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# UNIVERSALS OF HUMAN THOUGHT

*Some African evidence*

EDITED BY

BARBARA LLOYD
*Reader in Social Psychology, University of Sussex*

JOHN GAY
*Social Analyst, Ministry of Agriculture, Maseru, Lethoso*

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521298186

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First published 1981
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2010

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-22953-1 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-29818-6 Paperback

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*To Michael Ogbolu Okonji,*
*pioneering psychologist of Africa*

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# Preface

This volume has developed from a conference on 'universals of human thought' with special reference to African evidence held by the African Studies Centre of the University of Cambridge at Clare Hall, 14 and 15 April 1975. The original suggestion for a lecture series on cognitive studies had come from Sandy Robertson, the Director of the Centre. He had put these ideas to John Gay who was spending the year 1974–5 as a visiting fellow of the Centre and of Clare Hall, Cambridge.

Impetus for organizing the proceedings around the problem of universals had come from discussions between Barbara Lloyd and John Gay about issues left unresolved in her paper on the quest for universals presented at the Decennial meeting of the British Association for Social Anthropology at Oxford in July 1973. The original terms of reference were extended to include archaeology and literature as well as anthropology, psychology and linguistics. Jerome Bruner chaired the two-day meetings and provided an integrative summary at the final session.

The participants undertook revisions of their papers in the light of the proceedings. After reading the revised chapters and edited conference discussion Ernest Gellner prepared a general philosophical introduction. While we have had time to reflect and improve our original contributions the pleasure of the conference has been overtaken by two sad events. In September 1975 Michael Ogbolu Okonji, one of the conference participants, died suddenly. We are fortunate to have an appreciation of Okonji, the man and scholar, written by Herman Witkin, one of Okonji's intellectual fathers. But before the production of this book was completed Witkin died suddenly in July 1979 after a brief illness. Our volume thus marks the untimely passing of two men who contributed importantly to our understanding of cognitive universals.

We wish to thank all of those who sustained us in making the



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conference a reality and in making its substance a readable book. In Cambridge we received help from the African Studies Centre, its Director, Sandy Robertson and his secretary, Margaret Cooter, the fellows and staff of Clare Hall and Jeremy Mynott and his assistants at the Cambridge University Press. Judith Jenkins compiled the indexes, secretarial help was provided at Sussex University by Nicola Gillham, Betty Hayde and Doreen Mitten and we were also fortunate in being able to call upon the cartographic skills of Chris Heaps. Finally we would like to thank our contributors who came to Cambridge for the conference at short notice and afterwards worked diligently to prepare their papers for publication.

*Barbara Lloyd*
*John Gay*

*July 1979*

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# Michael Ogbolu Okonji: African psychologist[1]

*Herman A. Witkin*

Although he died at a tragically early age, Okonji had already produced a considerable body of empirical and theoretical work. That contribution is on record and can thus exert its appropriate impact on psychology.

The real meaning of Okonji's loss to the field is of another kind. At the time of his death he was clearly growing as a psychologist. An 'agenda', for himself and for African psychology, was already evident in general outline in his research and other activities, and appeared to be taking on a more definite form. Had he had the time to crystallize that emerging agenda, and to act on it, his impact on the development of African psychology is likely to have been even greater than it has been. Himself an African, steeped in African traditions and experiences, and sensitive to their potentially unique impact on psychological development, he was able to bring an African perspective to his conception in the way only someone indigenous to the scene possibly could. In a period when there are so few psychologists who, in their own lives, have shared directly in the African experience, any reduction in that small company can be ill afforded. The loss of Okonji from that small group is, for several reasons, especially serious: he was theoretical minded; he had qualities of

[1] **Herman A. Witkin**
With great sadness we report the death of Herman A. Witkin while his tribute to Okonji was in press.

Professor Witkin received his PhD from New York University in 1939, taught at Brooklyn College from 1940 to 1952, served as Professor in the Department of Psychiatry of the State University of New York Downstate Medical Center from 1952 to 1971 and came to Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey in 1971. In 1976 he was appointed Distinguished Research Scientist at Educational Testing Service where he remained until his death on 8 July 1979.

He was a world-renowned investigator of cognitive styles as integrative processes in personality development. He authored numerous books and articles on a variety of scientific issues and is included among the 100 most cited authors in the *Social Sciences Citation Index*. His tribute to Okonji was among the last of these publications.

*Donald R. Goodenough*



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leadership, both in conceptual and practical matters; his scholarship in psychology was very broad and deep; and his contact with Western psychology and psychologists was extensive and comfortable. So it is because he died when his emerging conception of African psychology seemed to be moving toward fruition, and because the small company of African psychologists was deprived of one of its best members and a potentially outstanding leader, that we feel a particular loss in the untimely death of Okonji.

Okonji's experience and training were broad and diverse. He was an Igbo from a traditional background, and a family of very modest means, making especially impressive the intellectual distance he managed to traverse in so short a life. For some time he worked for Shell Nigeria. His academic career began in sociology, which he studied at the University of Ghana. From there he went to Strathclyde, Scotland, where, working under Gustav Jahoda, with whom he earned his PhD in 1968, he shifted to psychology, in fact cross-cultural psychology. His first academic post was as Lecturer in Psychology at Makerere University, in Uganda. He remained there until 1972, when he left to become Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Zambia in Lusaka. In 1973, he moved to the University of Lagos in Nigeria as Senior Lecturer. Shortly before his death, he was made Associate Professor at that institution. During this brief academic career Okonji showed himself to be a fine teacher and productive investigator. His promise as a psychologist was quickly recognized beyond Africa. This was evident in his participation in many international meetings and conferences and in his relations with a number of psychologists around the world.

It was in fact when he visited me in Princeton in 1974 that I came to know him well, although we had corresponded in the preceding years. Our time together during that visit made it very evident that here was a first-rate scientist, a scholar who was very knowledgeable about the psychological literature, eager to learn as much as he could from others, yet critical and independent-minded in charting his own course. In the matter of scholarship, one of his purposes in coming to Princeton was to read papers available there which would be helpful for the review he was preparing of the cross-cultural literature on psychological differentiation. In the months following he frequently wrote for copies of additional papers. Beyond adding to my respect for him as a scientist, he impressed me, during his visit, as a really fine, warm, and substantial human being.

Okonji's work was diverse, but there are themes which flow

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through it and bind it together, features which characterize its conduct, and areas of recurrent interest.

First, he was theoretically orientated, concerned both with the critical examination of particular theoretical systems and with tests of their propositions. Another feature of Okonji's work, already mentioned, was his concern with the unique influences of the African context on psychological development and functioning. With his interest in broad theoretical frameworks and psychological universals on the one hand, and the influence of specific situational contexts on the other, it need not be surprising that Okonji's work was both intracultural and cross-cultural. Much of his intracultural research reflected his concern with problems of education, with the hope that the research might help deal with these problems in practical ways. Finally, the empirical work Okonji did quite consistently bears the trademark of a really good and meticulous methodologist who was well informed about the field in which he was engaged.

Each of these aspects of Okonji's work merit further comment. Because of the importance of his Africanist stance in so much of what he did, that is a good place to begin. That stance is best described in his own words (Okonji 1975a):

> In Africa, as in all other human groups or societies, the scientific enterprise is rooted in the prevalent World view, the systems of beliefs and values. African approaches to the study and understanding of human behavior are shaped by the African's view of the nature of the Universe and man's position in it as well as the systems of beliefs and values. It is true that there are some variations in African culture and ecologies, hence the need for caution in generalizing about the whole continent. But while caution is useful to guard against extreme sweeping generalizations about Africa, my personal impression in my travels through Western, Eastern and Central Africa is that African cultures are more alike than we are even prepared to accept. (p. 297)

It is noteworthy that while seeking to develop a psychological perspective which reflected the African setting, Okonji did not regard Western psychology as a source of danger to such an enterprise which had to be guarded against. This is not surprising since he received his graduate training in the West. In fact, Okonji seemed quite eager to learn as much as he could about Western psychology's theories and methods for his work in the African setting. At the same time he kept a critical eye on their relevance and appropriateness to that setting and sought to maintain the distance he felt necessary to allow achievement of the independent African position he was seeking to

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formulate. By not seeing Western psychology as a threat to the African enterprise, it was possible for Okonji to maintain congenial, colleaguely relations with Western psychologists. This situation greatly facilitated communication, to the benefit of the field at large. Indeed, he seemed to be looking toward the eventual integration of what came out of the African work with concepts and findings in Western psychology, in order to achieve a psychology which is free of Western cultural biases and which has universal applicability.

A paper Okonji presented at a symposium at the Kingston meetings of the IACCP, 'African approaches to the study of behavior' (1974a) expresses his African orientation very cogently. The basic position Okonji takes in this paper is that non-Western peoples, no less than Western peoples, study and try to identify the behaviour of others within their group, as part of their need to predict and control the behaviour of these people. In making this basic point, he notes:

> So far it has been taken for granted that the science of psychology is an esoteric Western invention beyond the grasp of other people (there are even people who still maintain that psychology is too abstract and complicated a business for Africans and Africa). Yet we do know that the ability to predict future behavior is indispensable for the survival of any group of people. (p. 1)[2]

To make his point that non-Westerners 'have a psychology' which mirrors their group's existence, Okonji presents a sensitive, descriptive set of what he calls 'ethnographic notes' on the Igbo of Nigeria, and on several other African groups. The focus in these accounts is primarily on cosmology, especially the religious belief systems and values of these groups. These accounts, though brief, make fascinating reading. Following their presentation, Okonji goes on to consider the 'tools' Africans use in their approaches to the study of each other's behaviour. Naturalistic observation is plausibly described as the main one. Another is physique watching, which derives from the categories of physical typologies and stereotypes, relating physical characteristics to behaviour, which many Africans have developed. Still another particularly fascinating approach is role-playing, in which the intention or veracity of a child or adult is checked through the use of a contrived situation which might, for example, make it possible for the person being 'checked' to be caught in the act of

[2] This statement was in the paper Okonji presented at the Kingston conference, but was not included in the shortened version published in the proceedings of the conference.

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doing something of which he had been suspected. Yet another approach is the use of personal, family and clan case history.

What Okonji sought to do in this examination of ethnographic settings, and of the approaches people use in trying to understand each other in order to conduct their relationships, was to start with behaviours in their naturally-occurring context and then to identify methods of studying these behaviours which are appropriate to them. Such a sequence is quite different from the more commonly followed one of importing Western approaches to the study of non-Western behaviours.

This perspective on the study of behaviour, and the attention he drew in some of his empirical reports (e.g. Okonji 1970) to the need for more carefully worked out taxonomies of Western tasks taken over into non-Western cultures, encourage the speculation that Okonji might have made more use of tests devised for their indigenous appropriateness, to complement his predominant use of tests of Western origin – in other words, to have followed both an emic and etic approach.

Okonji's focus on the African scene carried with it a strong commitment to using the knowledge about African psychology and behaviour on behalf of Africa's practical problems, particularly in the area of education. Interestingly, Okonji saw a strategic political reason for doing applied work, aside from the payoff such work might have for problems of everyday living. Thus he wrote (Okonji, in press):

> It has been suggested that it may be premature to become applied-oriented at this stage of the history of psychology in the developing countries. Yet, a psychology which is still associated with metaphysical and philosophical disciplines runs the risk of acquiring the image of an abstruse and irrelevant discipline unless it can be made to appear concerned with some of the immediate and pressing problems of society. Since most activists in the field of cross-cultural psychology are foreigners in the countries where they do this research, the whole enterprise may be seen as an aspect of neocolonialist exploitation of the developing parts of the world. Worse still, cross-cultural psychology may come to be seen as a European-masterminded plot to study and understand people in non-Western societies for the sake of showing how inferior they are, thereby justifying racism and racist oppression.

Beyond expressing these ideological concerns, Okonji did a good deal of research on cognitive variables (mainly from the Piagetian tradition) relevant to education which might ultimately be helpful in

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increasing the number of technologically trained people in Africa. These studies had an intracultural focus, and used as subjects children of different ages, educational experiences and socio-economic background. In one instance a Western group was included as well, but in most cases the results obtained with the indigenous groups he studied were looked at against extant knowledge about the behaviour of Western children in similar situations. The cognitive function which received particular attention in these studies was classificatory behaviour (Okonji 1968, 1971a, 1974b). Other functions examined included understanding of geometry (Okonji 1971b) and auditory-visual integration (Okonji 1975b). In comparing the results for his indigenous groups to data from Western studies, Okonji sought to identify what may be 'special' to the cognitive operations of his African children, and eventually useful in maximizing their learning. It is worth noting, parenthetically, that in some of these papers on cognitive functioning universals in behaviour continued to intrigue Okonji.

Okonji's concerns with practical applications were not limited to his empirical work alone. As we see later, it was also an important focus in his thinking about theoretical issues and systems. And it took him into the public arena as well. Mundy-Castle (1975), in a memorial statement on Okonji, notes that Okonji gave radio talks and wrote popular articles on such themes as 'African personality' and 'Psychological causes of civil war'.

We turn now to what has been another major feature of Okonji's work and thought: his theoretical-mindedness. Two theoretical frameworks, Piagetian theory and differentiation theory (especially its field dependence-independence cognitive-style component), were of particular interest to him throughout his career. These two conceptions guided his very first research, carried out for his doctoral dissertation on cultural variables in cognition (Okonji 1968, 1969). For Okonji there were important similarities between these two conceptions and they shared characteristics which drew his interest to them. He saw both as developmental in nature, with a particular emphasis on differentiation; their stance was an organismic one; they seemed to lend themselves to use across cultures; they offered opportunities for pursuing his continuing interest in universals in behaviour, which he approached with an eye for the moderating influence of situational factors to which his concerns as an Africanist led him; they were 'big' theories (he apparently felt comfortable with such theories), which offered leads for examining diverse facets of behaviour in their

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interrelationships and with regard to their origins; and they had potential for fruitful application to problems of education, which was so important to him. But his interest in these two approaches went beyond charting parallels between them. He had already pointed out in his dissertation, written as early as 1968, opportunities for bringing them together and the possible advantages of doing so:

> For both the notions of the development of cognitive style and Piaget's theory of cognitive development make their central process that of ego-differentiation or ego-decentring. But Piaget failed to make adequate allowance for variations in socialization practices across cultures in spite of all its influences in both the rate and pattern of cognitive growth. It is the writer's view that a full appreciation of the implications of the concept of cognitive style and applying them to the Piagetian model of intellectual development will enable it to cope with problems of intertask consistency and variations in patterns of growth across cultures that have cropped up from time to time in the literature. (p. 181)

In both these insights, Okonji was ahead of his time, and a very large number of studies have substantively confirmed the first of them. (See Huteau, in press, for a recent review of the literature relating performance on Piagetian tasks to individual differences in psychological differentiation.) Okonji himself (Okonji & Olagbaiye 1974, 1975) contributed to that literature a number of years later, thus putting his conception of the interrelation between the two theoretical frameworks to empirical test. This study showed, among Nigerian children, an impressively high relation between field dependence-independence and performance on the Piaget & Inhelder 3-mountain task. In a paper completed just before his death (Okonji, in press) he commented on the potential value of bringing these two conceptions together in the cross-cultural arena in particular. 'If these two theoretical approaches can be demonstrated to be closely linked in cross-cultural studies,' he wrote, 'then the way will have been paved for a unified organismic theory of development.' This evidence of a continuing interest in the relation between Piagetian and differentiation theories, his proposal on the possible benefit to be gained by pursuing that relation in the cross-cultural arena, and the empirical work he did on that relation late in his career, makes it possible that this is one of the lines of work he might have continued.

In addition to his study with Olagbaiye just cited, from his dissertation onwards Okonji did a number of studies on Piagetian variables in children (Okonji 1968, 1971a, b, 1974b). As noted when these studies were cited earlier, though primarily intracultural, they

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attended to Western findings on record for the sake of identifying cognitive operations in African children which might enter into how such children learn.

In the case of differentiation theory, here again Okonji conducted empirical studies, but in addition he wrote papers of a conceptual nature, including his contribution to the present volume, and an extended review of the cross-cultural literature on differentiation (Okonji, 1980). We can imagine that several features of differentiation theory – that it is concerned with formal psychological properties which are more likely to be similar across individuals and groups than are content properties, and yet the expressions of these formal properties are influenced by concrete prevailing conditions – may have made it attractive to someone like Okonji who was intrigued by universals and at the same time concerned with how seeming universals are moderated by the African setting.

Considering first his empirical work, Okonji's dissertation research (1968, 1969) focused particularly on rural/urban differences in extent of field dependence-independence among Nigerians. His expectations here were based on proposals from the original Western-based theory on the role of child-rearing practices in the development of cognitive style. Other hypotheses he considered came from proposals in the Western conception about sex differences in cognitive style and self-consistency in performance across cognitive-style tasks.

Although a risky enterprise, it is tempting to seek continuities in Okonji's work over time. In speculating about the bases of the partial confirmation he found of his expectation of greater field dependence among his rural than among his urban subjects, Okonji (1969) points out that though he emphasized the contributions of differences in child-rearing practices to this outcome, other influences may have played a role as well; and he calls for research on the contribution of each of the components of what is in effect a complexly integrated assembly to the development of cognitive styles. Perhaps in pursuit of this directive, Okonji subsequently conducted a study (1973) in which he examined mother–child interactions in relation to children's cognitive style, taking the very desirable methodological step of interviewing mothers and making direct observations of actual mother–child interactions. One of the problems Okonji ran into, however, came precisely from contextual factors and/or data characteristics specific to the setting in which he worked. Scores for variables derived from both methods showed an exceedingly restricted range. While the bases of this lack of range is not clear, it inevitably

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had an adverse effect on the possibility of obtaining significant correlations between these scores and other measures.

Okonji's comprehensive review of the cross-cultural literature on psychological differentiation, which he finished drafting just before his death (Okonji, 1980), gave him an opportunity to examine differentiation theory and its empirical underpinning, from a cross-culture perspective. Okonji came out of his examination of that literature with what, on the whole, is an essentially positive view of the general validity of most of the postulates of differentiation theory and its potential for use in other cultures. Thus he wrote: 'Considering the conglomeration of tests and experimental situations used in these studies one is amazed that so many results seem to be saying the same things have been obtained.' At the same time he pointed out lacunae and areas of vagueness in the conception; and he identified places where things may be different, conceptually and empirically, in non-Western settings than in the West, suggesting directions of enquiry for documenting these differences and their possible sources. He saw the job ahead in this way: 'We recognize from empirical observation and anecdotal evidence...that the concept of style in cognitive functioning may be applicable to non-Western peoples, yet we do need studies which will detail and clarify the ways in which these styles are conceptualized in different cultural groups.' Whether he might have taken such further steps himself, it is of course not possible to say.

Because Okonji's review was conducted from the vantage point of someone outside the culture in which differentiation theory grew up, his views about the usefulness of the theory and its accompanying methodologies in the cross-culture enterprise, and his critical commentaries merit serious attention.

It has been possible to spell out what Okonji accomplished in his lifetime, and to conjecture about where he seemed to be heading in what would ordinarily have been a still long span of working time ahead. As to what he might have accomplished had he lived, that can be no more than guesswork. Because he was already a fine and productive psychologist, it is reasonable to believe that he would have gone on to grow and accomplish much. His commitment to an African psychology, joined with his activist stance and his concern with theory, make it also reasonable to believe that he would have done his part in, and perhaps given leadership to the development of an African psychology which had legitimacy in its own right and connecting pathways to general psychology. But these are all in the

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realm of what might have been. There can be no doubt, however, that he helped give impetus to a development which will be carried forward by his colleagues and successors, in part because historic forces compel it. In this sense, we may say, in keeping with the ancient Greek wisdom, 'No voice is wholly lost that is the voice of many men', that Okonji left a mark on psychology which will continue to be felt.

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## Contributors

JEROME BRUNER has been Watts Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford and has taught at Harvard University. He has undertaken research on social, developmental and cognitive psychology in the United States, England and Senegal.

BERNARD COMRIE is Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Southern California and was previously Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Cambridge. He has studied language universals and language typology, drawing evidence from a variety of linguistic groups. His special interest at present is the syntactic typology of the non-Slavic languages of the Soviet Union.

PIERRE DASEN is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science at the University of Geneva. He has done research in cross-cultural psychology, with particular emphasis on Piagetian psychology, in the Ivory Coast, Kenya, the Seychelles, Canada and Australia.

RUTH FINNEGAN is Senior Lecturer in Comparative Social Institutions at the Open University and has recently taught in the School of Social and Economic Development in the University of the South Pacific, Fiji. She has done research in oral poetry and folklore in Sierra Leone and the South Pacific.

ROLAND FLETCHER is Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney in Australia. He has carried out research in settlement patterns in Malta, Ghana, Crete and Egypt.

MEYER FORTES is the Emeritus William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. His research among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana has included, on the basis of his original training as a psychologist at University College, London, studies of perception and cognition.

JOHN GAY is a rural sociologist for the Ministry of Agriculture in Lesotho and is currently studying cognitive and affective aspects



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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-29818-6 - Universals of Human Thought: Some African Evidence
Edited by Barbara Lloyd and John Gay
Frontmatter
More information



of farming among rural Basotho. He has taught at Cuttington College in Liberia and done research on cognition among the Kpelle of Liberia.

ERNEST GELLNER is Professor of Philosophy (with special reference to Sociology) at the London School of Economics. He has published work on many topics in philosophy, social theory, and anthropology.

GUSTAV JAHODA is Professor of Psychology at the University of Strathclyde, and has taught at the University of Ghana. He has undertaken research on perceptual development as influenced by environmental factors and the development of social concepts in several African countries.

NIGEL LEMON is Principal Lecturer and Head of the School of Social Sciences at Sunderland Polytechnic and has been Lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. His research interests include bilingualism, attitudes and socio-legal applications of psychology.

BARBARA LLOYD is Reader in Social Psychology at the University of Sussex. She has studied socialization among the Gusii in Kenya and the Yoruba of Nigeria. Since 1968 she has studied cognitive development in English and in Yoruba children.

OGBOLU OKONJI was Associate Professor in Psychology at the University of Lagos at the time he died. He had taught at Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Zambia. His research interests were in the area of cognitive development.

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