AFRICAN LITERATURE AND THE CHANGING WORLD: THE ANTITHETICAL IDEOLOGIES OF INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNALISM IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVELS.

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Abstract

The synergic nature of African culture is endowed with cultural values that promote peace, oneness, harmony and care for one another. Thus, the ideology of communalism is a highly esteemed African practice which works for the survival of the people and for the common good. This principle and practice of communalism have held the African culture from total annihilation. This is even in spite of occasional individual dissidence found among those communities. African literature has dealt with matters of cultural importance, highlighting individual and collective tendencies which have reflected certain ideologies in fictional texts and narratives. Chinua Achebe, a leading literary African writer has extensively promoted African communality in fictional texts. Hence to explore the fact of African Communalism and the conflict of individualism, selected novels of Achebe including; Arrow of God, Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease, are to be examined to present characters that are seen as non-conformists. This study is aimed at making a literary exploration on the longstanding ideology of communalism, in the spirit of ofuobi/anyibuofu. It will specifically make a critical evaluation of the dissenting activities of the key individuals in the texts and the consequences of their actions. The conclusion will promote a re-orientation and re-ordering of individual psyche to the assimilation of cultural ideologies in our changing world.

Key words: Ideology, Communalism, Individualism, Antithetical, Re-orientation, cultural values.

Introduction

African Literature has come a long way in dealing with issues concerning Africa and its cultural facts and ideologies. It is an expression of African countries' social structure and concerns about the past and present history reflected in literary narratives. A. N. Akwanya in *Literary Criticism from formal to Questions of Method* potends that, 'African Literature represents an African experience, with a mode of imagination derived from the African background…' (13). These experiences are captured in writings of different genres of literature. Speaking about literature in a wider Sense, *50 years of the Nigerian Novel (1952 – 2001)* explains 'literature as a movement of thought or fantasy coming into being as, and in one of the forms sanctioned and hallowed by tradition's (A.N. Akwanya

and Virgy A. Anohu 3). Literature as a movement cuts across the globe in their types and functions. African literature therefore, is literature about African society. African society is communal and collective in nature and structure, thereby 'the structure and functions of African society define the individual identity within a cosmic context which approximates Elliot's synthesis of "the timeless" and "the temporal" the past and the presents' (Lloyd Brown 28). Thus, individuals in the community share relatively common ideas and facts that become societal ideology or philosophy. These ideologies are cultural values that promote harmony in the community among individuals. This is however, in spite of individual differences and interests.

These ideologies act as strong guiding principles and code of conduct for members of the community. Most of these are represented in literary writings by African fictional writers focusing on the relationship between the individual and the community. This situation is described as 'a humanist approach to literature and explains that it obviously has a serious limitation. Its idea of the business of the novel as centered on the interface between the individual and society is demonstrable' (A.N Akwanya 2). Thus, such relationship between the individual and the community is demonstrated in the texts of Chinua Achebe and lends credence to the fact of individual interest and perception in spite of the held ideologies.

Individual's dissension becomes antithetical to communal ethos thereby putting pressure and chaos on the community and threatens the peace and harmony therein. Thus, African writers have in their fictional narratives represented the conditions of African communal society guided by unwritten laws articulated in forms of aphorisms or witty sayings, and philosophies such as *Onyeaghana nwanne ya, Igwebuike, nwanne di na mba* depicting the oneness among the people. These communal dictates are represented by Asouzu (2007a) as complimentary philosophy of *Ibuanyidanda*, as a new approach to African philosophy for resolving problems, advancing the quality of life, human life and contributing to the quest for meaning within and beyond Africa'. (Kanu Ikechukwu 226). There is however, a lacuna in these dictates of communal ideologies which leaves the individual to his choice but at a cross road.

Chinua Achebe in his fictional works has made great impact and exerted much influence and impression in the themes and plot narratives representing the typical African traditional communities living and bonded by these ideologies. However, the crux of the matter is that there are instances of non compliance to

the wisdom inherent in these communal ideas though with attendant consequences borne by dissident individuals. As observed by D.A Masolo in a paper, 'Community, Identity and the Cultural Space' that, 'our complex lives of multiple choices and interests, ranging from occupation to friendships and amusements and to participation in public Policy-oriented activities, all bring us into bonds with others in yet more complex ways' (Masolo Online). This complexity is equally seen in the acceptability of the guiding norms in the community. Masolo while highlighting the importance of individual and community interface asserts that 'individuals and community were related in a constant mutual dependency. The specific behaviour of individuals in various contents gave the community its cultural boundaries' (Online). Individuals are indispensable component of the community and will remain so regardless of difference.

While affirming the novel as a means of promoting cultural values, it is observed that 'from the beginning therefore, the Nigerian novel has been traditional in so far as it has sought consciously to be art. It comes of age, that is, at the time it first impresses itself on the general consciousness, by taking place in a form which is also traditionally very important for a literary culture' (A.N. Akwanya and Virgy .A. Anohu 5). Literary scholars have leveraged on the rich thematic culture of the novels to critically analyze diverse themes and issues around communal norms and African cultural values. For example, the essay 'African Cultures and Values' expands the context of culture to include 'a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other people or society…. It goes on to include a people's social norms, taboos and values. Values are to be understood as beliefs that are held about what is right and wrong and what is important in life' (Gabriel Idang Online). African values are however appraised with time and age for better adaptation. The essay further highlights the relevance of African-culture and values to the contemporary society and 'maintains that these values be critically assessed and those found to be inimical to the well-being and holistic development of the society be discarded. In this way, African culture and values can be revaluated, their relevance established and sustained in order to give credence to authentic African identity' (Idang online). This illustrates the fact that there are issues of contention in the application of these value and therefore a need for appraisal and re-examination for general acceptability.

The essay, 'Language and Action in the Novels of Chinua Achebe' has the central theme of *No Longer at Ease* as espousing 'the distance between what is said to be

and what is. For example, the morality of public office offered by Mr. Green, the white civil servant, is a facade, like the accountant's clean collar on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* It asserts an ideal, but one irrelevant to the problems of the time and place, and it is bitterly exposed in Mr. Green's tired and cliché-ridden sermon on the effects of the climate on the 'African character' (Gareth Griffiths 71). The paper reveals the issue of failed morality and corruption in the Nigerian civil service.

Bernth Lindfors writing in 'The Palm Oil With Which Achebe's Words are Eaten' observes that '*Things Fall Apart* is the story of Okonkwo, a famous warrior and expert farmer who has risen from humble origin to become a wealthy and respected leader of his clan. His entire life has been a struggle to achieve status, and he has almost attained a position of pre-eminence when he accidentally kills a kinsman' (C.L. Innes & Bernth Lindfors 51). In this essay Achebe uses proverbs to promote the image of Okonkwo as a person who tries to remain relevant and gain respect in his community through individual efforts but fails. The essay further highlights the fact that Achebe's use of proverbs 'tells more about the values of Igbo society, such proverbs also serve as thematic statements reminding us of some of the major motifs in the novel e.g. the importance of status, the value of achievement, the idea of man as shaper of his own destiny' (C.L. Innes & Bernth Lindfors 53). The essay clearly highlights Achebe's creative talent in the use of proverbs and promotes the great depth of value and beauty of African culture and philosophy. In 'Re Thinking of African Culture and Identity: The Afro-Politan Model', the writer argues that 'afropolitanism is an enunciation of the ideas of contamination, hybridity, hyperculturality and other postmodernist terms that disrupts essentialist and oppositional notions of African culture and identity' (Chielozona Eze Online). These new ideas and infiltrations in the understanding of the African culture come with destabilizing effect with its divergent voices.

The review of literature has taken a look at some of the critical works done by scholars around the ideas of cultural values and individual and community interests, but there are still areas not yet covered. One of such is the chaos between the interface between individualism and communalism created by the overriding influence concerning the acceptability of cultural norms. This is what this paper aims to deal with by making a literary study of dissensions witnessed between individual protagonists in the selected novels of study and their cultural communities, namely; Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart,* Obi Okonkwo of *No Longer at Ease* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God.* This study is based on the framework of

African social philosophy and ideology of communalism, hinged on the Igbo maxims of *ofuobi/anyibuofu* to examine the activities of these individuals that are in antithesis to communal dictates. The paper will in conclusion observe the negative consequences of individualism and promote the long standing communal values as better acceptable codes of conduct for the sustenance of peace and harmony in our changing world.

Conceptual Issues

The concepts of individualism and communalism are key in the discourse of this paper. They are to be studied on the standpoint of African social philosophy and ideology. However, related concepts like socialism and communitarianism are used with the same understanding of communalism. Specific issues of African cultural values hinged on the ideologies of *ofuobi* and *anyibuofu* form the tone of the discourse. The communal or communitarian aspects of African moral and political thoughts are reflected in the communitarian features which have been subject of much discourse. Using African social philosophy as the stand point of analysis, Kanu writes that 'it is not to say that there is a unitary or uniform perspective on issues in Africa in the sense that every African adheres to it, but the fact that these ideas are indigenous to Africa, seen, interpreted and analyzed by African philosophy' (Kanu 17). Explaining the meaning of Ideology in *Tradition and Modernity* Kwame Gyekye writes that the term 'Ideology was first used to mean ''the science of idea''. It was to be used to improve social and political conditions of the human beings through the creation of sociopolitical norms. Ideology is defined as a dominant set of ideas about the nature of the good society' (Gyekye 164). Thus philosophies scripted as ideologies and maxims are adopted to African culture and for the good of the people. These ideas are unique in their *africanness*.

Thus 'the "africanness" and "philosophiness" of African philosophy speak of its particularity and universality which are basic ingredients in the philosophical process' (Kanu 22). Hence African philosophy and ideology speak to African problems and situations. Accordingly, Odimegwu avers that 'just as in the family, every member is a blood relation so in communalism every member of the community was treated as brother or sister who had natural rights of belonging' (Kanu 3). For this reason, the problem of one member of the community was the problem of another, especially if it had to do with an outsider. Contributing, the essay, 'The Place of the Individual in the Traditional African Society' explaining the seeming cordial relationship between the individual and the society, opines that 'this does not suggest a lack of dispute or

dissension among members of the same community, it only suggests that even if at home they quarreled and fought, they united to fight an external aggression' (Oliver Ona and Hyginus Ezebuilo 227). But going further, the superiority of communal ethos over individual will and interest holds sway in entrenching the communal spirit. Thus, the essay, 'The Individual in African Communalism' affirms that:

This community structure of African societies, especially within the sub-Sahara, engenders a high spirit of communalism. Every one contributes something to the common stock. Their cooperative community spirit goes a long way to portray their altruism: community interests come before personal interests, as the power of the community is superior over that of an individual. This is evidenced in such Igbo sayings like (the relatives or community is one's strength/power); *Umunna bu ike, Anaghi eleli-amala eleli* (you cannot neglect the community); etc. Africans carry out their civic and social responsibilities according to the provisions of community tradition (Ogbuja, Columbus Online).

The key philosophy in this study is communalism in African cultural milieu in relation to individualism. Communalism explained as a communitarian doctrine is described as a socioethical idea and doctrine about 'social relations as well as moral attitudes: about what sorts of relationships should hold between individuals in a society, and about the need to take into account the interests of the wider society not only in designing sociopolitical institutions and in evolving behavior patterns for individuals in their responses to the needs and welfare of other members of the society' (Kwame Gyekye 149). In the same vein 'Communalism in African setting promotes unity, togetherness, brotherliness and cooperation which are vital elements that propel the wheel of globalization' (Etta Emmanuel, Dimgba and Offiong 303). In affirming this interdependency, Kwame Gyekye further states that:

There is some truth in the view that communalism or individualism as applied to a social arrangement is a matter of degree. For this reason, we should expect a human society to be either more individualistic than communal or more communal than individualistic. But, in view of the fact that neither can the individual develop outside the framework of the community nor can the welfare of the community as a whole dispense with the talents and initiative of its individual members. I think that the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both community and individuality is to ascribe them the status of an equal moral standing. (Gyekye 41).

The inter-relationship between the individual and the community becomes complementary as each needs the other to survive. Man as an individual belongs to a social or cultural society. Therefore the 'central place of the community and the individual has strong implications for African ethics' (Kanu 170). However, in African cultural space, the community is seen as the guide to the ethical and value essence of the individual and is seen to occupy a higher stance in the ladder of the relationship.

Affirming the ideology of a communal spirit 'Prophecies and Protests-Ubuntu and Communalism in African Philosophy' we read that:

> In the notions of *Ubuntu* and communalism the African community spirit is epitomized. The meaning of these notions shows that there is a high estimation of the community in African thought and practice, higher than that of the individual, but not at the cost of forgetting the individual person. A person is a person in the community and through the others of his or her community. This implies a culture of mutual help, of caring for each other and sharing with each other. This is not only expressed in the African languages; it is also practiced by talking to each other, by means of dialogues. Of course, this culture should not be understood in an idealized way. But in spite of struggles between members of a community, envy and hatred, every member can rely on support from somebody of the extended family when in serious trouble or in danger of life. (Heinz kimmerle Online).

Communalism is expressed as a stronghold for communal existence. The idea of individualism is linked to personhood in African philosophy, whereby.

However, the overriding precedence of community over the individual is perceived as unjust and unfair to some who take pride in their self and personal ego. Therefore:

> As a consequence of the central place the community occupies in African ontology, personhood is strongly linked to the community. African philosophy accepts that personhood is something attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through performing the various duties imposed on him or her by living in the community. A person is defined by reference to his kinship, and as such, the reality of communal world takes precedence over the individual. (Kanu 170).

This inadvertently causes a problem of adherence and dissension among the people. One of the problems of non adherence as posited by Kanu stems from 'lack of indigenous written philosophical tradition in Africa …. Not implying that it cannot be written, but that it is basically embodied in proverbs, aphorisms and pithy sayings. Its philosophicality is not determined by writing' (Kanu 2). The unwritten nature of the philosophy makes it open to individual perception and rationalization giving rise to frustrations and doubts.

According to Quinton (1995), Teichmann and Katherine in explaining the nature of the non philosophical counterparts of the three elements of theory of philosophy posit that, '…Everyone has occasion to doubt and question beliefs, their own or those of others, with more or less success and without any theory of what they are doing' (Kanu 5). The question of individual doubt of the ethics and values of the community very much occupies an alarming space in the sphere of this reality. Again, Kanu quoting Gyekye observes that for most of these individuals, 'their understanding of philosophy has been conditioned by their experience of western philosophy. Thus, they judge the validity of African philosophy from what they know as western philosophy or from the categories forged by the West' (Kanu 3). Dissension or doubt usually emanate from individuals who have come into contact with western ideas or education.

Apart from doubt, communalism makes room for loneliness for the individual who have embraced another philosophy. Gyekye argues that 'the consequence of this will be that one individual will come to be suspicious and fearful of the other and will keep to himself or herself. Leading a lonely life will thus become a preferable (or a preferred, way of life. This need not be so if we have a clear and deep understanding of the value of community life for our individual lives' (276). A well ordered community life has far reaching advantage for the wellbeing of the individual.

In this study the challenges of doubt, frustration and consequent isolation of individuals will be explored in the select texts of Achebe. Kanu Ikechukwu has classified such studies as belonging to the 'literary or artistic school of African philosophy' (54). This issue will be examined on the philosophical aphorism of *Ofuob*i and *anyibuofu* as evidenced in the novels' narratives.

Issues of Individualism in Antithesis to Communalism

In revealing the maxim of *Ofuobi* and belongingness in the texts of Chinua Achebe, the issues of individual interest and rejection of the collective consensus will be explored through the actions of the key characters namely; Okonkwo of

Things Fall Apart, Obi Okonkwo of *No Longer at Ease* and Ezeulu of *Arrow of God.* It is evident in all the fictional narratives the central role of communal living. They are situations whereby communities are guided by maxim and shared values. The communities of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease,* and Umuaro of *Arrow of God* represent the ideal African cultural communities. The main characters of Achebe's novels are projected as always feeling the endemic tensions of conflicting cultural values.

In the novel *Things Fall Apart,* 'Umuofia was feared by all its neighbours. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all their surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point, there was general agreement …' (*Things Fall Apart* 10). This general statement confirms the fact of the people speaking with one voice. The Umuofia Progressive Union Lagos State living out the communal love, rallies round a member who had lost his Job and solicit help from among them for Joshua who is now without a job. 'That is why we say that he who has people is richer than he who has money. Every one of us here should look out for openings in his department and put in a word for Joshua. This was greeted with approval' (*No Longer at Ease* 72). The Umuofia of *Things Fall Apart* is the same with *No Longer at Ease,* which is termed a continuation of *Things Fall Apart.* The people of Umuaro believe so much in the sighting of the new moon by Ezeulu so as to pronounce the new yam festival. Therefore in 'this season of the year his task was not too difficult, he did not have to peer and search the sky as he might do when the rains came' (*Arrow of God* 1). The new yam festival heralds the harvest and eating of the new yam.

For these cultural communities, close kingship relations are held at a high premium. This idea highlights the fact that 'the synergic nature of the society that allows people to build houses and work on farms together is directly opposite to the western individualistic model' (Gabriel E. Idang Online). Thus Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* is a product of communal effort as he receives his education abroad through community effort. Thus, 'six or seven years ago Umuofians abroad had formed their union with the aim of collecting money to send some of their brighter young men to study in England. They taxed themselves mercilessly. The first scholarship under this scheme was awarded to Obi Okonkwo five years ago' (*No Longer at Ease* 6). Such communal effort reflects the maxim of *Igwebuike.*

However, the individuals in the three novels have issues against the common belief of the communities. This creates contention and pressure in the space.

Remy Oriaku observes in an essay 'When Brothers Fight to Death': Internal conflicts and the Tragic Resolution of *Arrow of God'*, that 'Each of the novels has its dominant figure. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* and it is with them that the novels open. There is the wrestling match in *Things Fall Apart'* which shows Okonkwo as a man of action and imitates his rise to greatness' (Okike 48-49). In *Arrow of God,* Ezeulu is shown to be 'contemplative, he is seated in his Obi watching for the appearance of the new moon' (49). Still describing the person of Okonkwo, A.N. Akwanya observes that:

Though one of the greatest in Umuofia, Okonkwo never becomes a member of the coterie of elders who make all the political decisions in Umuofia. Unconsciously, it is this warlike image that he projects in public. So it is in the function of a warrior of uncommon standing that he is identified within the Umuofia public, his personality almost entirely subsumed in that function. In the social space he stands out as one who has little to say to other people, although he converses quite well with his friend Obierika, he is given to dialoguing with himself (82).

It is this trait of being on his own which is antithetical to communal life that predisposes his acting against the expected communal ethics. Akwanya similarly writes that 'Ezeulu is even more thoughtful than Okonkwo, and lives alone with his thoughts all the time. This lonely existence seems to be imposed by his office as chief priest, and he accepts it with equanimity" (*Okike* 83). Ezeulu's exalted status as the chief priest shapes his perception which is in contradiction with the general community ideas. Perhaps, his position makes him allocate and exercise power of personal interest.

The scenario with Obi Okonkwo is different. He is shaped by exposure to western education and experience, thereby, forming opinion different from the community. Hence, in 'Language as a Theme in *No Longer at Ease* Felicity Riddy says, 'Obi Okonkwo is what Clark calls a citizen of two world' as the first person in his village to receive a university education and a post in the senior service … The difficulties which confront and finally overcome him stem from his inability to identify himself wholly with either the traditional or the modern way of life, and his lack of a sense of identity is most clearly reflected in his speech' (Felicity Riddy 151). It is evident that Obi Okonkwo's problem with his clan and his family stems from his conventional ideas to issues. The major dissention between his people and himself is his desire to marry Clara who is an Osu.

This issue attracts vehement opposition from the President of Umuofia in Lagos who does not mince words in trying to call Obi to order, he tells him openly at

the gathering of his kinsmen. 'I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry and even thinking of marrying her…' (*No Longer at Ease* 75). Obi reacted to this with disrespect and eventually walked out on the president, and the entire Umuofia Progressive Union in Lagos, all in a bid to assert his interest. Obi shouted in English. 'This is preposterous … I am not going to listen to you anymore … But don't you dare interfere in my affairs again…' (*No Longer at Ease* 75). And he stormed out of the meeting place in spite of the efforts of some people to pacify him. Back in the village, Obi argues with his father on his choice. When his father declines his consent to his proposed marriage to Clara, he says, 'what is this thing? Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man Osu, a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcast, and his children, and his children's children for ever. But have we not seen the light of the Gospel?' Obi used the very words that his father might have used in talking to his heathen kinsmen' (*No Longer at Ease* 121). This shows his frustration especially when his arguments could not change his father's mind on this. This situational argument between Obi and his father presents a society where system is more basic than the rights of individual members. Here, the concepts of justice and fairness are sometimes ignored in favour of preservation of the groups. Thus, to confirm Obi's father's reason for opposing the marriage merely on existing belief whereby 'Osu is like leprosy in the mind of our people … if you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory' (*Things Fall Apart* 121). At the end, the traditional belief however triumphed in spite of Obi's expectation.

Therefore, if a man comes into conflict with his society, he must either accept these differences or be destroyed. This nightmare comes to life in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo clashes with his society's beliefs. The conflict that exists between Okonkwo and his society is what ultimately leads him to his downfall. Okonkwo disagrees with many of his culture's most important values. These are held sacred in the clan and have been practiced generations before him. Okonkwo battles the new religion but not in total support of the men of Umuofia. He seems to stand alone in most of his decisions, including the decision to kill Ikemefuna. Okonkwo's growing resentment about the missionary and government makes him act violently towards them. With all these 'Okonkwo as he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the hands of the white man's court messenger, and he swore vengeance' (*Things Fall Apart* 159). In fulfilling his threat, Okonkwo in a struggle kills the white man's messenger, knowing full well he is left to his fate, he

hanged himself. Thus the episodes surrounding Okonkwo and his actions are more of personal ego, hence it is 'forced by his own dogged insistence on masculinity to deal the fatal blow'. So determined is his effort to be known for achievement, which his society reverses, that Okonkwo gives no heed to the wisdom of age, which his society respects (*Things Fall Apart* 101). Eventually, Okonkwo suffers the implication of his actions by taking his own life to avoid further humiliation by the white men.

In *Arrow of God* Ezeulu's quest for power and authority wedges him against the collective wishes of the people of Umuaro. He refuses to eat the yam to herald the pronouncement of the new yam festival. This also stems from resentment and vengeance on the people for abandoning him when he was detained at Okperi. He also gets blinded by exercise of power. Hence to understand Ezeulu one must comprehend his deep concern over the way his world is changing. This concern is expressed both in his decision to send one of his son's to a mission school. After a long period of silent preparation Ezeulu finally revealed that he intended to hit Umuaro as its most vulnerable point, the feast of the new yam. Before it, a man might dig up a few yams around his house to ward off hunger in his family but no one will begin the harvesting of the big farms. And, in any case, no man of title would taste new yam from whatever source before the festival. Ezeulu held on to his personal ego against communal wishes to punish his perceived enemies. Unfortunately, he suffers the consequence. Thus, the voice of dissension is antithetical to collective ethos.

Conclusion

The African cultural society is community oriented. In spite of the changing dynamics in the system caused by infiltrations of other philosophies and cultural experiences, cultural ideologies are still relevant. African literary writers all through the periods have represented the struggle between individual personhood and the community in designing the cultural values and norms. Chinua Achebe's novels studied here observed that dissension and struggle witnessed in the activities of the individuals attracted negative implications which the individuals suffered alone while the community survives. The paper suggests the reorientation and disposition of the individual in the community towards a better understanding and acceptance of cultural values in consonance with the general existing ideologies of *ofuobi*, of speaking and acting with one voice. Hence, in our changing world, communalism and its apparatuses should be entrenched over individualism in order to maintain a peaceful and harmonious society.

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