation building, to civil war, and to post war developments that witness Niger Delta as the wealth of the Nigerian nation. These factors made the period, 1849 – 1999, significant in the political and economic history of Nigeria.

The essay discusses the author's research methodology in the Niger Delta region. His object of study was the socio-economic history of the region between 1849 and 1999. With this object, the particular and the uniqueness of the events and the developments experienced through time were the major points of research. The repositories of knowledge used were the oral data, esoteric traditions, ethnographic and archaeological documents. Other sources include the philological records, archival and written sources. These were subjected to critical evaluation. Two methods of authentication aided the search for historical truth, accumulation of data and the search for uniformities in them. These two methods complement one another, enriching the author's knowledge of the object of study with evidence of historical testaments. After interpretation of data, the work was presented for human self-knowledge.

Endnotes

¹ W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, (London: Hutchinson, 1967), p. 16.

² E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Longman, 1961), p.126.

³ Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), p.15.

⁴ Omu, Paul. "The Pottery," in M. J. Vatsa (ed.) *Voices from the Trench*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1978), p. 111.

⁵ Nwodo, C. S. "Philosophy, Pragmatic History and African Past" in N. C. Ejituwu, *The Multi-Disciplinary Approach to African History*, (Port Harcourt: UPH Press, 1998), pp.15-33.

⁶ Lord Acton *Lectures on Modern History*, (London: OUP, 1906), p.13.

⁷ Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, p.117.

⁸ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*. (London: CUP, 1920), p.ix.

⁹ S.J.S. Cookey, *King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His Life and Times 1821 – 1891*, (New York: NOK, 1974), p.11.

¹⁰ I. P Okonny, *et.al.* (1997), "Geology and Soils," in E. J. Alagoa and T. N. Tamuno

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A. G. Leonard, *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes*, (London: OUP, 1906), p.12.
- ¹² David Henige, *Oral Historiography*, London, Longman, 1982), p. 2.
- ¹³ G.I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria*, (London: OUP, 1963), p.2.
- ¹⁴ Henige, *Oral Historiography*, p.34.
- ¹⁵ E. B. Akpakpan, “Elements of Political Economy.” Unpublished Monograph, 2000.
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- ¹⁶ Jan Vansina, *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*. (Madison: The Author, 1978), pp.77-78.
- ¹⁷ Jan Vansina, (1965) *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), pp.170-173.
- ¹⁸ Boma A. Pepple, (1997) “Ibani Owu-Ogbo in Perspective” *Ibani Herald: Bonny-Opobo Monthly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan. – Feb. 1997), p.4.
- ¹⁹ M. P. Okonny, Personal communications in 2000.
- ²⁰ Chief A. B. Datubo in a Personal communications in 2003.
- ²¹ Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria*, p.4.
- ²² A. A. Derefaka, “Archaeological Research in the Niger Delta: Results Problems and Prospects,” in N. C. Ejituwu, *The Multi-Disciplinary Approach to African History*, Port Harcourt: UPH Press, 1998), p.111-132.
- ²³ A. E. Afigbo, “Oral Tradition and the History of Segmentary Societies,” in Erim Erim and Okon Uya (eds.) *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1981), p.58.
- ²⁴ E. U. Aye, Personal Communications in 2000.
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