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**Funeral ritual of Mon National living in Hinthargon,  
Bago Township**

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**Funeral ritual of Mon national living in Hinthargon,  
Bago Township**

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**Abstract**

A ritual is a specific behavior or activity that gives symbolic expression of certain feelings or thoughts of groups and individuals. Funerals are 'rites of passage' with three stages - separation, transition, and reintegration. In Mon funeral ritual, the deceased is placed on corpse's shelter (*Jaungnein* in Mon) and a traditional spirit-basket (*leikpyartaung*) is placed at the head of the dead person. Mon funeral is supported by voluntary associations (*Parahita*). The Mon-nationals living in Hinthargone are found to be able to uphold their ethnic identity in terms of funeral ritual although their neighbourhood is occupied by non-Mons. The objectives of this paper are to elicit the celebration of Mon traditional funeral ritual in Hinthargon; to explore the influences of Mon identity on its funeral ritual; and to find out the relationships between funeral ritual and voluntary associations (*Parahita*). This study was conducted by ethnographic research method and descriptive study design. The study period was from 2009- 2012. In this study, interviews were made of Mon nationals who have knowledge and experience regarding Mon funeral, social welfare service associations' leaders and members through In-depth Interview and Key Informant Interview. Data were added to by the way of taking photographs and recording the talks.

**Introduction**

All societies have their own customs and beliefs surrounding death and each culture has its own approaches to dealing with loss. These may be more or less standardized but almost always involve a core of understandings, spiritual beliefs, rituals, expectations and etiquette (Cited in Setsiba, (n. d)). According to Radzilani (2010), a ritual is a specific behavior or activity that gives symbolic expression of certain feelings or thoughts of groups and individuals. Taylor (1980) stated that rituals represent a symbolic affirmation of values by means of culturally standardized utterances and actions. From this perspective, rituals seem to perform specific functions in a given society or culture.

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Kurihara (1997) said that funerals are 'rites of passage' with three stages- separation, transition, and reintegration. In a funeral, these stages have the following meaning: 1. The deceased is separated from this world, 2. He / she moves to the afterworld, 3. He / she is reintegrated into the afterworld. Mon national celebrate funeral ritual according to the above procedures.

### **Materials and Methods**

The study was conducted in Hinthargon ward, Bago Township which is formed by (31) wards. In Hinthargon ward, there are (1567) households and the total population are 9445 (Office of the Administrator of Hinthargon ward, 2008). The majority of the people living in Hinthargon are Mon national and the population is 6170 (65.32 %).

This study was conducted by ethnographic research method and descriptive study design. The study period was from 2009- 2012. The objectives of this paper are to elicit the celebration of Mon traditional funeral ritual in Hinthargon; to explore the influences of Mon identity on its funeral ritual; and to find out the relationships between funeral ritual and voluntary associations (*Parahita*).

To implement those objectives, twenty informants were interviewed and enquiries were made of the members of voluntary associations (*Parahita*), the Mons who are knowledgeable about Mon-tradition funeral ritual through In-depth Interview (IDI) and Key Informant Interview (KII). One informal group interview with key informants of the study ward (local leaders and elders) was performed. Data were analyzed manually according to themes and sub-themes and were added to by the way of taking photographs and recording the talks.

### **Processes of Mon funeral ritual**

Most Mon nationals living in Hinthargon believe that "it is easy to living for everybody but difficult for death". It means a person doesn't need to worry to hold money to eat something but he can have some difficulties to the corpse if he does not have some money. They give each other help when a person passed away in the Mon family.

Almost all the Mons perceive themselves as they are Mon national and they celebrate their funeral as Mon traditional custom. The first stage of Mons' funeral ritual includes, informing the corpse preparing team, washing the dead

body, preparation of corpse and placing the body in a coffin. In the second stage, burial is carried out. The third stage continues up to many years after one's death.

### **Informing the corpse preparing team**

According to the interview, when a Mon national dies, there is a series of events which usually take place. Formally, the Mon nationals inform the corpse preparing group. It has five members including those who are knowledgeable about the Mon traditional forms of funeral but take no fees. But they can be offered money at the discretion of bereaved families. It undertakes all the jobs concerning the traditional funeral - informing his/her death to the village people, making instruments to be used in the funeral, inviting guests, proceeding with the funeral program, and the burial etc. A Mon national said:

*“When a person dies in Model Mon (Mon Sanpya) we inform the preparing group immediately. They held themselves responsible from start to end. Members are Mon, so no need to worry about Do’s and Don’ts. After the burial some affordable money is given to them.”*

Mons’ funeral ritual is held in quick order when a person has died so as not to let the floor become warm. Nowadays a deceased person’s children are often away, so the corpse is kept for a day at the minimum and three days at the maximum to await children’s return. Although most of Hinthargon Mons go to the far places and work there, their family does not move there. The unmarried or the husband and wife in a family work in the place far from home. But they leave their children with their parents and send them money once a month. They all come back once a year to Mon Sanpya where their parents live. On this a Mon national said:

*“According to Mon tradition, the corpse is not kept long enough to make the floor warm. Nowadays most children (of the dead person’s) are usually working at faraway places, so it is kept for three days mostly.”*

### **Washing the dead body**

The corpse-preparing group comes over quickly on receiving news of a deceased person and asks the bereaved family member to collect two earthen pots (whose water will be used for washing the corpse). Between the two earthen pots, one contains water and the other traditional herbal shampoo. To wash the corpse,

it is put on the washing platform that is a crude bamboo platform. A mat may be placed on the bamboo platform. The placement of a mat and bamboo platform between the corpse and house floor means it is no longer associated with this house.

Firstly the corpse is washed, so as to cleanse it of impurities connected with its old life, brushing it with traditional shampoo from legs to head as opposed to head to legs in case of a living person. Then the corpse is washed with water out of the other pot, just like the former washing with traditional shampoo. Thus the two types of washing separate the living from the dead. At some homes the relatives help out in washing the corpse.

### **Preparation of corpse**

In a Mon funeral, all the Mons constructed a decorated shelter (a corpse's shelter) for the deceased because visitors to the bereaved family home might feel apprehension at the prospect of repeated rebirths, at the same time pondering on eight Paths, four Noble Truths, and six sense objects. It is called "*Jaungnein*" in Mon. There is no need to set up a corpse shelter if funeral ritual is to be held immediately. On this a 78 year-old Mon said:

*"Being devout Buddhists, the Mon set up a corpse's shelter to provoke apprehension at the prospect of continuing rebirths in line with the Buddha's teaching."*

To construct a corpse's shelter, firstly the flooring is prepared by a master who has knowledgeable about traditional Mon funeral. He is presented by an offering of three hands of bananas, a coconut and some cash. The construction has four levels in each of which eight four-cubit bamboo strips and six two-foot bamboo strips are matted. The four-cubit is the estimated length of a person; and the eight bamboo strips represent the Eight Path, namely: Right way of viewing things, right way of thinking, right way of saying things, doing what is right or proper, right way of living, exertion in the right direction, right attention, and right abstraction of the mind. The six bamboo strips are representative of object of vision, object of hearing, object of smell, object of taste, object of touch and object of conceptualization. The four tiers represent *dukkhasacca* (ဒုက္ခသစ္စာ), *samudayasacca* (သမုဒယသစ္စာ), *nirodhasacca* (နိရောဓသစ္စာ) and *maggasacca* (မဂ္ဂသစ္စာ). Thus the corpse's shelter is built to completion tier by tier.

Some corpse-preparing members explained that after the corpse is washed by the relatives, helping one another, the corpse is placed on it. And they dry it with towel, brush it with a kind of tree the bark and root of which are used in making a fragrant paste for cosmetic purpose (*thanakha*) paste and scented water and dress it, but in reverse order. The nether garment for it has a stitch line along the middle to convenience the dressing. Then the corpse's thumbs and big toes are tied together respectively with strings made up of thread which is eight times the handbreadth of eldest son and hair of daughters. If the dead person has no sons the thread is not used. In case of a female, the corpse's hair is brushed with coconut oil and knotted. Into the corpse's mouth goes a currency note of kyat five hundred or kyat one thousand as of 2011, while its face is covered with a handkerchief (see in figure 1).

After that, six posts, that is three posts on each side, of the four-tier flooring are set up. Those six posts represent the six sense objects, the elimination of which would supposedly make one realize *nibbana*. A piece of white cloth, fixed atop the posts, serves as the cover. Then the corpse's shelter is turned into *Dhamma* house (see in figure 2). Voluntary helpers, having gathered flowers from nearby the house, make long strings of flowers with thread and hung it around the corpse's shelter four times or in four rows. Paper umbrellas and streamers are included in offering alms-meal to the monks, and after the water-pouring rite those articles are taken to a monastery or pagoda for its sojourn. On preparation of a corpse a Mon householder said:

*“To set up a corpse's shelter, old volunteers, especially Mon grandmothers are helped out by way of making paper streamers. They in turn are helped by youths, like, picking flowers.”*



Figure (1) The preparation of the corpse to put in a decorated shelter (*Jaungnein* in Mon)      Figure (2) The corpse put in the specific place

Then a ring is hung with a string tied to the top cover, right above the dead man's novel. It is meant to serve as a guide for the dead person to reach up to the abode of celestials, and later to be possessed by the spirit-basket carrier. Most of them fake a golden ring in order that it can be hanged on their dead bodies when they die. But those who are in lack of enough money make only fake golden ring that is hanged to their dead bodies.

And a spirit-basket is placed at the head of the corpse. That basket contains: a coconut to wash the face of the corpse just before its burial, a set of dress of dead person, his utensils like pipe, betel box, rosary, glasses, a new earthen pot to be broken up, on removing the corpse from the bereaved family home, to signify the deceased does not belong to this home no more. Moreover, four cubits of white linen to wear in the waste and another two cubits of white linen for turban are placed in the spirit-basket. If the corpse is to be buried, two candles are also put in that basket; they are to be lit when the corpse goes down into the grave (see in figure 3).

A small kitchen is set up at the foot of the corpse, until it is put in the coffin, to cook food for the deceased separately. This signifies the deceased has nothing to do with the living. Nowadays a separate kitchen is not used, but a plate of ready-made meal is put, and renewed, near the corpse until the seventh day of death (see in figure 4). By the way, the deceased is separated from the world.



Figure (3) The spirit-basket being put beside  
the corpse



Figure (4) Feeding the corpse  
rice and  
curry

### **Placing the body in a coffin**

On arrival of all relevant relatives the corpse is put in the coffin to be then lifted onto the motorcar. Just before putting into the coffin, the dead person is paid obeisance to by his or her offspring and other relatives. The coffin has to be cleansed beforehand, using one bamboo tube containing traditional shampoo and another bamboo tube containing water. Then the "*Jaungnein*" is broken down, the corpse is wrapped with the mat and tied up with the strings. A special new ladder

is made already so that the dead person, now cut off from the house, can leave using his or her own ladder. The number of rungs has to be even, like, two or four (see in figure 5). The special ladder has to stand at the foot of the original staircase.



Figure (5) Two bamboo tubes and a new ladder for the corpse

The coffin is taken down the staircase, the lower part first. As soon as the coffin reaches the ground a relative of the dead person breaks up the two earthenware posts, to signify the dead person belongs to this house no longer.

However, some connection needs to remain on behalf of the spirit so that a piece of thread is connected between the coffin and the house. A monk out of the group of monks which conduct Buddhist rites holds that string. After the corpse is put in the car the spirit basket and a meal packet are placed on the coffin.

### **Burial**

When the funeral procession starts at the cemetery the spirit-basket is carried by eldest child in case of a dead father and by youngest child in case of a dead mother. Afterwards the deceased is pushed a little aslant towards right (in case of a dead male) or towards left (in case of a dead female) before closing up the coffin to bury or entomb.

On funeral day the spirit-basket carrier wears the four-cubit white cloth on his or her waist, and another white cloth as a turban. White cloth signifies the person is in distress and unlike others (see in figure 6 a & b).



Figure (6 a & b) The carrier of the spirit-basket

The spirit-basket carrier follows behind the corpse. Formerly in a funeral procession on foot the spirit-basket carrier follows the corpse. Nowadays in a motorcar he or she rides in front in the hearse.

The coffin, taken down from the hearse, has to go around the dug grave three times before placement with it. Then the coffin is opened and the corpse's face is washed with cleanest coconut water gotten by breaking up, in one stroke, with the coconut contained in the spirit-basket. There is no rule on who must wash the corpse's face (see in figure 7). They believe if it falls with inside looking up, he or she would be reborn as a human and quickly at that; and if it falls with downwards, the dead person would be reborn taking a long time.



**Figure (7) Breaking the coconut to wash the corpse's face with the coconut liquid**

Then the deceased's cloths over the coffin are passed over it three times before bringing them back home. That procedure is called *meekyaw*, signifying the dead person's spirit is being called back home. When they come back at home the dead person's clothes are put where the corpse lay until seventh day of the death, where after they are given away to a poor person. Some took a stick from the graveyard and placed it where the corpse lay because they believe the spirit of the deceased can live before seventh day of the death in the house.

And the special ladder is taken to the grave and set up there to be used on descending. Moreover a candle is lit on the edge just outside of the grave and another candle is lit in the grave, so as to help the dead person go into light, to a good destination. After the funeral the ladder and bamboos of the corpse's shrine are to be destroyed at the cemetery because these are used for the deceased. These are rituals for separating the deceased from this world.

The third stage continues up to many years after one's death. During this stage, the bereaved family holds to donate the offerings to Buddha, monks and neighbours for the deceased, the seventh day after the death, on the one month after death, on every year. The deceased is then reintegrated into the afterworld.

There is no discrimination in celebrating funeral ritual between chiefs and lay men.

At the funeral, the relatives from near and far and friends in the ward come and sleep near the dead body until 7 days are completed. And then they open the doors of the house for 24 hours in order that the soul of the dead person can come and go in and out of the house at any time. The elders in the ward who are knowledgeable in Dhamma discourses come to the funeral at night and talk with the guests.

### **Other kinds of death**

Funeral rituals are held forthwith when a person meets with a violent death due to lightning strike, or accidents like motorcycle collision. A coffin is not used; the corpse wrapped with a mat is put on bamboo matting made of eight bamboo strips and carried to the cemetery by hand, not on shoulders. At the cemetery the corpse is not buried, but cremated with the use of petrol.

When a woman dies during delivery the funeral rituals are done forthwith. The corpse, wrapped in a mat, is carried to the cemetery on bamboo matting made of eight bamboo strips. Mother and still-born are buried separately. If twins are born, the dead bodies are rolled up in a mat and sent immediately to the cemetery. The dead body of the first born child is sent later than that of the second born child because they believe that the second born child is older than the first born one.

### **Taboos**

- When the corpse's shelter is in use on the floor of a stilted house, crockery or any other articles are not to pass underneath. If they did, they would not be fit to be used, it is believed.
- The dead person shall not lie underneath the house rafter because he would be conceivably required to still bear the burden of household.
- If a death takes place on full moon day the funeral rituals are carried out forthwith as the next day is deemed improper.
- If two deaths occur in one day the funeral for later death are carried out first. Then the funeral for the first death must follow.
- A funeral procession should not proceed straight to the cemetery from the front of the bereaved family's house because it is auspicious place fit for living persons only.

- If a death has occurred outside the corpse must not be taken into it otherwise that deed would harm the village.
- If a pregnant woman dies, the dead child is taken out by cutting abdomen. When the corpse of the mother is placed in order, the dead body of the child is also put between the thighs of the mother.

### **The relationship between voluntary associations and funeral ritual**

The Mons have founded some voluntary associations to support whatever bereaved family among the members of such associations. The aim of such associations is to provide financial support for bereaved families in carrying out funeral ritual properly. They are known as social-welfare service associations or voluntary associations. The majority of members of these associations are Mon nationals although the minority are non-Mons.

These associations have been in existence since their older generations such as their grandparents' time. At that time, when a poor family lost one of its members, the people in the ward had to give them necessary service to carry out a burial successfully because the family members could not afford to hold the funeral ceremony on their own expense. Thus, most of them realize the key role of community service that managed to facilitate an important and inevitable human activity. Having got the good idea of supporting community service to a poor family to hold funeral ritual with no worry about the cost, they first founded the social welfare service association. A leader of such an association said:

*“We have founded the social welfare service association and contribute member fees to the fund. The more crowded the house, the more secure and encouraged the bereaved family becomes.”*

Nowadays, there are altogether seven associations that have already been founded in Hinthargon. Of these seven associations, four of them are rice associations while the remaining three are Motor Vehicle association, which is aimed to give monetary help to the bereaved family; *Ngo-than-kyar* association, which is aimed to start collecting association fees as soon as a person is known to be dead; and the rest *Kyant-khaing-ye* association, which is aimed to give monetary help to the bereaved family.

### **Rules**

When they first founded the association, member fee for each household was one kyat only in 1960. However, when they found out that the family was too poor to serve the mourners with meals, the members started contributing rice in addition to the assigned member fee. Later, it was commonly accepted to provide a bereaved family with not only the member fee but also some rice. A member of the social service association said:

*“We don’t need to worry about the decent burial after our death once the association has come into existence.”*

The member fees assigned by these associations differ from one another. Some associations assign one viss of rice and five hundred kyat in 2011 as contribution fee to the bereaved family while another assign one viss of rice and three hundred kyat in 2011 and the rest one thousand kyat with no rice in 2011. The initial investment of the association also differs from one another. Most of the associations assign 4000 kyat in 2011.

A typical social welfare service association is made up of from at least 150 households to at most 300 households. Some Mon households tend to join two or three associations as members depending on their financial status. Regarding this fact, a 78-year-old Mon woman who has joined more than one association explored her opinion like this:

*“I have joined all the social welfare service associations because I can get much more support for my funeral.”*

When a household wants to join the association, the head of that household can inform the chairman and the secretary of the association. When there is a seriously ill one in it will be rejected. Rejecting or accepting as a member can be done according to the decision made by the executive committee member.

And then, every head of a household must list the names of all members of his family. These members must be those who live together in a house and who live on the same earning. In a household, anyone who has completed twelve years of age can fill in the member list and can access to the right of receiving the support after death. Regarding the rules of the association, a member said:

*“If there is more than one family living together with the host parents that family has to join the association as a new*

*member by following the rules of the association and giving assigned fees.”*

According to the interview, if a member fails to give member fee for one event, it is to be expelled from his or her association. If a member is on a long trip to other places, he or she needs to delegate member fee to a person on his behalf. An important factor to be taken into account is that no illegal gambling is to be done in the funeral house. If there is a gambling group being formed at the funeral ceremony, the association withdraws all the rights including the contribution fees from the bereaved family.

If a member household loses one of its members, the bereaved family has to immediately inform the chairman, secretary and executive committees of the association about it. In addition, they also need to let the informant to know about the death of the family member. And then, the informant has to go round the ward to make all the people know about the death and he also has to remind them to give contribution fees to the bereaved family on which day before the seventh day donation ceremony for the deceased one. The informant does not need to give contribution fees.

Then the executive committees including the chairman of the respective social welfare service association have to accept the contribution fees of the member at the bereaved family's house. They accept the fees according to the list of the members. This social activity is known as *Ah-Thin-Thai-pay-the* in Myanmar (see in figure 7). An association chairman said:

*“If the bereaved family has registered in three associations there will be three committees for collection of association fees. Every household has registered in from one to five associations.”*



Figure (7) Giving member fee to the bereaved household through the social welfare service associations

Such duty can either be performed on the day when the deceased passed away or on the eve of the seventh day donation ceremony for the deceased. The former type is done for a poor family while the latter for a well-to-do one. If the bereaved family is rich enough to spend the cost, the members of association coming to give them contribution fees are served with meals. A typical meal served to the mourners is rice and steamed fish accompanied by two side dishes namely cassia buds soup and chicken with gourd. In case of those who cannot afford the cost, they manage to arrange meals for the committees who perform their duty at their home.

The close relatives and neighbours of the bereaved family come to the seventh day donation ceremony celebrated for the deceased. The visitors are usually served with rice noodle in fish gravy (*Mohn-hin-gha*) or pilaf (*Dan-Pauk*) depending on the financial status. Sometimes it is common practice that the contributors to the funeral cost are recognized for their kindness by the bereaved family members who return them with some kinds of gifts such as glasses, cups, plates and napkins.

### **Inheritance**

When the parents died, there is no discrimination between the children in sharing property. The property is shared by the children in accordance with the siblings wish. When the inheritance is divided among the children of the parents who have died, no son or daughter can have any extra portion. It is divided according to the wish of brothers and sisters that live.

### **Discussion**

In this study, the Mon national believe in Buddhism and the funeral is prepared Buddhist style to have funeral attendees feel religious apprehension. For example, Mon nationals have performed their practice of building, a structure over the corpse illustrating the *Dhammha* taught by Lord Buddha. Thus the mourners can feel contrition and regret on impermanence. Evident believers in Buddhism, the Mon national try in various ways to have the dead faring well in afterlife.

Similarly, in Kurihara's study (1997), Japans also believe in Buddhism and in funeral, the Japan monks recite sutras by the side of the deceased, the occasion of which is held on the seventh day after the death.

From the above studies, it can be assumed that the funeral ritual is always connected with the religious belief of the people involved in it.

Kurihara (1997) said that the Japanese have voluntary organizations to have a funeral conducted according to traditional custom. Usually migrants in a city, the Japanese family as a whole has to live side by side with those of other ethnicities. Moreover, there are the dissolution of a supporter system of Buddhist temples, the disintegration of the village community, and the problems of graveyards or cemeteries. Thus, their funeral cannot be celebrated by traditional customs.

In contrast, in this study the Mon national also have voluntary organizations to help holding the funeral. Separated from families, the children live in cities as workers but all the family members do not move to there, so a funeral at home is hold according to Mon traditions. If the Mon national are together in a community but without voluntary organizations, or are elsewhere as migrant family a Mon style funeral will not be possible.

From the above studies, it highlights funeral service associations which conduct the burial or cremation in accordance with traditional customs. It is the major supportive factor to encourage the preservation of ethnic identity. Therefore, a factor for an ethnic group to maintain their traditional customs is having voluntary organizations, existing together in a single community and having self-concept on their ethnicity.

In this study, a change unlike before is: funeral ritual was held forthwith in the past, but today the corpse is kept for three days so as to allow children visit back home for the funeral. Formerly the funeral procession proceeded on foot, but it proceeds by motorcar today. In the past a Mon traditional funeral made use of a fireplace, but today cooked food is used. These changes are meant just to keep abreast with the times, not to break the essence of the Mon traditional funeral ritual. It highlights funeral have existed from the beginning of human history and their forms were different from place to place, and time to time.

In this study, there are social-welfare service associations to support Mon funeral ritual. These are founded on the basis of community service arisen from a strong sense of community and lead to the unity of a cultural group. In one hand, the contribution fees are reasonable enough to enable each member to participate in this community service. On the other, the recipient is poor or rich can benefit in

terms of both financial aids and sympathy and kindness from the mourners. However, these associations are not found in Japanese funeral ritual. Therefore, it is found that for peoples' values and beliefs their funeral rituals remain different.

In Malawi Human Rights Commission's study (n.d), in Nkhata Bay (Malawi) the bereaved wife wears rags, and she is not supposed to wear shoes. Her face is covered so that there is no eye contact with relatives of the husband. The woman dressed in such attire so that she is easily identified as the chief mourner.

In this study on funeral day the spirit-basket carrier wears the white cloth on his or her waist, another white cloth as a turban. White cloth signifies the person is in distress and unlike others. Therefore, it is found that every society has performed funeral ritual according to their traditional beliefs and practices.

In the study of Malawi Human Rights Commission's (n.d), in Nkhata Bay (Malawi) when the parents died, the property was distributed almost equally among children. Similarly in this study, regarding inheritance when the parents died, children inherited equally the property. It highlights in human societies some traditions are very similar to one another.

### **Conclusion**

Almost all the Mon nationals of Hinthargon hold funeral ritual in accordance with Mon traditional customs. They can do so because of the supportive groups and associations which provide the bereaved family with both money and service. Almost all the Mon nationals perceive that they recognize themselves as Mon national. And Hinthargon is the integration of Mon nationals to maintain Mon identity. Therefore, the Mon-nationals living in Hinthargon are found to be able to uphold their ethnic identity in terms of funeral ritual although their neighbourhood is occupied by non-Mons.

### **Recommendation**

The social-welfare associations of the Mon nationals contribute much to the funeral ceremonies. Therefore there should be such associations in every society.

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