


The African Church confronting the cosmic powers

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This article focusses on the church in Africa, dwelling with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit to confront the cosmic powers. Using the African 'circular' patterns, God's presence with his people from the Old Testament times through the New Testament, an argument is presented that the African church possesses the potency to confront the cosmic powers that impinge upon the human dignity, with intentions of breaking down the community of Christ. The circle is presented as a force building towards community cohesiveness and, therefore enhancing the communality for strength against eternal forces that are aimed to destroy the church. The secret of the victory of the community over the cosmic powers is through God's presence with his people, communality (togetherness) of his followers, and the empowerment by the Holy Spirit. God made his presence visible through *shekinah*, tabernacle, miracles of provision for their needs, sacrificial rituals, temple and prophetic leadership. The article concludes that God has always opted to commune with his people, because he himself is a communal God. He is in community, the trinitarian God dwelling together with and among his people. During the uncertain times of confrontation with cosmic powers, he has been at the centre while his people are encircling him and look towards him as a centre of attraction.

Intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary implications: Understanding the context of African church, confronted with cosmic powers, the church is encouraged to understand the power of the presence of God. With anthropological concept of a circle, one understand the importance of community as a way of being empowered to stand the challenges of cosmic powers.

Keywords: God; church; cosmic powers; community; power; demons.

Introduction

The church as a community in communion with God and itself is the better explanation of the *ecclesia* as taught in the Bible. In this article, the ideal African community, together with its challenges, especially the confrontation with cosmic powers, is theologically explored for better understanding of what the church is all about. The African communal structure is used as a foundation object lesson for this understanding (Williams 2013:132). Thereafter, the argument unfolds that the power of the community (church) is based on this circularity (Mbiti 1969b:163), the presence of God that historically was represented by *shekinah*, tabernacle, miracles and the temple. The continuing power of the community is derived from its communality, which is threatened by cosmic powers. Both the Old and the New Testament are appealed to in order to reinforce that the church is the alternate and empowered community with Christ at her centre to provide this power against these cosmic powers. The bottom line is the alternate community, the church, which derives her victory over cosmic powers through faith in the presence of God, communitarian relationship with God, and the dependence on the *charisms* imparted by the Spirit.

The circle: The power of community

Africans perceive the world in circular movements and shapes (Mbiti 1969b:163). Formation of circles in communal gatherings, around the fire, the meal dish, dances and architectural designs such as huts, kraals among others all tell the story that: 'There is supernatural power in the circle, the curved, and the round.'¹

1. Across the 54 African countries and the diversity of societies, cultures and communities, there are similarities in the role dance plays: in religious rituals; marking rites of passage, including initiations to adulthood and weddings; as part of communal ceremonies, including harvest celebrations, funerals, rituals and ceremonies. Circle in African Dance (03 July 2019) <http://www.thecircleway.net/articles/2019/7/3/circle-in-african-dance> (viewed 15 June 2021).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The circle has no beginning or end, therefore representing the immortal and eternal part (absolute reality). Africans considered the circle to represent God,² having the beginning but no end, just as his creation is (Mbiti 1969a:23). Although many religions in the world are centripetal, 'Christianity is centrifugal – it breaks out' (Chesterton 2009:47). The centrifugalism of the circle is not static or permanent. It is dynamic and can change size, shape or surroundings.

We normally hear of the people or the church around the Word, around Christ, or around the Holy Spirit. This is the first step of re-looking at the church around a particular object. The concept 'around' suggests sitting in a circle or seating in such a way that an object is in the middle and it is surrounded. It carries the meaning of encircling or interconnecting. This speaks of circling around gazing into or towards a particular object. It is from this perspective that the church as the community is where believers assemble, proclaim Christ, and remember his atoning death. Nolan (2006) expresses the communality that:

Like all families, God's family will meet around a table for meals. Hence the centrality of meals in Jesus' life, his 'table fellowship' as it is sometimes called. What also follows is the sharing that is characteristic of family life. (p. 87)

Although the table is always considered rectangular, in some cases it is oval or circular in shape to enable encircling around it. It is a meal on it that is the centre of attraction, not necessarily its shape. The emphasis here is an African way of sitting around as opposed to the shape of the table. All who belong to this new community around Christ are 'invited to his table and may be called children of God' (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:575). Christ is the centre gazed upon by all those sitting around the circle or a table. He is the object of attention. The winds of four corners of the earth (Revelation 7:1-4) refer to the whole earth which in this context idealise this encircling. The ordinary or physical rotatory motion from any of the four winds inevitably results into a circular form. These are cardinal directions with four main points of compass (east, west, south and north) with ordinal or intercardinal directions in between to make a full circle. These 'four winds' encompass all directions or the four corners of the earth (George & George 2014:167) and is figuratively used to describe the whole earth or heaven. The philosopher, G.K. Chesterton, extends the thoughts of four directions by illustrating it with the cross. As far as he can demonstrate, the cross has at its heart a collision and a contradiction yet can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Its paradox is that its centre can grow without changing. 'The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers' (Chesterton 2009:47–48).

The meticulous settlement positions of the 12 tribes around the tabernacle during the wilderness wanderings reflect the 'around' or a 'circle' concept discussed here. God's instruction

2. Bailey speaks of the African Genetic Seed and the whole *Internal Unity* consisting of unchanging sameness + internal linkages of Coherence, Consistency, Compatibility, Balance and Harmony. These ingredients inside the Circle are what constitute a *Sacred Circle of Wholism* – a wholeness representing the way things are with respect to God's plan. That Wholism speaks to its own stability by maintaining order – by its Circle having no beginning or end – by its parts, each significant, turning around one another – and by every part working together (Joseph A. Bailey, African Cosmic 'me/we' Circle of Wholism (25 April 2017). <https://theivoice.com/african-cosmic-mewe-circle-of-wholism/>).

to Moses gave specifics concerning the pattern of wilderness camp. According to Numbers 2, the encampment layout according to tribes was settled together on each of the camp's sides. For instance, the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun settled on the eastern side of the tabernacle. The tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Gad were settled on the southern side of the tabernacle. The tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin were on the west, while those of Dan, Asher and Naphtali were on the northern side. Each tribe was under their leader's banner or what is commonly known as a standard, which was like the modern-day national flag or code of arms. The tribe of Levi was specifically chosen to serve the nation at and through the tabernacle. From their tribe, there were clan leaders leading the Levites settling around the tabernacle. For instance, in the West was the clan of Gershon, the North was occupied by the clan of Merari, while the South was settled by the clan of Kohath. Moses together with Aaron's clan occupied the East of the tabernacle.

God in community with his people

The tribal flags point to the real banner of God, Jesus Christ. The four faces and the four colours speak of him. He is the standard for his people (*Jehovah Nissi*), the central figure surrounded by his people. God camps with His people. It has always been his plan to dwell with them. He made this visible through *shekinah*, tabernacle, miracles of provision for their needs, sacrificial rituals, Temple and prophetic leadership. These manifestations had the purpose of God making his presence, guidance, provision and protection known to his people.

The *shekinah* was the symbol of God's dwelling or presence with or among the children of Israel during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. This word, *shekinah* was coined by the Jewish rabbis as an extra-biblical expression to signify God's dwelling among his people. *Shekinah* signified a divine visitation of the presence or dwelling of God on earth among his people. It was in Succoth during the wilderness wanderings when the Lord appeared in a cloudy pillar by day and fiery pillar by night. This daily or nightly pillar was constantly present with God's people (Ex 13:20–22). The pillar was not only for guiding but also indicated the presence of Yahweh at a particular place (Hyatt 1971:150). It was from this pillar of cloud that God's voice could be heard through Moses. There is a biblical injunction that this pillar was not only visible to the Hebrews but also to the Egyptians (Ex 14:24–25). The glory of God was visible to neighbouring nations during the sojourn and settlement in the promised land. Its presence was enough to convince His enemies that this God was not someone to be resisted.

The second symbol of God's presence with and among his people was a portable sanctuary called the tabernacle, and as the Old Testament scholar Wood (1970:151) refers: 'There was need for it to be central, for, being God's own sanctuary, it represented His presence among the people'. During the wilderness wanderings, it represented God's presence among his people but later after Israel's settlement on the

land, the tabernacle situated in Shiloh was a unifying instrument of the different tribes.

The visibility and symbolism of the tabernacle is loaded with interpretation with some eschatological fulfilment in Solomon's temple and Jesus Christ himself. It continued for ages as the symbol of 'the divine provision of a place of worship and witness' (Olford 1978:33). The fundamental meaning is God's presence, which is to be sought and experienced in an act of worship, a place where people could meet with God (Clements 1978:66–70).

Miracles were the demonstration of God's provision and sufficiency to supply when people were in need. He turned the bitter water into the sweet water at Elim (Ex 15:27, Nm 33:9). Through their wandering period, He provided them with manna and quail to satisfy their hunger (Ex 16). When there was no water, he supplied them from the rock (Ex 17, Nm 20). When they sinned and were bitten by snakes, he provided wisdom for bronze snake to heal their wounds (Nm 21). These miracles are the evidence that God's people are under his care, guidance and provision. There were many other miracles during and after 40 years of wilderness wanderings that show that God is always closer and with his people to provide for their both physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

The presence of God continued to manifest through the temple built as a continuation of the tabernacle. This was brought forth by King Solomon, and it became the symbol of the presence of Yahweh in the midst of the people. After the nation had settled peacefully on the land, priesthood established, nationhood solidified, monarchy firmly established, the presence and provision of and by God had to be perpetuated. The focus moved from the tabernacle in Shiloh to the temple in Jerusalem. 'The temple became the symbol of Yahweh's presence among His people' (Resane 2017:19). The people continued to strengthen their faith in God by participating in temple rituals, hence the presence of the temple assured them of God's continuing presence and provision intentions for his people. 'Like an invisible monarchy, God dwells amidst his people in the temple' (Van der Meer 1966:25).

Prophetic leadership was also the manifestation of God's presence among his people. The voice of the prophet was regarded as the voice of God. The prophet was called upon for the divine intervention, because a prophet 'was thought of as someone who received divine messages which were then spoken to those to whom the prophet was sent' (Miller 1987:23). Prophets in Israel were inseparable from the divine exertion or presence. Some such as Samuel, had a cultic centre (Rama), while some were operating from their contexts with no specified delineation. This diversity of contexts determined the content of their message. For instance, Jeremiah and Isaiah were the city prophets, while Amos, Hosea and others were country prophets (VanGemeren 1996:41–43). Critical to this discussion is that the voice of the prophet was theocentric, demonstrating God's presence in and with the prophets.

When coming to the New Testament, *shekinah* is Jesus Christ as the habitation of God's glory (Jn 1:14). It is in Christ that all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col 2:9). Hamilton (1999:236) captures it well stating that 'God, who once dwelt among His people in an edifice, now dwells among us in Jesus Christ.' Christ is the visible manifestation of God, the real presence of God here on earth. Just as God dwelt in the 'tabernacle' before the Temple was built, so did he dwell in Jesus. This notion is expressed by Moltmann (1996:261) as 'God's indwelling in the Temple (his *Shekinah*) represents God's real presence in space, while every interruption of working time on the sabbath represents his real presence in time.'

The God who became flesh dwells (tabernacles, tents) among his people. He went through *kenotic* processes to take the human form so that he can have full sympathy and empathy with his people. God opted to lower himself in order to identify with his creation. The fullness of his deity had to be empirically experienced by those he created (Col 1:19; 2:9).

Eschatologically, the world is waiting for the full experience of the full dwelling of God among his people. The redeemed of the Lord (*ecclesia*) continues to come to God and wait expectantly to see God as per Christ's dictum in Matthew 5:8 that they will 'see God'. This will be a time of *fruitio Dei et se invicem in Deo* –when they find themselves in God and enjoy themselves in God. At his advent, all the eyes shall see him, including the people who crucified him on the cross. This God in flesh will be realised as a real *eschaton* – God's living presence interpenetrating all things, becoming 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28). As Moltmann (2000:50) asserts: 'we shall see, hear, feel, smell, and taste God'. The God who historically took pleasure in dwelling with his people will eschatologically do so. This evolved historically and it continues into the future. It is vital to associate oneself with Torrance (1965:192–193) that:

The Church was formed in history as God called and entered into communion with his people and in and through them embodied and worked out by mighty acts of grace his purpose of love which he brought at last to its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. (pp. 192–193)

The trinitarian God is resident with the universal church community. Indeed, 'The triune God is a God in community, rich in inner and outward relationships' (Moltmann 2000:309). The mutual relationship is because of experienced grace of God the community is partaking in and sharing of with those outside its jurisdiction. It is the relationship of joy, hope and love where mutuality is the reason for the fullness experienced by faith in Jesus Christ.

Empowered community confronting demons

One of the most difficult subjects treated in systematic theology is demonology, the study on demons or evil angels, despite that the Bible refers to the reality, power and schemes, both of God's holy angels and of Satan and his hosts (Moreau 1990:96). According to O'Donovan (2000:201), Africa is the land of the spirits, and that missionaries testimonies attest to

the fact that pastoral or missional work in Africa is confronted with demonic powers or cosmic powers. Palmer (2015:41) attests to the fact that 'the biblical worldview, like the African worldview, presupposes the existence of a world of spirits.' This notion is furthered by Kunhiyop (2012:53) that the world is permeated with divinities and spirits who can have positive or negative effects on every aspect of life. From the evangelical point of view, the truth is affirmed by Adeyemo (1997:38) that traditional religions are thriving, libations and sacrifices are offered to demons, and worst of all many African leaders seek help from the ancestors in times of crises. There are countless stories of mystical powers out there, of unseen forces in every village and city throughout Africa (Gehman 2005:85). Pastoral training and formation hardly makes reference to demonic realities. Our curriculum on angelology focusses on good angels that serve as God's special agents to guard Christian lives. The debate about the reality and existence of demons always revolves around their origin and their identity. The general epistemology regarding this is that demons are created angels by God and thus were, originally good, but sinned and thus became evil (Erickson 1999:149). They collaborate with Satan as helpers in his programme of opposing God and his people.

The reality of 'demon' has been in existence among the peoples of the earth for thousands of years. The word *demon* contains the Greek root *dia* or *daiomai*, meaning 'to divide, to tear or to portion out' (Koch 1978:23). We all know how Jesus was confronted by *demoniacs* in the New Testament. One learns how these demonic powers unseat and unsettle human sanity in order to make a person psychokinetic or telepathic – the disguises of supernatural powers. Dickason (1978: 156–157) alludes to the fact that demons 'seem to seek desperately some body to inhabit' and regard humans control as 'one of the best means to accomplish their destructive and deceptive purposes.' But the demonic activities are acknowledged as 'it is believed that bad spirits inflict injury and cause accidents and suffering' (Kunhiyop 2012:53). This is a broad acceptance within the African worldview. Nothing happens by accident and some human or superpower is responsible for every death. Every dangerous phenomenon such as disease, lightning strikes, accidents of any kind, natural hazards such as floods, famine, pandemics among others are all originated by either a witch or some supernatural power. Turaki (1997:41) expands this by stating that 'African concepts of reality and destiny are deeply rooted in the spirit world. All social and spiritual phenomena are governed by the laws of spiritual mystery'.

The church is the empowered community coexisting with cosmic powers within the disarrayed communities. The redeemed of the Lord resemble unity with all other people, for 'we share the same essence of humanity, and in this communality, we experience a unity' (Williams 2013:21). Whatever the world communities experience, the church also experiences, although in a different level or perspective. The church is not immune or bulletproof from the arrows directed by and from the cosmic powers. The cosmic powers are the strongholds in the spiritual realm, claiming dominance

through territorial spirits or demons with some goals of embracing wicked behaviours and ungodly ideas. That is why Dickason (1978:169) highlights the fact that 'The activities of demons are quite diverse but always directed toward the promotion of unrighteousness and ultimate destruction of that which is good'.

Humans are usually the instruments to dominate a sphere of cosmos – individuals, communities, creatures among others. The evil spirits can overtake human minds by collecting ideas that are in consonance with Satan's strategies of destroying human life quality. 'Spirits are also said to possess and influence human beings for their own purposes' (Kunhiyop 2012:53). One common sight in South Africa is what some people call 'highway hobos' – these are mentally disturbed people occupying the sideways of the freeways, mostly using bridges and culverts as a haven for unfriendly weather conditions such as cold and rains. Some of them have mental illness and one cannot strike an intelligible conversation with them as they live in 'another world'. The person possessed may have unusual strength (Mk 5:2–4), may act in bizarre ways such as wearing no clothes and living among the tombs rather than in a house (Lk 8:27) or may engage in self-destructive behaviour (Kunhiyop 2012: 149–150). These are the victims who end up with some form of schizophrenia or mentally debased conditions. These persons show some signs of cosmic attacks and disturbances against peace in the minds of human beings.

Practices such as magic, fortune telling, occultism, witchcraft among others are irreconcilable with Christian ethics (Theron 1996:109). The bottom line is that African ecclesiology faces these demonic forces. For instance, the African chief influenced by the witch doctor can exert his influence by refusing a church leader a piece of land to build the church. In some cases, the church can be built, and the structure be destroyed by the strange fire, lightning or thunderstorm. The community of believers can sometimes be attacked through fierce tribal opposition, strange spiritual or emotional oppressions among others. This is the time when the God-empowered community should stand together in unity and in communion with the trinitarian God to nullify these powers through faith and intensive prayers. It is therefore important to know the enemy and his tactics. Understanding demonology and demonic activities is crucial to spiritual warfare.

The Old Testament acknowledges cosmic powers in the form of magicians, spiritists and witches, although it did not approve of them. Gwamna (2014:131–132) helps in describing them as sorcerers (people who use charms and spells), magicians (people engaged in secret arts), enchanters and charmers (engage in witchcraft and interpretations of dreams), diviners and false prophets (see false visions, engage in idolatries and the delusions of their minds, experts in charms and snake charmers), and sinners who will be punished.

The reality of cosmic powers is acknowledged by Paul's famous Ephesians 6:1–20. Reference to the armour implies that church life is a battlefield, what is always referred to as

spiritual warfare. The community life, although empowered by the Spirit, is a warfare, a struggle, hence the Pauline statement: 'We wrestle.' This is an ongoing battle, and the church as a community resides in a world which is 'a battleground, is a place in which we literally have to fight for our souls, to fight for our eternal welfare' (Lloyd-Jones 1986:23). Attacks may come from within through pseudo-doctrines, and externally through demonic activities.

Paul extends his teaching that the external attacks are real. We do not fight against enemies of flesh and blood, but against 'rulers', 'authorities', 'cosmic powers of this present darkness', and 'spiritual forces of evil' (Eph 6:12). There are 'cosmic powers of this present darkness' at work in the world, opposing God's good purposes, opposing Jesus' sacrifice to redeem the world. There are indeed demonic powers that promote injustice, coldness of heart, fear, and despises and abuses God's creation. At the end, these powers depersonalise and dehumanise human beings who were made in God's image.

There is a general acceptance that even in Africa, mystical powers such as magic, sorcery and witchcraft continue to affect everyone for better or for worse (Gehman 2005:85). The bottom line is that like throughout the world, witchcraft is widespread in Africa. In exploring the extent of African spirituality, Bourdillon (2000), together with co-researchers expounds the subject of witchcraft as follows:

The basic belief is that certain people have special, unnatural powers to harm others, and that they use these powers in perverted ways that contradict the values or norms of society. Witchcraft by definition is thoroughly evil, and a witch is a person who practices witchcraft. (p. 176)

Demonic activities can operate as occultism. Occultism as 'a religion, primarily following a path either opposite of the God of the Bible or ignoring the God of the Bible, worshipping various deities or man himself' (Els & Jonker 2005:5). Satanic activities are demonic and occultic cosmic powers fighting against the church community, calling for church to aggressively engage in spiritual warfare. These powers act in some very subtle ways. Apart from disruptions in social structures such as poverty, animism, syncretism, cultural confusions and mental disturbances, there is a subtle way they use and that is the false doctrine. Samples (2017:215–216) point out that 'heresies and false doctrine are sometimes associated with demonic influence (Tm 1 4:1–2).' False doctrines are the distortions of the Bible truths. They are the anti-God or anti-Christ utterances that undermine the God of the Bible and Christ. They speak against the Holy Spirit, and sometimes devalue the Holy Spirit. Their main areas of attack are God or Christ, and his church. Their primary purpose is to deceive humankind with some supernatural spiritual counterfeit. They promote a disregard for human dignity and life sanctity. False doctrines are deceptive but for the naïve, they sound genuine and pure. False doctrines are always extra-biblical by adding, subtracting, contradicting or nullifying the biblical doctrines. The main vehicles of their ideology are mass literature promotion – soft or hard, mass

media (radio, television and websites), and of course word of mouth recruitment strategies

Heresies and distortions of truth often come about when people are out of fellowship with God and with each other and refuse to be under the covering and correction of a church body. They fail and fall short of the Apostle Paul, who after 14 years in the ministry, met with the leadership in Jerusalem and asked that they examine what he taught. He did this *for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain* (Gl 2:2). The genuine teachers of the truth are transparent to be evaluated, scrutinised and assessed by the church and those in ordained and recognised church leadership positions. Proclivities to reject this kind of submission may be a false plan from cosmic powers in order to destroy one's orderly life within the community where one receives strength and protection. One's knowledge of truth may be marred by accepting the twisted doctrine through false teachers. These false teachers are used by demons to 'generally deny or cloud the genuine deity, the genuine humanity, or the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ with its appropriation by faith' (Dickason 1978:177).

The church is cautioned that 'rather than blown over by gale-force winds of global change, churches are to be empowered by the Spirit to chart the course towards the coming Kingdom' (Dearborn 2000:179). The cosmic powers use heretic persuasions to pluck people away from the circle (community of believers) by either replacing the object (Christ) at the centre of the circle or distracting circle members to take away their eyes from the focus at the centre to something else out of the circle. The out of the circle distraction is the removal or dislodging a person from the community focussed on Christ, so that the support structure can collapse for the member, consequently be destroyed. They despise the 'the cultural values of communal life, guarding against individualistic tendencies' (Karamaga 1993:28). These heretic persuasions have proclivity towards subordinationism – the ideology that rejects Christ's deity by holding to the view that Christ is subordinate in nature or essence to the Father (Samples 2017:45–46). There are heretic voices in the world and they express themselves through false doctrines and false hopes. They flourish and produce many results, as Lloyd-Jones (1986:134) asserts: 'They can make people feel very happy, they can give them release and deliverance from worry and anxiety'. This is a cautionary statement alluding that inclusivist systems in socio-ecclesial systems should bring Christians together, encouraging a coexistent communal sharing and harmony. Doctrinal error or heresy can be potent enough to dislodge one from both the centre and the circle – Christ and the Church.

Conclusion

The church in the world is an alternate community because it is empowered by God. It is 'the group that experiences God's story with humankind' (Gregersen 2000:183). From the time of creation, God has always opted to commune with his people because he himself is a communal God. He is in community – a *perichoretical* relationship of the trinitarian

God together with and among his people, the church. 'God will not be without his Church; the Church is nothing without God' (Torrance 1965:192). During the uncertain times, he has been at the centre while his people, the community of believers are encircling him and look towards him as a centre of attraction. Historical facts of God making his dwelling among the people can never be disputed or refuted. Both the Old and the New Testament are appealed to in order to reinforce that the church is the alternate and empowered community with Christ at her centre to provide this power against these cosmic powers His presence among his people had been symbolised by the *shekinah*, tabernacle, miracles and the temple – all prefigures of Christ of the New Testament. As an alternate community, the church is the empowered community always fighting against the cosmic powers. Torrance (1965:195–196) is correct while stating that 'It was Church as act of God, as the community called into being by the Word of God, and constituted through union and communion with him.' It is the presence of God with and among his people that *the gates of hades* fail to prevail against the community. Community life is better found and experienced in and through the church community.

The battle of cosmic powers is engaged in a spiritual, not physical battle; its source is not ultimately human. It is not the battle with flesh and blood. It goes beyond any social association or affiliation because Christian spirituality is not measured by political and economic power or social status. As it is a spiritual battle, it therefore needs a spiritual arsenal that is divinely provided. Community life is a warfare.

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