ETHNIC POLITICISATION AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN CYPRUS UNDER BRITISH RULE

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to analyse the dynamics of ethnic group formation and the first waves of ethnic politicisation in Cyprus under British rule. I argue that religion and religious institutions played a significant role in the formation of different collective identities in the island. The rise of Christianity early in the first century under Roman rule on the one hand and the settlement of Moslems on the other created two massive cultural movements that helped to the formation of the two distinctive identity systems. Despite Islam was the identifying element of the Ottoman State and its ruling elite, this structure did not generate any political conflict between Mohammedans and other religious groups. It can be said that the ideology of Ottoman State helped to incorporate elites from various ethnic-religious groups into the state bureaucracy. The state ideology of Ottoman Empire was based on religion, not nationalism. The most obvious of this can be seen in the relations between Ottoman ruling centre and its subjects. Ottoman population was divided into 'Millet' system based on religious beliefs, by which different religious groups were granted certain local autonomy in particular community affairs.

The first waves of ethnic politicisation emerged as a legitimist reaction against the colonial policies and aimed at preserving the traditional structures including political privileges granted by Ottoman State. When Ottoman Sultan transferred the administration of Cyprus to Britain, this did not rise any radical change in the political expectations of local communities. This situation, however, does not mean the presence of an unconditional acceptance of colonial rule.

Introduction

The island of Cyprus has been under the effects of different civilisations throughout her history. It is believed that, one of the most important and strategic metals for primitive industries, copper, was discovered between the years of 2500 -2000 B.C on Cyprus. Due to her geographical position in overseas trade, Phoenicians settled in the island and

established many trade centres such as Citium, Lapethos, Amathus, Tamasos and Idalion at the beginning of ninth century BC. A king ruled each of these centres. While Phoenicians brought to Cyprus their alphabet, they did not attempt to colonise the whole island. On the contrary, the Greek migrants who began to settle on Cyprus in the fourteenth century B.C did not come to Cyprus only for trade interest, but also colonised it.[1]

Cyprus was under the rule of Assyrians in the eight century BC. Until she was subject to Roman Empire, Egyptians and Persians ruled the island between the years 668 and 344 BC. When the Roman Empire was divided into two regions in 395 AD, Cyprus passed -because of her geographical location- to the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire. At the end of Byzantine rule, the population of island was largely composed of local orthodox Christians. In that time Armenians and Marionettes were the minor cultural groups in the island who had migrated to the island in the sixth and twelfth centuries AD respectively.

Byzantine domination was followed by the rule of Lusignan and Venetian dynasties. Under Lusignan rule, Catholic Church was established as official authority on religious matters. Orthodox Church was banned. Local Orthodox Christians, however, did not give up their distinct beliefs and traditions in religious issues. In terms of economic relations, Orthodox population were strictly separated from the Catholic ruling elite who were the owners of agricultural areas and were able to control trade activities. At that time European feudalism and its basic institutions were brought into Cyprus. When Venetians came to Cyprus only governing elite was changed, but new masters continued the previous systems in economic, political and religious areas.

1. **Cultural Construction of Ethnicity**

It can be said that religion and religious institutions played significant role in the formation of different ethnic identities in Cyprus. The rise of Christianity early in the first century under Roman rule and the emergence of local Orthodox Church as an autonomous institution in local affairs helped to the formation of a collective identity system, Orthodox Christianity, in the island.

Under Roman and Byzantine rule local Orthodox Church gained several privileges from the central government and became a powerful, indigenous institution with the right to represent local people. During the years of Byzantine administration, it also gained a political position to act in the name of emperor on local affairs. Archbishop of Cyprus, the head of local church, became "ethnarch", the community leader and was entitled, by the emperor *"to carry an imperial sceptre of silver and gold, with an orb and jewelled cross at the top, and to sign his name in red ink."*[2] Having a set of important functions in social life, the Orthodox Church had served as 'culture bearing' institution.

Since Cyprus was the first country ruled by a Christian, L. Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor of the Island, it also began to have a special position in Orthodox world from the beginning of its establishment.[3] Furthermore, Apostles St. Barnabas and St. Paul[4], two of the original twelve followers of Jesus officially introduced Christianity to Cyprus. Due to its importance in the history of Christianity, the Church of Cyprus succeeded in obtaining an independent status among other religious authorities in Orthodox world. When the Patriarch of Antioch, one of the strong regional religious authority in Byzantine era, demanded several times, in the mid fifth century AD, that Cyprus should be under the administrative authority of Antioch, the church of Cyprus, receiving support from the emperor, could manage to resist this claim to maintain its independent status.[5]

When Cyprus came in the hands of Ottoman Empire, Orthodox Christianity, was the basic cultural identity in the island.[6] Ottoman administration made a radical change in the cultural structure of Cyprus. First, it restored the Orthodox Christianity and the authority of Church by accepting the second as the institutional expression of a particular identity. Second, it made Islam element a permanent and collective identity in the island's population.

It can be said that two massive historical movements, the rise of Christianity and the settlement of Moslems into the island led to the creation of a dual identity system in the island. During the early years of Ottoman rule, the first Moslem settlers were Ottoman soldiers who fought against Venetian army in Cyprus. However, historians recorded several immigration movements, from time to time, from different part of Anatolia and Rumelia into Cyprus.[7] Since the immigration of Ottoman subjects was systematically organised and politically supported by the state, the newcomers tended to maintain their cultural traditions.

Along with the effects of religious organisations, the development of a dual system in education was another factor that contributed to maintain established systems of identity. In Ottoman regime, the basic aim of education "*was to train pupils to become faithful subjects and officials of the sultans and their government*."[8] The lack of a standard and centralised system of education in Ottoman administration made the religious institutions the only influential channel of socialisation provided them with a direct control in educational system. Hodja who had been trained in a theological school was the teacher and Mosque was the place of education for Moslems. The Church and Bishops performed the same functions in the Christian community. After British undertook Cyprus, they made some radical effects that served to institutionalise cultural differences into new forms. As a colonial power, British did not attempt to create a standard organisation for educational activities. Legal regulations in educational system made by British had aimed at formalising the existing differences between the two communities. However, the most influential change came out with the using of English language, in some private schools that gave rise to the Orthodox Church's opposition. Since cultural formations appeared in long term institutionalised practices, the use of English did not result in any radical changes in identity system.

2. Ethnicity and Local Self-Rule

The state ideology of Ottoman Empire was based on religion, not nationalism. The most obvious of this can be seen in the relations between Ottoman Throne and its subjects. Ottoman population was divided into 'millet' system[9], by which different religious groups were granted certain local autonomy in particular community affairs. Despite Islam religion was the identifying element of the Ottoman State and its ruling elite this structure did not generate any political conflict between Mohammedans and other religious groups. It could be said that the ideology of Ottoman State helped to incorporate different elites from various ethnic-religious groups into the state bureaucracy.

> "*The non-Moslems opted for government service through converting to Islam. Though many members of the converted elites preserved personal ethnic ties to their original groups, including the continued use of their native languages, this situation did not*

create a conflict of allegiance between their ethnic identity and political allegiance" [10]

The Ottoman political system did not impose a policy of 'islamisation' aiming at forcing non-Moslems to adopt Islam. On the contrary, it conferred a freedom of religion and a certain local autonomy to religious groups to provide efficiency for its administration and to increase its central-political control on its subordinate groups all over the empire. As soon as Cyprus became under its control Ottoman Empire abolished aristocratic privileges and serfdom in the island. Orthodox Church of Cyprus was entitled with the right to represent local Christians. Following the tradition of Byzantine era, the Ottoman State began in the second half of seventeenth century to recognise the Archbishop of Cyprus as the 'ethnarch', the community leader of Christian population.[11] It can not be said that the Ottoman Sultan was only interested in the representation problem of dependent groups in empire, but also aimed to establish a well functioning administrative apparatus, which would serve to empower central administration and its political control. Local autonomy was also used to provide efficiency in collecting local taxes.[12]

Beginning early years of the Ottoman rule, the Orthodox Church began to use the same privileges that it had in the Byzantine era. The Orthodox Church was also granted an imperial berat, which empowered it with certain powers in such issues as marriage, commerce, inheritance, and possession[13]. The Archbishop of Cyprus developed close relationships with ottoman central bureaucracy in Istanbul. In the wake of this success, local church had reached a position to affect central policies towards Cyprus and played most significant role in local politics between 1785- 1820. During this period, the Ottoman administration was in need of demanding the support of the Church of Cyprus to implement and collect new taxes in the island.[14]

3. Social Space in Ethnic relations

Ottoman ruling centre was not interested in the ethnic origins of Cypriot Christians. Furthermore, there are strong evidences that unlike in the case of other ethno-religious groups such as Armenians and Marionettes, Orthodox Christians in Cyprus were not identified with their imagined 'national' origins. They were named as '*Zimni'*, a common name that had been used to identify non-Moslem subjects in the Ottoman Empire. It is important to note that, until the Greek independence war, Orthodox Cypriots had been considered as having strong loyalty to the Ottoman ruling centre. This is true because they did not develop any organised movement based on the idea of 'national struggle' and they did not identify themselves with the Greek cultural identity.[15]

During the Greek independence war, the Ottoman Sultan commanded, by a '*firman,*' that all Christian to be disarmed. The Sultan stated in his firman that Cypriot Christians always supported the central government against local rebels[16] but he also commanded that, because of its general character it was necessary to apply his command in Cyprus too.[17] The execution of some religious leaders of Orthodox Church of Cyprus during the Greek war of independence can not be placed in the real policy of Ottoman centre towards Cypriot Christians, but rather it reflects the awkwardness of the Ottoman local bureaucracy in the island.

It can be argued that the local Orthodox community in Cyprus had realised its political existence as a part of multi-cultural structure of Ottoman Empire. This realisation can be

seen as a result of social interactions between Moslem and Christian communities in Cyprus. In the Ottoman era, distinct cultural identities were able to maintain their institutional habits in their social fabrics. However, peaceful coexistence of cultural groups throughout centuries provided a proper ground for them to develop strong interactions in their social relations. For example, Orthodox Cypriots did not hesitate to use the Sharia Court of Cyprus, "*not just in mixed cases but in cases involving other members of the same faith.*"[18]

As I have stated above, Ottoman administration did not generate a policy of 'islamisation' aiming at forcing non-Moslems to accept Islam faiths. Despite this reality, many Christians changed their religious beliefs voluntarily. In the late part of sixteenth Century about 30% of legal agents in Sharia Court were converts.[19] Another research in the records of Sharia court of Cyprus points out that the members of the two communities were in an intensive interaction not only in legal matters but also in their daily social activities.[20] Members of both communities did not hesitate to lend people from other community. They were partners in the market place. Furthermore, regardless of the differences in their religious beliefs, they supported each other.

Social interactions between the two communities tended to include a limited degree of cultural integration. The existence of stable and harmonious relationships between the Ottoman Serai and the Orthodox Church, and the development of deep interactions between the two major identities, led to a situation in which each identity group was affected by the other in religious habits. The emergence of a new, different group of identity called 'Linobambaki' which meant 'both Mohammedan and Christian,' closed to the two dominant cultural groups, indicates a limited cultural integration:

> "*In Cyprus, as in other oriental countries, one set of names -Ali, Hassan, and Mohammed -are only used by Moslems; other again - Pedros, Georgia, and Nicolas- are only used by Orthodox Christians, while a third group – Yacoub, Yousouf, and Mousa- are used alike by Moslems and by Christians…*"[21]

Evolving a cultural habit, which included some members of both communities, was supported by a religious tradition. Both Hodjas and Priests were active not only in providing religious services for their own religious communities, but it was very acceptable for members of the two communities to use the religious services provided by the individual religious actors of other community. Another cultural development similar to the religious interactions appeared in the spoken languages in the island. It is known that, after conquest, words and phrases of original Ottoman Turkish began to be used in local Greek dialect. The two communities incorporated several motives of oral communication from each other into their spoken languages. In the British period this interaction had continued. As it had been observed by a Turkish teacher;

> "*In mixed villages almost all Turks speak Greek [Greek Cypriot dialect] and a part of Greek Cypriots speak Turkish and when members of two communities come into interaction in business activities and in other social activities, they sometimes use Turkish or Greek and sometimes a mixed language including both Turkish and Greek.*"[22]

Since Greek language was the dominant means of communication especially in business and in commerce, Turks in certain villages had preferred to use Greek in the daily communications between themselves too.[23]

Intellectuals of both communities tended to share the same ideological values about social relations between the two communities. This is very evident for intercommunal conflicts that occurred rarely and that created tensions including the use of violence. Faced with intercommunal violence erupted in 1912, the leaders, and intellectuals from both communities were very sensitive to maintain peace and good relations between their communities.[24] We have been informed that Moslem intellectuals were very willing to establish good relationships with Christians and that they applied to their Christian fellows to unify people.[25] They considered intercommunal cooperation as necessary and the only way to improve the welfare of the people. Although they speak in the name of Moslem community, Moslem intellectuals had seen the island as the "homeland"[26] of both communities regardless religious differences. The continual claims for Enosis, however, served to separate this conformity between the two communities. The most serious reactions of Moslem leaders and intellectuals appeared in their response to the claims for Enosis. Moreover, it was this claim that led Moslem leaders to demand the restoration of Ottoman legacy in the island.[27] Except few examples, Moslem leadership did not develop any perspective on the "Cyprus problem." Therefore, Enosis claims met with no serious counter-action of them. It is true that Moslem leaders considered Enosis not an ideological issue but rather a matter of security. But they always called the colonial administration to put an end to the demands for enosis.[28]

4. Ethnic Politicisation against Colonial Policies

The British undertook the administration of Cyprus from Ottoman Empire in 1878. Between the years of 1878 and 1930, the colonial administration did not face with any serious attempt against its sovereignty in Cyprus. When Ottoman Sultan transferred the administration of the island to British, this decision did not raise any important change in the political expectations of local people in Cyprus whose basic interests were in agriculture. This situation, however, did not mean the presence of an unconditional acceptance towards colonial administration and the lack of local political attachments, within the two communities. Elites of the two communities who were aware of their distinct identities had accepted British rule voluntarily. When the colonial administration launched certain policies to reshape the traditional social structures established by Ottomans, elites of the two communities began to insist on their traditional rights.

4.1. Legitimist Reactions

The first colonial Constitution of Cyprus (1879) was primarily based on the principle of 'equal representation' that allowed local communities to have equalled seats in legislative assembly. Three years later, however, the colonial administration made a radical change and adopted 'proportional representation' as the basic principle relating to the island's administration. According to the new constitutional regulation, there would be six official members appointed by colonial government, and three Moslems and nine Orthodox Christians elected by local communities separately. It is evident that while Orthodox

Church did not accept the principle of 'equal representation,' the acceptance of proportional representation brought about a resistance in Moslem community.

An elite group of Moslems began to criticise the proportionality principle by claiming that it abolished the traditional privileges of Moslems. This criticism can be seen in a leading article published in *Kıbrıs,* a weekly Turkish newspaper:

> "…*Since our island is under the rule of British government in a temporary status, Moslems should not accept any change, destruction, or amendment in any aspect of Ottoman legacy.*"[29]

Moslem leaders and intellectuals were demanding 'equal representation due to the fact that Moslem community was the ruling group in Cyprus in Ottoman era[30] and that colonial administration was not empowered with any authority to alter the traditional order. The proportionality principle tended to consider Moslem community as one of the local cultural groups regardless of its ideological hegemony in administrative apparatus of the island. The second important criticism, which was shared by many Moslem intellectuals, was about the rights and powers of Legislative Council. Since this organ was not given such powers[31] as its counterparts had, Moslem intellectuals blamed the colonial government for providing no real power for people's representatives to deal with political issues.[32] However, the rapid collapse of the resistance against the proportionality principle encouraged Moslem leadership to develop good relationship with colonial administration.

Beginning in the early years of British rule, the Orthodox Church, as well as Moslem leaders, began to insist on certain traditional rights. Among others, the first basic claim included the exemption of sacred properties, of religious institutions of both communities, from governmental taxation. The second important demand was about the political rights of Orthodox Church and bishops. Namely, the Orthodox Church demanded Bishops to be accepted as the natural political representatives of Christian population of the island.[33] Finally, the Church aimed to force the British to grant a majority of membership to the local inhabitants.[34] It is interesting that the Orthodox Church, like Moslem leadership, tended to use Ottoman legacy as a legitimate basis to provide support for its claims against colonial government. The basic idea was that the British were bounded by the Anglo-Ottoman convention of 1878, which placed Cyprus under colonial rule.[35] When two priests were arrested by colonial authorities for cutting forest wood, in 1879, a year after Anglo-Ottoman convention, Archbishop of Cyprus, Sofronios had declared the fears of Church about the future actions of British. He demanded in his letter to the British authorities that it was necessary for colonial government to show respect to the immunities granted by Ottoman Sultans to the religious institutions. Archbishop declared:

> "*In our Royal Berats, which are so many title-deeds between the Ottoman government and the spiritual chiefs of the several Christian communities, are described some privileges and rights which the conqueror Mahout II had granted to the spiritual chiefs, and which their successors had confirmed, wherein is positively stated that wherever clergymen commit any offence which is intended to be such an application on a such matter should be made to the Archbishop…*"[36]

Although the Church was very inclined to support the idea of Enosis[37] in the whole period of British rule, its basic aim was to force colonial government to give local autonomy to the island. In the nationalist rhetoric of Orthodox Church, Enosis, the unification of Cyprus with Greece, was seen as the initial step to the "Megali Idea", the restoration of Byzantine Empire. It was very evident that, Enosis remained to be a nostalgic and a romantic idea in the first thirty years of British rule. This is because of the Orthodox Church's inability to develop a political control over, and an ideological transformation in, the Christian Orthodox population. Church hierarchy was the only effective agency for Enosis without creating a massive political movement in real sense. However, Enosis was used by the Orthodox Church as a symbol of its resistance against the modernising policies of colonial government. The basic motives behind the political opposition of the Church had lied in the demands to maintain its traditional privileges. The Orthodox Church was not only the representative body of local Christians, but also the major property owning institution that made it the biggest employer in the island. Because of these reasons, most criticisms about the colonial policies tended to be based on economic problems. In 1897, a Greek Cypriot newspaper, Foni Dis Gibru, declared this reality as follows:

> *"The principal cause of our complaint against the English government is the financial question. All other questions are secondary, insignificant so to say, would easily be removed if that great evils were remedied. We have often declared and now again do not hesitate to proclaim loudly that, pending her other good future, Cyprus will continue to be faithful and devoted to Her Majesty government..."*[38]

Although the Orthodox Church called itself as the speaker of Christian population and demanded several times that the majority of island's people had accepted Enosis as the national cause[39] the political division was very clear not only in Greek Cypriot community but also in the Church's ranks. Political developments in the British era had shown the inability of the Church in maintaining its traditional authority. This was partly a result of secularising policies of Colonial administration and partly the emergence of new social forces in political arena. Colonial administration did not accept the Archbishop of Cyprus as the speaker and political representative of local Christians. In this sense, the formation of a legislative organ based on limited franchise was the first loss of the church. However, the most radical challenge to the Church's authority was the decisive attempts of British to establish a political control on the educational system. After British took over the administration of Cyprus, new social forces were very willing to support status quo. In 1924, for example, the Church boycotted the elections, but some individual candidates, challenging this decision, run for membership in legislative assembly. They were fourteen candidates for seven posts. In the same year, pro-Church members of the Legislative assembly demanded from the British governor of the island to include an expression into his opening speech to stress the importance of Enosis. This proposal was rejected by a temporary coalition in the Legislative Assembly. The important point was the declaration of four independent members elected by Christian Orthodox community. They declared that they had been elected not to propagate Enosis but to act for the benefits of island's people. Therefore, they voted together with Moslem and official members against this proposal.[40] Furthermore, the emergence of a communist party that began to reject the

authority of Church had been increased the importance of secularising policies. To fight this tendency the Orthodox Church attempted to resist educational policies of colonial government. It is clear that, in the eyes of spiritual leaders secularising attempts in educational system would abolished the authority of Church not only in determining educational policies but also in political issues.

Conclusion

In Ottoman period and in the first forty years of British rule ethnic relations was open to the cultural interaction without including the notions of "nationalism" and "ethnic rivalry". Differences in culture structure did not give rise any kinds of permanent political confrontations between the two communities. It is evident that there is no necessary or natural reason why ethnic communities with different characteristics in culture should be in conflict. For most of history of the two communities, ethnicity or cultural differences had formed a secondary and insignificant factor in ethnic relations. As Cyprus history shows, the attempts of colonial administration, which aimed to break down the established group loyalties through a modernising process led to the formation of a culture-based political resistance in both communities. Even in the politicised atmosphere during the first forty years of British rule, the two communities remained to share the basic values of a common social and political system. However, the demand of elites of both communities to maintain the established order in social and political life encouraged them to stress the importance of their group rights against colonial rule. Demands for enosis can not be seen as the political indicator of a nationalist movement but rather a nationalist rhetoric that derived from certain international effects. Neither the Orthodox Church nor the Moslem leadership was able to establish a political control over their communities. In this sense, culture-based political mobilisation occurred as a 'legitimist reaction' by which the political actors do not attempt to refuse the political regime as a whole.

Notes

[1]   Hill, 1952, pp. 83-84.
[2]   Alastos, 1955, p.115.
[3]   Alasya, 1988, p. 9.
[4]   Frazee, 1985, pp. 13-14.
[5]   Papageorgiou,1962, p. 16.
[6]   Luke, 1969, p. 13.
[7]   Ibid, p. 75.
[8]   Weir, 1952, p. 67.
[9]   Despite the fact that the term 'millet' means 'nation' in modern Turkish, Ottoman subjects were grouped not by race, language or by region but according to their religious beliefs.
[10]   Karpat, 1985, p. 100.
[11]   Cobham, 1908, pp. 353-354.

12	Markides, 1977, p. 4.
13	Duckworth, 1900, p. 76.
14	Cobham, , p. 369.
15	Cassia,1986, p. 28.
16	The Orthodox Church of Cyprus did not give any support to the Greek nationalists in mainland Greece during the war of independence. Furthermore, it is argued that both the Arcbishop Kyprianos of Cyprus and the patriarch of Istanbul *were adamantly opposed to the Greek war of independence*," Pollis, 1973, p. 588.
17	Cobham, op. Cit., pp.258-262.
18	Jennings,1993, p.69.
19	Ibid, p. 138.
20	Çiçek, 1993, p. 47.
21	Dixon, 1879, p. 28-30.
22	Konur, 1938, p. 23.
23	Ibid, p. 30.
24	Vatan (in Ottoman Turkish), 27 May 1912, Cited by H. Fedai, "Kıbrıs'ta 1912 Olayları," Yeni Kıbrıs Dergisi, (June 1985), pp. 12-20.
25	Kıbris (in Ottoman Turkish), 17 December, 1894.
26	Ibid, 14 January 1895.
27	By means of a resolution adopted in a meeting organised by the leaders of Moslem community in 1918, it was declared that the restoration of Ottoman rule was the basic demand of Moslems against the unfair claims for Enosis. Sabahattin İsmail –Ergin Birinci,1987, pp.30-31.
28	Başyazı, "Hükümetin Dikkatine," Vatan, 18 March 1912: Cited by Harid Fedai, "Eski Basınımızdan", Kıbrıs, 22 August, 1994, p.32.
29	"Ifade`i Mahsusa,"(in Ottoman Turkish), Kıbrıs, 6 May 1895.
30	ORR, 1972, p. 97.
31	Legislative Council was an advisory organ. The Governor appointed by the British was able to reject or accept any bills passed in the Legislative Council.
32	"Ifade`i Mahsusa," (in Ottoman Turkish), Kıbrıs, 5 November, 1894.
33	Hill, pp. 572-573.
34	Gazioglu, 1960, p. 47.
35	Araouzos, 1908, p. 3.
36	Great Britain. Correspondence Respecting the Treatment of Prisoners at Famagusta in Cyprus, No. 8, London: Harrison & Sons, 1879, pp. 4-6, in Markides, p.7.
37	Vanesis, 1971, pp. 66-68.
38	Foni Dis Gibru, 16-18 March, 1897. Quoted in Hill, p. 503.
39	In his letter to the secretary of state for the colonies, Arcbishop Kyrillos, the president of the National Council declared: "*The Greek people inhabiting this island have proclaimed honestly and repeadetly by means of Pancyprion resolutions, demonstrations sent to London, that their unchangeable, and fundamental claim was the cession of Cyprus to her mother Greece.*" The Cyprus Cause, Limassol, Salpinx, April 1924. p. 9.
40	Hill, p. 538.

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