

Disseminating Folklore through Cultural Dance in South African Contemporary Theatre: A Case of *Siva* (Seven) Dance Production

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Abstract

There is a consensus amongst folklorists that the dissemination of folklore is entrenched in the tradition of orality. The idea that folklores are “‘passed down’ from generation to generation through ‘word of mouth’ or ‘tales’ confines the folklore tradition to the mono-modal communication platform of the ‘spoken word.’” While the authors acknowledge the richness and expediency of this delivery mode, this article advocates for the use of physicality and performance as supplementary embodiments of folklore. It argues that since the aspects of the body in time and space are already phenomenologically- integrated into folklore through the realms of words and imagination, it is necessary to fully synthesise performativity into the folklore tradition both visually and theatrically through dance and movement.

Keywords: cultural commentary; meaning-making; non-verbal communication; performance

Introduction

Cultural nuances differ amongst people demographically, which is what gives a people their identity (Axelsson and Skold 2014, 2; Ennaji 2005), and these nuances influence the manner in which tales are told within a specific group of people. It is within the proposition of this article that the nuances of performative embodiment (the body in space and time) is acknowledged as an inherent integral part of a people’s understanding of folklore and its traditional value. To this end, this article utilises a professional theatre production *Siva* (Seven), by Luyanda Sidiya, as a case to validate



physicality as a significant mode of disseminating folklore.

Performance as Transformative Behaviour

This article argues that from a performance perspective the practice of folklore tradition—for example, storytelling can never be entirely attributed to the oral tradition. In order to clarify the base of this argument, it should be understood that performance encompasses “restored behaviours or twice-behaved behaviours” (Schechner 2006, 28). Conquergood (as quoted in Striff 2003, 5) explains: “...performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters, and jokers, who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, [and] the mobile over the monumental.”

Schechner (2003, 36) further clarifies that in performance “... experience is not segregated to hierarchal planes, it is not that everything is the same, but all things are part of the wholeness and among things unlimited exchanges and transformation is possible.” According to Schechner (2006, 28)

to perform can also be understood in relation to: being, doing, showing doing” and “being is existence itself... doing is the activity of all that exists... and showing doing is performing: pointing to, underlining and displaying doing.

This supports and concretises the intent of performance as indicative of socio-cultural being and understanding.

The fact that the above-stated definitions of performance advocate that performances are also associated with verbs and adverbs demonstrates that there is action in the core of performance, and action can only be physically embodied by a living entity. Thereby, through performativity, every message that is passed from one person to the other, through both the non-verbal and verbal is accompanied by tone, gesture, pause, facial expressions, intonation, and rhythm. These elements assist the receiver with meaning, construction, and inherent understanding. Therefore, it is metaphysically arguable that folktales with moral values, historical accounts, traditional values, and educational values at the core, passed down generationally are accompanied by the abovementioned elements—verbal and non-verbal inherent communication. This implies that language is not only what people articulate verbally, but also what they physically express non-verbally even without uttering a word.

Performance and Cultural Transmission

From a professional performance perspective, culture can be perceived as the language of a people, and it inherently forges an identity of a people, in which oral or word of

mouth is also a fraction in the vast assortment of communication mediums. In the professional theatre performance of *Siva* (Seven), what could have literally been an oral narration of an epic tale of humanity's search for the oneness, wholeness, and connectedness was somatically delineated through a fusion of different cultural dances and movement nuances:

Luyanda Sidiya's choreography can conceptually be compared to the literature of writers such as William Gqoba's *imbali yasMbo*, A.C. Jordan's *Ingqumbo yeminyanya*, Solomon Plaatje's *Mhudi*, and Peter Mtuzze's *uDingezweni*. As your senses are submersed through multiple spheres, all fluid and constantly shifting much like culture. Within each of these, however, exists multiple realities as an idea or image changes its context depending on the spectator. (Makandulo 2015)

Makandulo's comparison of the professional dance and theatre production *Siva* (Seven) with the written works of some of the prolific writers of South Africa is an example of a performance critic's interpretation of written text or codes through physical action.

This substantiates an inherent instinctive influence of performance that was apparent and institutes a double-edged interpretation of making-sense/sense-making and forefronts its intertwined somatic semiotic/semantic nature through repetition and grounded interpretation:

In *Siva* (Seven) you experience religious liturgy and traditional orality as complementary – a result of the choreography. The evocative tempo of the drums switch swiftly between the syncretic dances... stylistically *Siva* (Seven), isn't simply the movement from the familiar to the unknown, it represents the contribution of the oral tradition to the work of Sidiya. Characterisation and action are also influenced by the divination of verse that can be traced from the language of Ifa. The sounds progress from humming syncopated rhythm to the vibrant drums of West Africa. (Makandulo 2015)

Subsequent to this evocative account by theatre critic Makandulo, the following section describes the production of *Siva* (Seven), which serves to offer a tangible account to substantiate the inherent non-verbal and performance modes of communication.

Siva (Seven)



Figure 1: Photograph of the production *Siva* including performers Julia Barnham and Lulu Mlangeni.

Photo credit: Wesley Mabizela

The performance of *Siva* starts before the audience enters the theatre, with two women positioned at the entrance of the auditorium. One of the women is crouched inside a metal bath tub, while the other woman ritualistically pours water over her. As the audience enters they pass right next to the two women, offering a public witness to a private intimate act. Immediately after the spectators enter the auditorium they see a darkened stage with a semi-naked man just adorned in his brown underwear, upstage opposite prompt side making subtle movements with candles.



Figure 2: Photography montage of *Siva* production at the National Arts Festival
Photo credit: CuePix and Niamh Walsh-Vorster

Once the audience is seated, the darkness intensifies, and an enigmatic voice recites a whispered prayer connecting with a higher power, ancestors, or deity. When lights illuminate the stage, a man down stage prompt side is revealed to be kneeling with a whip circling him—repetitively the performer sits upright and then prostrates himself with his forehead, nose, and palms on the floor like one performing a Salat Muslim prayer, all this while speaking in an indecipherable coded language. The coded text is a repetition of the very words that served as a catalyst to intensify the movement of the man with a candle, and this represented the metaphysical connection the two men have. As the performance progresses the man with a candle lights other candles, which are attached as extensions of his fingers, creating surreal and ritualistic depiction of burning fingers.



Figure 3: Photograph of production *Siva* including lead performer/dancer Xolisile Bongwane

Photo credit: Wesley Mabizela

The man with a whip gets up from the praying position and frighteningly lashes his whip, as other performers randomly enter the stage and surround the man with burning candle fingers—who at this point is moving in an abstract manner, dripping candle wax all over his upper body. Other performers surround him as if they are ritualistically gravitated towards him in their visceral abstract movements. The whip is then transformed into a skipping rope and the performance starts to fill the stage with dynamic energy. The man with candle fingers circles around the stage, accompanied by other performer followers, magnetically spellbound by his burning fingers. Eventually, the man with burning fingers exits the stage, leaving the rest of the performers on stage who join the chorus' activities.

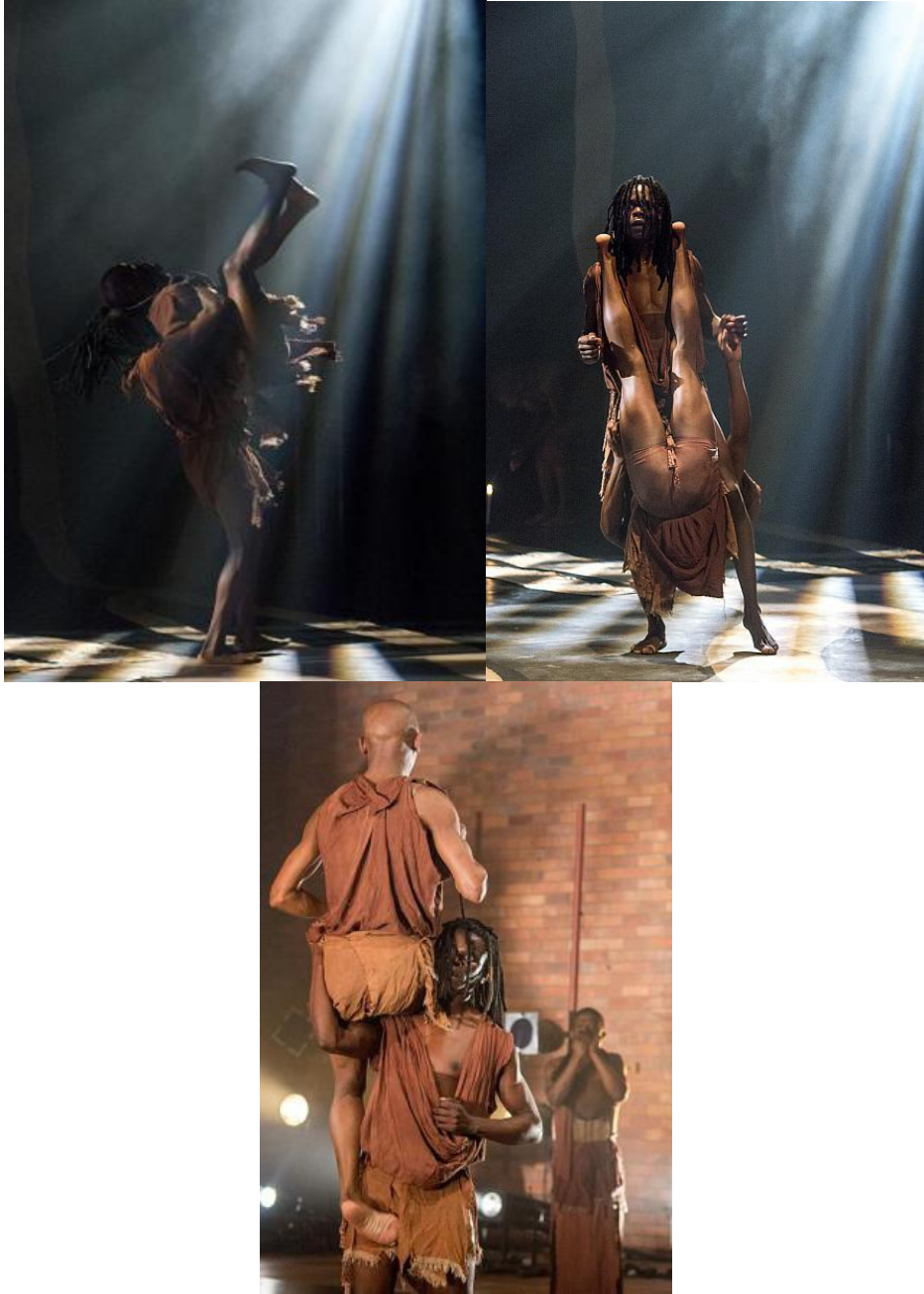


Figure 4: Photography montage of *Siva* production at the National Arts Festival
Photo credit: CuePix and Niamh Walsh-Vorster

From this point, the performers start to project their personal struggles through solo, duets, or group dance and movement sequences as if they are seeking each another's attention or going through a power struggle of sorts. The performance of these combinations and sequences comprise lifts, weight distribution, and contact improvisation amongst the performers (refer to Figure 4). The performers' movements are accentuated by "strange looks" on their faces that reflect anguish and emptiness (refer to Figure 5). This emotional expression is further emphasised by their costumes—brown rags, worn like medieval pilgrims on a quest for spiritual fulfillment.

The repetition of expressive movements and grounded dance routines immerse the performers into a trance-like liminal state, which further creates an enticing visceral response from the spectator as if an observer or witness to ritual. The percussive (jittering-like) movements of the performers in semi-trance state further serves to blur the boundary between a theatrical performance and a ritualistic motivated performance evocative of African spiritual healers. Further, the physicality of the performers' embodies nuances of different South African cultural and traditional dances. Also included are ritual and religious physicalities, such as those found amongst African Zionist dance. From a universal perspective dance and physicality elements of Ballet, Japanese kabuki theatre and African American hip-hop dance can be observed in the performance. Yet the ritualistic form of the performance distorts the direct link to these dance styles/techniques, as well as warping the nuances of cultural and traditional practices from which the physicalities may have been appropriated.



Figure 5: Photograph of *Siva* production at the National Arts Festival
Photo credit: CuePix and Niamh Walsh-Vorster

Towards the end of the performance, the spectator is invited to participate. This interactivity is encouraged by the lead dancer (the man with the whip) who encourages the audience to stand and check under their seats (refer to Figure 6). Here spectators find article flyers about “*Dr Bob*”, who can heal every diseases there is. The reference to *Dr Bob* is one that heightens the audience’s awareness of spirituality and religious elements. As in reality, such flyers about “doctors” are plastered all over the walls of buildings, street light poles and electric transformers across the cities of South Africa, specifically the city of Pretoria. This interactive participation allows the intensity of the performance as ritual element to be broken, and offers a light relief for the spectator who makes associations with their realities.

The lead performer’s last words to the audience is that everyone must go home, which is wherever one believes home to be—which, according to the choreographer Luyanda Sidiya (2016), signifies that one must look within themselves to find the oneness, completeness, and peace. This is juxtaposed with the two realities offered as an immersive experience for the audience—one of witness and visceral engagement with ritualistic and familiar physical activities; the other of commentary on the activities that South Africans interact with, from cultural and religious practice to searching for spiritual enlightenment, “healing”, and assistance from any source to make sense of one’s reality.



Figure 6: Photograph of production *Siva* including lead performer/dancer Xolisile Bongwane

Photo credit: CuePix/Niamh Walsh-Vorster

The amalgamation of different cultural and traditional dances create a universal appeal to the performance and has been utilised to reflect what Sidiya (2016) believes to be humanity's quest in this day and age. Sidiya further states that:

[...] as human beings tangled in our own disorder, disruption, and disassociation we constantly yearn for that which guides us to completeness, to oneness. We are in constant search within ourselves, in others, and all around us, for connectedness and peace.

Traditional Modes of Performance as Cultural Commentary

As described above, Sidiya's work is about humanity's search for connectedness and peace. As a theatre maker and choreographer he uses some of African cultural dance nuances, which he is familiar with—including IsiXhosa, Setswana, TshiVenda, IsiZulu, and African Zionists, Shembe, and Abapostile. However, Makandulo (2015) claims that he also recognises Afro-Cuban, Yoruba, and Japanese *Odori* dances. This instantaneously demonstrates that people intuitively and inherently communicate in a language that they understand and a vocabulary embodied in their cultural paradigm—be it verbal or physical. The production had no clear distinctions of cultural dances—nonetheless, through the fusion of performative elements, people of different cultural backgrounds were able to relate with the production from their individual cultural perspective.

Further, the performance of *Siva* (Seven) embodies spiritual and customary modes, which give rise to the ritualistic nature of the production. The grounded visceral embodiment of the performance blurred the latitude between the liminal¹ ritualistic performance and the liminoid² theatre performance, and is emphasised by the semi-trance state of the performers. This frolic of performers between two realms is induced by the repetitive nature of the dances and movements, which are inherent in most African ritual and spiritual dances/performances. The repetitive nature of the *Siva* (Seven) performance is informed by the choreographer's predisposition to the South African ritual performance and the Zionist, Shembe, and Abapostile churches' performance nature, which are quintessentially grounded in religion.

The visceral nature of the dance is symbolic of the totems, which give names to most South African clans and are prevalent through surnames. The notion of totems and anthropomorphosis is also a quintessential component of African proverbs, idioms, mythology, and legends. In *Siva* (Seven) these tales are told physically with little

1 Liminal implies the state of being in-between, occupying both sides of the threshold. This relates to a transitional or initial stage of the process.

2 The liminal is part of society, an aspect of social or religious ritual, while the liminoid implicates a break from society, and is part of a play.

attention to the oral element. Thus, the body of a performer in a space is designed to be symbolic of a sacred ground at a set moment that is timeless, telling a tale of pilgrims in search for oneness and peace. From a professional theatre performance perspective, *Siva* (Seven) is an epitome of a South African identity in the African theatre culture.

Cultural and Religious Appropriation Aspects Evident in *Siva* (Seven)

Tshivenda and IsiXhosa

The essence of the Tshivenda dance is explored in the production as an ensemble with the bodies of all performers dancing uniformly. The abstraction of the *malende* and *tshigombela* cadence brings about the ritualistic feel to the production, and when enhanced by repetition the moves become spiral and intense. The notation of the Tshivenda dance steps are in this case accompanied by hand gestures and facial expressions, juxtaposed with the overt shoulder movements.

A cadence of the IsiXhosa dance creates a non-verbal communication that reflects the self-determination in one's journey. These grounded dance formations are symbolic of the respective journeys that everyone has embarked on, and the social cohesion brought by rituals. The design elements found in the dance formation has performers mirroring each other as if they are looking for oneself in the other, which may also be seen as symbolic of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*—"I am because you are."

Setswana

The Setswana dance characteristics bring about a visceral component to the production, and emphasise the anthropomorphic element in performance. A *sirurubedu* dance, in which performers emulate a butterfly, is explored in the performance, creating an impersonation of the butterfly totem. This explores African people's relationship with their environment and other entities they share space within the ecosystem. This is symbolic of the idea of oneness and seeing reflection of oneself in ones' surroundings. This reflects the symbolic journey in the performance to be inclusive of other forms of life and fortifies the idea that all other forms of life also matter in the greater scheme of things.

IsiZulu



Figure 7: Photography montage of *Siva* production at the National Arts Festival.
Photo credit: CuePix and Niamh Walsh-Vorster

Both Tshivenda and IsiXhosa dance formations are characterised by short steps where performers do not lift the feet higher than the waist, that are symbolic of a casual walk in this spiritual journey. IsiZulu nuances on the other hand, bring forth the concept of a leap symbolic of idea of agency. The nuances of *indlamu* (Zulu traditional dance) in the performance also reflect arrogance, determination, and power (refer to Figure 7).

Generic Cultural Elements

The ritual aspect is apparent in the dance formation, which shows the performers leaping across the stage holding a stick to the floor. Eventually, one of the dancers pretends to get stuck, depicting the struggle to cross over from one side to the next. This leads to the formation of a circle of other dancers around him, which echoes the Khoi-San people's shamanistic dance portraying a healing ritual performance, or an initiation ritual procession amongst *Vhathu* or *Abantu* people of South Africa. The initiate dances in the middle until he goes into a trance-like state, with his whole body jittering, after which he wakes up and gets initiated, and is now able to cross over the stick.

Khoi-San, Sangoma, Zionists, Shembe and Abapostile



Figure 8: Photograph of *Siva* production at the National Arts Festival
Photo credit: CuePix and Niamh Walsh-Vorster

According to the choreographer, the production has a purely South African cultural dance influence, although some have claimed to have identified aspects of Asian performances, especially the Zionists antilock-wise spinning dance, which the Asian audience associated with their shaman dance (Sidiya 2016). However, from an African perspective, such performances could be identified within the trance dance of the Khoi-San people and the *Sangoma* or traditional healers amongst the *Vhathu* of Southern Africa. Technically, the Khoi-San, *Sangoma*, Zionists, Shembe, and Abapostile dance moves are grounded and spiral, symbolising a spiritual journey against the tides of a clock intended to induce trance (refer to Figure 8).

Repetition is the key component of the dance, which distorts the performers' sense of direction and time. Once performers are in a semi-trance state, the notion of place changes as well. The construct of Khoi-San, *Sangoma*, Zionists, Shembe, and Abapostile dance and its influence in the production concretises the concept of a spiritual journey from a religious perspective and also underpins the core purpose of the production. The shapes and gestures created from the Khoi-San, *Sangoma*, Zionists, Shembe, and Abapostile dance constructs were technically theatrical and not religious—yet the notion they represented were clearly depicted in the production.

Decoding Meaning-making

It is through the association of what we know as signs and how they are phenomenologically embodied that creates meaning in performance, regardless of the mode of performance (Chaplin 2005). Body language as a physical embodiment or non-verbal communication has stayed the same, and it is the repetition of the sign that crystalises the meaning of the sign or signifying elements. Performance also explores the use and significance of the gestures, movements, and body language to make sense of the world:

Artists have actively tried to reconnect to ritual action... however, performance is not just a doing, a form of carrying through. Like ethnography, it has also served as an instrument of cultural analysis... the performance is in itself ethnographic. (Taylor 2007, 77)

In *Siva*, through facial expressions and gestures, the mood of the performer during the performance is depicted. The frowning and smiling of the performers reveal the performers' feeling while the hand gestures and body postures reflect the attitude of the performers. These actions were open for meaning-making through both personal-cultural and socio-cultural interpretation.

The sound that accompanies the dance sets the mood, tone, and enhances meaning in relation to the dance formation. Most of the songs are a repetition of a single word, which makes it possible for the audience to understand the dance formation and further interpret the associated non-verbal communication created in the production. In this case, music could be considered an oral component of this folklore traditional presentation, while the dance formation is an embodiment of the lore.



Figure 9: Photograph of *Siva* production at the National Arts Festival
Photo credit: CuePix and Niamh Walsh-Vorster

The description of the performance can be regarded as evidence enough that folklore is not necessarily entirely oral or a word of mouth tradition—but a combination of cultural nuances embodied through spoken and non-verbal communication—since certain gestures have a collective meaning amongst certain people of a certain culture. These gestures are the ones that help people of a particular culture to understand the message that is being conveyed; even if no words are uttered. Folklore tradition is an embodiment of culture, wisdom, history, legends, and mythology of a people and that vast knowledge cannot be accredited to a single component of a people’s medium of verbal communication.

The *Siva* (Seven) performance is a holistic performance inclusive of all the modes. Also from the perspective of thematic nature, the performance is inclusive of the four elements of life—earth, water, air, and fire. The stage represents a sacred ground, while the loud breathing conscientised the audience to the element of air—a woman bathing live on stage, an act symbolic of a cleansing process, as well as a man with candles on his fingertips dropping wax all over in upper body as he danced;, further inclusion of fire and water references as well as symbolic of a purification ritual process (refer to Figure 10).



Figure 10: Photography montage of *Siva* production at the National Arts Festival demonstrating the symbolic use of the elements of water and fire

Photo credit: CuePix and Niamh Walsh-Vorster

The cold feeling of the water used by the women to bath, as well as the pain that the performer endures from the candle wax that burns further blurs the lines between the symbolic idea of pain and the actual pain. Just as the description in this article requires the images to further “translate” the non-verbal communication, so too the imagery created through this embodied performance may never be quite as articulate if it is only being described through spoken language. Like any other ritual, the performance was cathartic to the performers and audience alike, due to the liminal (or sacred) and the liminoid (or entertainment) time spent together. These four elements of life bring about the notion of completeness and tie together the three performance aspects—body, time, and space. This case study is a simple example of how the physical embodiment of culture, tradition, history, legends, mythology, and knowledge of a people can be gleaned beyond the mere word of mouth.

Conclusion

It is universally accepted that language is not bound to the exchange of words alone. In the same manner, folklore should not be seen to continue to solely exist in the realm of the spoken word. Narratives can also be embodied physically and visually through dance and theatre. The splendour of performance is that it can communicate stories to multiple receivers with various personal-cultural and socio-cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and races. Whereas language is restricted to the sender-receiver transmission model, where a common and shared dialect is required for the communication to be successful.

Spreading folklore through performance to a wide-ranging and inclusive audience will contribute to the preservation of these cultural nuances as well as go a long way to forge understanding between cultures through code-switching.

Siva (Seven), as a professional theatre production has proven that besides the realm of the spoken word there is another more powerful dimension of communication known as the physical embodiment of the unseen. Makandulo's interpretation of *Siva* (Seven) is inclusive of the embodied textual or coded, narrative, aesthetic, and performative modes of communication.

In an appraisal of a *Siva* (Seven) production, an audience member once remarked that she felt as if her ancestors had come alive and that they were physically talking to her throughout the performance. While through academia we cannot validate this anecdote, it nevertheless confirms that the effectiveness of performance is convincing viewers about the authenticity of what is being portrayed. Perhaps the best summation of the efficacy of performance as a transmitter of folklore is the one provided by Makandulo (2015), who concludes that

Sidiya takes the audience on a pilgrimage in deeply spiritual and dystopic setting. The movement allows you to take heed of all your senses, as alluded by the title, to a state of completeness and perfection.

Makandulo highlights “movement” not “words”, as the primary vehicle, which transport the audience to that “spiritual and dystopic” universe. Folklorists should start acknowledging, revering, and drawing from performance as a tool that incorporates verbal and non-verbal communication, useful to translating and breathing new life into folklore tales.

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