

## **Celebrating National Heroes: Dani Wadada Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok**

Africa has many unsung heroes, past and present, but generally Africa's record of honoring its heroes is rather poor. For sure, there are outstanding luminaries such as Mandela who are as much acclaimed outside Africa as inside. Then there are great Africans such as Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba, but beyond the narrow circles of the left African revolutionary circles they are hardly known, for example, by the ordinary school children in Africa. Then there are outstanding leaders such as Nyerere who are venerated, even adored, within their own countries and only just recognized in the rest of Africa. It is in this context that I write about the late Nabudere and the late Omwony Ojwok. Where do we locate them in the pantheon of Ugandan or African heroes? Or is the word 'hero' too big for them? This essay was written on the occasion of Uganda's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and produced in the Newspaper, *The Observer*, Kampala, October, 2012.

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## **Celebrating National Heroes: Dani Wadada Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok**

Uganda has produced its own great men, men such as the great nationalist I.K Musazi, who are now almost forgotten heroes of our history. As Uganda celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> year of Independence, it may be pertinent to ask: who and where are our post-independence heroes? Or have we produced no great figures over the last 50 years? It is in this context that I write about the late Nabudere and the late Omwony Ojwok. Because I knew them very closely I may be among those who are best qualified to appraise them, but for the same reason – because of possible bias - I may well be the least qualified. A full biographical assessment of the two must await a person more detached than I. And perhaps, also, it is too early to assess them. Nonetheless, whatever my credentials, I take the occasion of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary to undertake a brief interim appraisal of two of our best in the post-independence period.

Omwony Ojwok passed on to the other world on November 11, 2007 at an early age of 60. Nabudere followed on November 9, 2011 at a more mature age of 79.

### **My encounters with Dani Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok**

I met Dani first in London as students in 1961 when we were members of the Executive Committee of the United Kingdom Uganda Students Association - UGASA -- together with, among others, the Ateker Ejalu, Peter Otai, Chango Machyo and Edward Rugumayo. We were then engaged in helping to raise the political consciousness of young Ugandans like ourselves studying or working in the UK and in Europe.

Dani and I returned to Uganda in 1964. For the next six years, when I was at Makerere and he was practicing law, our paths crossed intermittently mostly during debates on "the Hill".

Makerere was a stimulating, exciting, place in the 1960s. At the time, a literary journal called the *Transition* (founded and edited by the late Rajat Neogy) provided a trendy intellectual platform to contributors like Ali Mazrui, Paul Theroux and Wole Soyinka. Dani occasionally contributed to these. But he was always an activist intellectual, someone not given to abstract theorizing. As an active member of the youth wing of the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), he was in the forefront of trying to revolutionise the youth of Uganda. For his pains, he was expelled from the Party. In his *Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda* (1997), Museveni explains why: "We had contacts with progressive politicians such as Dani Wadada Nabudere, Kintu-Musoke, Jaberu Bidandi-Ssali, Kirunda Kivejinja and Raiti Omongin. They were leftists who had been expelled from the UPC in 1964 for having belonged to the Kakonge wing of the party. Some of us also belonged to the Uganda Vietnam Solidarity Committee, which Nabudere had formed as a support and to oppose the American war of aggression against the Vietnamese people".

Nabudere, the youthful Ugandan revolutionary leader, just turned 30, was already known outside of Uganda too. For example, during the period following the revolution in Zanzibar in 1964 he played a critical role in the unification talks between Zanzibar and Tanganyika.

However, it was not until the 1970s that I really and intimately understood Dani as a great African revolutionary leader. Many from the left, including Milton Obote, had taken refuge in Tanzania after Amin took over and terrorised Uganda. Nyerere was our collective guardian and political custodian. Some of us like Nabudere, Mahmood Mamdani and I had joined the University of Dar es Salaam (DSU). Nabudere was a mentor to many of us, including if I may add, Yoweri Museveni. Nabudere taught us how to combine the knowledge of Marxist –Maoist dialectics with the principles of pan-Africanism to our situation in Uganda and Africa in a “new democratic revolution”.

Omwony Ojwok was my younger "soul brother". We were very close. I was born in a small village in Kaberamaido. Later we moved to Soroti for better schooling, but my father was an entrepreneur in Moroto – I believe the first “Indian” allowed in the District of Karamoja. So I spent the best times of my childhood in Moroto. While as a young boy I was chasing after donkeys in east Karamoja, Omwony was tending cows in his native village in west Karamoja. A brilliant young student of law, I first met him in Makerere in the late 1960s, then in Geneva in the 1970s where he was doing his post-graduate studies and learning French (in which he was fluent). He joined us at the DSU as a law lecturer. Omwony was a glutton for work (working to early hours of the morning), a meticulous archivist and recorder of events and conversations. He had started writing the history of Uganda; alas, never to be completed. Omwony always found time to listen to people and debate sincerely and openly, and be generous with them almost to a fault. He always had warm relationships with everyone with whom he came in contact with. This is a verdict shared by all those who had known him. His premature death deprived Uganda and Africa of this wonderful human being.

## **The "Dar Debates" and the Moshi Conference**

Nabudere is better known in Uganda as the main architect of the Moshi Conference which forged the unity between several contending factions that were struggling to oust Amin. He is less well known as, also, a Pan-African revolutionary leader. For example, at the DSU he was a founding member of the African Association of Political Science (AAPS) along with Anthony Rweyemamu of Tanzania and Nathan Shamuyarira of Zimbabwe. Nabudere was one of the first Presidents of the AAPS and a profound articulator of the AAPS philosophy. He showed how the social sciences as ideological expressions of dominant classes faced a crisis of relevance in Africa, and how these needed to be challenged. These ideas were later to appear in his *"African Social Scientists Reflections, Part 2: Law, Social Sciences and Crisis of Relevance"* (2001).

But it was not this but his book *"Imperialism and revolution in Uganda"* (1980) that provoked a robust discussion at the DSU. Later these discussions were reproduced as a book called *"The Dar es Salaam Debate on Class, State and Imperialism"* (1982) which I edited, with a foreword by Mohammad Babu, the well-known Marxist revolutionary from Zanzibar. The "Debate" had not only intellectual and pedagogical but also political and strategic value just as we were entering the final stages of the struggle against the fascist dictator Amin. The key analyses and messages argued by Nabudere in the "Debate" remain generally valid to this day, not only for Uganda but also Africa and, palpably also for the third world.

The significance of this debate became clear in the early months of 1979, as the very issues then debated took on a practical political salience after Amin's invasion of Tanzania in December 1978. Tanzania repulsed the invasion but then Nyerere was in a dilemma. Should he proceed to Kampala and his army effectively becomes the "occupation force", or should he try and forge a united Ugandan political front to take over the reins of government? He opted for the latter. But to forge unity of contending forces from Uganda proved a nightmare.

The disappointed Nyerere turned to the Ad Hoc committee for the Promotion of Unity Amongst Ugandans that was formed immediately following Amin's invasion under Nabudere's leadership. The Ad Hoc Committee was already working towards a conference in Moshi for all anti-Amin forces in conjunction with the Nairobi Discussion Group (NDC) that had been formed to do precisely the same thing. The NDC was chaired by Professor Tarsis Kabwegyere.

The Moshi Conference had its difficult moments. You can well imagine this from the kinds of internal conflicts that strain the opposition movements in Libya and Syria today. We were lucky in that Nyerere protected us from undue interference from the US and Europe (though the British did try hard - and succeeded up to a point - to influence the decisions at Moshi). The conference's success owed itself to the leadership of many Ugandans of vision who compromised on vital issues of power and responsibility in a spirit that came to be known as "the Moshi spirit".

Without discounting the very significant role played by all these leaders at Moshi, it may be said without exaggeration that the hard preparatory work of laying the structure of the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) and the transition strategy between the fall of Amin and the formation of an democratically elected body was done mainly by two persons – namely Dani Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok. The UNLF was to be chaired by the transitional president, Professor Y.K. Lule. Rugumayo was elected as the Chairman of the transitional parliament called the National Consultative Council (NCC); Omwony-Ojwok as the NCC's Secretary; and Nabudere as the Chairman of its most important Political and Diplomatic Commission. It is after the formation of the UNLF that the Tanzanian forces entered Kampala and the UNLF assumed power in Uganda in April, 1979.

### **The “Gang of Four” and the ouster of Lule as President**

I had not intended to discuss the so-called Gang of Four here, but an e-mail from Fred Kirungi, the Associate Editor of the Observer, who approached me to write this piece, has prompted me to do so. After the ouster of Y.K. Lule from the Presidency on 20 June 1980 the final tie for his succession was between Godfrey Binaisa and Edward Rugumayo. Edward lost to Godfrey by just one vote. I know this for I was at that critical meeting of the NCC at which we debated the “motion of no confidence” in President Lule. In his e-mail, Fred Kirungi suggested the following: “One of the points you may pick up on is his (Rugumayo’s) assertion that the Gang of Four removed Lule. It would be interesting to say why he was removed (there seems to be various theories) and whether things might have turned out better if Prof. Rugumayo had won the race to replace him, or the circumstances were such that no individual could have prevented the crisis that followed.”

I really cannot pretend to know whether Rugumayo would have made a “better” President than Binaisa or Lule. It is a speculative question. However, I must admit that this tantalizingly hypothetical question does raise important issues relating to the exercise of state power, and the style of governance. Can individuals in power make a difference? Fred’s question could well be in the minds of many.

Let me make one thing clear from the outset. Too much has been made in the Uganda media about the “Gang of Four”, of which I was the fourth member besides Nabudere, Rugumayo and Omwony Ojwok. We have been described sometimes as the “power brokers” in post-Amin Uganda. This surprisingly enduring myth around “the G4” needs to be demystified.

First, there was no such “gang”. Unlike the “Gang of Four” in China the Ugandan version was simply the creation of one man – President Godfrey Binaisa. In any case, the “four” of us were the outer visible component of a bigger movement. Let this be known that many people sacrificed their lives, families, and livelihoods in the struggle for democracy even within our own (rather small) Maoist movement that had its origins in 1964 under the leadership of Raiti Omogin, whom I mentioned in an earlier quotation from Museveni. A full history of these brave

people is yet to be written. Speaking for myself I should say in all humility that I was a latecomer and played a relatively modest role. The person who really took over the mantle from Raiti Omogin was Dani Nabudere.

Secondly, it is wrong to describe the G4 as “power brokers”. The movement of which the four of us were the visible exterior was a “movement” (albeit small), but it was more – much more – than “power brokers”. Power brokers focus on power, or putting certain individuals in power. The G4 was never interested in either of these. I must state that quite categorically. Even at the Moshi Conference its main architects – Dani and Omwony – were not driven or motivated by considerations of power. That they played a key role at Moshi was because the other forces were not as well prepared, and did not fully understand that “power” during the transition period (the transition between the removal of Amin and the election of a democratic government) was ephemeral, and that the main responsibility of the NCC that was created at Moshi was to restore (indeed in our case, to start from the beginning) the democratic process in Uganda which was so brutally interrupted by Amin.

Let me cut a long story short. It is only when President Lule appeared to miss the point about his “transitional” role that his ouster became inevitable. I know from personal knowledge that Nabudere had tried his level best, in many meetings with Lule, to persuade him to stay the course of the “Moshi spirit”. It was with the utmost reluctance that the Political and Diplomatic Commission of the UNLF decided in supporting a resolution of “no confidence” in President Lule in the NCC. The motion was moved by NCC member, Paulo Wangoola. Lule and his supporters had full opportunity to defend the President but they lost in a democratically held secret ballot (in the limited context of the transition phase), and so Lule had to step down. None of us rejoiced at this event.

As stated earlier, in the succession to Lule, Rugumayo lost to Binaisa by one vote. It was only later that I learnt that that crucial vote was of Nabudere. Why did Nabudere vote against his comrade when power was almost within reach? Dani later explained to me that ours was not the lure of power; ours was the more difficult responsibility of ensuring that Uganda remained united to create a new democratic and just society. Uganda was still a neo-colonial state (and, I would add here, that it remains so even today), and therefore it was a much longer struggle, and a long-term political work was necessary among the people at the grassroots level. It was in this context, Dani explained, that the Political and Diplomatic Commission which he was heading was much more important than assuming power as President.

Still the question remains: Would Uganda have been “better” today had Rugumayo been elected as President of the UNLF? In the section below I try to address this purely hypothetical question in a rather round-about way, for it is not such a simple question as might appear. Also I want to get back to Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok.

### **Principles before Power**

We all agree that power without principles is a naked sword. It brutalizes its user and its victims. Amin wielded it for eight years. But, and this is an important point, a dictator need not be wicked like Amin to abuse power. Quite ordinary mortals are susceptible to the corruptive influence of unchecked state power.

I believe that there are three main safeguards against the abuse of state power. The first is a system of checks and balance within the political system, sometimes as part of a country's political culture (as in Britain), but often enshrined in a constitution (as in the US). The second is the inalienable right of the people to revolt against a government that abuses state power – as, for example, in much of the Arab world today. And the third is the moral or ethical integrity of those who come to state power. It is this third safeguard that I wish to highlight here because it is the most reliable. Nyerere was an outstanding example of a leader who ruled through his moral authority. Without moral integrity, power can easily get into the head of those who wield it. Without it the constitutional checks are often ineffective, as these become subject to manipulation, as has happened so often not just in Africa but the world over.

Applying this wisdom of past experience to the Uganda situation on the day after the fall of Amin, I would venture to say that had the UNLF survived until its Moshi mandate was properly accomplished (that of a holding the first legitimate post-Amin democratic election), the history of Uganda from 1980 (when the UNLF was overthrown) to our own times might have been different (I believe perhaps “better”) than now. Once again, I say this from the benefit hind-sight.

So it is not a question of Rugumayo being “better” than Binaisa or Lule. Had he succeeded Lule, I believe that he would have been better placed to guide the country to accomplishing the Moshi mandate. I give three reasons for this. One, Rugumayo was present at Moshi, fully participated in the preparations leading to Moshi, was elected Chairman of the NCC, and steered the NCC in a democratic manner. Neither Lule nor Binaisa was at the Moshi Conference and could not be faulted if they did not fully understand the “spirit of Moshi”. Secondly, (and I can say this with knowledge and confidence) Rugumayo is not a “power-man”; power has never been his motivation. So even after the end of the transition phase of the UNLF, the candidacy for Presidency would have been an open-ended matter. Thirdly, and this is the most important reason, Rugumayo was subject to a double discipline – that of the NCC and that of the Maoist movement of which he was a member. Neither Lule nor Binaisa was subject to such stringent disciplines of either the NCC or an internally structured political party.

### **Nabudere's contribution to the science of political economy**

From 1982 to 1989 Nabudere moved to Helsingor in Denmark teaching at a Volk High School. This was one of his most productive years as a scholar. He wrote the over 300-page manuscript called *The Rise and Fall of Money Capital*, which I published in 1990 under an organisation called Africa in Transition which I had founded with my brother Vikash. It is probably the most comprehensive analysis of money since the early writings, among others, of Marx, Engels,

Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg, and Keynes, all of whom came under Nabudere's cutting edge analysis. Nabudere carried out a meticulous historical analysis of the rise of money as money (as distinct from its evolution as capital), and made the prediction that money will eventually overcome capital and then meet its own demise as an instrument of credit. This is what in fact happened in the first decade of the 21st century. Nabudere had already anticipated this during his period of research and writing in Helsingor. This book is one of the most outstanding, and relatively unknown, original contributions of Nabudere to the science of political economy.

### **The Nabudere-Omwony legacy to Uganda's political culture**

This is a vast subject and also most important section of this paper. Here I touch on only a couple of specific aspects (and that too rather briefly). One is the critical relation between politics and morality. Has the moral or spiritual code of a nation anything to do with its politics? More broadly phrased, has morality anything to do at all with politics or do they belong to two separate terrains, running parallel to each other but not meeting?

I take this opportunity to explain the perspective of Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok on this issue as I understand these from long deliberative conversations with them, and from close to thirty years of political collaboration with them. Although in the following paragraphs, I articulate the general views of these two leaders of our movement, I would argue, nonetheless, that the following views were salient aspects of the political morality of our entire revolutionary movement.

First, we held the view that there is no separation between politics and morality, though this was never stated as explicitly as I am doing now. None of us believed that the “the ends justify the means”. We were fully aware of the dangers of holding such a dualist view where politics and morality are placed in two separate spheres. In the Western political-philosophical literature this separation is often attributed (rightly) to the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian thinker, Niccolo Machiavelli (from whom comes the word “Machiavellian”), and sometimes (falsely) to Karl Marx. However, I shall not go into a philosophic discussion here.

What is important to emphasize here is that in our writings and verbal discussions we (meaning members of our revolutionary movement) have always argued that separating politics from morality leads to the dangerous tendency towards political opportunism and Machiavellism, and is seriously detrimental to building a national and global moral order. Some politicians argue that “means” are “only just means” and so any means are justified provided these achieve the desired “ends”. We never agreed to this. For the ends to be justified, the means should be justified in their own right, and in terms of certain moral or ethical codes.

Secondly, and in the context of the above proposition of the unity of ends and means, we took the position, generally, against violence and especially against state violence and state militarism. Both Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok have written extensively on this subject. This does not mean that resort to violence is not legitimate under certain circumstances, but these

circumstances need to be carefully understood, and violence limited to a strict code of ethical norms. Again, limitation of space prevents a fuller explanation of this. I will nonetheless give a brief, but symbolically significant example of this.

After the military coup of May 1980, the UNLF was renamed as UNLF (Anti-dictatorship), and our struggle for the democratic dispensation continued. Following the fraudulent election of December 1980, the Maoist wing of the UNLF (AD) opened up a guerrilla armed front around Mount Elgon. But after only a year or so the armed struggle was abandoned. The leadership (including both the political and the armed wing) debated over it, after a very intensive discussion decided to end the armed struggle. Why? Here I can only summarise our deliberations. In the areas in which we had armed operations, we defended the right of the people to resist state oppression (even by means of arms if necessary), and resist the looting of farms and the meager peasant resources by the state army. But, learning from actual experience on the ground, we decided that for a proper conduct of the armed struggle, one that could be morally defended, and that avoided unnecessary bloodshed, much more work had to be done at the political and organisational levels. It was therefore decided to abandon the armed struggle, and concentrate on political work. The UNLF (AD)'s Maoist wing was thus probably one of the few revolutionary organisations that deliberately ended its armed struggle and decided that a thoroughgoing cultural revolution should *precede* armed struggle (not follow as in the case of China).

There is a second aspect of the “political culture” of the legacy left behind by Nabudere and Omwony that I must explain. This is extremely important. I shall start by giving a couple of examples from their political practice before drawing lessons from them.

I have referred above to the formation of the Ad Hoc committee for the Promotion of Unity Amongst Ugandans under the leadership of Nabudere in 1978. One of the main principles behind it was that we shall not allow differences among the various forces fighting against Amin to undermine our unity. There were our former leaders like Obote who wanted to keep out, for example, the “Kabaka royalists”; and there were others who wanted to keep out “the Oboteists”. Even within our own Ad Hoc Committee there was for example the Changòmbè Group that argued that we must keep out the “reactionaries” from the unity conference and first forge a unity between “the left” and the “fighting forces”. Dani and Omwony fought against that tendency, and so the Moshi Conference included practically all political forces – from the “monarchists” to the “Oboteists” to the “Marxists”.

This is one example. Let me continue this story, and give a second example. At the end of the Moshi conference Yoweri Museveni (who was with the fighting forces within Uganda and therefore was unable to come to Moshi) found himself marginalised. He approached Nyerere. In his *“Sowing the Mustard Seed”*, Museveni recounts that he was then brought in as Deputy Chairman of the UNLF's Military Commission by Nyerere. This is partly true, but the fact is that, in spite of our differences with Museveni, we had thought that he had to be brought into the

UNLF's structures, and it was Nabudere who had then approached the chairman of the Moshi Unity Conference, Semei Nyanzi, and Nyerere to enable this.

Let me give a third example. When President Lule was in power, Nabudere as the head of the Political and Diplomatic Commission had tried his level best to persuade Lule to make peace with Obote in the "spirit of Moshi". But Lule was determined to keep Obote out. Even then, when Lule was overthrown, Dani did not rejoice over it. In fact, when Nyerere asked Lule to go to Dar es Salaam following the episode, it was Dani who accompanied him to Dar.

The point of these three episodes is that it was part of the Nabudere-Omwony Ojwok contribution to the "political culture" of Uganda that the "unity" of the people and their leaders must be placed above political differences between them in the struggle for democracy and national independence against fascist forces (such as Amin) and pro-imperialist forces (what we call the "comprador forces").

### **Nabudere, Omwony and the "grass-rooting" strategy**

I have already given an account of how and why the UNLF (AD) had abandoned the armed struggle in 1981. Some years later, our renewed political struggle was refined and called the "grass-rooting" strategy. In the mid-1990s Dani returned to Mbale and Omwony to Karamoja (and other numerous cadres in their respective communities) as part of this "grass-rooting" strategy. When Nabudere actively participated in the making of a "new" Constitution of Uganda under the NRM government as a member of the Constituent Assembly; when Rugumayo joined first the diplomatic corps and later as Cabinet Minister; and when Omwony-Ojwok joined the NRM – all these were part of our "grass-rooting" strategy broadly conceptualised within the context of a new situation then prevailing.

Towards the turn of the century Nabudere began to devote his energies to the larger agenda of encouraging a pan-African consciousness among the younger generation of Ugandans and Africans, and, as he described, a "new universal order based on basic pluralist-humanist principles", in which Africa would play a distinctive role.

He founded the Marcus Garvey Pan-Afrikan Institute in Mbale, later to evolve as a University of which he was the first Chancellor-Designate. In this capacity, he wrote: '...the model that I am advancing here is a direct reflection of our general experience under the global capitalist system and a reasoned response to its impact, which we can refer to as a "post-capitalist synthesis."' He advocated 'the restorative governance and justice' aimed at restoring social relations in society and establishing 'new balances that can enable people in the communities to regain control over their lives.' Democracy in this sense involves 'listening to voices of everyone who have normally been excluded from decision-making'. He was particularly emphatic on the restoration of African languages in popular discourse, because the unfamiliarity with colonial languages denied the African people a meaningful inclusion in the democratic processes. *Afrikology*, he argued, requires scholars, students and practitioners 'to liaise with the language communities in

understanding what they know and mean'. Going beyond Africa he proposed 'The horizontal restorative epistemology' -- worldviews (cosmologies) that are responsive to nature and that take into account 'our cosmic relations with nature'. (See his *The Crisis of Modernity and the Rise of Post-Traditionalism in Africa* (1998); *Afrikology, Philosophy and Wholeness* (2011) and *Afrikology and Transdisciplinarity: A Restorative Epistemology* (2012).

Let me end this section by saying that I believe that President Museveni recognises the very important contributions made by Dani Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok to the political culture of Uganda, even when he had differences with them on some critical strategic issues. This recognition was reflected in Museveni's excellent funeral orations for both Omwony and Dani, whom he described as "comrade and patriot".

## **Conclusion**

The political-cultural legacy left behind by Nabudere and Omwony Ojwok may be summarised in four succinct points:

1. That there is no division between politics and morality, or between "ends and means". Just ends do not justify unjust means. Means, including the use of violence, must be justified in terms of an ethical code that recognises the unity of the human race and its unique integration with Nature.
2. That the people of Uganda must place the UNLF principles of "Unity, Democracy, National Independence, and Social progress" (UDNIS, in short) above their differences – differences that the Empire uses to divide and rule us. That all democratic forces within the nation must be united in a principled manner in struggle against out-and-out fascist and comprador forces.
3. That the principles of restorative governance and justice aimed at restoring social relations in society must replace the present anarchic and outmoded forms of democracy. This involves "listening to voices of everyone who have normally been excluded from decision-making".
4. That we owe this not only to Uganda and to Africa but to whole humanity.

In concluding, I repeat the questions I raised in the introduction: as Uganda celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> year of independence, it may be pertinent to ask: who and where are our post-independence heroes? Or have we produced no great figures over the last 50 years?

Readers may answer this question for themselves. My own case is clear enough.

Yash Tandon

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