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A CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE TO SAVE THE PLANET: Realizing Sustainable Development Goals 2030

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to find the significance of a cross-cultural dialogue in the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030, specifically SDG 6 and SDG 12-15 which directly aim at sustainability of nature and the planet. During the times of the pandemic crisis the real challenge is to reform the global economy without causing environmental degradation guided by ethical vision and value systems embedded in diverse cultures. The pandemic situation turns our attention to see that the developmental needs of each nation is unique and hence there cannot be a unilateral and totalizing framework like the scientific one which is but anthropocentric in realizing the above SDGs. It is here that alternative models based on the biocentric view that every living organism has a moral significance and intrinsic value finds much relevance. The long tradition of cultural and ethico-religious values, typified as Earth Values, help in fostering global-local relations and the transformation of a political community around global ethics. Only a science-culture interface moulded in an ethical value framework can be successful in realizing the SDG's. The contemporary writings and researches done on sustainability reveals that such cross-cultural engagements have already begun, and the paper investigates how value systems can give a good ethical momentum in ethical decision-making and sustainable action plans.

Keywords: Biocentric View, Biotic System, Cultural Values, Earth Values, Ethico-Religious Value Systems, Science–Culture Interface, Global-Local Relations.

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1. Introduction

The times of COVID 19 pandemic is teaching humanity about the false narrative of 'safe and secure lives;' it reminds us that we are only a part of the biotic system, the planet Earth. The Global Agenda 2030 is a response to the cry of the earth which is realizable through Clean Water and Sanitation – SDG 6, Responsible Consumption and Production – SDG 12, Climate Action – SDG 13, Life Below Water – SDG 14 and Life on Land – SDG 15. The early reports on the first wave of global pandemic reveal stark differences in policies and outcomes across the countries. Hence it is vital for countries to learn from each other in this pandemic, which will help in the overall effort to measure progress towards the SDGs and to thereby foster best practices and accelerated learning among national and local policy makers. (SDG Report 2020, 29.) It is here that the *kairos* for a fresh dialogue opens up which include not only everything that is scientific but religious, ethical, and cultural. The paper examines how cross-cultural values would help in realizing the SDGs 12-15.

As per the Report of SDG 2020, the goals ranging from 12 to 15, that is those affecting the environment and planet is unclear. Moreover, the specific needs of each and every country in realizing the above specified goals are different. It is in this context that the search for alternative models that are locally feasible and globally acknowledgeable arises. Undoubtedly, scientific methods are necessary in realizing sustainable development goals. But the question remains, whether science is a total success or is it only ambivalent in realizing true progress and development. An economy with maximization of profit even at the cost of other living beings and nature cannot be sustained. Science and technological development has led to the exploitation of nature and environment for the selfish interests of man. But human beings have responsibility to care and protect the Other, which includes the entire biotic system for nature is a sacred creation. The different religions of the East and the West has taught human beings the essential interconnectedness of life and human bounden duty to preserve and protect nature. Hence it is vital to think whether the specified SDGs need more of value significations rather than measured quantifications. What we need today is solidarity between nations ensuring global local relations, solidarity with nature and life, and to build up a global ethics pointing towards the intrinsic value of nature and

environment. A cross-cultural value engagement with the scientific paradigms is very much needed to have a renewed understanding of what development is. It is refreshing to find that the contemporary researches on sustainability that is centred on ethical values lead to the above direction.

2. A Critique of Science and the Anthropocene in Sustainability

The introduction to the Sustainable Development Report 2020 reads that a key objective of Sustainable Development Goals 2030 will be "to restore economic activity without simply restoring old patterns of environmental degradation" (vi). International reports (IPC 2019, 17-18, IPBES, 2019, 1) confirm that many countries are driven by biodiversity threats and deforestation caused at least in part by unsustainable supply chains.

The pandemic has brought out some temporary benefits for the planet. Emissions of Carbon dioxide around the world have dropped significantly because of the low paced industrial activities, lower energy consumption, and reduced transportation of material and people (Le Quere, et al., 1-5). Studies show that emissions of Carbon dioxide and Nitrogen dioxide, a major air pollutant declined sharply in China during the early months of the pandemic (Ghosh 1-4, Mylly Virta 1-3). But it is alarming to see that the virus may also have a negative impact on the enforcement of environmental laws, including on deforestation as industrial lobbies put pressure on public authorities to loosen up restrictions or even postpone the adoption of new measures (Le Quere, *et al*., 1-5). It is totally unclear what impact COVID-19 will have on investment, policies, and actions to tackle climate change. Overall, the direction of short term impacts on environment and biodiversity goals is unclear. Hence the economic activities should be reformed only by safeguarding measures to protect the planet. Otherwise, the long term consequences on environment and biodiversity may be dangerously affected. The six transformation frameworks for SDG can be a very useful guide for rebuilding process. They include i. Education and skills ii. Health and well-being, iii. Clean energy and industry, iv. Sustainable land use, v. Sustainable cities and communities, and vi. Global technologies, all of which are guided by the twin principles of "leave no one behind and ensure circularity and decoupling" (Sachs 3). Among these frameworks iii and iv point out to use the Paris

Climate Agreement as the vision for long term change to inform investment plans and bail outs. Since the 18th century industrial revolution, there was a balance between technological development and human sustainability. But in the post industrial age, *techne* is understood without *poeisis*. As has been envisioned by Heidegger, technology is not to be operated as disposing, so as to coerce, extract or manipulate entities or nature but as something of *poesis*, "to make." Technology is not bound to instrumentality but it is also a way of bringing forth. *Techne* without *poeisis* makes science destructive, which squeezes the essential characteristic of humanness (Chandrakunnel 144). Only ethical, artistic, and cultural values can take science and technology to the real purport of the term development. Any process or activity that is holistic and integral in its approach to life and nature, essentially constructive and egalitarian in its political dimensions constitutes true development.

Sustainable development can be better articulated with tensions between balancing the needs of present generations with those of future generations without disrupting the life support system of the planet (Shahadu 777-778). Although ecological economics has much in common with sustainability science it is the latter that has made an unequivocal turn toward participatory democratic processes in knowledge production, notably, inter- and trans-disciplinarity, participatory experimentation, and practice based research (Norstrom, *et al*., 182-190). The complexity of human-natural systems has led to more genuine inter-disciplinarity and finding the means for making the sustainability science more inclusive that incorporates the social sciences and the humanities to a greater extent (Jerneck and Olson 18-19).

In view of the ecological crises, an increasing number of philosophers, scientists, thinkers, and environmentalists throughout the world have started interrogating scientism from within their own traditions. Undeniably, the culture of the Enlightenment and its betrothal of science to pampering humanity has promoted an anthropocentric worldview, whose banner of progress has ridiculed all claims of the nonhuman other as mawkish. It has led to a reality that is dangerous to the survival of life on this planet. The attempt shall be directed to considering an ecologically demanding question of human ethic and environmental value. The ethical concerns are to be juxtaposed against the scientific dualism supported by the

underlying dominant metaphysics and an unending quest for alternative worldviews, especially cross cultural values so far marginalized. This will foster a new cultural ethic and an ethical practice which would make for the bio centric view of the world.

A number of challenges to science and its all-knowing dogmatic claims surface now from the western quarters of physicists, environmentalists, and philosophers. Scientific development is parallel to biological evolution in the sense that both are products of competition and selection. So scientific development is a process driven from behind, not pulled from ahead to achieve a fixed goal. To recall, Thomas Kuhn's notion of incommensurability thesis has brought to view how the paradigm shifts through the appearance of anomalies lead to scientific revolutions expose as false all claims to a linear, continuous progress in science. Kuhn is of the view that there is no one scientific method to be used universally across all models. In other words, what is "the method in one science at one time is just that, and nothing more" (Kuhn 3). Paul Feyerabend also holds that the idea of a fixed method or of a fixed theory or rationality, rests on too naive a view of people and the social surroundings. According to Feyerabend, "the conception of one unique system of criteria which has always been leading towards success and is still leading towards it with no concern to its pragmatism and utility, creates the basis for spiritual monolithism and totalitarianism. Just like other forms of dogmatism, this form in its incorporation by a state becomes a state ideology" (*Against Method*, 7-28). The positions of Feyerabend and Kuhn raise questions as to science's dependability as regards historical progress to the presupposed truth.

It is a truism that the human scientific and technological legacy as the indubitable cause of life's degradation in the midst of many scientific achievements are human-centred. Rachel Carson opines that there is probably nothing more disturbing than the threat of widespread contamination of groundwater. "It is not possible to add pesticides to water anywhere without threatening the purity of water everywhere. Seldom if ever does Nature operate in closed and separate compartments, and she has not done so in distributing the earth's water supply. So, in a very real and frightening sense, pollution of the groundwater is pollution of water everywhere" (Carson 42).

Today, many of the philosophers and environmentalists all over the world increasingly realize that science as an efficient, result-oriented rationalism suffers from grievous dangers. They are seriously concerned now about the future of our planet and not only of human beings. Carson in her dedication of *Silent Spring* quotes Albert Schweitzer: "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the Earth" (Carson ii). A thoroughly homogenizing and totalitarianizing 'scientism' marginalizes cultural difference and tyrannizes modes of thought and freedom thus creating a negative impasse in progress and development.

The contemporary evolutionary theory views nature as cultural and culture as influenced by nature. "Culture as influenced by nature" is the notion that meant to evaluate the viability of constructing a nature/culture divide. (Xavier 1). The nature/culture divide is one of the bipolar nature of human thinking characteristic of scientific rationality. The divide seems arbitrary within and between the human and animal life when considering how the differences between natural and cultural dynamics of humans and animals are modelled as differences of degree, not kind. A potential approach in using the concept of consciousness to recontextualise a nature/culture divide in terms of the possession of consciousness by every being and everything is proposed in this context. The cultural ecofeminists insist that we should reconceptualise our relation with the natural environment in terms that overcome the disconnectedness and alienation that fuel the domination and subjugation of nature (Friedl 72).

The beliefs endorsed by Paul Taylor's bio-centric outlook in *Respect for Nature* deserves special mention in this context. i. The belief that humans are members of the Earth's Community of Life in the same sense and on the same terms in which other living things are members of that community. ii. The belief that the human species along with all other species, are integral elements in a system of interdependence such that the survival of each living thing, as well as its chances of faring well or poorly, is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to other living things. iii. The belief that all organisms are teleological centres of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good in its own way. iv. The belief that humans are not

inherently superior to other living things (Taylor 45). To accept the species–impartiality means to apply it in the human and non-human contexts. In other words, every individual living creature or ecosystem have a moral significance whose intrinsic value is to be recognised. Ecosystem and living beings can be seen as matrices within which intrinsically valuable individuals emerge. But what is important is the positive affirmation of intrinsic value and people's responsibility to recognize it and act accordingly. Value, thus, supplies ethics with its motivation and grounding for justifiable actions.

While environmental crises have brought the issue of natural intrinsic value to a simmering focus among western philosophers and ethicists, eastern thinkers look complacent with having their older traditions of ethics.

3. Religious and Cultural Values as Earth Values

This bio centric attitude appears to locate Taylor and other deep ecologists beyond any specific tradition either East or West, scientific or non-scientific in recognizing the nonhuman species in possession of value. In the Words of Edward Said, "The Orient is an idea that has a history and tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence in and for the West" (22). The thought, image, and vocabulary about the Orient has established a single story of culture in the minds of people in the West. Said emphasises this idea also when he says: "A widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for and represented her" (24). But we have to change our perspectives about this single story which then becomes the new cultural framework we immerse ourselves in to embrace all that is positive and constructive. The thought and the vocabulary of the Orient is well expressed in the religious and cultural values embedded in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and the like.

According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, when human beings begin to violate the universal system and fails to undertake their responsibilities as an integral part of the eco system, it creates negative impacts upon people, planet, prosperity, and peace (*The*

Gita 3.16).[1] Nothing in the Universe is an isolated self-completing unit but given its meaningful significance in the context of its natural community. No being or thing is devoid of the same pure and transcendental ground, *Brahman* (*The Gita* 10. 39).[2]

The *Tao* immanent in the *yin* as well as *yang* dimensions of life and reality sounds similar. The Zen pluralist norm spells: I am in all, and not only that all are in me (Dogen). Perhaps, Lao zi explains it in simpler terms. On cyclical nature of things – all existing things are really one. Life comes from the earth and returns to the earth (Lao Zi 149). The *Tao* gives life to all things, and its virtue nourishes them, forms each according to its nature and gives to each its inner strength (Lease 169). Thus, in eastern metaphysics, being and non-being are phenomenal entities or appearances of the same abiding principle: *the Brahman/the Tao/the No-mind*. Ideally, the Indian is nurtured with cultural nuances of this metaphysical grounding.

In the Abrahamic religions, the *Bible* speaks of the importance of stewardship (168). In the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, which teaches that "all is vanity," also says, "one generation passes away, and another generation comes: but the earth abides forever" (1:4). The similes and metaphors used in the *Hebrew Bible* argue for a responsible and joyful environmental ethics for contemporary living. The earth that brought vegetation and plants (Genesis 1.12), opened its mouth to receive the blood of Abel from the hands of Cain (Genesis 4.11). The heap of stones serves as witness (Genesis 31.48,52) and Moses requests the Earth and the heaven to hear his words (Deuteronomy 32.1) (Joerstad 2019 in Pingzhan 117). It reveals how the earth and ground are active partners in God-human interactions, providing us with glimpses into the theanthropocosmic life of the ancient Israel (Pingzhan 117). Islam calls for the utilization of natural resources (*ni'matullah*) as a gift of God; it is a sacred trust entrusted to humanity. It further upholds: "Do not cause corruption in the earth, when it has been set in order" (*Quran, Al-Araf* 7: 56).

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[1] "One who does not follow the wheel of this Universe or system of evolution, that malicious individual who dwells in sense pleasures wastes his life."

[2] "O Arjuna, I am the generating seed of all existences. There is no being, moving or non-moving, that can exist without me."

However, in the materialist cultures of the day, the globalist technology is at work to size all cultures down to one comprehensive structure. The contemporary civilization understands the language of scientific reason, and decides against inner vision, since objectivity and empiricist laws cannot structure a paradigm for the voice of inner vision to be a technologizable project. In *Farewell to Reason* Feyerabend maintains the fact that a model works does not by itself show that reality is structured like the model (Evans 100). The inner vision to plumb reality [the no-self / no-mind] blasts all models.

The socio-ethical values exhorted by the cross–cultural traditions point to the philosophical perspective that these values are articulated beyond a gendered language to humanize the nonhuman absolute. Thus, eco-criticism designates our engagement with the earth fairly experientially and in a language fostered by consciousness beyond theory formulated language. The earth in its abiotic conditions is not confuted to be devoid of life. Contemporary biologists and environmentalists better understand the invisible life of the soil. Rachel Carson observes: "Life not only formed the soil, but other living things of incredible abundance and diversity now exist within it: if this were not so the soil would be dead and sterile thing. By their presence and activities, the myriad organisms of the soil make it capable of supporting the earth's green mantle" (Carson 53).

By resacralizing the encounter of humans with the natural world and by learning to live harmoniously with the natural world, we can avert ecological catastrophe, and corruption of the mind. Thinkers like Taylor and philosophers like Zimmerman hold: "It is a common perception within the deep ecology movement that the religions of indigenous cultures, the world's remnant and newly revitalized or invented pagan religions, and religions originating in Asia (especially Daoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism) provide superior grounds for ecological ethics" (Taylor, *et al*., 2). A scientific study of the earth such as mentioned above may thus inspire an ecologically responsible attitude. If human cultural interactions with nature are historically evolutionary facts as reiterated by him the only rationale that would stay human interventions is except a pious willing suspension of anthropocentric mores (Baral 163).

4. Science-Culture Interface in Realising SDGs 12-15

In this context it is worthwhile to see that ecocriticism, one of the most significant developments in the early twenty–first century, has been emerging as a new trans-disciplinary paradigm in cultural as well as environmental studies. Timothy Morton treats ecocriticism as a cultural discourse: its views and uses get materialized with cultural tools, human language and symbols. He pleads that a constructivist view of nature is still capable of stimulating political actions. (Morton 13). In Zizek constructivist project, whether deep ecology or social ecology, it is all ideological means that let "nature exist only in discrete moments of man who culturally defines it, captures it, and takes a snapshot of it" through such means (Zizek, *Lecture*, 121).

The sphere of human culture is interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes. It recognizes the religious interdependencies and self-reflexive dynamics of cultural processes. The message offered by John Paul II is worth mentioning in this context. There exists an urgent need for solidarity between nations. The structural forms of poverty is to be addressed. Simplicity and spirit of sacrifice be a part of everyday life. The aesthetic value of creation is to be respected and finally, a sense of fraternity is to be cultivated (Kochappilly 338). With the ongoing dependencies of nature on culture and culture on nature productive analysis are drawn between environmental and cultural processes. They provide the necessary framework that are essential in realising the 17 SDGs in general and SDGs 12-15 specifically.

Today ecocriticism and environmental communication are rapidly converging (Slovic 1-3). In the first decade of the 21st century, researches dealing with the ways in which humans can develop a more acceptable cultural relationship with the environment are coming to the academic forefront. One example is sacred ecology, a sub-topic of cultural ecology, produced by Fikret Berkes in 1999. It searches for lessons from traditional ways of life in Northern Canada to seek new environmental perception for urban dwellers. This particular conceptualisation of people and environment comes from various indigenous forms of knowledge about species and place, resource management systems using local experience, social institutions with their ethical codes of behaviour,

and a world view through religion, ethics, and broadly defined belief systems (Berkes 7-10).

The above studies conform to the fact that culture is a balancing act between how much we use natural resources and in what ways we try to conserve them. Indeed, there is a sacred ecology associated with environmental awareness. The task of cultural ecology is to inspire urban people to develop a more acceptable sustainable cultural interaction with the environment that supports them. This explains what responsible consumption and production is (SDG 12).

Any humanistic endeavour is embedded in the environmental. The recent studies taken by Arizona University testifies to this. For example, one can read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a canonical literary text so as to see how the environments in the novel mirrored or fuelled the moods of the characters and how geographical distance or harsh climates perform. Such an academic intervention will put into contemporary discussions about climate change, environmental preservation, etc. with a firm conviction that humanities can work toward addressing environmental issues. This can be read as science-culture interface in climate action (SDG 13). Again, we need to investigate the histories and cultures of different food systems, decolonize the hierarchy that promotes the study and branding of certain traditional food ways while ignoring those of historically underrepresented communities, and support greater access to local food producers (Adamson, *et al*., *ASU news* 2021). Elkington's recent book, *Green Swans: Regenerative Capitalism* addresses the need to redesign the business and the economy and the opportunities and risks the absence of such change might bring in the coming days (SDGs 6, 12 and 15).

While discussing about the issue of sustainable energy in the light of Catholic Social Teaching prospects for sustainable development of the energy sector in the times of global climate change and environmental threats it is said: "The security of the current and future generations can be guaranteed only if the natural, economic and social components of the environment are balanced with the technological and ethical issues" (Katarzyna 110). Science must engage with other worldviews including indigenous perspectives of Mother Earth which can help us reimagine ways of living within, as opposed to outside or above nature (Toretell 8-10). The 2003 Paris Convention for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural

Heritage emphasises the crucial role of intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development. It is an ethical call to respect the message of intrinsic value of life on land, life on water since man must see that every being has a moral significance (SDGs 14,15).

Being sustainable in the technology field and being ethical and eco-friendly in business fields have a lot to contribute to sustainable development. Climate change is one of the big impacts which is being caused mainly by the industrial practices. The ethical case for concerted action to mitigate climate change, to foster adaptation, where it is irreversible and where it is possible to compensate its victims is unanswerable. Even if there were universal agreement about mitigation, adaptation and compensation the policies required are not immediately obvious for the needs of the people of different countries affected by ecological problems do vary. Hence the ethical issues of adaptation, compensation, and precaution have to be incorporated in the policies of sustainable development (SDG 13). Integrated policies rather local and not merely global policies may be the need of the hour. In designing the framework of such policies, which are at once scientific as well as ethical, the indigenous cultural and religious models shall be taken into account. Only such a framework can lead the UN SDG transformation principle iii. energy decarbonisation and sustainable industry and principle iv. sustainable food, land and water resources to its true realisations.

All these point towards two things: i. the critical engagement between sustainable scientists and philosophers and ii. The new role that sustainability scientists should take. The times demand a critical engagement between sustainability scientists and philosophers of science with respect to how to engage in scientific activities (Nagastu 74). The specific issues philosophers of science raise concerning current sustainability questions push and philosophers can address them. The following are some of the areas where philosophers can intervene in order to facilitate theoretical, methodological, ethical and cultural progress in sustainability science. They include the epistemological issues, conceptual questions and the role of values (Jetkonitz 39-40, Laplane 48-52 and Diaz 457-464). Again, the sustainability scientists need to be tightly coupled to decision and policy making processes (which are value-oriented) rather being merely curiosity driven (Spagenberg 275-280).

A cross-cultural orientation and attitude towards our social action and decision making provide a means to express and interpret our world experiences. The experience and interpretation of the Other through a reinterpretation of the Self is called a cross-cultural imagination. A cross-cultural value orientation stresses cultural difference and pluralisation, the context of global-local relations, thinking beyond established boarders, and the reinvention of a political community around global ethics. The experience of the Other (Nature or Life) is a sacred moment when the human person listens to the divine call to respect the intrinsic value of Nature/Life whose being is in God. It will definitely lead to the genesis of a political community, a collective consciousness rooted in global ethics.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion is not to subscribe to the idea that humanity may have to abandon all technology or scientific reason in order to restore an original form of nature. But changes in nature wrought by technology driven human persons are not natural in terms of an evolutionary pace. On the other hand, the ethical, religious, and cultural traditions are pointers to the scientific conceptual categories lacking in the experiential fact of the original nature of human person, the world, or nature. This experience, never a theory mediated trigger, inspires endless alternatives and possibilities for the infinitely cultural space. Science need to have revised its language, that is, technology, devising it to eco-friendly terms and human beings are to mould their wisdom for sustainable solidarity and partnership with nature.

Religious perspectives contribute in providing systemic changes for sustainability. Religion is the cultural identity marker causing the boarders between religion and culture to blur. Again, ethical values are best inculcated through the religious sentiments where one is culturally rooted in. The firm conviction in sacred trust that is valued by Islam, stewardship in Judaism and Christianity, equilibrium in Hinduism and Buddhism call for a concerted action to an equal distribution of resources between current and future generations. There exists an inseparable relation between religious environmental ethics and the secular environmental ethics (Zagonari 7). The different cultures ought not to espouse a monolithic belief of the east

or of the ancient. Geographically situated either in the west or the east, human beings must know and respect the intrinsic value of nature not for the mere reason that the life on the earth is endangered. But more importantly, it is for the fact that value, either ethical or cultural, is what it does, and not how it is formed in intellectual discourses. It must be concluded that environmental sustainability is not worth pursuing unless it is achieved for ethical reasons. It is only through such a reawakening of humanity that the specific SDGs 12-15 can be realised. The issue concerning the specified SDGs is not technical but ethical, they are all value oriented rather than fact oriented, which brings the purport of the above discussion.

Cross-cultural imagining has the potential to transcend the danger of national identities dictating our worldviews in search for glocalization, for intercultural communication and transformation. It is to the above kind of a cross-cultural engagement that sustainability implies today. The SDGs 12-15 can be realised only in a context of global-local relation or a reinvention of a political community around global ethics. In a pandemic situation where the picture of the short–term and long–term impacts of COVID-19 on the above said goals remain obscure, it is certain that only a science-culture interface can illuminate a better path forward for it highlights the twin principles of sustainability 2030, namely, "leave no one behind and ensure circularity and decoupling."

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