The World Humanities Report

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This publication is available online at https://worldhumanitiesreport.org.

Suggested citation:

El Shakry, Omnia. *The Humanities in Translation in the Arab World*. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

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The Humanities in Translation in the Arab World

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The Afterlife of Translation

In 1945 psychologist Yusuf Murad introduced the Arabic term *al-la-shuʿur* as "the unconscious" in the newly founded Egyptian *Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs* (Journal of psychology).[1] The phrase, redolent with mystical overtones, was borrowed from medieval Sufi philosopher Ibn ʿArabi (b. 1165). How might we begin to understand the shuttling between Sigmund Freud's *das Unbewusste* and Yusuf Murad's *al-la-shuʿur*? On its surface, the translation epitomizes an interconnected network of intellectual exchange between the Arab world and Europe. After all, Murad had studied psychology at the Sorbonne in France, returning to Cairo to translate and teach the canons of European philosophy and psychoanalysis. At a deeper level, we can trace how humanistic inquiry in the Arab world has led to theoretical innovations premised on crossing boundaries often thought to be sharply demarcated and partitioned, such as between East and West. In this sense, Murad represented a long-standing Arab intellectual heritage of blending traditions that earned him the moniker the "philosopher of integration."[2]

In the introduction to his 1949 adaptation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim discussed the impulse to blend traditions in the Arab world. Such an impulse, Hakim argued, could be traced as far back as Abu Nasr al-Farabi's neoclassical contemplation of Plato's *Republic*, in which Greek ideas were poured into the mold of Islamic philosophy and Arabic thought.[3] Through this process, the intermarriage of literatures, ways of knowing, and ways of being took place. Murad's reliance on the medieval lexicon of Ibn ʿArabi to convey Freud's notion of the unconscious is exemplary

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[1] This essay draws on information and analysis from portions of my previously published works: *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); "Translation, Tradition, and the Ethical Turn: A Reply to Bardawil and Allan," *Immanent Frame*, October 11, 2018, https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/10/11/translation-tradition-and-the-ethical-turn/; and "Psychoanalysis and the Imaginary: Translating Freud in Postcolonial Egypt," *Psychoanalysis and History* 20, no. 3 (2018): 313–35, https://doi.org/10.3366/pah.2018.0271.

[2] El Shakry, *Arabic Freud*, 22.

[3] Tawfiq al-Hakim, "Introduction to King Oedipus," in *The Arab Oedipus: Four Plays from Egypt and Syria*, ed. Marvin Carlson (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, 2005), 22.

of how knowledge in the humanities is produced through translating texts and concepts across languages and in the synthesis and integration of religious and secular knowledge, as well as of tradition and modernity. Simply put, new forms of humanistic knowledge emerge from the encounter between different knowledge traditions across space and time.

It would be a grave mistake to assume that such knowledge—produced in part through translation—is simply derivative of European intellectual formations. We must reject the conceit of much of Euro-American theory, in which "geopolitics provides the exemplars, but rarely the epistemologies."[4] What might it mean, in other words, to rethink the epistemological and ethical contours of the humanities while standing in a geopolitical elsewhere? Specifically, what might the global humanities learn from the complex processes of translation in the Arab world?

I draw attention to the theoretical innovations of Arabic humanities scholarship in the postwar period. First I examine the creation and development of an Arabic-language lexicon in psychoanalysis through the production of glossaries and dictionaries. Then I focus on specific theoretical concepts—the self, the unconscious, and the imagination—and show that the movement between European languages and Arabic entailed creative improvisation and highly original syntheses of various knowledge forms. To demonstrate this, I draw on two thinkers: Yusuf Murad (1902–1966) and Sami Mahmud Ali (later known simply as Sami-Ali, b. 1925),[5] both of whom earned their undergraduate degrees in Egypt and later earned doctorates in psychology from the Sorbonne. I illustrate how in the process of translation they reconfigured the psychoanalytic corpus by drawing on Islamic knowledge traditions, thereby displacing the allegedly secular orientation of psychoanalysis.

Murad and Sami-Ali were accomplished translators from French and German to Arabic, respectively, and their translations deeply informed their academic work. Equally important was their ability to move between medieval and modern knowledge formations. Here we may observe how the work of translation both draws on and diverges from European modes of knowledge production. Indeed, as Walter Benjamin notes, "a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife." Furthermore, this is not a relationship of originals to bad copies; rather, "in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and renewal of something living—

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[4] Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 152.

[5] In his Arabic writings his name appears as Sami Mahmud Ali, in his subsequent French writings as Sami-Ali. I retain the latter, when possible, to avoid confusion.

the original undergoes a change."[6] In other words, can we make the Arabic translations of Freud speak back to the original German Freud? What might we learn by doing so? Let us explore the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of translation in the Arab world.

Translating Psychoanalysis in the Arab World

Glossaries of Knowledge Production

Before embarking on a conceptual history of translated terms, we should take a moment to think about the material infrastructure in which translation occurs. The Arab world is known for its rich intellectual history and its culture of print-ed journals, or *majallat*, which many scholars have mobilized in reconstructing the history of ideas in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, the multiplicity of Arabic dictionaries, glossaries, and lexicons have been underused, or perhaps more accurately undertheorized, sources in conceptual history.[7] In the field of psychoanalysis and psychology, specifically, there exist stand-alone encyclopedias and dictionaries, such as Farag ʿAbd al-Qadir Taha's *Mawsuwʿat ʿIlm al-Nafs wa-l-Tahlil al-Nafsi* (1993) and Fakhir Aqil's *Muʿjam ʿIlm al-Nafs* (1985). A focus on published full-length dictionaries obscures shorter but still rigorous attempts to translate the lexicon of psychoanalysis, much in the same way that a focus on the full-length translations of Freud hides the fact that Freudians existed long before these translations in the Arab world.

A case in point is the glossary of terms (*Bab al-Taʿrifat*) published at the end of each issue of *Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs*; it was introduced by Murad in the inau-gural issue of the journal as a dictionary that provided the Arabic equivalents to English, French, and German terms in psychology and psychoanalysis. Murad emphasized the difficulty and importance of precise terminology, remarking that in some cases, multiple terms were needed to convey the meaning of a single word and to adumbrate the various interpretations of terms by different schools of thought.[8] Notably, he often returned to classical Arabic texts to create new meanings for words and clear, precise, and capacious translations. Crucial for our purposes is the fact that Murad's felicitous translations were often closer to the German spirit of Freud's terms than were the standard English transla-

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[6] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 71, 73.

[7] For an exception, see Marwa Elshakry, "Knowledge in Motion: The Cultural Politics of Modern Science Translations in Arabic," *Isis* 99, no. 4 (2008): 701–30.

[8] Yusuf Murad, "Bab al-Taʿrifat: Niwa li-Qamus ʿIlm al-Nafs," *Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs* 1, no. 1 (1945): 100–101.

tions, as in his choice of Arabic terms for *das Ich* (ego) as *al-ana* and *das Über-Ich* (super-ego) as *al-ana al-aʿla*.[9] By contrast, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim bemoaned the problematic nature of the English translation of *das Über-Ich* as "super-ego" rather than the more suitable "above-I."[10]

Sami Mahmud Ali included expansive glossaries (*Thabt al-Mustalahat*, *Muʿjam al-Mustalahat*) in his translations of Freud. The first was a dictionary of psychoanalysis appended to Sami-Ali and ʿAbd al-Salam al-Kafash's translation of Freud's *Outline of Psychoanalysis* in 1962.[11] Taking up nearly a third of the entire text, Sami-Ali's glossary contained detailed discussions of highly specialized psychoanalytic terms, such as *Trieb* (drive, *pulsion*, *ghariza*), *Verdichtung* (condensation, *takthif*), *Verschiebung* (displacement, *naql*), and *Übertragung* (transference, *tahwil*). They were meant to situate Freud's language within the universe of psychoanalysis and away from the conventional meaning of terms in psychiatry and psychology.[12] In his 1963 translation of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Sami-Ali revisited and expanded this lexicon to include terms such as *Projektion* (projection, *isqat*), *Œdipuskomplex* (Oedipus complex, *ʿuqdat Udib*), *Hemmung* (inhibition, *kaf, tʿatul*), *Deckerinnerung* (screen-memory), and *traumatische Neurose* (traumatic neurosis, *ʿasab al-sadma*).[13]

These were immensely erudite and encyclopedic entries, well noted and sourced, and they provide a wealth of information to anyone interested in the history of translation or the history of ideas in the Arab world. Each entry drew attention to the Freudian and post-Freudian usage of terms, frequently citing authors such as Sándor Ferenczi, Karl Abraham, and Melanie Klein. Significantly, Sami-Ali's glossaries were published five years earlier than Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis's celebrated *The Language of Psycho-analysis* (1967), illustrating the depth and rigor with which Arab translators and thinkers engaged the psychoanalytic tradition.

Murad's and Sami-Ali's glossaries are, in fact, *Begriffsgeschichten* (conceptual histories) that may be situated in two modern linguistic traditions simultaneously. The first lexicographic tradition is that of Arabic genealogical dictionaries, beginning with Ibn Manzur's medieval *Lisan al-ʿArab* and followed by the later

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[9] Yusuf Murad, "Bab al-Taʿrifat: al-Majmuʿa al-Thaniyya," *Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs* 1, no. 2 (1945): 245–46.

[10] Bruno Bettelheim, *Freud and Man's Soul* (London: Flamingo, 1985), 49–64.

[11] Sami Mahmud Ali, "Thabt al-Mustalahat," in Sigmund Freud, *Mujiz fi al-Tahlil al-Nafsi*, trans. Sami Mahmud Ali and ʿAbd al-Salam al-Kafash (Cairo: Dar al-Maʿarif, 1962), 84–117.

[12] Sami-Ali, "Thabt al-Mustalahat," 84.

[13] Sami Mahmud Ali, "Muʿjam al-Mustalahat," in Sigmund Freud, *Thalath Maqalat fi Nazariyyat al-Jinsiyya*, trans. Sami Mahmud Ali (Cairo: Dar al-Maʿarif, 1963), 163–94.

development of modern Arabic-language dictionaries, such as al-Zabadi's eigh-
teenth-century *Taj al-ʿArus min Jawahir al-Qamus*, Butrus al-Bustani's *Muhit al
Muhit* (1867–70), and in the twentieth century *al-Mujʿam al-Wasit* of the Majmaʿ
al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya (Arabic Academy of Language) and Ismaʿil Mazhar's *nahda*
dictionary.[14] The second tradition was that of French philosophical dictionar-
ies, such as André Lalande's *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*
(1926; Technical vocabulary
and criticism of philosophy),
an exceedingly popular text
known for its analytical rigor
that continues to be cited
today. Incidentally, Lalande
had taught at the Egyptian
University and influenced
many scholars of philoso-
phy and literature, including
Murad.

> Unraveling the assumption of a secular subject of psychoanalysis . . . is how we can make the Arabic translations of Freud speak back to the original German Freud. Such practices of reading and translating necessarily unsettle "the West" as a supposedly singular and secular formation.

Beyond creating the necessary scholarly apparatus for the emergence of
new forms of knowledge, such glossaries moved in tandem with the work of
translating Freud into Arabic. The most significant translation efforts were
supervised by Mustafa Ziywar (1907–1990) as part of a series titled *al-Muʾalafat
al-Asasiyya fi al-Tahlil al-Nafsi* (The foundations of psychoanalysis). Ziywar and
Murad cofounded *Majallat ʿIlm al-Nafs*, and Sami-Ali had trained at Alexan-
dria University under Ziywar. The series included many translations of Freud's
work: translations in the early 1950s by Ishaq Ramzi of the *Introductory Lectures
on Psychoanalysis* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, followed by a translation
of *An Autobiographical Study* by ʿAbd al-Minʿam al-Miliji and Mustafa Ziywar
(1957), Mustafa Safouan's seminal translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*
(1958), translations of *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* by Sami-Ali and ʿAbd
al-Salam al-Kafash (1962), and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* translated
by Sami-Ali (1963).

The Self and the Unconscious (*al-nafs wa-l la-shuʿur*)

Let us turn now to specific concepts in Arabic translation to better under-
stand the process by which vocabularies moved between knowledge traditions.
Freud's notion of *die Seele*, or psyche, was best captured by Murad as *nafs* (soul,

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[14] Elshakry, "Knowledge in Motion," 708n21.

spirit, *âme*), a term distinct from mind, personality, and subjectivity.[15] It was a concept implying a spiritual core, alongside the presence of the unconscious (*al-la-shuʿur*), as a place where God could be manifest. Imbued with a primordial divinity, as in the Sufi concept of the *Nafas Rahmani* (Breath of Divine Compassion), the term was intimately bound up with preexisting meanings.[16] Its genealogical reach extended into Islamic invocations of the term used by Ibn ʿArabi and others. The *nafs*, thus understood, oscillated between bodily and spiritual manifestations, functioning as a *barzakh*, or isthmus, between spirit and matter. Envisioned as a spectrum of darkness and luminosity, the *nafs* was also expressed in a tripartite conceptualization derived from the Qur'an and loosely echoed in Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul*.

Similarly, Murad detailed his translation of the unconscious, with reference to Freud, as "an aspect of the self . . . that cannot be made conscious except with psychoanalysis; it is constituted by 'primordial meanings' that are not sufficiently conscious and of repressed tendencies, desires, and experiences. Although it is not possible to know its contents in a direct manner, it may be known through the interpretation of free association and dreams."[17] Significantly, his choice of words for "consciousness" and "the unconscious" were, as I noted already, evocative of the medieval Muslim mystic and philosopher Ibn ʿArabi. Tunisian psychoanalyst Raja Ben Slama comments that "the first translators rendered it [the unconscious] by an old term evident in the great Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi (1165–1240): *lâshu'ûr* which is a negation of knowledge and feeling," as opposed to later Lebanese translators, who "translated it by *lâwa'y* the negation of consciousness, with a reference to the idea of a container."[18]

Murad found epistemological resonances and elective affinities between pre-psychoanalytic (Aristotelian and Islamic) and analytic traditions. Ibn ʿArabi was read alongside Freud; the unconscious was understood as divine unknowing and the drive (*Trieb*) as ethical self-transformation. Yet such claims, if viewed as "mere translations of psychoanalytic concepts" into "an Islamic idiom," as Fadi Bardawil notes, would leave untouched the assumption that modern self-hood, and by extension psychoanalysis, are normatively secular.[19] The non-West

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[15] Bettelheim, *Freud and Man's Soul*, 70–78; Murad, "Bab al-Taʿrifat: Niwa li-Qamus ʿIlm al-Nafs," 106.

[16] El Shakry, *Arabic Freud*, 42–49.

[17] Murad, "Bab al-Taʿrifat: Niwa li-Qamus ʿIlm al-Nafs," 106.

[18] Raja Ben Slama, "The Tree That Reveals the Forest: Arabic Translations of Freudian Terminology," trans. Andrew Goffey, *Transeuropeennes*, November 5, 2009, http://www.transeuropeennes.org/en/articles/106/The_Tree_that_Reveals_the_Forest.html.

[19] Fadi Bardawil, "The Arabic Freud: Discourse Interruptus," *Immanent Frame*, October 11, 2018, https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/10/11/the-arabic-freud-discourse-interruptus/.

would once again be relegated to an exemplar rather than an epistemology. Yet we might do better to understand the self as the *nafs*, intuition as *kashf* and *firasa* (modes of spiritual unveiling and mystical insight), and knowledge as *maʿrifa* (an illuminative cognition of the divine), thereby unraveling the assumption of a secular subject of psychoanalysis. This is how we can make the Arabic translations of Freud speak back to the original German Freud. Such practices of reading and translating necessarily unsettle "the West" as a supposedly singular and secular formation and provide "a way of affirming that the original as a self-consistent, unified theory or textual body never existed."[20]

Imagination (*takhayyul/tasawwur*)

In 1963 Sami-Ali translated Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* as a critical edition meant for research and teaching, titled *Thalath Maqalat fi Nazariyyat al-Jinsiyya*. Basing his translation on the German text *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, published in the 1942 *Gesammelte Werke*, Sami-Ali supplemented that text with James Strachey's 1953 English critical edition. Here I focus on a key concept developed by Sami-Ali in that text and in subsequent works: the notion of the imaginary or the imaginal world. In the larger tradition of psychoanalysis, the imaginary is crucial for understanding the modes of perception and projection characteristic of infantile sexuality. Sami-Ali's version is no different in this respect, presenting the imaginary as forged in the crucible of the early years of infancy.

Sami-Ali's specific conceptualization is highly original and entails a notion of the imagination (1) as "productive and reproductive" of human reality, (2) as an expansive arena believed to be at the core of human existence, and (3) as characterized by conjoined opposites or the identity and nonidentity of dualities.[21] I elaborate on these points, but bear in mind that while the first point is common to other philosophical and psychoanalytic perspectives and particularly to phenomenology, the other two are wholly original and emanate from Sami-Ali's unique synthesis of Western psychoanalytic traditions and Islamic metaphysics.

Sami-Ali's view of the imagination was in keeping with a longer-standing philosophical tradition known as phenomenology, which included the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This tradition reduced the

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[20] Dennis Porter, "Psychoanalysis and the Task of the Translator," *MLN* 104, no. 5 (1989): 1074.

[21] Sami-Ali, "Muʿjam al-Mustalahat"; Sami-Ali, *L'Espace imaginaire* [Imaginary space] (Paris: Gallimard, 1974); El Shakry, "Psychoanalysis and the Imaginary"; Kathleen Lennon, "Unpacking the 'Imaginary Texture of the Real' with Kant, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty," *Bulletin d'analyse phénoménologique* 13, no. 2 (2017): 34–51.

distance between perception and imagination and emphasized the "productive and reproductive" nature of imagination, as well as the "'imaginary texture of the real,' the imagination at work in the everyday world which we perceive, the world as it is for us."[22] Although Sami-Ali was well versed in phenomenology, we would be mistaken if we attributed his understanding of the imaginary solely to Western metaphysics. Indeed, a much older and richer tradition of the imaginary exists in the spiritual ontology of medieval Islamic mystic Ibn ʿArabi, whose poems Sami-Ali eventually translated.

Sami-Ali's understanding of the imaginary was far more expansive than that of most Western philosophical thinkers—so much so that, for him, it was coextensive with subjectivity itself. In Sami-Ali's thought, the imaginary, as the embodiment of psychic life, centers on the dream world (believed to be at the core of human existence) and on the equivalents of dreaming in waking life—phantasm, reverie, illusion, delirium, hallucination, play, belief, magical thinking, and so forth.[23] This deeply resonates with Ibn ʿArabi's emphasis on dreams as the principal domain for the manifestation of the imagination.[24] Briefly, for Ibn ʿArabi the "ontology of imagination" holds an exalted place and is marked by an intermediate reality, an ambiguity, and a conjoining of opposites (*al-jamaʿ bayn al-aḍdad*); it is both "vast and narrow."[25] As Ibn ʿArabi states, "Imagination is neither existent nor nonexistent, neither known nor unknown, neither negated nor affirmed."[26]

To enable us to conceptualize the ontological and epistemological ambiguity of the imaginary, Ibn ʿArabi provides an example well known to psychoanalysts: the individual's reflection in a mirror. What is the ontological status of the reflected form in the mirror? Like the imaginary, it is both existent and nonexistent; the individual "knows for certain that he has perceived his form in one respect and he knows for certain that he has not perceived his form in another respect. . . . Hence he is neither a truth teller nor a liar in his words, 'I saw my form, I did not see my form.'"[27]

The conception of the imaginary as conjoining opposites, or what is known in

[22] Lennon, "Unpacking," 50.

[23] Sami-Ali, *De la projection: Une étude psychanalytique* [Of projection: A psychoanalytic study] (Paris: Payot, 1970), xvi.

[24] William Chittick, "Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Eschatology," *Muslim World* 78, no. 1 (1988): 54.

[25] Chittick, "Death and the World of Imagination," 53, 59; William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 115–18.

[26] Ibn ʿArabi, quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118.

[27] Ibn ʿArabi, quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118.

Arabic as *aḍdad* (auto-antonyms), helps us better understand Sami-Ali's concept of psychic reality as a series of dynamic polarities conjoining the real and the imaginary, subjective and objective, inside and outside, existence and essence, perception and projection, past and present. Indeed, Sami-Ali discusses *aḍdad* as a structure of reciprocal inclusions that constitute the general dimension of the imaginary, similarly to the dream world in which a ≠ a, or to the divine who is both the first and the last, the manifest and the nonmanifest.[28]

Crucially, Sami-Ali's notion of the imaginary was structured by Sufi understandings, and his originality lay in part in his ability to draw on non-Western metaphysics and non-Enlightenment traditions, particularly on an Islamic philosophy that valued the identity and nonidentity of dualities. This supersession of more rationalist notions of the imagination—whether of Freud's attachment to the reality principle, Sartre's deference to the Cartesian cogito, or Merleau-Ponty's overreliance on consciousness—highlighted instead the importance of the creative forces of imagination that exceeded the boundaries of the human subject.

Conclusion

If translation aims "at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one,"[29] then our historical interlocutors—Murad and Sami-Ali—found ample resonances between Western and Islamic thought. Our challenge in the global humanities is to recognize such creative encounters in which scholars in the Arab world engaged in innovative improvisations and syntheses of knowledge formations across various temporal and spatial boundaries. But a more radical engagement would be for Western humanists to reopen the archive of the central concepts in their own canon—self, unconscious, imagination—to disseminate and proliferate their meanings with non-Western concepts. Perhaps such a dissemination would dislodge the ontological and epistemological conceit of a universal grammar of the subject presumed by readers of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis.

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[28] Sami-Ali, "Langue arabe et langue mystique" [Arabic language and mystical language], *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 22 (1980): 187–93; Qur'an 57:3.

[29] Benjamin, "Task of the Translator," 76.

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