Women and Traditional Politics in the Bamenda Grassfields-Cameroon from the Precolonial To Postcolonial Periods

Abstract: This article analyses the role of women in traditional politics in the centralized states of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial periods. The article asserts that women were very engaged actors of the administrative machinery of the various chiefdoms and illustrates that they provided services at different levels in the day to day functioning of palace administration. They adjudicated in issues of conflicts as well as ensured the respect for palace etiquettes. The study employs the Anlu association in the chiefdom of Kom (Cameroon) as one of the critical case evidences to re-evaluate, the position women occupied in the topography of power in indigenous African societies. From more womanist than feminist perspective, the article argues that, the Bamenda Grassfields women were not passive subjects, but agents capable of initiating and transforming policies and ideologies in their respective chiefdoms.

Keywords: Cameroon women, traditional politics, centralized societies, Bamenda Grassfields.

Introduction

Diplomatically, each community in the Bamenda Grassfields represented what could be referred to as a ‘nation’. That is, these communities consisted of groups of people who felt that they had a common ancestor, culture, religion, territory and government. Power or divine rights were fully attributed to the traditional authority, locally known as Fon who acted as the custodian of the village. As a mark of veneration to the super ordinate powers of the Fon, he was usually attributed symbolic titles like ‘noble leopards’, ’mighty elephants’, and ‘great buffalo’. Any leopard caught in any kingdom belonged to the Fon and was brought to him. It was a taboo to call the Fon by name, touch him and to talk to him directly. The Fon had the responsibility of maintaining peace and stability in their Fondoms while the people had the moral obligation of supporting them. However, the Fon’s powers were checked by members of the most powerful regulatory societies like the ngumba, the nwereong, the kwifon among others depending on the communities in the Grassfields in which they were found, recognized and respected. Fons were assisted by village heads that represent him at village levels.

On the other hand, women played vital functions in traditional governance and diplomacy in different villages. For instance, the Queen mother in was a close confident and advisor to the Fon and in many ways influenced the Fon’s decisions in key issues affecting the life of the Fondon. Through her, women’s grievances were articulated. The article examines the role of women in traditional politics in the Bamenda Grassfields within a defined conceptual context.

Conceptual Scope

At present, two tendencies dominate the definition of woman, the biological approach preached by naturalists and the socio-anthropological approach which favours the role and social status of the woman. The biological definition, or definition by sexual difference, valorises the “real” being of women. In a sexualized sense, women are human beings of the female sex, which is the sex that gives birth. From this perspective, the operative characteristics and differential element of women compared to men lies in sex and in biological differences. Such a biological approach is more and more integrated to a more global and operational one, the so called socio-anthropological approach. The socio-anthropological approach definition of the woman puts an emphasis on her social role and status and on her social existence. Here, the woman is known as an actor in the same capacity as man. Thus, one thinks of the woman in a multidimensional view by going beyond the classical opposition between the domestic and the political, and integrating the feminine dimension in the global understanding of society.
It is worth acknowledging that neither roles and status alone nor sex alone is sufficient to render an account of the extent of the differential values between sexes and the functions that are specific to the woman. Roles and status refer back in each socio-cultural milieu to a world of representations, which is itself inherent in a conception and vision of the world. One should therefore consider the games of symbolism, ideology and power that ensure a society’s internal equilibrium and reproduction. The social status of women and the relationships between them and men cannot be thought of outside the question of power that determines the social dynamics. “Woman” must at once be naturalized and sociologies. To be a woman is to be both a biological being and a social actor. One does not happen without the other. The biological and the social are linked. They influence each other and, sometimes, determine each other.

The position held by women in the traditional milieu is somehow complex, ambivalent and controversial. The social norms that define the roles and social status assign to them an inferior position to the man. The social practices and the symbolic representations confer to them an important role in social life. It is through the institutions and the systems of representations that the contradiction is revealed. It is inherent to the dynamics of power in the traditional societies. Whatever the situation, it appears that the traditional sphere submits the women to a double logic: the logic of submission and subordination in the public space and that of power and affirmation in the domestic space. The study privileges the socio-anthropological approach. The political status of the woman is fundamentally determined by the socio-anthropological structure of women’s conditions by the regulation of power functioning in terms of the logic between women and men in the society. The socio-anthropological perspective enables us to sketch out an operational categorization of women in Cameroon and in the Bamenda Grassfields in particular.

The endeavour to define, to categorize, or to draw a typology of Cameroonian women has certainties and uncertainties. With certainty, it is known that the Cameroonian woman is a complex and diversified reality. There is not a unique category or type of woman in Cameroon. There are many, according to their social origins, their training, their professions, their marital status and their area of life. Women’s identities are not primordial data, intangible and immovable. In so far as they are social creations, they are moving, dynamizing and changing. In a certain milieu, a woman can valorize her peasant identity and in another, display her professional status, whether public or private, all being done in relation to the interests at stake in a given situation or to her personal expectations. In the frame of this study, we have made an operational choice that takes into account the living place of the woman and her matrimonial status. The category of woman considered here is the one who lives in the rural zone or in a partially urban zone, whether married, unmarried, widowed or divorced. In the Bamenda Grassfields context, it is the women who occupied crucial positions in the traditional politics of their polities. This choice is not only operational, but is also ideological.

A variety of methods are employed in politics, which include promoting its own political views among people, negotiation with other political subjects, making laws, and exercising force, including warfare against adversaries. Politics is exercised on a wide range of the different social levels: clans and tribes of traditional societies, modern local governments, companies and institutions sovereign states and to international communities. In this paper, we used the phrase “traditional politics” as an institutional framework to describe the political systems of some Chiefdoms (Fondoms or Kingdoms) in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. In this system, the Fon stood at the forefront of the administration. He often, even in absolute monarchies, ruled his Fondom with the aid of an elite group of advisors, with some of the strategic members coming from the female folk. The expression “Bamenda Grassfields” in this paper denotes the area conterminous to the North West Region of Cameroon. It came to be called the Bamenda Grassfields at the dawn of German penetration into the region. This area was characterized by exposed ridges and not-forested rocky slopes and forest galleries along the river valleys. The name Bamenda Grassfields was therefore derived from the region’s vegetation. For the purpose of consistency, the expression ‘Bamenda Grassfields’ is used throughout this article to allude to groups like the Tikar, Chamba, Munchi and Tadkons that claim diverse origins but share centralised political structures.

**Women in Traditional Politics**

In most communities in the Bamenda Grassfields, women were represented in traditional administration by the Queen mother known as Yaa, Mayaa-a, Nafoin, No-not, and Mafor. The Queen mother was still the highest female personality of each community and ruled over women and even the Fons’ wives. Like the Fons, they never went to public places or freely associated with other women of the same community. In most societies in Africa, the Queen mother was forbidden by customs to see or touch any corpse as that could defile her and reduce her spiritual powers. In Meta just like in many areas of the Bamenda Grassfields, the administrative post of a Mafor in was purely reserved for teenage girls related to the Fon. In many cases, for a woman to be appointed to the social rank of Mafor or the village queen, she had to be the mother or sister of the Chief. Some consultations were often done among some of the councillors and some of the palace women before appointing the Mafor. The consultations consisted of a critical evaluation of her character in relation to the post she was to be given. The post of Mafor had little political influence in Meta and her influence was felt more within the palace than within the village. However, in some clans like the Shi, the
Queen mother had the rank of a traditional councillor and was part of the king-makers in the chieftaincy, a practise that was not common in Meta.

Oral sources from Meta clan revealed that pre-colonial Meta was ruled mostly by a Council of Elders. Some names like Nung and Muyang have often been influential women such as the Mafor. The Nung and Muyang were known as the clan’s founding mothers. In her administrative functions, the Mafor was in charge of settling disputes among the village women and was often called up in the council of elders when there was a serious matter to discuss concerning women. She defended the women and pleaded for clemency in case of any sanctions. They equally played the role of advisors to the councillors, by virtue of their age and experience. Through the Mafor, a person who had been condemned by the council to death could plead for clemency. Also, dissatisfied litigants solicited the services of the Mafor to plead to the council to re-sit and review their litigations. As such, the Mafor could influence the judgements of the council. Thus, the role of the Mafor in the administrative system was not negligible because she served to complement the activities of the council. Her functions became more significant in the development of chieftaincy and close to her were the errand boys who were also serving the council.

In the Wimbum land of the Donga-Mantung plateau, women equally took hold of strategic positions of responsibility in the administration of their villages. The Maya-a (co-gent) was the highest female personality in the village. She was enthroned before a new Fon could be enthroned. In this community, the Maya-a was the queen of the land and rule over all women even the Fon’s wives. The Fon’s wives (Bkinto) were accorded very important positions in the society but different from that of the Queen mother. The Bkinto could not mingle carelessly with any group of women or attend public markets. The wives of the palace notables (pkibai) called pwiba were equally highly respected. There were other important notables in the land who worked closely with the female traditional authorities in the village. These were the Tantoh and the Shey. The Tantohand the Shey were the leaders of the manjong society. They wielded a lot of power and commanded respect in the society. They deliberated over issues ranging from defense and the peace and order of the Fondom including the development projects. Unlike the case in Bafut, they were permitted to attend the village council sessions and apprehended the defaulters of the laws of the land. These personalities, in most cases acted in consonance with the Bkinto and pwiba.

**Women’s Contribution to Conflict Mediation and Peace**

Early findings from various fields of studies such as anthropologist, sociologist and historians revealed that a fundamental fact on African traditional societies lies on the sacred character of the respect given to the elderly in general and to elderly women in particular. “The elderly woman,” according to Miriam; Was respected by all, and played a key role in crisis management and conflict resolution. Thus, when a conflict degenerated into armed violence, an appeal would usually be made to a third party of mature years which could be elderly women to calm the tension and reconcile the combatants. Such an appeal for mediation was usually made to a woman who enjoyed the consideration and respect of all who knew her.

The same studies revealed that if war broke out among the Tikars, the oldest women of the clan would go to meet that of the opposing clan so that together, they could interpose themselves between the belligerents in order to make them see the good intentions of cordiality. When words proved fruitless, the women would threaten to expose their nakedness or to go down on their knees. In either case, the gesture signified a curse for those who bore the responsibility for such grave acts. Because of the respect that the enemy soldiers had for the women, they would usually put down their weapons before the cordial acts were accomplished.

The same study suggests that in case where there was no laying down of arms, the old women, nude and on their knees, would crawl towards the foolhardy combatants and say to them:

“We are your mothers; We do not want war; We do not want bloodshed; Do not fight with your brothers; They have sent us to sue for peace.”

And if the assailants still refused to see reason and marched on the village, they would suffer the ultimate punishment for having disobeyed and obliged their ‘grandmothers’ to expose their nakedness. Following investigations in the same area of our study, oral sources from Aghem, Kom, Oku and Bafanjti testify that this act was predominant with women from their respective communities. However, these observations coupled with women participation in peace building also portray the strategic task of women in conflict mediation processes. They served as leverages in peace restoration and conflict prevention when conflicts erupted in families, clans or communities in which they were bonded. In this connection, women of the Bamenda Grassfields played both an active and a passive role in the restoration of peace in traditional Bamenda. This was what happened within the framework of pacts, for example. As noticed in pre-colonial Bamenda, a pact usually operated in the resolution of a conflict caused by the murder of a clan member. When required,
Women as Peace Envoys

Before the advent of Western occupation in the Bamenda Grassfields, some communities used elderly women who could no longer conceive as peace envoys. This was because women had always been considered to be inviolate. As such, they were shielded from war-related violations. In times of inter-tribal wars, women were the only ones who could move across the zones of conflict freely without much danger. It were women who studied the situation, assessed the prospects for peace and facilitated contacts and communication between the two warring parties. During periods of heightened tension, women usually led peace emissaries. The Bamenda Grassfielders are careful as to whom they should choose as a peace envoy. Those selected are required to possess a wide variety of qualities and competencies, including a sense of responsibility, patience, good personality, oratory abilities, decency, just to name but these. They were equally expected to be well versed with customary law, and were required to possess a well-informed knowledge of the problem at stake. In such circumstances of awareness of the crisis situation, women capitalizing on their neutrality and the privileges bestowed on them by culture in many cases in the Bamenda Grassfields, shuttled between the warring clans, theirs and that of their husbands. They carried messages of peace and reconciliation, and they mobilized and encouraged the forces of peace from both sides. When the real cause or causes of the war were figured out, the aggressors acknowledged their mistakes, submitted themselves to mediation and accepted the verdict. Expounding on the role of the Queen mother, Kah holds that:

When a very critical issue was to be deliberated upon, the Queen Mother, known as nafoyn, zhehfaai, or mafu in the Kom, Laimbwe and Bamileke ethnic groups respectively, would summon the women elders of the different quarters and families to a meeting. During this meeting, they examined the issue and made suggestions for correction or improvement. Following on the heels of the meeting of these women elders there was a general assembly of women to discuss the practical implementation of decisions taken by the elders. Other appropriate channels were used to disseminate information to women in the wards of the villages and lineages or families. Women were generally mobilized from the level of the compound, lineage, quarter, and village levels. These revelations bear evidence of the great potentials women in most African societies had in matters of conflict arbitration and reconciliation. On the other hand, women in many instances in the Bamenda Grassfields were also noted for resilience and commitment to cause when need arose. It is in this perspective that the article surveys a well-structured women group known as Anlu in the Kom traditional Fondom of the Bamenda Grassfields.

Women Commitment to social-cause in Traditional Diplomacy: The Anlu Society Case Evidence

Among the Kom of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, Anlu is a disciplinary technique designed by women to seek redress for particular offences committed by men against womanhood. Anlu means to drive away. It was an act of ostracism. If a person maltreated a pregnant or nursing mother, he was ostracized. He could not have any social contact with members of his own close kin group. Initiated on a military basis, Anlu was organised along the lines of njong, a village military club. Whenever women took action against a man, they met and organized themselves under a head called na-anlu (lit. the mother of anlu). She was usually the oldest woman in the village. During the period that the women enforced an effective band on a person, she co-ordinated all actions taken to punish the individual concerned. She was assisted by spies (iigwesii, sing. Iigwe).

In Kom, there are many and controversial sources concerning the origins of Anlu. The most popular is that at a time when Kom men were off fighting at Ake, another enemy group came to attack the palace at Laikom, thinking that they will encounter only women whom they considered easy targets. But the women (member of Anlu) saw the invaders coming and dressed in men's clothing, wearing shirts as men and triangular baskets (nko 3e) on their heads to resemble war helmets. From a distance, the invaders mistook them for men and began to run away in confusion. The women defended the palace by rolling stones down on the invaders and the defence was so successful that the organization of women became known thereafter as Anlu. Thus this organization which is said to have its origins in women’s militant or warlike activities became part of the peace-keeping force especially during the pre-colonial
During the 19th century, Anlu’s tactics of isolation or ostracism were well-developed. The crimes most often mentioned by early researchers such as Nkwain and Nkiwi in this domain were incest; abuse of elderly parents; impregnating a wife when she was still nursing an infant; seizing a husband by his penis; or insulting a wife by saying that she had a “rotten vagina”. In practice, the scope of anlu’s activities went beyond these lists, a point to which we shall return below. When an offence was committed repeatedly, a decision made to punish, lu, the culprit on one of the two rest days (Piggin, “country Sundays”) in the eight-day week, Tu’ibolle or Tu hvuni Kom, women assemblé in the compound of the Anlu messengers, the ngwe’s (surgical, gwe). Before they left the compound, garden eggs (funya, sing., manya, pl.) were cooked to take along. At each junction in the road, some grass was burned and one garden egg was added to it. The anlu leaders also carried along a drum, borrowed from a leading dance and mukum group. When they reached the offender’s compound, they sang lewd songs, using obscene gestures and language, urinated and defecated in the house and yard to defile the compound and threw garden eggs at the offender. Then they placed the pot of garden eggs on the offender’s household hearth and withdrew. This experience runs in concordance with Kah’s emphasis of Women’s use of symbols to impress on society when he intimates that:

These symbols made the women sacrosanct, feared and revered in the Kom society. With this social security, the Anlu could carry out its purification activities unperturbed as was the case with unrepentant offenders. If they happened to remove the pot placed in their hearth by the Anlu, they could fall sick or die in consequence. This practice and powers caused culprits who were guilty to quickly admit their malevolence and plead for forgiveness. They informed Anlu’s messengers of their decision and the messengers called the other women to assemble. On the next rest day, the women received the offender’s proof of penitence, ten fowls and a large basket of com flour. After, the compound was cleaned and while the meal was being prepared, the offenders were led to a stream, where they were submerged and the creeping stems (an ivy-like plant) the women had worn were thrown in after them and allowed to float downstream. Then the offenders’ heads were shaved, and they were rubbed with cam-wood. Men did not participate in the purification rites but were present for the reconciliation and were given some of the fowls to cook for themselves. This act of banishment and then forgiveness is an aspect of Anlu that is usually mentioned but downplayed in the literature of the subject. No matter how heinous the offence, the ways of first punishing and then reincorporating an individual were established. Such mechanisms were commonplace in Kom organizations and they normally entailed complete forgiveness, whether an individual is tried by men and acquitted of witchcraft or punished by women for bad moral conduct. The matter was finished when the ceremony of reconciliation was performed, although it is possible that individuals were sometimes punished again for different offences. On the other hand, an unrepentant offender could be isolated for life.

It was believed that Anlu acted to enforce or uphold community morals, although it was not the only group that could act thus. To support the argument that Anlu was essentially a moral force and to illustrate the scope of Anlu’s activities in recent decades, a listing of actual cases in which individuals were ostracized by Anlu during colonial and post-colonial periods is instructive. All these incidents contained elements that lend credence to the broader definition of Anlu as an amoral force, not just a women’s disciplinary organization, concerned solely with women. The following case evidence suggests that there was cooperation between the men’s mukum groups and the women’s Anlu, as well as fambuen, another women’s organization. In this case, the female lodge complemented men’s organizations, to address the crucial concerns of the fondom.

One of the cases handled by Anlu had to do with succession dispute in one of the family’s in Kom. Contrary to matrilineal Kom practice, a Belo man by name Njong who was a member of the patrilineal Kijem clan was fighting to succeed his father. Unfortunately for him, his father was not a member of the Kijem clan and succession in the usual Kom way was to proceed first to the father’s brother and then to their maternal nephew. When Tingum the paternal uncle came to the compound, a Kijem man insulted him, saying that he had jiggers in his feet, and beat him. Two offences were
thus committed: first, refusing to allow the successor’s right to assume leadership of the compound, and second, insulting an elder. Mukumgang, the most powerful masquerade society in the area, called for Anlu to punish the man. He was punished, and he abandoned his wives and his mother and ran away to Big Babanki A Kom neighbouring community, where he stayed for some time. Eventually he came back to Mukumgang and repented and they arranged for Anluor fambuen to cleanse him.\textsuperscript{xxxiv}

Nkwi states that, Anlu, was “an effective instrument for punishing those who had committed crimes against womanhood or maltreated women”. On the basis of this, the scope of intervention of Anlu could be broadened to include crimes committed that involved human reproduction as well as insolence. Thus a man who insulted his real or putative father could be punished although there was no crime against womanhood involved. Such crimes as incest, sexual insult, or beating a pregnant woman were considered amoral acts” that invited Anlu social redress. On the other hand, if a man impregnated his wife while she was still nursing a child, both men and women were subjects to chastisement.\textsuperscript{xxxv}

A serious case managed by Anlu’s activities in Belo-Kom took place in the mid 1950’s when one woman at Djichami was disciplined because of her promiscuous attitude and insolent character towards her husband and mother-in-law. Anlu came out in full force. The victim did not repent and Anlu did not abstain from wearsome the case. They were called to the compound of the leading mukum group, but they refused to go. Finally the victim’s influential family sought help from the Colonial District Officer (D.O.), who came to tell the women to stop their activities. The colonial police were sent to Belo to keep order, and Anlu sang songs about the police who had come to restrain them but instead spent their time going after harlots. Although the Anlu demonstrations eventually ceased, the ostracism continued after the reunification of Cameroon and the woman who was well known for her promiscuous life, now aged, is looked on with spite in the area where she lives.\textsuperscript{xxxvi}

During the same era, a woman at Anyajua, wife of one of the heirs Lo’oh, reined 1954-1966), had a daughter who ran away from home and returned in the late stages of pregnancy. The mother was angry with the daughter and drove her away from the compound. The daughter went into labour and delivered her child on the road nearby, with no one to help her. Anlu came out and disciplined the mother, singing songs about the daughter and her child lying on the road and about to be wounded by dogs. Lo’oh, the husband, signified his acquiescence as well as his wish that the reprimand would soon end by playing the drum for the demonstrators, but the mother’s brother came to her defence, telling the women not to demonstrate in the compound again. The next day, Anlu went instead to the brother’s compound and demonstrated, singing rude songs about his displeasure with them and threatening him with similar actions if he did not desist.\textsuperscript{xxxvii}

In January 1986 in the neighbouring village of Belo, there were plans to chastise one young man who was allegedly responsible for getting involved in series of incidents concerning the deaths of four people. His father had died in 1982 and while returning from the funeral his father’s death, his brother had been killed in a car road accident and another man had been killed by a tree that was felled in the hapless young man’s compound, and yet another man was killed when the truck in which he was carrying some wood for the young man missed its position on a narrow bridge and fell over. These deaths prompted the speculation that the young man had entered into an alliance with a group dedicated to the killing of people. It was said that he had been taken to one of the group’s meetings and told to bring five “fowls”, that is living humans. Judging from other sources, the full payment had not yet been made but it was believed that with full payment made, the young man who was a prosperous shopkeeper was to become fabulously wealthy.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} The local mukum group had not moved to prevent him from completing his payments; Anlu thus decided to act when he came to the weekly market, they planned to force his mother to begin the shrill cry that signals the beginning of Anlu. But the young man did not appear at the market and the decision to reprovehim was suspended as of that moment.\textsuperscript{xxxix}

However, as examined in the different cases, the scope of intervention of Anlu was wide and included fertility in general, especially the fertility of the land, but it can be argued that precedents for this broadening of was influenced by the political setting that recognized the role and force of women associations as complements of men’s institutions in the effective and efficient administration of the fondom. Generally in the Bamenda Grassfields and in Kom in particular, wherever there was a man’s organization, there was also a women’s organization that stood as its counterpart. The male counterpart of Anlu’s ostracism of one or more individuals was the alang, an injunction, in the form of a “stick” (effectively, a no-trespassing sign) placed in a farm that warned people not to tress-pass through the area; this stick was placed by the mukum. It is worth noting in this context that certain women became members of the mukum, although they never danced in costume with the men. The practice of admitting women to at least partial membership in the mukum groups was rare but real.\textsuperscript{xl} While women became members of the men’s mukum groups, the privilege was not reciprocal and men did not become members of women’s organizations, including both traditional and political Anlu, although some men participated indirectly and others colluded with Anlu in certain actions.
Another parallel to Anlu, often drawn by Kom people, is njang, a men’s military society. Women were not members of the men’s njang but there was a women’s njang and when the men’s group met, the women danced and feasted alongside them. Following the day’s festivities, the women’s njang visited the houses of participants at night to sing, beg for food or favours, and blessed the infertile. The women’s njang in some cases took barren women from their homes and bestowed them for brief periods on particularly potent men who were trusted to impregnate them. The husband of a barren woman could not object to such measures. Thus, attempting to control fertility was not an activity restricted to men or to men’s groups such as the mukum, nor was it solely the preserve of the Anlu organization. But while njang acted as a local organization to ensure fertility, Anlu acted as a local organization to prevent the abuse of fertility and to punish what might be called “illicit” or “illegitimate” fertility that threatened to pollute or endanger the community.\textsuperscript{xii}

CONCLUSION

The article has shown the multifaceted role that women in the Bamenda Grassfields played in traditional politics. In the domain of conflict, women clearly played a crucial role in conflict prevention, management, resolution and post conflict reconstruction. The investigation asserts that women were very engaged actors of the administrative machinery of their various chiefdoms. It is illustrated that women provided services at different levels in the day to day functioning of palace administration. They adjudicated in issues of conflicts as well as ensured the respect for moral values. Using the case of the Anlu in Kom, it is illustrated that women stood at the fore of moralising society, ensuring social justice, purifying the land from evil. They also encouraged parturition through rituals that reverted barreness. It has been shown that as a social entity, women associations complemented the activities of men’s associations in assisting the traditional ruler in the discharge of his duties. The article intimates that, Bamenda Grassfields women were not passive subjects, but agents capable of initiating and transforming policies and ideologies in their respective chiefdoms. The study therefore, dismantles the social boundaries between women and men in the spheres of socio-political interventions.

END NOTES

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