

CONTEMPORARY ALEUT MATERIAL CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of contemporary material culture among the Aleuts? What is the pattern by which Western introductions were accepted by the Aleuts? How valuable is contemporary material culture as an index of non-material aspects of culture? These questions guided the field study reported in this paper.

There are only twelve surviving Aleut villages: six on the Aleutian Islands, four in the Alaska Peninsula-Shumagin Island area, and two on the Pribilof Islands. In the summer of 1970, I conducted field work in three Aleutian Island villages: Unalaska, Akutan and Nikolski. I selected villages on the islands rather than the peninsula because a prior field investigation (Jones: n.d.) revealed a great likelihood of finding aboriginal and transitional material culture items in the more remote Aleut villages.

The most westerly of the three villages, Nikolski, lies midway in the Aleutian Islands. Unalaska is approximately ninety miles northeast of Nikolski, and Akutan is roughly forty miles northeast of Unalaska. Each of the village sites occupies a stretch of ocean beach near a supply of fresh water.

A DC-3 or Grumman Goose which calls once or twice weekly is the only means of passenger access. A supply ship calls once monthly in Akutan and Unalaska and twice annually in Nikolski. Radio is the only mode of communication with the outside in Nikolski and Akutan. An Alaska Communication Service telephone system in Unalaska furnishes long distance service but no hook-ups to individual houses.

According to my census the Aleut population of Nikolski, Akutan and Unalaska are fifty-four, eighty-seven, and one hundred ninety respectively. There are twenty-four Aleut households in Nikolski, nineteen in Akutan, and forty-eight in Unalaska. Bachelor households, which were virtually non-existent at the turn of the century, are relatively prevalent today: eight in Nikolski, six in Akutan and twelve in Unalaska. Unalaska is the only one of the three villages with a substantial white population, roughly one-third of the total. The few whites residing in Nikolski and Akutan are, for the most part, married to Aleuts.

The majority of persons in each village place primary reliance for subsistence on wage employment. Fish-processing plants are the central source of income in Unalaska and Akutan. A sheep ranch, employing about seven persons, is virtually the only employment source in Nikolski; consequently, most Nikolski Aleuts leave the village for part of the year to engage in wage employment, usually in the fisheries industry. Work in the fisheries industry is generally intermittent. Wages are low, roughly \$2.50 an hour, and prices are high — seventy-five to one hundred percent more than those in Seattle on many items — according to my survey. Thus the majority of villagers may be considered to be poor.

Though the residence pattern is primarily nuclear households, extended kin bonds are still viable in Nikolski and Akutan. A system of mutual obligations and responsibilities

insures aid in times of need or crisis. This system has largely disintegrated in Unalaska, in part because of large emigrations, and in part because of high levels of personal and family demoralization.

Political organization in the village varies. Unalaska westernized local political organizations in 1941 when it became a corporation of the state (Jones 1969:55). Following incorporation, the traditional chief and elder system disintegrated. By contrast, Akutan has retained a slightly modified form of the traditional chief and elder system, eschewing incorporation as a native village under the Indian Reorganization Act (Spaulding 1955:158). Political organization in Nikolski represents a combination of modern and traditional forms. Nikolski incorporated as a native village under the Indian Reorganization Act in 1939 (Berreman 1955:52), thereby adopting a village form of government; however, the chief system continued to function and is still viable.

Aleuts consider the Russian Orthodox Church integral to their old culture; in fact, the church is one of the few contemporary institutions from which Aleuts derive a cultural identity. The Russian Orthodox priest stationed at Unalaska visits Akutan and Nikolski for special events such as births, deaths and weddings. In the priest's absence, church readers perform the services. Another church member, known as a starast, organizes the maintenance of the church. These positions — starast and church reader — carry high prestige in the villages.

CONTEMPORARY MATERIAL CULTURE

This section includes two parts. In the first I shall present a composite picture of material culture in the three villages, noting variations when relevant. In the second, I shall examine the differential distribution of material possessions in one village — Unalaska.

Description of Material Culture

Aleut material culture is predominantly Western, reflecting the dominance of a money economy and the availability of Western introductions. The chief material survivals from the aboriginal and Russian periods (the latter extended from Bering's discovery of the Aleutians in 1741 to the U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867) are associated with subsistence hunting and fishing, fish camps, arts and crafts, the Russian Orthodox Church, and steam baths. The aboriginal culture items associated with these survivals are frequently modified in form. Both aboriginal and Russian material survivals play a minor part in contemporary Aleut life (See Table I for a list of indigenous and Russian-introduced material items).

Village structures other than dwellings include a Russian Orthodox church, community hall, general store, schoolhouse, several community-owned steam baths and a post office. Unalaska has additional structures — a dock, warehouse, jail, clinic, liquor store, bar, and Baha'i and Methodist missions.

The typical Aleut household complex consists of a dwelling and storage shed in addition to one or more of the following:
boat house, steam bath, smokehouse, or fish drying rack. Because of the absence of indoor plumbing, Nikolski household complexes also include outhouses.

Table 1. Indigenous and Russian-introduced material culture survivals in Unalaska, Akutan, and Nikolski, 1970

Heirlooms	Indigenous forms	Modified indigenous forms	Russian introductions
seal shoulder bone game	sea lion stomach for storage*	Aleut hand-carved spoon — modern design*	icons*
artifacts	model of barabara partition	Eskimo-Aleut doll*	church books written in Aleut*
	hand-carved ivory snuff box*	gut bag embroidered with imported thread*	hand drill
	seal skin sleeping rug*	stuffed seal toy*	steam bath*
	grass basket*	monster mobile made from parts of seal and sea lion*	grass beater*
	eagle wing broom*		
	seal gut bag*		
	hand-carved animal trap*	snake hook, steel hook replaced bone*	
	hand-made fish net		
	fish drying rack*	gaff hook, steel hook replaced bone*	
	smoke house*	Aleut greeting card, paper replaced seal gut*	
	barabara*		
	spear and throwing board	Aleut Valentine, plastic replaced seal gut*	
	Aleut sea shell ladle		
Aleut grass woven dolls*	rag rug woven with traditional Aleut weave*		
	hand-carved wooden bracelet — modern design*		

*Items currently in use or made for gifts or sale.

In addition to houses, six families in Unalaska and five in Nikolski possess fish camps. Two fish camps in Nikolski include traditional barabaras — semi-subterranean sod dwellings. The absence of fish camps in Akutan is due, in part, to villagers' efforts to avoid the stigma of poverty which they associate with the camps.

The typical Aleut house is a small, old frame structure consisting of a porch (kalador), a kitchen, usually the center of household activities, and one to four rooms leading off the kitchen. One of the four rooms may be used as a parlor.

Typical household furnishings include an oil stove, a table and chairs in the kitchen; a sofa, two chairs, a lamp and a table in the parlor; and a bed and chest in each bedroom. Icons and photographs line the walls of nearly every room. (Aleuts secure icons from relatives, the church, or mail order establishments.) Porches are used for storage of tools, fishing equipment and food. In addition to dishes and cooking ware, nearly every home has a clock, radio, phonograph, and frequently a polaroid camera and cassette tape recorder. Most families possess several aboriginal heirlooms or handicrafts but Aleuts rarely display such items in rooms to which visitors have access.

Aside from Nikolski, which has no community power or water system or indoor plumbing, over half the houses in the other two villages feature one or more gas or electric appliances — stove, refrigerator, washing machine and freezer. Except for the absence of these appliances, the household inventory of Nikolski presented in Table 2 typifies the three villages.

Only one household in the villages surveyed has a commercial fishing vessel. Many households possess a small boat — dory or skiff — used for recreation and subsistence hunting and fishing. Dory or skiff ownership characterizes forty-six percent of the households in Unalaska, fifty-eight percent in Nikolski, and seventy-four percent in Akutan.

Differential Distribution of Household Inventories

This section is based on an inventory of selected items for every Aleut household at Unalaska. Other than the exceptions noted for Nikolski, the inventory is typical of the three villages. It includes every aboriginal or Russian-introduced material survival: home manufactures (grass-woven articles, wood carvings, seal gut bags, snuff boxes, Aleut greeting cards, Aleut valentines), steam baths, icons, fish camps, and fish drying racks. The indicators of Western material culture comprise major items in use in Unalaska: automobiles, washing machines, dryers, stoves, freezers, refrigerators, power tools, motor bikes and boats. Items excluded because of insufficient data but equally as prevalent as the above are radios, clocks, phonographs, cassette tape recorders and polaroid cameras.

Table 3 shows the frequency of occurrence by household of the inventoried items. With the exception of icons, which nearly every household possesses, and automobiles, which only a few persons can afford, these selected material culture items reveal a pattern in their frequency distribution. Western materials have the highest frequency in the population and items related to Aleut culture, the lowest (Table 4).

Table 2. Household inventory, Nikolski, 1970

Shed (about eight by eight feet)	
driftwood	
Honda	
beach seine	
carpentry and mechanic's tools	
Porch (about eight by twelve feet)	
water barrels	
buckets	
washboard	
wash tub	
broom and mops	
gaff hook	
fishing tackle	
net needles	
Pantry (about six by six feet)	a few staples, including:
dishes	flour
silverware	sugar
pots	canned milk
Kitchen (about eighteen by twenty feet)	
oil-wood burning stove (Sears)	
wooden table and chairs (from salvaged lumber)	
sink (salvaged)	
high chair	
baby walker	
cassette tape recorder	
kerosene lantern	
Russian Orthodox calendar	
box of baby toys	
box of comic books	
Parlor-nursery (about twelve by twelve feet)	
sofa (gift from uncle)	
sewing machine (inherited from grandmother)	
dresser	
crib	
table	
wood heater	
phonograph	
icons (four) (gifts from relatives)	
Bedroom (about six by nine feet)	
cot	
end table	
hook for hanging clothes	
Bedroom (about six by nine feet)	
single bed	
end table	
portable wardrobe	
Bedroom (about ten by twelve feet)	
double bed	
dresser	
rifle, shotgun, ammunition	
Aleut dolls	

Table 3. Inventory of selected material culture items, Unalaska, 1970

<u>Indices</u>	<u>Number of households (N = 48)</u>
Indigenous and Russian-introduced material culture	
fish camp	6
steam bath	8 (3 in village, 5 at fish camps)
fish drying rack	10
home manufacture (of indigenous items)	10
icons	44
Western material culture	
stove (oil, gas, or electric)	42
refrigerator	21
freezer	29
dryer	11
washing machine	33
power tools	21
motor bike	19
automobile	9
boat	23 (8 dories, 14 skiffs, 1 crab fishing vessel)

The distribution of the above items varies along two dimensions, the most significant of which is occupational status. Table 5 suggests that the lower the rank of the occupation, the higher the frequency of traditional material culture items and the lower the frequency of Western material items. The variation in frequency of traditional material culture items can be explained in terms of acculturation levels, the higher status occupational groups including more acculturated persons than the lower status groups. The variation in frequency of Western material culture items, however, may be a function of financial resources. Nearly every member lacking major Western material items expressed an interest in securing them when he acquired sufficient funds.

The only other dimension along which the distribution varies is age. The frequency of indigenous and Russian-introduced material culture items is higher in older age groups (Table 6). The younger age groups, with their better education, appear to have less interest in indigenous and Russian-introduced materials. The two items of Western material culture with a higher frequency in younger age groups are motor bikes and refrigerators.

Table 4. Frequency distribution of selected material culture items, Unalaska, 1970.

Material culture item	Number of households (N = 48)	Percentage
icon	44	92
stove (oil, gas, electric)	42	88
washing machine	33	69
freezer	29	60
boat	23	48
power tools	21	44
refrigerator	21	44
motor bike	19	39
dryer	11	23
fish drying rack	10	21
home manufacture (of indigenous items)	10	21
automobile	9	19
steam bath	8	17
fish camp	6	12

Table 5. Percentage distribution of selected material culture items by occupational category, * Unalaska, 1970

Indigenous and Russian-introduced item	General Population	N = 4 Group 1	N = 5 Group 2	N = 14 Group 3	N = 14 Group 4	N = 6 Group 5	N = 2 Group 6	N = 3 Group 7
icon	92	75	80	100	86	100	100	100
fish drying rack	21	0	0	7	29	33	100	33
home manufacture	21	25	20	21	21	17	50	0
steam bath	17	0	20	14	7	33	100	0
fish camp	12	0	0	7	7	33	100	0
Western item								
stove	88	100	80	100	86	83	0	100
washing machine	69	100	40	93	71	17	0	100
freezer	60	100	60	86	43	33	0	66
power tools	44	100	40	43	21	66	100	0
refrigerator	44	100	40	64	36	0	0	33
motor bike	39	50	60	50	29	33	0	33
dryer	23	100	40	21	7	0	0	33
automobile	19	100	20	29	0	0	0	0
boat	48	100	40	43	36	66	100	0

Group 1 includes households headed by a businessman.
 Group 2 includes households headed by a regularly employed commercial fisherman.
 Group 3 includes households headed by a regularly employed skilled or semi-skilled worker.
 Group 4 includes households headed by an intermittently employed unskilled worker.
 Group 5 includes households headed by a member who combines subsistence activities with wage employment.
 Group 6 includes two single males who rely entirely on subsistence activities.
 Group 7 includes households with no member in the labor force.

PATTERN OF ACCEPTANCE OF INNOVATION

Four factors appear to be related to the pattern of innovation in the Aleutians: the prestige associated with the item, the financial resources to procure it, the innovator's integration in the community, and the practical advantage of the innovation.

Prestige was one of the first responses volunteered by informants queried about their reasons for accepting certain innovations. Even traditionally oriented Aleuts when protesting the destructive effects of certain innovations on the old culture explained the community's acceptance in terms of prestige factors. The acceptance of the dory in Unalaska is illustrative. Old-timers claim to have resisted the introduction. "She wasn't safe; we couldn't land her on rocky beaches or carry her across land so visiting our old hunting grounds was out." These old-timers blame the widespread acceptance of the dory on the young people who liked the prestige associated with the white man's materials and who also liked the easy life. Purchasing a dory was easier than building a bidarki, they explained. (An interesting contradiction arises when one considers that the contemporary old-timers were the young people at the time the dory was accepted). Berreman (1954: 103), in a study of Nikolski, confirms the importance of prestige factors. He attributes the adoption of the dory in Nikolski, in part, to the fact that white men approved it while they ridiculed the bidarki.

A second condition for the acceptance of Western introductions is the means to secure them. This is demonstrated in Unalaska by the strong relationship between degree of affluence and frequency of major Western material items (Table 5). It is also indicated in Nikolski, the most impoverished of the three villages, by the absence of indoor plumbing and the dearth of individually owned power generators. The persisting use of the sea lion stomach for storing a winter supply of food in Nikolski probably represents, not so much a desire to perpetuate traditional culture as a lack of cash to procure substitutes. In Akutan and Unalaska, where there is greater access to cash, Aleuts have largely replaced this method of storage with freezers and refrigerators.

A third factor influencing the acceptance of innovation is the innovator's relationship to the community. Whites married to Aleuts and integrated in the community play a far more significant innovative role than those who remain peripheral to the community. The pattern of acceptance of oil stoves and heaters in Unalaska is illustrative. Fuel oil became available in Unalaska in the early 1920s when oil replaced coal as a fuel base for ships calling at adjacent Dutch Harbor. Thereafter, nearly every white resident installed oil stoves and heaters. Aleut families, however, did not adopt them until about 1937 when three whites married to local Aleut women purchased oil stoves and heaters. This provided an opportunity for Aleuts to inspect these items first hand in houses which they customarily visited, and the adoption of oil stoves and heaters soon followed.

A comparison of the community role of Akutan's one white-Aleut family with the one white family in another community provides additional evidence of the importance of this point. Nearly every major innovation in Akutan in the twentieth century can be attributed to Huey McGlashan or his progeny. The older McGlashan, a Scotch-Irish immigrant, married a local Aleut woman and became an integral member of the community. As the sole entrepreneur in the community for the first three decades of the century, McGlashan was always considered fair and trustworthy in his dealings with local people (Spaulding 1955:

22). McGlashan's introductions include the dory, frame house, oil stove and heater, beach seine, bathtub, and Western food, clothes, and gadgets (Spaulding 1955: 22, 83, 164, 304, 343). Of these, only the bathtub was rejected due to the Akutan Aleuts' preference for the more social atmosphere of the steam bath. In 1921, a son of McGlashan initiated and participated in the construction of a community-wide hydroelectric system (Spaulding 1955: 34). Shortly after World War II, another son promoted the installation of indoor plumbing in every home. Thus, innovations by McGlashan and sons have significantly influenced Akutan's economy, living standards and life styles.

By contrast, a white sheep rancher and his white wife in the other community live atop a hill overlooking the village, remain socially aloof from Aleuts and community affairs and are generally distrusted. The rancher's offenses include withholding wages from Aleut workers for indefinite periods of time and shooting people's dogs, ostensibly to protect his sheep. Consequently, few Aleuts will work for him, and fewer still visit his home. This reduces the possibilities of Aleuts becoming familiar with or interested in the sheep rancher's material possessions, for example, electrical appliances or modern furnishings. Furthermore, the rancher's failure to contribute technical skills or information concerning where to acquire technical assistance to the community may account, in part, for the low level of community services and facilities in Nikolski.

That an innovation has some demonstrable advantage over what it replaces is the fourth condition influencing its acceptance. Despite McGlashan's integration and popularity in Akutan, his first introduction of dories at the turn of the century was resisted. Aleuts considered them too heavy and unmanageable for traditional hunting activities. In contrast to the landing of a bidarki, several men were required to launch and haul in the dory. When McGlashan established a commercial cod station in Akutan in 1915, he imported a number of dories. Because of the large carrying capacity and speed of the dory — these boats could travel thirty to forty miles a day compared to ten or twenty for the bidarki — Aleuts employed by McGlashan promptly saw the advantages for commercial fishing. Thereafter, the dory quickly replaced the bidarki. The adoption of the dory in Nikolski in the 1920s reflected a similar pattern. This period was the height of fox hunting at Nikolski, and the dory proved especially useful for this purpose. Because of its large carrying capacity, the dory could transport hunters, equipment and furs. These advantages resulted in the widespread adoption of the dory in Nikolski (Berreman 1954).

If Aleuts saw no practical advantages, innovations were not accepted. The beach seine, for example, was never popular in Akutan or Unalaska. Aleuts could see no reason for catching more fish than they needed. There was no outlet for a surplus at that time. Also Aleuts preferred their traditional methods of gaffing, angling, snatching and trapping in creeks. The popularity of beach seining in Nikolski probably reflects the impoverishment of the village and thus a greater reliance on subsistence fishing than in the other two villages.

MATERIAL CULTURE AS AN INDEX OF ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

In this section, I shall consider the degree to which Aleut material culture reflects the social and political organization of the village and orientations to Western work norms. I am referring specifically to norms emphasizing clock-oriented schedules, industriousness and reliability.

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Variations in material culture in the Aleutians do not, by and large, reflect subcultural differences, but rather, income differences. Virtually every member of each village I visited wants the material comforts and conveniences of Western society and secures them when he acquires sufficient cash. Thus, contemporary Aleut material culture is an excellent indicator of involvement in a money economy, but it does not reveal the nature of that involvement in terms of work orientation and behavior.

A comparison of work norms and behavior in Unalaska and Akutan shows striking differences. The transition to a money economy in Akutan early in the century was accomplished by nearly year round employment opportunities. From 1912 to 1942, a whaling station near the village provided employment for the fall months. From 1915 until the outbreak of World War II, a cod processing station in the village furnished employment in the spring months, and during the winter months, Akutan Aleuts trapped the then valuable Arctic fox (Spaulding 1955: 22). Shortly after World War II, a crab processing ship permanently located in Akutan Bay, offered employment for six to nine months of the year. These opportunities promoted two changes related to the work norms and behavior of Akutan Aleuts. First, the Aleuts responded to an economic situation that offered a reliable and steady income with industry and responsibility. Second, because jobs were available for all who wanted them, females as well as males, the village responded to the new opportunities as a unit rather than as individuals. The latter factor, as we shall see, served to sustain village cohesion and morale.

Shortly after the war, on the basis of the reputation of Akutan Aleuts as reliable and industrious workers, Wakefield Fisheries located a fish processing ship in Akutan Bay. Although contemporary employment opportunities are less stable due to the decline in the king crab resource, Wakefield can still rely on Akutan Aleuts to work whenever needed and for as long as necessary, sometimes as much as eighteen hours a day.

In contrast to Akutan, the Unalaska economy in the twentieth century has been unstable and unpredictable. Throughout this period jobs with the Northern Commercial Company trading post or the Dutch Harbor supply station were available for a few. The majority, however, depended on seasonal employment at the Pribilof Island seal rookery, but by the time these workers returned home, their pay checks were encumbered by debts at the local market. For the remainder of the year, the majority of Unalaskans were poor and eked out what living they could. Periodic booms in Unalaska — construction during the Nome gold rush when thousands of prospectors en route to Nome passed through the village; foxes until the 1930s when the furs became relatively valueless; construction again in the early 1940s when thousands of military troops occupied Unalaska and Dutch Harbor, and king crab in the 1960s — a boom which has already passed its peak — raised aspirations only to shatter them several years later with the depression that inevitably followed (Jones 1969: 45-65). Consequently, the Unalaska Aleut failed to take seriously jobs that offered neither a reliable and steady income nor opportunity for the majority. In the contemporary period, Unalaska Aleut absentee rates are so high that the superintendent of the single fish processing plant operating in the summer of 1970 would hire only four Aleuts despite the availability of a large proportion of the Aleut labor force. According to both Unalaska management personnel and Aleuts, local workers are unreliable and irresponsible. They may absent themselves from the job to go fishing, hunting, on a drunken spree, or just because they dislike the boss. Thus, because of dissimilar economic opportunities, significant differences in work orientations and behavior evolved in these two villages. Yet material culture provides no clues regarding this diversity.

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Social organization in the three villages also varies, due, in part, to differences in opportunities to change as a unit rather than as individuals. If some members of a family or community adopt one set of cultural norms and behaviors and the remaining members observe others, conflict and disunity are bound to arise. In Unalaska, the fact that certain individuals adopted Western work norms, e.g. clock-oriented schedules and the pay check as the private property of the wage earner, disrupted the traditional systems of mutual obligations and responsibilities among kin. In Akutan, where opportunities existed for the group as a whole to adopt Western work norms and behaviors, this dissolution did not occur. The extended family in Akutan continues to observe mutual obligations and responsibilities though the form of these has changed. In Nikolski, where the majority still places considerable reliance on traditional subsistence activities, the extended kin system is similarly intact. Thus, again we see that material culture furnishes no information regarding these features of social organization in the villages.

Material culture also fails to shed light on differences in political organization. Akutan is the most politically traditional village in the Aleutians, spurning even a village council form of organization under the Indian Reorganization Act. The chief system in Akutan operates much as it did prior to white contact. The chief is still the central authority. He is responsible for deciding matters of village-wide interest, arbitrating interpersonal disputes, and negotiating with representatives of the larger society.

By contrast, Unalaska is organized as a first class city under Alaska Statutes, with the same responsibilities and obligations as a city like Seattle. The city council, generally dominated by whites, has usurped the powers of the chief, and the Aleut community has not replaced the late chief, who died in 1967. Other functions formerly performed by the chief, such as settling interpersonal disputes, have been assumed by the white policeman, or, in some instances, by no one in the village. Consequently, relations with the outside world, community decisions and arbitrations of disputes are handled in large part primarily by whites and outsiders. Material culture in these villages gives no indication of this political diversity.

SUMMARY

I have described contemporary material culture in three Aleutian villages: Akutan, Unalaska and Nikolski, and I have analyzed the pattern of innovation and the value of material culture as an index of change in non-material aspects of culture.

I found aboriginal and Russian-introduced material culture survivals peripheral to contemporary social and economic life. Material culture is predominantly Western. Its distribution varies primarily in terms of occupational status, the lower ranking occupational groups having a higher frequency of traditional material culture items and a lower frequency of Western material items. I explained these variations in terms of lower acculturation levels and less affluence in the lower ranking occupational groups.

I suggested that selective integration of Western introductions in the Aleutians is influenced by the prestige associated with the item, the financial means to secure it, the innovator's relationship to the community, and the practical advantages of the innovation over what it replaces.

Finally, I found contemporary Aleut material culture to have limited value as an index of Aleut social and political organization and Aleut work norms and behavior.

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