

Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady: A Religious Education Reformist in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century

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Abstract: This study examines important sources that related to Syed Shaykh b. Ahmad Alhady. The reasons for choosing him are he was among the first persons to be able to bring about reforms in Malaya and was the most vocal reformist in Malaya during his time, when compared to his contemporaries such as Shaykh Tahir b. Jalaluddin, Hj. Abbas b. Taha and Mohd. Yunus b. Abdul Hamid. The objective of the writing is to seek out materials which are deemed relevant and promising sources for the study of Syed Shaykh. The research mainly uses library and archive research methods to identify sources concerning Syed Shaykh. It is found that there are several works on Syed Shaykh but almost all placed excessive attention on his thoughts on education. Writing on the sources for the study of Syed Shaykh is considered meaningful as no other authors have been known to have done anything similar. Besides, this study may provide a fast access to the available sources and they are feasible to all, especially those who are interested to study on him.

Key words: Syed Shaykh • Sources • Reformist • Modernist • Novelist • Journalist • Education

INTRODUCTION

Between 1882 and 1906, the Europeans dominated many regions of the world, i.e. France in North Africa, Britain in India and Africa, Russia in Central Asia and Holland in Southeast Asia. The waning state of the Ottomans stirred reform movements in several countries such as Egypt and India, led by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) respectively [1]. Explicit opposition towards European colonialists began in the early 1870s. A volatile reaction reached its peak when the British occupied Egypt in September 1882. In fact, the British occupation was not opposed by its colony alone. It also raised objections from other European powers and the Ottomans. This was because the occupation had an impact on their vested interests in Egypt, i.e. on their financial, administrative,

national and international affairs. The British consequently created a labyrinthine conflict that involved many different parties; among the European powers themselves and between Egypt and the Ottomans [1].

In Egypt, the British occupation generated self-appraisal among the educated Muslims to include al-Afghani and his disciple, Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), on the weakness of Islamic institution. They all saw the need for serious reform. The religious reforms needed to be designed to suit the needs of modern realities. Among the Malay scholars in Malaya who showed a great interest in the ideas of reform and modernization as disseminated by al-Afghani, 'Abduh and Ahmad Khan was Syed Shaykh b. Ahmad Alhady (1867-1934). It is probably right to say that his interest in the modernists' ideas was associated with his opinion that reform could improve the inhabitants of Malaya.

Review of Sources for the Study of Syed Shaykh Ahmad

Alhady: Writings on Syed Shaykh could be categorised into four different types. The first category is historical in nature, which presents Syed Shaykh as “a Muslim reformist or reformer within the historical development of Malay nationalism.” The second category may describe Syed Shaykh as a Malay novelist and journalist, whose writings covered a wide-ranging of topics on social, religious and educational issues. The third category discusses ‘Abduh’s influence on Malays in Malaya. It presents his roles and contributions in Malaya. The last category refers to writings which focus on Syed Shaykh within a socio-historical framework [2]. It could be discerned from here that these works on Syed Shaykh focussed on two major themes of writing; firstly on Syed Shaykh and his thoughts and secondly, on Syed Shaykh’s effort on reforms.

One of the studies on Syed Shaykh is an unpublished bachelor’s degree academic exercise written by Ku Mohd. Faizal Ku Hashim, entitled *Kitab Alam Perempuan Karya Syed Syeikh al-Hadi: Satu Kajian Transliterasi Dari Halaman 1 Hingga 56* (Book of Women’s World by Syed Syeikh Alhady: A Transliteration Study from Page 1 to 56). Almost the entire academic exercise is a transliteration of some selected pages of Syed Shaykh’s work entitled *Kitab Alam Perempuan* (Book of Women’s World) [3]. The academic exercise offers a brief summary of Syed Shaykh’s work that contains issues pertaining to knowledge, education for girls, emancipation of women and their progress. In this respect, Malay women must have access to learning opportunities in order for the Malays to be well developed into a knowledgeable society. In fact, education for women was very much critical for the progress and development of any nation [4].

A similar nature of work was done by Mahathir Mohamed Ali for his bachelor’s degree academic exercise entitled *Kitab Alam Perempuan Karya Syed Syeikh al-Hadi: Satu Kajian Transliterasi Dari Halaman 56 Hingga 113* (Book of Women’s World by Syed Syeikh Alhady: A Transliteration Study from Page 56 to 113). It is also a transliteration of selected pages of Syed Shaykh’s book, *Kitab Alam Perempuan*. The work discusses the importance of learning for women, home schooling, its appropriateness for a boy and girl and several important subjects concerning education for children [5]. The concept of wearing a veil (*al-hijab/purdah*) is also an important subject matter of

Kitab Alam Perempuan [3]. Syed Shaykh debated on the obligation of wearing veil as practiced by the Malay female. They made it as part of Islamic law owing to their contacts with Muslims of other races, especially the Arabs who firmly held to the practice. All the four major schools of Islam, the Hanafite, Shafi’ite, Malikiite and Hanbalite, unanimously agree that woman’s face and hands are permissible to be uncovered [3,5].

Another important work on Syed Shaykh is the writing of Ibrahim Abu Bakar entitled *Islamic Modernism in Malaya: The Life and Thoughts of Sayid Syekh al-Hadi 1867-1934*. In the work, the historical biography of Syed Shaykh is described effectively and the account of his life covers Syed Shaykh’s residency from Malacca to Penang [2]. Ibrahim gives a long explanation pertinent to Syed Shaykh’s religious, educational, social and political thoughts, which describes Syed Shaykh as a Malay modernist. The description is associated with the conditions of the Malays who were behind in term of progress and who were less successful than the other ethnic groups in Malaya.

Ibrahim specifically discusses the position and role of reason in Syed Shaykh’s thoughts in his article, *Three Muslim Modernists’ Thoughts on Reason in Islam*. It also documents the thoughts of two other Muslim modernists, Ahmad Khan and ‘Abduh, on the faculty of reason. In the work, Ibrahim posited that the three modernists placed great stress on making use of reason. They called upon all Muslims to utilize reason and to eradicate the practice of blind imitation (*taqlid buta*) [6]. According to the modernists, reason is essential in contemplating the universe and understanding the Almighty God. They were up against the Muslim traditionalists who completely adopt the teachings of past authoritative Muslims. Ibrahim highlights the emphasis Syed Shaykh gave on the faculty of reason, which was rejected by the Muslim traditionalists. Islam, as maintained by Syed Shaykh, is a religion of rationality and reason as it recognizes the position of reason in human life [6].

In his article, *The Divine Decree and Determination in al-Hadi’s Thoughts*, Ibrahim considers the question of religion in the thoughts of Syed Shaykh. It explains Syed Shaykh’s stance towards the doctrine of divine decree and determination (*qada’* and *qadar*). Syed Shaykh, as asserted by Ibrahim, was convinced that the reasons for Muslims’ decadence and backwardness were attributed to their misunderstanding of the concept of *qada’* and *qadar*. The doctrine, according to many Muslims, is

essentially anchored in the belief that Islam recognizes determinism and fatalism as understood by the Jabarites. Accordingly, Syed Shaykh called the Muslims' attention to the true principles of both divine decree and its relation to human's own effort. Ibrahim suggests that Syed Shaykh's concept of human choice and man's effort corresponds to that of Ash'arites' [7]. The discussion on this aspect in the article is very useful to identify the religious dogma of Syed Shaykh's thoughts.

Syed Shaykh is *Sayed Shaikh al-Hadi dan Pendapat2 Nya Mengenai Kemajuan Kaum Perempuan Sebagai Tersiar Didalam Majallah al-Ikhwan* (Sayed Shaikh Alhady and His Opinions on the Progress of Women as Published in *al-Ikhwan*) written by Marina Merican is also promising to provide materials concerning Syed Shaykh. Much of the works were devoted to problems of women in *al-Ikhwan* for therein is found much attention given to the subject in the magazine along with religious issues and social problems. Marina considers Syed Shaykh as a feminist and he was at the leading edge of feminism in Malaya, as his monthly column in *al-Ikhwan* entitled *Alam Perempuan* (Women's World), dealt with several central themes of women's issues. The most interesting part of Marina's work is the discussion on the impact of Syed Shaykh's magazine, *al-Ikhwan* (The Comrade) on the society and the Malay community in particular. She maintained that Syed Shaykh's call for emancipation of women and education for girls was probably not directed to the Muslims in Malaya alone. She argues that the local born Arabs (*Arab Peranakan*) of Malaya, especially of Penang, where *al-Ikhwan* was published, were extremely critical of women's emancipation. In addition, there was no information about the reaction of the community towards Syed Shaykh's ideas on women's liberation [8].

As mentioned before, Syed Shaykh was not only described as a reformist but he was also a prolific journalist. Articles contained in a work entitled *Syed Syeikh al-Hadi: Cendekia dan Sasterawan Ulung* (Syed Syeikh Alhady: A Scholar and Laureate) presented Syed Shaykh's works as a journalist. The most significant work is done by Fadhullah Jamil entitled *Syed Syeikh al-Hadi: Pemikirannya Terhadap Islam dan Perubahan* (Syed Syeikh Alhady: His Thoughts on Islam and Changes). It expounds Syed Shaykh's thoughts on education, faculty of reason, women's emancipation, superstition (*khurafat*), innovation (*bida'ah*), mystical order (*tariqat*), usury and religious worship. The work acknowledges his mission in

reforming the existing educational system through his ideas and concept of modern Arabic school (*madrrasah*), integrated knowledge and more education for women [9]. Almost all articles in the respective work credit his novels for disseminating ideas on reforming education in Malaya. The articles also illustrate some of the external factors that influenced Syed Shaykh's thoughts, his role in the development of the Malay language and his views on women's liberation.

Another work that similarly presents Syed Shaykh as a journalist and novelist is *Syed Syeikh al-Hadi: Sasterawan Progresif Melayu* (Syed Syeikh Alhady: A Progressive Malay Laureate) by Talib Samat. He examines every aspect pertinent to Syed Shaykh ranging from his personal background to his attitude and thoughts. In this writing, Talib gives readers an idea about Syed Shaykh's remarkable contribution to the field of Malay journalism and Muslim intellectuality. According to Talib, Syed Shaykh genuinely appreciates knowledge, which was clearly depicted through his articles in *al-Imam* (The Leader), *al-Ikhwan* (The Comrade) and *Saudara* (The Brotherhood). Being aware of the inadequacy and the limitations of periodicals and newspapers as vehicles for learning, he translated his thoughts on religious, social, educational, political and economic reforms into books and novels. These works, as maintained by Talib, feature the significance and influence of 'Abduh and Qasim Amin, an Egyptian feminist, on Syed Shaykh's writings [10].

Talib's work entitled *Sejarah Dan Sumbangan Penerbitan Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi Dalam Pembangunan Intelektual Bangsa Melayu* (The History and Contribution of Syed Syeikh Alhady's Publications in the Intellectual Development of Malays) is also akin to present Syed Shaykh as a journalist and novelist. In the work, it highlights the significance of newspapers, books, novels and literature published by Syed Shaykh to propagate the reformists' ideas. Syed Shaykh's migration to Penang provided him with the opportunity to establish his own publication company, The Jelutong Press. It played an instrumental role in providing Syed Shaykh the platform to disseminate his ideas and thoughts on various issues including religion, knowledge, education, literature, etc. His works were aimed at prodding the Malays to religious and intellectual growth [11].

Syed Shaykh's role as a reformist is described in another article of Talib entitled *Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi: Pelopor Pendidikan Islam Terawal di Pulau Pinang*

(Syed Syeikh Alhady: The Pioneer of Islamic Education in Penang). The work begins with an explanation of the life of Syed Shaykh. Then it recorded the toil and exertion undertaken by him to eradicate corrupted religious practices such as superstition (*khurafat*) and innovation (*bida'ah*) among the Malays. Printed media and educational institutions were utilized in attacking false and corrupted religious teachings. The traditionalists in turn attacked him and his modernist colleagues via their own newspapers such as *Lidah Benar* and *Pengasuh* (The Educator). Syed Shaykh's role and success in reforming the institutions and system of education in Malaya were discussed at the end of the work. The setting up of a new *madrasah* system had a remarkable impact on both the *pondok* system that was already very much rooted in the Malay States and the secular education system introduced by the British [12].

Among the earliest writers who acknowledged Syed Shaykh's contribution as a novelist and a reformist was Abdullah Basmih. His writing, *al-Sayyid Shaykh al-Hady: Pujangga dan Pelopor Kesedaran Politik* (Syed Shaykh al-Hady: The Literary and The Pioneer of Political Awareness), is full of extracts taken from articles by Syed Shaykh. This writing also cites passages from other journals that responded to Syed Shaykh's thoughts on the Malays and on national reforms, in which Abdullah showed his appreciation for these efforts. For him, Syed Shaykh's novels had significantly contributed to the development of modern literary activity as he says, "How special is al-Hadi's time, a time in which the Malay literature was rich with beauty and art. But what do we have today? Most of them are unappealing and mind-numbing!" [13]. It follows from here that Syed Shaykh in the eyes of Abdullah is a true Malay writer and a reformer.

Yahaya Ismail's article, *Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhadi: Reformis, Ahli Fikir, Novelis Progresif* (Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady: A Progressive Reformist, Thinker and Writer) similarly presents Syed Shaykh as a reformist and a novelist. It describes Syed Shaykh's thoughts on reforms as he was adept at recognising his gift for writing and made full use of it to propagate his ideas. This was especially so when he realised that disseminating ideas to the Malay society directly seemed pointless. He then set out to publish novels for spreading his ideas on religious, educational, social and political revival. Yahaya points out the significance of *Faridah Hanom* ([The Story of] Faridah Hanum) in boosting Syed Shaykh's name as a Muslim reformist and a modern novelist [14].

One of the sources that are classified as a socio-historical work is *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hadi* compiled by Alijah Gordon. It consists of numerous writings by several writers in dedication to Syed Shaykh. The work includes selections of Syed Shaykh's writings, which are identified by his son, Syed Alwi, as a cry and call for a reform movement in Malaya. Those collections were previously published in either *al-Imam* (The Leader) or *al-Ikhwan* (The Comrade) [15]. Syed Mohamed Alwi's work in *The Real Cry* is also promising in highlighting Syed Shaykh. He narrates how Syed Shaykh had brought him up as his grandson-cum-adopted son. His description explains the position of Syed Shaykh towards knowledge and its acquisition. Although Syed Shaykh himself did not acquire formal qualification, he believes that knowledge should be made accessible to everyone depending on his interest and capability to widen his intellectual capacity. Syed Shaykh, as written by Syed Mohamed Alwi, strictly educated the latter to instil the passion of learning and knowledge in him. He had provided his adopted son with both the modern and religious knowledge, which discloses indirectly his reformist zeal. His teaching and instruction truly shaped his grandson's mind as the latter brought up his own children using Syed Shaykh's ways [16].

An essay of Linda Tan (Linda Cheng Mong Hock) in Gordon's work provides us with valuable information about educational reforms of Syed Shaykh [17]. In her academic exercise entitled, *The Life and Times of Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi*, Tan perceives the ultimate aim of Syed Shaykh's ideas on reforms was for a national revival. Syed Shaykh, as Tan claims, wrote on religious, social, economic and educational revival for they would significantly contribute to a national reform. Tan believes that Syed Shaykh, due to his inspiration for national revival, gained much valuable experience from working at the Batam Brickworks Company. He encountered first hand the ability, or rather inability, of the local people to face the colonial encroachment and the pressure of working with foreign enterprises. In this respect, Tan highlighted several of Syed Shaykh's articles that demonstrate his disfavour over foreign powers. In this respect, he was more critical towards the economic exploitation by the foreigners and less on their political control over Malaya [18].

According to Tan, Syed Shaykh had consistently stressed on religious reforms because they were 'nearest to his heart' [19]. The statement that Syed Shaykh was

consistent in emphasizing religious reform could be linked to the influence of 'Abduh's opinion on education. It, as he maintained, is the most vital element of religious reforms, hence the revival movement should start from education [20]. Accordingly, this led to a revolutionary change in Malay community. Being impressed with the well-developed nations, Syed Shaykh endlessly urged the Malays to acquire knowledge especially those related to science and technology. In this regards, he states, "every kind of knowledge which will enable the Muslims to equal or compete with the other people in the field of life" is good [18]. As such, the Malays can stand at par with other nations, including the Westerners who were so advanced technologically at the time.

The Master's thesis of Jamilah Othman entitled, *Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi: His Role In The Transformation Of Muslim Societies In Peninsular Malaya & The Straits Settlements During The Latter Half Of The 19th & Early 20th Centuries*, tries to bring to light some factors that had shaped Syed Shaykh's mind and his character as a Muslim reformist in Malaya. Jamilah posits that Syed Shaykh's formative years in Pulau Penyengat and his short stay in Egypt was crucial in moulding his mindset to reform the Malays [21]. It was among the causes that had contributed to his awareness of the conditions of the Malays and the Muslims at large. Jamilah felt that analysing the conditions of Malay societies at that time would assist us to understand its influence on Syed Shaykh's perception on the Malays' backwardness in terms of progress and development [21]. Every aspect of Syed Shaykh's ideas on reforms including politics, economics, religion and education are discussed in the fourth chapter [21].

Zainon Ahmad's Master's thesis entitled, *The Life, Times and Thoughts of Sayyid Shaykh Ahmad al-Hadi*, likewise acknowledges Syed Shaykh's critical thoughts on education. Similar to the other writers who wrote about Syed Shaykh and his educational reforms, Zainon's work centred on typical issues such as the importance of education, educational transformation, female education and the Malay response to education. Apart from these, Syed Shaykh's thoughts on the need for Malay unity and economic progress were also considered. Syed Shaykh's ideas on education, as Zainon claims, were "perhaps the result of his experience and reflections of the educational trend then" [22].

A work which also deals with Syed Shaykh, albeit indirectly, is *al-Imam: Its Role in Malay Society 1906-*

1908 by Abu Bakar Hamzah. The writing mainly concentrates on one of Syed Shaykh's notable religious-reformist periodicals, *al-Imam* (The Leader). He recounts the historical development of the periodical, its financial resources and its contents. The main goals of *al-Imam* were to deal with religious problems, educational dilemma, political crisis and social issues of the Malays and the Muslims in general. According to Abu Bakar, although *al-Imam* did not reveal its writer, Syed Shaykh probably played a significant role in its writing and editorship. It could be discerned from *al-Imam* when it discussed ideas by Syed Shaykh and other Malay modernists on the importance of Muslim educational revival [23].

Abdul Aziz Mat Ton's *Politik al-Imam* (The Politics of *al-Imam*) credited the role played by *al-Imam* in responding to the political scenario of that period. The work explains the world politics that affected the Malays and the political affairs of the Malay world from the 16th century to the 18th century, which saw European domination. As imperialism was not confined to the Southeast continent, the spirit of reform (*islah*) emerged in many colonized regions. Ideas on reform and its movement in Egypt spread into Malaya via several key Malay figures. They saw the need for Malay revival since there were similarities between the conditions of Muslims in the Arab land and in Malaya. The publication of *al-Imam* (The Leader) was one avenue that was successful in rejuvenating the Malays to change - politically, socially, educationally and economically. *al-Imam* served as a platform to address issues of political ideology and criticism against certain groups in the society. *al-Imam* became a modern political vehicle and its influence on the society was almost apparent [24].

In an article entitled *Pengaruh Akhbar Saudara (1928-1941) Terhadap Perkembangan Pemikiran Masyarakat Melayu-Islam di Tanah Melayu* (The Influence of Saudara (1928-1941) on the Development of Malay-Muslim Thoughts in Malaya), Mahani Musa wrote about *Saudara* (The Brotherhood) as being one of the most significant press of the Malay community. It started as a mouthpiece for the Young Faction (*Kaum Muda*), against the ideas of the Old Faction (*Kaum Tua*). From dealing with predominantly religious matters, *Saudara* then changed its focus and began addressing social and political issues. It dealt with the right of the Malays in their homeland as opposed to the other ethnic groups who were originally immigrants. Apart from political and economic issues, *Saudara* also

considered questions related to education. Mahani highlights that *Saudara* spoke against the Malays who were incompetent and who were too dependent on the government. They attended school for the sake of gaining employment with the government. However, their capability to compete in the job market was marred by their weakness in the English language [25].

Mohd. Sarim Mustajab's work entitled, *Gerakan Islah Islamiah: Kajian Terhadap Tiga Tokoh Pelopornya* (The Islamic Reform Movement: A Study of Three Significant Pioneers), discusses several reformists of Malaya, namely Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaludin, Haji Abbas Mohd Taha and Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady. According to him, they shared the same level of spirit, effort and perception of reforms as these reformists felt responsible to wake the Malays from their deep slumber. The modernists at the same time criticized the Malays and the Malay leaders for their strong attachment to deviant religious teachings. The Malay leaders were also criticized for their failure to play any definitive role in improving the conditions of their own society. Syed Shaykh was regarded as the most outspoken reformist amongst his contemporaries. His thoughts are mainly grounded in his firm conviction in his own knowledge and his opinion on the right to use reason. In fact, his strength was in his own publication company, i.e. The Jelutong Press. He used the company as a platform to call upon the Malays to subscribe to his ideas on reforms [26].

Another work associated with Syed Shaykh is an article by Amini Amir Abdullah, *Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiah, Pulau Pinang: Pengaruh dan Perkembangan* (Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiyyah, Pulau Pinang: Its Influence and Development). It highlights the roles played by several prominent figures in the establishment and development of Madrasah al-Mashoor. The writing presents us with an idea on how impressed the society was with the founding of modern Arabic school (*madrasah*) which introduced a new educational system. It illustrates the earlier years of Madrasah al-Mashoor, which started as a place to learn the Qur'an and the teachings of Islam. The *madrasah* later transformed into an even better institution with Syed Shaykh as the principal (*mudir*), who aspired towards an integrated knowledge. For the first time, a *madrasah* was teaching its students the English language, in addition to religious studies. This work illustrates the task undertaken by Syed Shaykh to make his educational reforms a success [27].

Syed Shaykh's successors, namely Abdullah al-Maghribi, Abbas Bakar al-Rafiee, Hussain Bakar al-Rafiee and Ahmad Osman Bajunid then carried on the ideas for reforms. The teaching of religious subjects in Arabic remained as they were and English was also taught at Madrasah al-Mashoor. The introduction of English into such a religious learning centre met with good response [27]. In fact, work on Madrasah al-Mashoor is preceded by an unpublished bachelor's degree academic exercise by Muhammad Daud entitled *Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiyah Pulau Pinang: 1916-1969*. Muhammad similarly writes about the development of Madrasah al-Mashoor from its first year of operation until 1969, its role and contribution and its influence on the society [28].

Abdul Rahman Ismail's article entitled *Sayyid Syaikh Al-Hadi: Satu Catatan Tentang Tarikh Lahir, Umur dan Kematian* (Syed Shaykh Alhady: A Note About His Birth Date, Age and Death) signifies its concern on Syed Shaykh's birth date, age and death. Abdul Rahman was perhaps disturbed by the dispute over the subject, but his conclusion pertaining to Syed Shaykh's date of birth is questionable. Although Abdul Rahman refers to the *Saudara* (The Brotherhood), he does not use the most reliable source, i.e. Syed Shaykh's own writings in *al-Ikhwān* (The Comrade) concerning his personal life and the writings of Syed Alwi as the closest person to him. In addition, the article seems to focus more on the grief and sorrow felt by the Muslim Malays over the loss of Syed Shaykh [29-32].

CONCLUSION

To conclude, sources for the study of Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady are somewhat numerous and almost all of them touch upon his thoughts on education. It could be due to the role that Syed Shaykh played in introducing reform into the national system of education and the religious education in particular. It must be borne in mind that the aforementioned sources for the study of Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady are not final as new works will be published. It is significant to mention that in order to study on Syed Shaykh, one need to seek out the primary sources which are in the form of personal letters (*surat persendirian*), old periodicals and old newspapers. Apart from these, works of Syed Shaykh Ahmad Alhady himself in the forms of books, novels and newspapers are promising to provide data and information relevant to the subject matter.

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