

# Speaking for Themselves: LDS Ethnic Groups Oral History Project

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IN 1985 THE Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University had just completed almost ten years of looking at the experiences of Mormon families—polygamous and monogamous—around the turn of the century. I was in the process of writing *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle*, and I was looking for a new oral history topic. Nothing really caught my interest until my friend Alan Cherry, an African-American who joined the Church in 1969, reminded me that because of scanty records, Church members know very little about the diverse experiences of Mormon Afro-Americans.

I began some preliminary research and found that he was right; while several articles have been written about Jane Manning James, a black who lived in Nauvoo and then followed Brigham Young west, all of them were based on James's short autobiography. Cherry pointed out then unless something was done to preserve the history of current black American Mormons, their stories would be lost. Everyone would think that Alan Cherry, Mary Frances Sturlaugson, Joseph Freeman, and Romona Gibbons, blacks who have written books about their experiences in the Church, were typical LDS Afro-Americans. They are not.

Out of that conversation with Alan Cherry, the LDS Afro-American Oral History Project was born. At first financial limitations restricted the project to Utah. But grants from the BYU College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences along with donations from the Silver Foundation and from individual Church members allowed the project to expand throughout the United States. Between 1985 and 1989, Cherry conducted interviews with 224 black Latter-day Saints from Hawaii to New York and from Michigan to Louisiana. These interviews provide a valuable data base from which to look at the experiences of LDS

African Americans. I have published a few articles based on these interviews and am currently working on a book-length manuscript.

As the Redd Center launched its study of black Americans, we recognized other ethnic groups had been neglected as well. We knew that blacks had had unique experiences because of the priesthood restriction and wondered how different their experience might be from other ethnic Church members.

We discovered that obviously blacks have some unique concerns. Whether they joined the Church before or after the priesthood revelation, LDS African Americans had to come to terms with their feelings about the priesthood policy, which previously prevented men from being ordained to the priesthood and men and women from receiving temple blessings. But we also found all ethnic groups—including blacks—found a mixture of integration and cultural misunderstanding/prejudices within the Mormon Church. While often ethnic members felt their concerns were unique, the interviews showed common threads.

After completing our work with blacks, we began interviewing Native Americans. Ernesteen Lynch, a Navajo who taught at a private high school in Farmington, New Mexico, and who took an oral history class from me at BYU, was just starting to interview people in the Four Corners Area when Elder George P. Lee was excommunicated. The members with whom she had scheduled interviews wanted to wait until they had a chance to sort through their feelings. The project was delayed, but when it resumed we were able to ask Native Americans about their reactions to Lee's excommunication. Of the thirty-nine Native Americans who have been asked, "What was your reaction to the excommunication of George P. Lee?", the most common response was "shock." While some of the interviewees felt that Lee was justified in his complaints about the Church's cutbacks in Native American programs and others viewed Lee's excommunication as racism, for the most part those interviewed felt Lee had to work through his own concerns. Their feelings about the Church were the same as when they joined. When they were interviewed, all of the interviewees were still active in the Church ("Reactions" n.d.).

My goal was to have interviewers talk to people from their own ethnic group. I always felt that blacks, for example, would feel more comfortable talking to a black about their experiences as a Latter-day Saint than to a white. After listening to Alan's interviews, I knew I had been right; the interviewees talked about concerns that I am sure they would not have told me. Now I needed to find ethnic interviewers convinced of the importance of preserving their ethnic Mormon history. Three Native Americans—Odessa Neaman, Angela Moore Fields, and Malcolm Pappan—enrolled in my oral history class at BYU. Along

with students Deborah Lewis and Jim M. Dandy, these students conducted interviews with Native Americans. They were not, however, able to donate four years of their lives to the project as had Alan Cherry to the LDS Afro-American Oral History Project. Nevertheless, their work was important.

In an effort to hasten the work on the LDS Native American Oral History Project, I posted a job offer at the BYU Multicultural Office asking for ethnic interviewers who wanted to talk to people from their cultural background. As a result, I hired Emeralda Meraz, a Mexican American, and Katuska Serrano, a recent immigrant from Peru, to interview Hispanic Americans. When ethnic interviewers were hard to find, I asked Janean Goodsell, whom I had hired as a transcriber, to interview Asian Americans. She had served a mission to the Philippines and had been a Primary president in a Southeast Asian branch in the Washington, D.C., area.

I hope in the future to extend interviews to more ethnic groups. I thought I had volunteers to interview LDS Tongan Americans, but the project did not develop as planned. In my research for the project, I discovered that not only is there little information about Mormon Tongans, there is very little written about Tongans in the United States. Just as historians are rewriting American history to represent the multicultural experiences of ethnic groups, Latter-day Saints need to be aware of the history of all of our members. The Redd Center LDS Ethnic Group Oral History Project can help us do that.

It is impossible to find a random sampling when conducting oral history interviews. I am glad Church membership records do not distinguish members by race or ethnic background—but this makes them a researcher's nightmare. Without a numerical ethnic breakdown, it is impossible to know how many black members there are in the Church. With no ethnic statistics, it is also impossible to determine how many Latin Americans should be interviewed in Los Angeles, for example, to have a random sample. Therefore, we gathered interviewees by what some sociologists refer to as the "snowball" method. One person would refer us to someone else. We have tried very hard to represent a variety of ages, occupations, marital status, and educational background in our interviews.

In the excerpts that I offer in this essay, I have included people with a variety of experiences and some with several cultural backgrounds. Ken Sekaquaptewa's father is Hopi, and his mother is Chinese. Shirley Moore, a Native American, is also part Mexican-American. Donna Fifita is a Sioux married to a Tongan. I have selected others because they have lived in a number of places and thus can compare Saints in different areas. Barbara Pixton, who is in the U.S. Navy,

joined the Church in Italy and has lived throughout the world. Elijah Royster has lived only in Hawaii as a Latter-day Saint but previously traveled in the military before he joined the Church. Rosalinda Meraz and Gloria Moreno were selected because they represent a growing number of Latina Americans in the United States who only speak Spanish and attend Spanish-speaking branches. These women were interviewed in Spanish, and Kevin Krough, a professor in the Language and Philosophy Department, at Utah State University, transcribed and translated these interviews. I selected the rest—Annie Wilbur, a black Latter-day Saint from the Pittsburg area; Beverly Ann Perry, an LDS African-American from Southern California; Chester Hawkins, a black librarian from northern Virginia; Ronald Singer, a Navajo who lives in Salt Lake City; Annoulone Viphonsanareth, a Laotian immigrant to Washington, D.C., and a BYU student; Robert Lang and Elizabeth Pulley, LDS African Americans from Los Angeles, and Mason Anderson, a black Mormon from Charlotte, North Carolina, who have attended largely black branches—because I felt they expressed some of the ethnic concerns and dilemmas that I described in my introductory article.

Oral history interviews provide important data for research, but they do more than that. They preserve the “personal voices” of singular Church members, allowing those members to talk openly about their experiences and feelings as Latter-day Saints. The excerpts from the Redd Center interviews that follow are the raw, unedited research data conducted five or six years ago. Because they are free-flowing conversations, they may not always be clear. They do provide a flavor of the individuals interviewed, their faith, and their very real concerns about how they can best fit into the Church’s patchwork quilt. These histories are personal. They reflect the experiences of new members and the experiences of those who struggle within wards or branches to accept those who look or seem different. Threads run through all the stories, reminding us that we are all God’s children.

Each individual interviewed discussed the process of contact with the Church, subsequent conversion, and then the struggle to maintain activity. Elijah Royster, a native of North Carolina, remained in Hawaii after serving in the military, including a tour in Vietnam. While in the service, Royster promised himself that he would find God. An African-American Mormon invited him to attend church, so Royster gathered his family and, on the way to the chapel, got lost. When they finally arrived, the service had begun. He described his initial impression:

We sat through the sacrament service. The chapel was full, so we had to sit in the overflow. . . . [In] the churches I had gone to before I had to sit there and

be quiet. I noticed with the children back there there was a lot of noise. We were really trying very hard to listen to the speakers. There was a negative mood there.

Then I noticed how all of the Saints were so friendly and kind and shaking our hands. Having been in life the way that I had, immediately I recognized that it was genuine it wasn't a put-on; it wasn't something phony. That had a great bearing on my feelings and my thoughts about the Church. (Royster 1986, 6)

Barbara Ann Pixton left her home in Canton, Ohio, and joined the Navy when she was in her early twenties. She had been in the Navy for four years when, in Naples, Italy, her supervisor invited her to attend the LDS Church. She went and later married the man who introduced her to the gospel. Her first impression is significant for what did and did not happen:

If you're in the military and stationed thousands of miles away from your family, you can't help but be lonely. The very first time we went to church I was overwhelmed by the love, especially being black. We walked in, we sat down in the back, and everybody's head didn't turn around to see who just came in. In the Baptist church everybody has to turn around and look and see what you're wearing and who came in and who was with whom. Nobody moved. Everybody was paying attention. After the meeting, the majority of the sisters got up, came in the back, introduced themselves to me, and shook my hand. They were very warm. I thought to myself, "I want to learn more." (Pixton 1986, 3-4)

Annie Wilbur, a Pennsylvania-born African-American convert, had a very similar experience. Wilbur had a long-standing bitterness toward whites. Even after becoming a surgical technician, she continued to harbor negative feelings. She met Mormon missionaries, refused at first to attend their all-white church, then finally relented and attended services. She says:

The next Sunday I did go to church. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. It was a beautiful experience. These experiences are hard to talk about because you cannot describe them. There are no words to say what you are going through. It is just a feeling inside of you.

I went, and everybody treated me like I had been a member there all of my life. There were about two or three people that I knew. There was one girl who worked at the hospital and I had seen her. There happened to be a young man there who was from the same area that I was brought up in. He had been converted two years before that, and he had gone on a mission. While I was there, he bore his testimony. I did not know that he was Mormon. I knew his family, and he came from a good family. The family was always very nice. I was just amazed to see him there. (Wilbur 1985, 9)

Royster, Pixton, and Wilbur all joined the Church after the 1978 revelation that extended priesthood membership to all worthy male members. Those African-Americans who were baptized before 1978 faced a much more difficult decision. As Chester Hawkins states:

I had about eight to ten sets of missionaries. It was in the fall of 1976 and went all the way up to the summer of 1977. I didn't feel like I wanted to be rushed into joining the Church. I wanted to take my time. I had a lot of problems with the priesthood issue, but I felt like I could weather through it. The reason I had a lot of problems with the priesthood issue was because I was strong on the black issue and didn't want to join some church that would tell me that the black race is responsible for what Cain had done. I still have some problems with it, but I am willing to live with the whole problem. (Hawkins 1985, 4)

Beverly Ann Perry of Los Angeles also joined the Church before 1978 and later served a mission. She describes an early phenomena of the Church in Southwest Los Angeles Branch where most of the members were black: "Some good has come out of the branch, a lot of good. But I think the leadership needs to be reinforced. In the beginning I was telling everyone, 'Go because it is so neat.' But now I do not think I would tell anyone to go. It seems like they have gone twenty steps backwards from the beginning" (Perry 1985, 31).

Most African-American converts were adults when they decided to join the LDS Church. Native-Americans, on the other hand, were more likely to be baptized as children and then faced the difficult task of obtaining acceptance within the LDS community and avoiding rejection of and by Native Americans. Ron Singer, a Navajo who spent years on the Church Placement Program, described the reality of balancing Mormonism with Navajo traditions and religion:

After I joined the LDS Church, it was kind of hard to juggle the two religions. If you really believe your religion, I guess it wouldn't be too hard. Here I was trying to get along with two. My grandparents still live the old traditional ways. I had to learn to respect that.

When I got ready to go on my mission, I sat down with my stepdad, and we talked. He brought in the Navajo religion and how it related to the LDS religion. All of a sudden my eyes just opened. It all fit in. My mission really helped me because that brought more of the Navajo religion into it. After I got back, I studied more of the Navajo religion. My testimony was strengthened. (Singer 1990, 3)

Another Native American member, Shirley Equerra Moore, discusses the difficulty of living her religion when surrounded by practical problems. Originally from Parker, Arizona, Moore (whose own lineage is half Native American and half Hispanic) feels that being a Latter-day Saint creates unique problems for some Indians. She says:

For one thing, how many Indian kids are born leading music with one hand and playing the piano with the other hand? That's a personal challenge because we weren't raised with any kind of music. It seems like all LDS kids grow up taking piano lessons.

I think that most non-Indians think that Lamanites maybe aren't as bright, and therefore, couldn't possibly have a testimony. I know that sounds sarcastic,

but it's as if non-Indians think intelligence has to do with spiritual things. (Moore 1990, 5)

Ken Sekaquaptewa had similar experiences. A native of Phoenix, Arizona, Ken had a Hopi father and a Chinese mother from Shanghai. He notes that what may be usual for one culture may be misinterpreted by another: "I think . . . the Indian people and the Chinese people are . . . at a disadvantage in that way because people stay so much within themselves and never show emotion" (1990, 12). Singer, Moore, and Sekaquaptewa all talk about the way a leadership style and behavior based on an Anglo model constricts those cultural groups that are less gregarious. Donna Fifita, a Sioux married to Pona Fifita, a Tongan, recalled how she confronted the stereotype of shy, lazy, and backward people. After living on a reservation in South Dakota, she and her family moved back to Utah. She says:

I remember feeling really uncomfortable in my regular ward. . . . I wanted to prove to Heavenly Father and to [the ward members] that I wasn't like an Indian that would be inactive, an alcoholic, or whatever stereotypes they had towards Indians. A lot of them used to treat me really indifferently. I remember I would bear my testimony boldly to them in sacrament meeting. I would tell them how I knew this Church was true. (Fifita 1990, 11)

The Fifita, Singer, Moore, and Sekaquaptewa interviews focus on a major problem facing American ethnic Mormons. Most of the individuals interviewed talked about racially segregated branches or wards and were uncertain whether they were better for minorities.

Rosalinda Meraz, a native Mexican, came to the United States in the late 1960s. Already baptized, Rosalinda and her family attended an English-speaking ward, but because Rosalinda spoke only Spanish, her only church job was tending children in the nursery. She never felt very comfortable, and finally the family began attending a Spanish-speaking branch forty-five minutes away. She described her experience:

The advantage [of a Spanish-speaking branch] for someone who doesn't speak much English is everyone speaks the language, so you can get involved more in your callings. In English you don't feel very good. You don't progress fully because you don't speak the language. We don't understand anything when we don't know English. The English we use outside the Church isn't the same as the English spoken inside the Church. I've seen many members go to an English ward, and within a year they come back to us [to the Spanish-speaking ward] because they haven't progressed at all, because they don't understand. (Meraz 1991)

When asked how she would feel if the Spanish-speaking branch were dissolved, Meraz exclaimed:

I'd feel bad. I already have to go to Callexico forty-five minutes away. For me, it would be sad if the branch were to be dissolved, unless they then put the branch here in L.A. because I live here. But please don't make me go to the

English ward. I guess I'd have to go to the English ward, but I think it would be a step backward for me. I like to be helping, working in the Church. (Meraz 1991)

Another Hispanic American member, Gloria Moreno, mentioned the problems she faced in northern California after moving back from Mexico. "Things just weren't like they used to be," she said. "I began to fall away because I didn't feel the same, because they didn't invite me. I think that in the Church to be active, to feel committed, to enjoy it and to learn more and not let things get lukewarm, you've got to be involved in the activities and have responsibilities in the Church. If you don't have responsibilities in the Church, you can't stay active. I think that is what happened to me."

The northern California Spanish-speaking branch was dissolved because the group remained small and leadership developed slowly. Gloria explained that without the Spanish branch, "I felt alone. I felt like I didn't have anybody to support me. I didn't have anything to lean on." She stopped attending the Mormon Church and started going to the Catholic Church with her sister. She explained that at the Catholic Church "[I] began to feel like I used to feel, at home. But I always tell my sister I feel an emptiness" (Moreno 1991). Now when Gloria attends the Mormon church, she is treated like a "visitor" instead of a member.

The Meraz and Moreno experiences highlight a difficulty that is familiar to members of other races. Shirley Moore says about the Native American Poston Branch outside Parker, Arizona: "There was a lot of prejudice in Parker. Somehow or other I started going down to the Poston Branch just for activities. There were almost all Lamanites there except for the leaders, because, of course, the Indians couldn't be leaders. What did they know? I'm being sarcastic" (p. 6).

After Shirley married, she moved back to the reservation and attended the Poston Branch. Her husband became the branch president, and for a while things went well. However, she moved to Utah with her husband and children, and a short time later the Poston Branch was dissolved. Shirley noted, "I feel sad because I know that some of those people won't feel good about going to Parker Ward. But you can't always sit back and say, 'I'm just a poor Indian and people will look down on me,' although I certainly have had those feelings" (Moore 1990, 10).

She worried that Indians would be reluctant to attend a white ward, even though they "have something to offer." She told the following about Sister Redhouse:

She's a Navajo woman, and she wears her Navajo clothing. She's what I think of as a typical Navajo woman. I feel like she's a spiritual giant. She doesn't



say very much, but she was my visiting teaching companion. I've never had an easier visiting teaching companion. She was really special. I feel like people could learn from Sister Redhouse, but I don't know that she'd ever go to Parker Ward. (Moore 1990, 10–11)

Donna Fifita also thought Indian branches are helpful. "Not all Indians are going to feel like me or fight like me to be noticed," she said. "They like that feeling of being with other Indians. I imagine that is especially true of Navajos or anybody. I guess I really should say anybody who has been raised on a reservation and then comes here. To be put into a regular white ward would be harder for them" (Fifita 1990, 16).

Each ethnic group has faced this transitional problem. African-Americans have struggled from segregated small groups, to integrated branches, to wards, and back again. Black branches provided valuable opportunities for LDS Afro-Americans to hold a variety of positions new converts might not be called to in large wards. As Robert Lang, president of the Southwest Los Angeles Branch, argued, "A black man gets baptized into a ward with another race of people. What is the chance of this particular black person getting a calling in order to learn leadership? It is kind of slim" (1985, 12). Elizabeth Pulley explained, "I have the opportunity to teach mother education and social relations classes in Relief Society. I have worked in the Primary" (1985, 15). Mason Anderson elected to attend the Charlotte branch because he "felt if I went into a church that was already established, I would not be able to do hardly anything. Rather than being on the fight for the Lord, I might be pushed out and not have the opportunity and might just sit cold over in another church. . . . I might not have the opportunity to be a worker or be active there as I am here. . . . To be able to work is really helping me in my growth in the . . . Church" (1986, 31).

Anoulone Vipbonsanarath, a Laotian who joined the Church in northern Virginia, agreed that the ethnic branches provide a necessary transition after conversion. However, she noted that the cultural diversity among Southeast Asians needs to be recognized:

The major problem in the Asian branches is just basically language communications. It is hard because a lot of people don't speak English. Especially we have Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese together. It is hard because our languages are totally different. Other than that, it is fine. It is not a big barrier. I don't think the problem is so big that it would stop people from going to church.

All of the members of the Asian branches were from the same area, Southeast Asia, but our cultural backgrounds are totally different. The Laotians and the Cambodians are pretty similar. But with the Vietnamese, it is totally different with our attitudes and just how we see life in general. That is why the missionaries said, "It is hard to mix them together." I don't think we have any

discrimination or prejudice against each other. It is just sometimes hard to get us together just because of the difference in the cultural background. (1991, 20)

Language and ethnic segregation continue to cause problems as well as provide an internal comfort zone. Donna Fifita, who married a Tongan, finds discrimination against Polynesians in wards, at the stake level, and especially in athletics.

There's a lot of prejudice even against the Tongan people. Tongan people are so gifted in their talents, and I've seen how the white Latter-day Saints are towards them, especially in sports because that's what the Tongans are so gifted in. I would see so many unfair calls in basketball and unfair calls in volleyball. They wouldn't make those calls on their own white people. (Fifita 1990, 12)

The Fifitas are an interesting example of a multi-cultural family. The same is true of Ken Sekaquaptewa, a Hopi-Chinese, whose wife Debbie is from Hawaii but whose ancestry includes Hawaiian, Chinese, and Portuguese progenitors. Barbara Ann Pixton, African-American, married the Anglo that introduced her to the Church. All of these individuals have moved from area to area within the Church and discover that unconditional acceptance varies. Elijah Royster chose to stay in Hawaii because he knew race mattered less there, even within the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the history of the Church, missionaries have taken the gospel to the corners of the world. Originally, converts were encouraged to come to Zion and were then often dispersed to various settlements. Although new converts professed the same religion, difficulties in early times between Danes and English, Germans and Americans, Welsh and Swedes persisted. After a few intermarriages and the passage of time, however, the nineteenth-century European convert became American and Mormon.

Today's ethnic converts face a very similar problem. The Church now advises them to stay at home and strengthen their local areas, but many gather to America and often temporarily to the Rocky Mountains for educational, economic, or family reasons. Their problems are much like those faced by new converts a century ago, yet their commitment to the religion convinces them that they can overcome difficulties and create a better world for their children.

Four of the oral histories highlight shared dreams, hopes, and aspirations. Ken Sekaquaptewa summarized his feelings:

I think my personal hopes and goals are for my kids. My hope is that they will have an understanding of and appreciation for their Indian culture, their Hawaiian culture, their Chinese culture, and whatever culture they're a part of. Especially, I hope they develop a testimony of the gospel. I think if they have a strong testimony they will be able to cope with trials and problems and successes [of being multicultural]. (Sekaquaptewa 1990, 18)

Donna Fifita believes that children are the key to eradicating prejudice in the future. She said:

I talk to them about prejudice. I tell them what I went through. I tell them I don't want them to ever feel that they're lower than anybody. I don't let my children feel that they're lower than white people. I let them play right along with the white kids. If my kids come back and tell me that so and so scolded them and treated them unfairly, I'll go right to the mom and tell them, "That really bothers me. You're blaming my kids for something when your kid is just as much involved." My neighbors around here know I'm not an easy pushover for anything. I won't let prejudice interfere with my kids.

I want my kids to have a good self-esteem. I want them to be proud of who they are. They are Sioux and Tongan. They come from strong cultural backgrounds. I want them to learn their dances, both Tongan and Native American dances. They want to. Whenever school projects come up, they go and do their thing. They'll do their Polynesian little dances for them or they'll do their Indian dances at Thanksgiving time. They'll bring their Indian costumes. They're really aware of who they are and where they come from. I want them to be proud of that. (Fifita 1990, 7)

Rosalinda Meraz and Shirley Moore add another dimension to the discussion of ethnic diversity. They point out that love and learning can conquer all. They remind us that the Church has much to offer the people of the world. Meraz states:

I thank God for all that I have. Almost all that I have I owe to the Church, to our religion, because I've learned so much in Relief Society. I've learned how to be a better mother, how to be a better daughter, how to be a better wife, how to be a better friend, a better neighbor. I was a very timid person. Since I joined the Church, little by little, I have come out of my shell. . . . All that I am now I owe to God and Jesus Christ and to the gospel. I'll never be sorry. I only wish I had learned of the Church earlier. (Meraz, 1991)

Moore elaborated on what she sees as her mission in life:

I'll tell you what I try to share with other members of the Church. I just want them to know that we're all basically the same. We all have the same needs. We all have the same desires. Hopefully if we're LDS, we all have the same goals. What difference is it that we have different backgrounds? I just don't feel that it's necessary for me to say, "This is what we believe," as far as some kind of cultural background.

I know that ignorance is a problem in a lot of places. I know that ignorance is a problem here. I just feel like since I have this knowledge I should share it. I don't think people should look at me and say, "She's a Lamanite, and she's doing this?" Lamanites can do these things as far as like being Relief Society president. First of all, I don't think there's any big deal about being Relief Society president, but some people seem to think so. I want people to know that I am a brown person, and yes, brown people are capable of doing these things. I never stand up and say, "Look at me. I'm a brown person standing in front of all of you."

I think I just basically treat people like we're all the same. I really try to look at individuals and not look at backgrounds or ethnicity. I think that is something that the gospel can teach us. I think that it can give Native Americans some hope,

as it would any culture. I think that if any culture would embrace the gospel, then they would feel that they were really children of God, that color of skin doesn't matter. They are just as precious to our Heavenly Father as anyone. It would also do something for their self-esteem. (Moore 1990, 25-26)

In the final analysis, oral history provides insight into the personal experiences of those interviewed. Religion is the common thread that ties these particular histories together. They remind us of the significance of every soul and of our responsibility to work together to guarantee that the larger Church remains a haven for all of God's children.

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